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Auction Napa Valley has \$15.8 million weekend

BY PEG MELNIK

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Kristen Reitzell attends Auction Napa Valley, Saturday June 6, 2015 at Meadowood Resort in St. Helena. (Kent Porter / Press Democrat) 2015

ST. HELENA — An unsuspecting crowd at Saturday's Auction Napa Valley had no idea a Grammy and Golden Globe-winning musician was on-hand. But John Legend took the stage, sat down at the grand piano and performed "All of Me," wooing the well-heeled under the white tent at Meadowood in St. Helena.

Legend helped organizers raise an estimated \$15.8 million, down from last year's \$18.7 million take.

Now in its 35th year, the fundraiser benefits Napa Valley nonprofits focusing on health, youth and affordable housing.

More than 850 people gathered with paddles for an afternoon of goodwill bidding Saturday. Though organizers provided an expected total from the multi-day event, numbers for the auction only were not available.

The top single lot of the day, selling for \$850,000, was the one Legend introduced for Raymond Cellars. It features a private performance for 30 by Legend, plus six 3-liter bottles of the inaugural reserve blends of Legend Vineyard Exclusives.

"John is very deep into wine," said vintner Jean-Charles Boisset, who owns Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena. Boisset said he and Legend did a blending session about nine months ago at Raymond Vineyards and he encouraged the musician to come to Auction Napa Valley to help raise money for the auction and to kick off the brand.

Another hot lot featured a two-week trip to top wine producers and estates in Europe, including Chateau Mouton Rothschild, Beaucastel and Pol Roger. It sold for \$800,000, with two duplicate lots offered later, boosting the sale to \$2.4 million. That total take set an Auction Napa Valley record, organizers said.

The most sentimental lot of the day was Fund-A-Need, which raised funds for early medical intervention for Napa Valley children. It was introduced by a video illustrating how early intervention benefited a Napa Valley toddler named Mia, with the medical condition of spina bifida. After the video Mia danced on the stage with her father Jaime. Then she spoke into the microphone and said "thank you" to the crowd. Organizers did not release totals for Fund-A-Need.

A highpoint of the afternoon for bidders crazy about cult cabs came when auctioneer Fritz Hatton introduced the Screaming Eagle lot, crooning the name of the highbrow producer.

The lot, which sold for \$500,000, featured a single 12-liter bottle of the 2012 Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon. Screaming Eagle continues to hold the title for the highest-selling lot for a single bottle of wine. In 2013 and 2000, a 12-liter bottle of Screaming Eagle also sold at Auction Napa Valley for \$500,000.

The day ended on a high note, with news of the totals and organizers setting off a round of confetti that filled the stage.

Napa's expected take trumped the Naples Winter Wine Festival, which raised more than \$12.3 million in January and has had something of a friendly rivalry with the Napa event in recent years. Napa's take also eclipsed the Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction, which raised a record-breaking \$4 million last year.

The live auction was the showcase of four days of tastings, tours and dinners. Friday's Napa Valley Barrel Auction at Hall Winery in St. Helena drew about 2,000 people.