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On a clear Saturday night in February the Hilton McLean Tysons Corner is decked out in Mardi Gras finery. Purple and gold are the colors of the night, and the anterooms and ballroom are elegantly appointed and ready for a sophisticated-yet-fun party.

After months of planning by the school and volunteers, the big night of the 12th annual Bishop Denis J. O'Connell High gala has arrived; it's the annual fund-raiser for the private Arlington Catholic school, and with a silent auction, raffles and a live auction on the agenda, there is clearly more at stake than giving the parents a plate of surf and turf and a good time on the dance floor.

The silent auction is an impressive array of interesting choices representing a wide variety of interests, from sports to travel to dinners with dignitaries, and the display tables snake in long zigzags through the room. Just about every clipboard at the auction item has an ascending price, a clear sign that the parents understand they are here to help the school.

Cocktail hour is over, the silent auction closes and the crowd heads for their appointed dinner tables, some sold in sponsorship packages for \$5,000 for 10 seats.

Then the show begins. School officials make remarks from the stage that's been set up along one side of the dining hall, presenting updates on the school year and, eventually, introducing a dark-haired woman who comes to the stage.

She rises from a table where she was earlier part of the audience, and strides to the center of the stage with a distinct sense of purpose. Dressed like the other women, maybe a bit more demurely, she takes the microphone, and in a friendly tone welcomes everyone, making a few in-jokes about the O'Connell crowd. Is she someone's wife? She's doesn't appear old enough to be a parent ... maybe a trophy spouse?

It seems Sherry Truhlar is going to help with the live auction, which is sweet of her. Someone holds up the first item and an image of it comes on the video screen; Truhlar describes it in colorful terms that convey the value without over-hyping it.

And then ...

"Who will give me a hundred dollars? One hundred dollar bid, now two, now two, will you give me two? Two hundred dollar bid, now three, who will give me three? Two-and-a-half, two-fifty? Fifty? Fifty? Two-fifty!"

The patter comes fast and furious, rapidly, effortlessly, with no stutters or stammers, and she blows through the item without losing her breath before declaring that item sold, moving onto the next item up for bid.

Clearly, she has done this before. It's like a magic trick, and you can't stop watching. And with her demeanor—firm, yet just a touch sympathetic—you want to help her sell that item, so you end up bidding, and buying. And it goes on for dozens of items, big and small, and they all sell, rapidly.

Damn, she's good. But who is this woman?

Ellsworth is smack in the middle of Kansas, between a lot of nothing and a lot more nothing. "I come from a farming community, but I'm not a farm girl," says Truhlar in the living room of her Park Fairfax townhouse, what she calls the "glossy headquarters" of her Red Apple Auctions. She's lived in the Alexandria house since 1997, but it still has a like-new tone, no doubt due to her predilection to frequently change the paint and appointments.

How she came here, and how she came to be one of the most successful benefit auctioneers in the country is a long story full of surprising twists—seven years of full-figure fashion modeling? Exotic animal trainer?—and single-minded determination to see the world and learn as many new skills as she had time for classes.

As a student at Emporia State University in Kansas, Truhlar, who is now "29 again," got her first taste of the Big City during an action-packed six-week internship for Kansas Senator Bob Dole, the former Republican presidential candidate who was riding high at the time as the Senate's minority leader. "He paid his interns," she says, still grateful. "He was one of only a handful who did. He told us if you're going to work for me, I expect it to be good and I'll pay you for it."

Lesson learned: Good work equals money. And it was just what the communication and political science major needed to get her to her next great adventure, working for the Wichita-based Koch Industries (owned by, yes, THAT Koch family), a diversified energy company that sent the young Truhlar from city to city on various training programs, a dream come true for the not-farm girl.

"It was fabulous. Six weeks in Lexington, Ky., six weeks in Canada, six weeks in Long Beach, Cali. You have to remember, when I was a young girl we went on camping vacations to Oregon or some place. This was very different."

Koch transferred her to Pittsburgh to sell cement; that's where she landed an Ambassadorial Scholarship from Rotary International. "They do wonderful work," she says of Rotary, "and the scholarship is you get to go to any school and they pay for it. So I quit my job and went to Australia."

Australia?

"The University of Wollongong." She lets that settle in. "I got my master's degree."

Master's in hand it was back to Koch and Wichita, and after you've seen the bright lights of Sydney, well, "I needed something more metropolitan," she confesses. She had fond memories of Washington, so she moved in with a friend, got a job with General Electric in marketing (she makes it sound easy), "and that's when I decided I wanted to go to auction school."

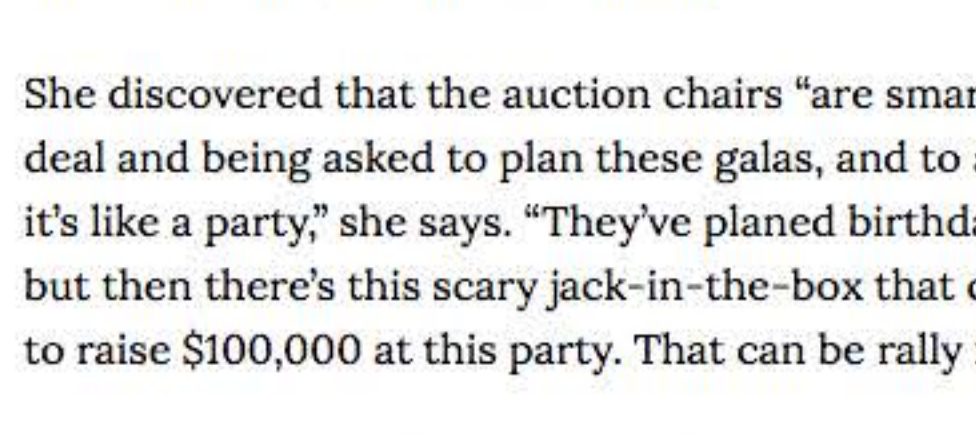
Of course! It only follows!

"I've always had interest in different things and I took classes in a lot of them," she says. "I decided to take an auction class because I said it would be fun to learn how to do that fast talk."

That fast talk. As if it's a skill a young adult could acquire and conquer. Livestock auctioneers spend a lifetime perfecting their "chant," the technical name for it, and it has to be good because the fortunes of the farmers is at stake. Undaunted, Truhlar Googled "auction schools" and found one in St. Louis.

"And in a very cold March I took a vacation from GE and flew out to Missouri for auction school."

The week was interesting, but at first it was livestock auctioning, heavy equipment auctioning, estate sales ... "and then we had one speaker come in and talk about benefit auctions."



Sherry Truhlar doing her chant at Chef's Best, an event hosted by Food & Friends at the Washington Hilton in June 2012. (Photo courtesy of 522 Productions)

A light went off in her head. "As he was talking about benefit auctions, I realized that my job at GE at the time was planning events. Management meetings, sales incentive trips, holiday parties, trade shows, things like that. I knew how to plan an event!"

Coming home she got her auction license and bonds, "all the stuff you need to be a professional auctioneer," she says, and meanwhile perfected her chant.

"It took nine months before I figured it out," she says. "I drove to GE in Gaithersburg every day and in the car I'm listening to my CDs, practicing all my drills, all these tongue twisters, and then I started to develop my own chant."

Her own patois isn't the jargon-heavy, high-velocity cadence of a livestock auctioneer. The words aren't slurred or blurred; if she slows down just a nudge, it just sounds like ... fast talk.

With the chant skills under control Truhlar volunteered at different auctions around the region, perfecting the lingo, learning the ways auctions are organized, and, most importantly, she painstakingly documented the processes. Truhlar writes everything down and analyzes the facts and figures for clues as to how to do it better.

She discovered that the auction chairs "are smart, savvy women coming in on a one-shot deal and being asked to plan these galas, and to an extent they know what to do because it's like a party," she says. "They've planned birthday parties, bar mitzvahs, family reunions but then there's this scary jack-in-the-box that comes out and says, by the way we need to raise \$100,000 at this party. That can be rally frightening to some people."

Worse, the nonprofit organizers remind the chairs that "the kids won't have field trips if you don't raise the money. They won't have the equipment they need. Observing all of this and documenting it, I wondered how can this be taught in a way that someone who is just coming into it can understand it and get it the first year?"

When the doors of the gala swing open, the partygoers are seeing "the birth of the baby," she says. "For nine months there's been this plan taking place, we've been getting the nursery ready, we've been painting, we've been buying furniture, and the night of the auction is the birth of the baby and whether you are ready or not, the baby's coming."

Don't be mistaken: Truhlar doesn't just swoop in on the night of the ball like a begowned superhero, save the day by raising tons of funds with her super powers, and then fly out until next year. In fact, for most of her clients she's been working with them from the beginning, helping develop everything from the thematic concept to the marketing to how the funds will be collected.

Over the years—she was Virginia Rookie Auctioneer of the Year in 2004—Truhlar has created strategic levels of involvement, each representing a different level of pricing for her services. There's a "high level, when I'm interacting with someone and working with them personally. But if they can't afford that, they can buy a \$97 webinar, or a \$20 mp3 that I have online that teaches them how to ask for items that will sell to make them money."

A glorified party does not need Truhlar, she'll tell you. Some events just aren't right for raising money and she's told prospects "this is a party and you're going to have to change too many elements to turn it into a fundraiser."

"A \$5,000 auction doesn't need me, they need a \$25 product to give them tips and get them moving along. Next year they'll need a \$100 product to get them to the next level, and once they start getting to that point where they need help, then they can bring in somebody to do the whole shebang," she says.

She's paid a flat fee, or she receives a commission bonus for exceeding a benchmark, or she's paid on straight commission. Truhlar says 76 percent of her clients report record-setting events, that is, better than last year. "And that's in a recession," she says proudly.

At the Bishop O'Connell event—where she sold Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift tickets, a week in Kinsale, Ireland, and a reserved pew at graduation (wildly popular, as it happens)—the total was better than the year before, "and that's always good," says Kim Aubry, director of advancement at the school. "We probably wouldn't make as much on our own. There's a whole psychology to auctions, and [Truhlar] knows how to work the crowd—and know the crowd."

If you've never been lucky enough to serve as a volunteer for a charity auction, you have little idea what goes into the event. Sure, someone hangs bunting on the silent auction table and puts centerpieces on the banquet tables. But someone obtained the bunting, collected the centerpieces, arranged for the banquet, hired the DJ and paid the deposit, found the hotel, paid the deposit, recruited staff ... you get the idea.

Just as vital, someone managed to beg, cajole and get down on bended knees to acquire donated goods, services and trips to sell, which is not easy. Truhlar surveyed her auction co-chairs and learned that the chairs spend no fewer than 1,000 hours of their "spare time" in the run-up to the auction.

"That's not the committee, that's the chairs. That's six months of full-time work," she says. "This is why all the auction chairs say I can't do it again, my husband will divorce me. And, oh, the committee members are doing 1,000 hours each, too."

Planning and producing a fund-raiser is "a three-legged stool," she concludes.

Procurement. "Item acquisition. How to ask," she says. "I hate asking people, but that's what these volunteers are learning to do. What items should you ask for?" One auction chair told her they sometimes get a half a can of paint donated for sale. "A used paint can is not going to work. I have to teach them what will sell well and how to spend their time wisely." She also teaches how to write a strong procurement letter and how to develop other marketing materials.

Audience development. "Getting the right people to the event. And who might that be?" "No. 1, they have money to spend; disposable income. And No. 2, they are committed to the cause or can become committed to the cause." She teaches volunteers what to include in the underwriting program and what to include in the invitation to generate interest and excitement.

She also points out that an auction's audience isn't limited by who is already on the donor list or parent's directory. She helps them think beyond the obvious audience and market to those who may have a commercial interest for sponsoring a gift and buying a table.

Operations. It's huge, and it's "a really wide, diverse area. It's registration and checkout, marketing before and after, décor, raffles and games, the timeline for the event. You need people, items and a way to get the money."

Newbies will struggle, but it gets, well, not easier, but smoother. "Fifteen years down the road you've got a machine in place and all you have to do is bring in new technology as it's developed."

Truhlar has clients around the country and Canada, and is on the road "quite a bit." About a third of her business is out of town, in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, California, Michigan, Kentucky, Indiana, Arizona, and that's just in the last year. She has "virtual assistants"—a techie in California and a local employee for social media—to keep things moving.

And she's not the only auctioneer that may be out on a night representing Red Apple Auctions. There are other auctioneers contracted by Truhlar who will do the chant after Truhlar has helped develop the event. She only has so many Friday and Saturday nights, "and everyone wants March," she sighs.

It's clear Truhlar isn't going to retire as an auctioneer. She's restless and curious about what else she's good at. She's was in real estate school in 2005 when she broke into fashion modeling, a career that took her to Florida and California exotic then lost its zing. She worked with grizzlies, big cats and elephants at a Florida e-boutique animal training school, a career she changed her mind about. Lately she's studied e-marketing to promote the auction business but sees the larger picture; it's a venue with promise.

"For me, it's always keeping interested," she says. "If I'm interested in something that passion will come through."

And what would she be doing if she wasn't being one of the best charity auctioneers in the country?

"You mean," she says, "what do I want to do next?" — *Buzz McClain*

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