



For Happy Home, Communities That Care

YOU NAME IT and Brent Sobol's communities have done it.

The Atlanta-based independent rental owner (IRO) of Happy Home Communities prides himself on resident programming, budgeting 1 percent to 2 percent of revenue each year for community events and employing a Resident Services Coordinator to help plan the activities.

Sobol says his communities offer events like after-school tutoring, Bible study, drawing contests and senior aerobics at least three days a week. An additional larger event is held once per month.

"It can be hard to quantify ROI, but these events have led to rent growth, lower crime, fewer lawsuits and higher resident and employee retention rates," says Sobol, who has a portfolio of 1,100 units. "There's a lot of goodwill, but it's also a competitive advantage because the resident programming is an amenity that is rare, appreciated and valuable."

The community events target everyone from little children to adults and seniors. Past favorites include an art contest, an "American Idol" talent show, a festival with a moon bounce, the dedication of a playground, employee bowling, face painting, a balcony decorating contest, trick-or-treating and a visit from Santa. Sobol says the highest-attended events are those that include giveaways or raffles.

Events for the older children and teens range from a PlayStation 3 gaming competition to a performance from a local band and a "DJ Night" with free pizza and a DJ who taught the teens how to write "positive raps."

Several members of the "original hip-hip boy band" Full Force, including lead singer Bow-Legged Lou, also came to one of Sobol's communities and spoke to residents about living responsibly. Sobol says the band members, who have produced and writ-

ten music for artists such as The Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears, are now motivational speakers and were already in Atlanta for another event.

Such events are not only fun, but encourage a positive way of life. Sobol has invited agencies to speak about health issues such as diabetes prevention, heart disease and blood pressure screening and asked the local police chief to talk to residents about community safety. An Atlanta councilwoman also met with residents and addressed their questions.

"It doesn't cost anything, for example, to have your elected officials come to your property," Sobol says. "Candidates are interested in politicking to apartments because the residents are a hard demographic to reach. If they visit your community, they're going to remember you and residents will feel as though they were heard."

Sobol suggests partnering with vendors who share similar civic-minded values, as they may be willing to pay for the food at an

event or sponsor one of their own. Chase Bank, for example, sponsors a financial literacy program for Sobol's residents. Allied Waste also hosted a Community Safety Day, with a dump truck for the kids to sit in while they discussed safety concerns at a construction site.

Outside of his portfolio, and in conjunction with neighboring apartment communities, Sobol has sponsored a youth baseball and basketball team, participated (with 15 residents) in a town clean-up day, organized a voter registration event and hosted an entrepreneurship program and job fair.

"It's about showing the world that you're a responsible corporate citizen," Sobol says. Employees today want to work for companies that value their humanity and residents want to live in a community that shows they care about them." — *NAA's Lauren Boston*



Happy Home residents enjoy crafts.