

SWEET CHARITY

Mary Love, philanthropist and wife of the chocolatier, keeps worthy causes close to her heart

Story by LINDSAY DOWNEY

When your workday involves tasting truffles and you're about to celebrate 25 years with your chocolatier husband — not to mention the fact that your very name embodies the romance of the month — well, life doesn't get much sweeter than that.

But Mary Love, 51, longtime philanthropist and wife of Norman Love, is spreading her adoration this February to the whole community. She's spearheading Norman Love Confections' Sharing a Lil' Love program for local nonprofits.

As cocoa-craving couples flood the company's Fort Myers and Naples chocolate salons for Valentine's Day and throughout the year, they can pick up boxes of specially marked chocolates, with \$1 from each box going to United Way. It's the first of three triannual beneficiaries of the program. (Love hasn't yet identified the other organizations that will receive big hugs this year).

The philanthropy chocolates will be filled with kid-friendly flavors — such as Cookies 'n' Cream and Peanut Butter and Jelly — to symbolize the needs of children in the community.

It's all part of Love's extensive work for young people, which oozes with more goodness than her favorite Norman Love Confections Vanilla Rum Truffle (which she nibbles every day, by the way). Taking on projects for children became especially important after she and Norman, who met in Fort Lauderdale in 1985, started their family.

Both son Ryan — who recently graduated from the University of Central Florida and works full-time at NLC — and daughter Carly, a pre-law student at Florida Gulf Coast University, were born seven weeks premature and spent time in the neonatal intensive care unit.



Photo by AMANDA INSCOPE

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"We were really young and scared and it was a big deal for us," Love says.

So when Love heard the Harry Chapin Food Bank was short 4,000 turkeys last Thanksgiving, she thought of children and their young, struggling parents and quickly took action. Within a day, she whipped up a promotion that offered a box of Norman Love chocolates to anyone who donated \$11 to the food bank, the cost of a turkey dinner. In 10 days, the program raised \$23,974 — enough to feed 2,179 families.

Love — who promotes and supports more than 250 nonprofits annually — parlays her family's culinary prowess participating in events such as this month's Southwest Florida Wine & Food Fest and through a Food Factory partnership with Community Cooperative Ministries Inc., which runs the Fort Myers Soup Kitchen and mobile food pantries, to provide families with affordable, nutritious meals.

And the love doesn't stop there.

The queen of chocolate and charity offered plenty of charm when she and Norman hosted an event at their south Fort Myers home in October that raised about \$17,000 for The Heights Foundation's cultur-

al center, and when Love acted as a celebrity server during a fundraiser at Roadhouse Café.

"She was a riot," says Kathryn Kelly, executive director for the foundation. "She was a lot of fun and brings a lot of energy to events — and of course, chocolate."

Cancer causes also are close to the heart for the Loves, who both lost parents to the disease. The couple supports everything from the Cattle Barons' Ball to Barbara's Friends, a program for children with cancer at The Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida.

Love even helped create October's inaugural "Powerful Women, Powerful Choices" cancer symposium for women at the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa in Estero.

And though they have clients all over the country who purchase their sugary treats, Love says it's Southwest Floridians who inspire them to give back.

"We know that it's the community support and the people who are coming in day in and day out, year-round, who keep us running," she says. "Without them, I don't know that we would have made it through the last

lean years."

When Love, a Chicago native, isn't working on her next charity project, you might find her in the unlikeliest of places: battling it out on the ice hockey rink.

As captain of the co-ed (but mostly male) team, the Ever Kegs, Love plays hockey every Sunday at Germain Arena, earning plenty of bumps and bruises along the way.

"I am not a good player," she laughs. "I earned the 'C' on my jersey because I'm the oldest one on my team."

Norman plays too — but on a different team. Hockey is the one endeavor they don't take on together. The chocolatier is much more competitive than his laid-back wife, Love says with a laugh.

And though they'll probably be too busy for anything but gazes from across the chocolate salon on Valentine's Day, the Loves will likely take time from their philanthropic endeavors on the 28th for a little silver anniversary canoodling. And maybe a Tahitian Caramel Heart or two. **G**

— Norman Love Confections is located at 11380 Lindbergh Blvd., Fort Myers, (239-561-7215); and 3747 Tamiami Trail N., Naples (687-7215). For more information, visit normanloveconfections.com.