

Making It: Sherry Truhlar's Red Apple Auctions

By Vanessa M. Gezari
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Six years ago, Sherry Truhlar took a week off work to learn how to sell cattle, cars and real estate using an auctioneer's singsong chant. It wasn't the first time Sherry, of Alexandria, had used personal time to learn new skills. On previous vacations, she'd worked with exotic animals in Hollywood and attended bartending school. After several days in a classroom full of men in cowboy hats, she completed her final exam at the Missouri Auction School -- dubbed the "Harvard of auctioneering" by Newsweek -- and returned to her day job as an event planner at GSX in Gaithersburg.

But Sherry's enthusiasm for auctioneering persisted. She began attending local auctions and practicing chants in the car on her way to work. The winter after taking the course, she won a rookie of the year competition held by the Virginia Auctioneers Association, which led to a part-time position as an auction floor worker. In 2005, when she was laid off from her job at GSX, she decided to turn her love of auctioneering into a business.

Sherry, born in Kansas, is a plus-size model who describes her age as "30-something" (revealing it exactly could cost her modeling jobs, she says). Her desire to live in a big city with plenty of trees brought her to Washington. After six years at GSX, she simultaneously launched her modeling career and started Red Apple Auctions, focusing on benefit events that raise money for schools and other nonprofit entities.

Volunteers often run benefit and charity auctions, but a professional auctioneer can bring elegance and credibility to an event or organization, Sherry says, and can raise significantly more money than a volunteer emcee. At an auction to benefit a school in Rockville, Sherry brought in 25 percent more revenue than a similar event hosted by volunteers, she says. Besides being a professional salesperson, an auctioneer is an actor, using showmanship to get bidders excited about the cause they're supporting.

Advertisement "Auctions have a unique way of not only raising money but drawing a community together," Sherry says.

With \$10,000 in startup costs, mainly for auctioneer training, licensing and marketing, Red Apple grossed \$159,000 last year and netted about \$89,000, Sherry says. Her clients include Northern Virginia Family Services, the Strathmore Hall Foundation and Food & Friends, which provides specialized meals for people with HIV/AIDS, cancer and other illnesses. She has about 18 contract employees, paid on a per-job basis, who serve as auctioneers and floor workers. Sherry pays herself about \$1,000 a month and supplements her income with modeling jobs and by renting out space in her four-bedroom house.

Since Sherry started running the annual auction for Carpenter's Shelter in Alexandria five years ago, revenue has grown, and the shelter has been better able to articulate its mission, says Fran Becker, executive director of the organization, which helps the homeless.

"It really wasn't through guilt or anything else that people contributed," Becker says. "They contributed to the live auction and won the prizes because they believed so much in our good work, and Sherry in every which way got our message out there better than I could as executive director."

Sherry hopes to expand Red Apple nationwide. Few auctioneers are women, she says, and even fewer bring her energy and experience. "It's a personality-driven business," she says. "There's other auctioneers out there, but there's no other Sherry."



SHERRY TRUHLAR'S RED APPLE AUCTIONS focuses on benefit events that raise money for schools. (D.A. Peterson)

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