

Banging the Gavel at the Sylvia Center Auction

by Ralph Gardner Jr.

If you could choose any job for a day, what would it be? My first choice, perhaps not surprisingly, would be president. Not for the responsibilities of office, but the perks: I'd like to fly on Air Force One and never have to wait on a sweltering tarmac to take off, pay for soggy sandwiches or go through customs.

Astronaut would also be up there; it would be fun to see the Earth from outer space.

Where might auctioneer rank? It's not quite as glamorous as president or astronaut, but there is something bracing about applause erupting as a Picasso passes the \$100 million mark.

It was something of that urge for novelty that persuaded me to accept Liz Neumark's invitation to serve as auctioneer Saturday night at a benefit dinner for the Sylvia Center. That's an organization she founded that brings kids to Katchkie Farm in the Hudson Valley to harvest and cook their own food. It also holds after-school programs in New York City to teach kids, who may have never seen a carrot outside a grocery store, about where their food comes from and how it's grown.

Ms. Neumark is also the founder of GREAT PERFORMANCES, one of the city's leading caterers, and the author, with Carole Lalli, of "Sylvia's Table," a cookbook being published this

month, inspired by the farm's healthy-eating mission and the children who visit.

I'm not going to make believe the auction is my favorite part of the evening at these sorts of events. I usually sink ever deeper into my seat as peers bid on chateau stays in the south of France and dinners for 12 prepared by Daniel Boulud on their private yachts. However, this promised to be a somewhat more modest affair—a quarter of the crowd would hopefully be friends and acquaintances.

Still, if you've attended one of these charity dinners—where the likes of Sotheby's Hugh Hildesley, the dean of charity auctioneers,

effortlessly seem to entice people to part with their money, appealing to their vanity while sprinkling the proceedings with bon mots that keep the rest of us watching from the sidelines amused—you realize auctioneering is a subtle art.

Indeed, I contacted Mr. Hildesley for tips on how to run my own auction. His first advice was to go easy on

the punch bowl. "One or two drinks max," he cautioned.

"It really helps to know a decent percentage of those present," he went on. "So much of it is getting their attention at an event where they hadn't planned to show you much attention."



Photo credit: Bobby Sudekum

**GREAT
PERFORMANCES®**
Celebrate Food.™

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

He also suggested limiting the auction to no more than 10 lots. That's for the sake of brevity—since people would rather go back to eating, drinking and socializing—and also so you have enough bidders. “You want more than one bidder per lot,” he explained sensibly. “Keep it amusing,” he added. “Use some humor, but never at the expense of the item, or, of course, the donor.”

Ultimately, a fine auctioneer is a combination conductor, stand-up comic and fly fisherman, he said: “When you get down to your final two bidders, you reel them in.”

Our auction had one big-ticket item: lunch for four at Katchkie Farm prepared by world-renowned chefs from the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas. I thought I might be able to draw a modicum of mirth from some of the other lots, such as a wheelbarrow-inspired bench that one doesn't have to lift to move around, built by “Farmer Bob,” Katchkie Farm's Bob Walker.



“Our auction had one big-ticket item: lunch for four at Katchkie Farm prepared by world-renowned chefs from the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas.”

There was also a jam-making session at nearby Kinderhook Farm with Beth Linskey of Beth's Farm Kitchen. Her triple-fruit marmalade ranks among the best. I wouldn't have to feign passion over that item.

My favorite lot, was a farm equivalent of “Supermarket Sweepstakes.” You'd be let loose at Katchkie Farm to gather as much produce as you could in one hour. In fact, I'd personally experienced that avaricious pleasure a couple of weeks earlier, because Ms. Neumark and Farmer Bob had graciously invited me and my family to help ourselves to their strawberry patch, the source of that evening's delicious strawberry rhubarb crumble.

I wasn't super nervous as Ms. Neumark handed me the microphone and a gavel—until I realized I had no idea what I was doing. This became apparent when I realized we hadn't decided at what price to start bidding, nor what increments to raise the bid, assuming there would be more than one bidder.

Not more than a couple of minutes into the auction I discovered my daughter Lucy standing discreetly beside me. “You have to suggest the next price,” she explained. “You were asking people to suggest their own price.”

Oops!

“But you got better immediately,” she told me later that evening.

I suffered from several other deficiencies. I couldn't remember who bid last, or what the price of the last bid was. “The best auctioneers are a little introverted,” Mr. Hildesley had told me.

“It requires huge concentration.”

Fortunately, the audience was both forgiving and generous. All the items sold and all had multiple bidders. Indeed, a bidding war even broke out over the Las Vegas Cosmopolitan dinner.

“You were the most thankful, friendly auctioneer,” my younger daughter Gracie told me afterward.

I suppose I did say thank you whenever I got a new bid, as if people were saving my skin. But the cause was worthy—not only the Sylvia Center and children being introduced to nature and good nutrition for the first time, but also my self-esteem.

**GREAT
PERFORMANCES®**
Celebrate Food.™