

Hometown heroes

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have hauled shell, to use one of their catchphrases: Late last month, Mirage Studios of Northampton, whose founders, Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman, hatched the idea for the hugely successful comic book heroes 25 years ago, announced that it was selling the global and intellectual rights to the Turtles to the cable network Nickelodeon.

With the \$60 million deal, Mirage is bowing out of a lucrative enterprise — the franchise spawned hundreds of tie-ins, from TMNT action figures to TMNT breakfast cereal — and going back to basics. The Mirage Group now plans to focus solely on publishing comic books, including some new TMNT titles, Laird says.

Mirage is also focusing right now on another basic: supporting the community that's been its home for a quarter century. The United Way of Hampshire County has just launched its 2010 drive, and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are headlining the effort.

Mirage has announced that it will match any first-time donations, along with any increased workplace donations by previous givers, up to \$25,000 — \$1,000 for each year of its existence. The promotion is being called the TMNT25 Challenge.

Given the local United Way's \$1,125,000 goal, \$25,000 may seem modest. But the Mirage offer promises a bigger payoff than that. Posters urging potential donors to "Shell-ebrate your community" (the Turtles offer endless pun potential) feature a sketch of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Donatello charging from the sewers, sporting T-shirts with the slo-

gan "Live United." Half the battle in getting people to donate to charity is getting them to even notice the charity. With the TMNT tie-in, mission accomplished.

The offer gives the campaign some extra juice at a challenging time. The United Way relies heavily on contributions solicited in the workplace; nearly half of the money it raised in its 2009 campaign came through such donations. But in the past year company closings and downsizings have meant that the local work force has gotten smaller. The TMNT25 Challenge is designed to counter that by encouraging giving among those who might not have previously considered it.

The Mirage Group's new partnership with the United Way continues a tradition of good work in western Massachusetts courtesy of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Through his Xeric Foundation, Peter Laird has long supported local schools and arts organizations, as well as new comic book artists. The foundation says it has given away \$2 million since Laird established it in 1992. Last year it awarded more than \$60,000 to 18 groups, a broad range that includes Girls Inc. of Holyoke, Jacob's Pillow dance festival in Becket and the Northampton Survival Center.

The Mirage Group's new role in the current United Way campaign reflects that longtime connection to the community, and broadens its reach even more to encompass the thousands of people assisted by the charity's 27 partner agencies.

We wish the Turtles well in their new relationship with Nickelodeon. But we're glad they're still on hand to fight the good fight in their hometown.