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Battle of the barristers: D.C. lawyers rock out to raise funds

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At the Black Cat last Thursday night, an enthusiastic audience of over 1,000 gathered for what looked like a classic battle of the garage bands.

When members of The Unnamed Party kicked off their set with the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter," the sound from the band's guitars amplified the space, colliding with the voices of fans singing along.

A casual onlooker might not have realized that behind the band's hipster T-shirts were six attorneys from one of the oldest law firms in D.C.

The lawyers weren't there just to re-enact long-ago dreams of becoming rock stars; they were raising money for Gifts for the Homeless, a local nonprofit that buys new winter clothes for homeless men, women and children in the greater D.C. area.

In a friendly competition among law firms, 12 bands participated in the eighth annual "Battle of the Law Firm Bands" last week to support the charity. Glenn Howard emceed the event — he's currently general counsel for the Pew Charitable Trusts, but he earned his

rock 'n' roll stripes announcing for the 1970s group Sha Na Na.

Audience members voted "Chicago style" — meaning early and often — for their favorite band by placing donations in fish bowls. The band that ended the night with the most money would be winner.



"For me personally, if I have a choice of putting on a tuxedo and going to some dinner and eating rubber chicken for a charity or raising almost \$150,000 in five hours playing guitar, guess which one I'd pick?" said V. Gerard Comizio, lead guitarist for The Unnamed Party and a partner with Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP.

The bands were also encouraged to raise money ahead of the event, and for its second year of competition, The Unnamed Party came up with a novel (and secret) fundraising strategy in its attempt to outwit last year's winner: Sutherland

Comfort, from Sutherland, Asbill and Brennan LLP.

Comizio said The Unnamed Party decided to ask members of its international law firm to vote for the songs band would play at the Black Cat event. The band proposed 10 songs that could make it onto the playlist for its 30-minute set, along with a write-in option. Votes could be cast for a \$5 donation, a price the band hoped would encourage people to vote multiple times.

By Comizio's estimates, this early strategy brought in approximately \$8,000. And the winning song? "Get Back" by The Beatles.

But despite his band's efforts, returning champion Sutherland Comfort took home top honors again this year, raising more than \$31,000 for Gifts for the Homeless.

Naseem Nixon, a second-year associate with Sutherland and the band's lead singer, said she and her backup singers practiced three times a week at lunchtime for the past month or so in the firm's fifth-floor conference room.

"It was nice to create a different kind of common bond with music, rather than just the law," she said. "And knowing we were helping to clothe people we see on the street every day was great."



The bands collectively exceeded their goal that night, raising more than \$145,000 through the event and breaking last year's record by \$14,000.

"It's a worthy cause, serving the needs of the homeless in the Washington, D.C., area, and providing warm clothing in the winter," said Comizio.

Gifts for the Homeless is in its 25th year of operation, and because it is entirely volunteer-run, 100 percent of the donations raised go to helping the region's homeless. The board of directors meets monthly in the conference rooms of various members' firms, and when operating costs arise — like creating and maintaining the nonprofit's website or renting trucks to deliver clothing to shelters — members volunteer to pay out of pocket.

"When you put a dollar into this organization, ... that dollar goes directly to the homeless," said Comizio, who serves as a member of the board of directors.

According to Bart Epstein, the organization's president and the senior vice president and general counsel for tutor.com, Gifts for the Homeless will purchase clothing with the approximately \$250,000 it raises throughout the year.

Residents of more than 70 shelters in the District as well as



in Maryland and Virginia will benefit, including Miriam's Kitchen, Martha's Table and the Community for Creative Non-Violence, the largest homeless shelter in the area.

Gifts for the Homeless also runs an expansive clothing drive in November, distributing the donations to shelters throughout the area. Epstein said the organization always needs more men's clothing than women's, and he was quick to note that anyone can get involved.

"So many people today are struggling with the basics, and everyone goes through ups and downs in life," said Epstein.

More information is available at gfth.org.



Photo courtesy of Gifts for the Homeless

Last week's "Battle of the Bands" featured lawyers performing to raise money for Gifts for the Homeless, a nonprofit that buys new winter clothes for homeless men, women and children in the region. Clockwise from top right: Fans enjoying the show; Big Sur lead singer Bess Gutter; the backup singers of winner Sutherland Comfort; Sutherland Comfort lead singer Naseem Nixon; and members of The Unnamed Party.

