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Food pantry auction items reflect changing times



Some tourists get into a car with a U.S. flag in Havana, Cuba, Wednesday. A trip to Havana is being offered as an auction item at an upcoming food pantry fundraiser. (Ernesto Mastrascusa / EPA)



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I don't normally pay that much attention to auctions at local fundraisers, but this one caught my eye for its news value alone.

The sixth annual gala for the Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry, which will be held Saturday evening at Pipers Banquets in Aurora, offers a trio of live-auction items -- including a vacation to Cuba -- sure to draw attention because of their relevancy to how the world is changing.

One item guaranteed to garner impressive bids: Four tickets to a Friday night game in April or May at Wrigley Field, courtesy of Dr. Cary Frazer of Fox Valley Care Clinic.

The package also includes a night at the Westin Hotel on Michigan Avenue and brunch at Shaw's Crab House. But the real draw, of course, will be those four seats in April or May to see The World Series Champion Chicago Cubs -- how weird does that still sound? -- an experience that likely rose in value now that the team has reached such a historic pinnacle.

Speaking of historic significance, a second auction item is a day spent with the Aurora Police Department, which includes lunch for five with Chief Kristen Ziman, the first female chief in Illinois' second largest city.

This package also offers a chance for a tour of the police department and ride-along with officers, which may not sound like it is news worthy in itself. But it wasn't all that long ago -- at least for those of us who went on gang stakeouts or drug busts with Aurora cops back in those ugly days -- when you couldn't have paid a resident for a ride-along in a squad car ... much less expected someone to pay out big bucks -- tax deductible, of course -- for the experience.

But the streets have become less violent and those negative perceptions have changed here in Aurora, thanks to a lot of hard work by officials and community members. This is the second year the APD has offered a day with police as an auction item for the pantry's gala, and that fact alone says something significant at a time where there is so much tension and mistrust between officers and residents in other communities.

Then there's the really big ticket item: a week-long trip to the once forbidden Havana, Cuba.

There, the winner will stay in a two-bedroom apartment located in the center of the city offering restaurants, shops, theater and cultural centers that have only been open to American tourists in a gradual and limited way since President Obama re-established the relationship with this Communist-ruled Caribbean island two years ago.

It was the suggestion of Sherry Truhlar, an auctioneer with Red Apple Auctions out of Washington, D.C., who the food pantry hired to handle the main event at the gala on Saturday, to offer this unique vacation.

While there's still "a lot more paperwork" to make this sort of trip happen, compared to Mexico or Canada, for example, Truhlar noted that it's becoming easier to visit the once off-limits island, with more major airlines recently beginning to promote direct flights from places other than Miami or Tampa.

"It's been incredibly popular" on the fundraiser circuit, she added, with many not-for-profits organizing their themes around the exotic "Havana Nights" experience. In fact, just last Friday, a week-long stay in a three-bedroom apartment in the island city went for \$9,400 at the fundraising auction she led for 360 Youth Services in Naperville.

"People are excited to go now and see Cuba like it was, before it becomes too Americanized, as is sure to happen," Truhlar said. If for no other reason, men especially want to get to the island to see those 1950s cars. And that curiosity is good for events trying to raise money for worthy causes.

The whole idea is to get "fresh auction items that appeal to a large crowd," that are "relevant for the times" and "set you apart from the other fundraisers," she noted.

Looking over the three main auction items, Truhlar praised this local food pantry committee for doing an "excellent job" of meeting that criteria.

Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry Executive Director Marilyn Weisner credits her gala committee, in particular the two auction chairwomen, Tina DeGustino and Kate Peters, who were able to snag Ziman for lunch since Peters also happened to be the chief's eighth-grade teacher. For more details on the gale, go to www.aurorafoodpantry.org

Truhlar, who does these auctions all around the country, was impressed.

"When you have a lot of support from the community," she said, "it really does make a difference."

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