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Successful Auction adds millions to help valley



A winning bidders paddle is held aloft during the live auction at Auction Napa Valley on Saturday at Meadowood Napa Valley.

ST. HELENA — In 1981 at the first Napa Valley Wine Auction, a six-pack of wine from Opus One, the new Robert Mondavi-Baron Philippe Rothschild collaboration, sold for the then-staggering sum of \$24,000.

In 2015 at Saturday's live auction, part of the four-day fundraising extravaganza, a six-pack of the same wines, 1979 and 1980 vintages, in a lot offered by Opus One, sold for \$240,000; of course, the 2015 did include a trip to Dubai.

The Founders Lot, offered by the Opus team, the honorary chairs of Auction Napa Valley 2015, garnered \$2.4 million after the lot was tripled to allow three couples to pay \$800,000 each for a two-week trip to France.

"The amount of money I've seen change hands today is mind-boggling," said Charlene Floyd, a Houston resident attending the auction for the first time.

At press time Saturday, the Napa Valley Vintners, who launched the auction in 1981 to raise money to provide health care for farmworkers, were still tallying up the funds they raised at this year's auction. A rough estimate adding up figures through out the four-hour auction, was more than \$12 million. To this, the Vintners will add the funds raised by the 200 additional lots being offered on an online e-auction and the 120 barrel auction lots that were up for bids at the Friday auction held at Hall Winery.

The Saturday live auction unfolded as flawlessly as an event for 850 possibly can under three enormous tents on the fairway at Meadowood Resort in St. Helena. Guests arriving around noon, found a marketplace of stalls had been created in the first tent, where they could sample wines and choose foods from the stalls filled with variety French, Italian and American food, from baguettes and polenta and to fried chicken and snickerdoodles.

An energetic staff carried platter after platter of sandwiches and salads from the food service tent as the The Cartoon Jazz Band played "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" and the theme from Looney Tunes.

Just after 2 p.m., guests were summoned into a massive, air-conditioned tent, filled with sofas, tables, all well supplied with bottles of wine. Auctioneers Fritz Hatton and Humphrey Butler alternated presenting the 51 live auction lots, infusing their pitches to the crowd of bidders with banter and antics. Hatton improvised the sound of hoofbeats to his rapid-fire number calling to provide atmosphere for the Lokoya lot that would take winners to the Kentucky Derby. Both auctioneers rode bicycles for the lot that sold \$5,000 buy-in lots to take place on a Napa to Yountville group ride on the Vine Trail (wine included).

The highlight of the afternoon was a surprise performance by musician John Legend, who appeared on the stage with Jean Charles Boisset of Raymond Vineyards to promote a lot that the two created together. Legend, an Oscar nominee and winner of Grammy and Golden Globe awards, will perform a concert at Boisset's Wappo Hill home for 30, and the guests will also receive liters of the inaugural release of Legend Vineyards reserve blend, created with Raymond. The lot garnered the highest single bid of the event, \$850,000, purchased by vintner Rick Jones.

History repeated itself when a 12-liter bottle of Screaming Eagle sold for \$500,000, as it did in 2013. In 2000, a six-liter bottle of Screaming Eagle became the highest-selling single bottle of wine when it sold for \$500,000. Screaming Eagle now donates a balthasar to the auction every other year.

The auction concluded with a touching reminder of the purpose for the event when guests watched a video about a year-old girl born with spina bifida, who needed a spinal fusion, expensive surgery far beyond the means of her parents, as her father explained in the four-year old video. Through the Napa Valley Vintners' children's health initiative, funded by the auction proceeds, her family was able to get insurance that paid for the procedure. At Auction Napa Valley 2015, the child, now 5, appeared on stage with her father to dance with him and thank the bidders for the help they provide for children in the valley.

Her appearance preceded the final lot, the Fund-a-Need, which raised more than \$1 million, including a \$300,000 gift from the children of the late Baron Phillippe Rothschild and another \$300,000 from Constellation Brands, which is now in partnership with Opus One.

Last year's live auction raised \$16.2 million; and the total auction amount raised was \$18.7 million.

In 1981 at the first auction, "We raised \$140,000. We thought that was fantastic," said Margrit Mondavi, who attended the Saturday event. Whatever the number raised, she noted it's really about "good wines, good times, the Napa Valley spirit."