

## Longmont auctioneer Don Martin raises money, spirits

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LONGMONT, Colo. -

Don Martin was just getting started in the auctioneer business when he learned a lesson about the value of humor when chattering on stage, trying to raise money.

Longmont's Martin, who now focuses exclusively on charity auctions and fundraising, got started in the much more staid world of retail auctioneering while living in Arizona. He was hawking a box of "general merchandise" -- odds and ends that might draw a few bucks from the crowd.

The box itself was prominently marked as containing bedpans. Martin, of course, assured the crowd not to worry. That's when an assistant hoisted the box over his head ... and liquid began to sluice out from the bottom. Turned out that an old-style steam iron had overturned inside.

"I saw everyone's faces, and I thought, 'I'm just going to roll with this stuff.' I started to improvise and it made the whole thing a lot more fun," says Martin, 57.

Martin's brash, occasionally outrageous, Jersey-guy sense of humor might not play if he were trying to move Holsteins, bales of tobacco or foreclosed properties, but it has well served scores of charities in Colorado, Arizona and the Cayman Islands -- with a particular focus on Boulder County -- since he jumped into the charity-auction game in 2002.

"He creates a lot of fun," says Ann Tapp, executive director of Boulder's Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence. Martin has been the auctioneer for the organization's annual Chocolate Lover's Fling for seven years.

"We love him. He's a unique combination of energy, passion and he's got that East Coast edge that can sometimes be a little...." Tapp pauses, then laughs. "Let's just say he's got an interesting sense of humor that works well during the stress of an event." Martin readily confesses to an "unorthodox" -- some would say un-P.C. -- sense of humor. He sees himself as an entertainer, and notes that many of the nonprofits he works with stopped hiring bands or comedians after they saw him do his thing.

"I've always felt I'm just a wannabe Frank Sinatra who can't sing, a Billy Crystal whose timing is off," he says. "Being an auctioneer allows me the opportunity to stand on stage with a microphone in my hand and over the years that has developed into entertainment. It's all about having fun."

Martin is a rare, self-taught auctioneer. During multiple careers in retail -- charity auctioneering, he says, "is just retail on steroids" - he attended merchandise auctions with his brother, who was in the used appliance business. Intrigued, he sent away for an aptitude test from the country's premier auctioneering school in Kansas City, Mo.

He passed with flying colors. But instead of forking over the tuition and spending time in the Show Me State, he spent the next year practicing on his own with a tape recorder, "auctioning" off everything he saw.

"If my wife got frisky, 'What say we meet in the bedroom?', I'd start saying, 'Our next item is a session with my lovely wife.' If she made meatloaf, I'd 'auction' that. I'd 'auction' off the dogs and cats," he says. But when he visited an auction house and asked for a tryout, he remembers being "just awful." After six months more practice, he went back and "rocked the house."

He left his retail career after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and decided to dedicate his skills to helping nonprofits.

"I just realized that time is worth more than money, and how fragile things can be. I wrote a business plan that was service based," he says.

Charity auctioneering, he says, requires a special approach. Instead of a crowd of dour-faced old farmers, he's facing people unaccustomed to listening to the rapid-fire cadence. He constantly reminds people where bids are, and isn't afraid to pull on the reins and remind people that they've come to raise money for the organization.

And he stands ready to auction off just about anything. Three times, he's managed to raise thousands of dollars for his trademark red Chuck Taylor sneakers, which he wears with a tuxedo, and left the event in stocking feet.

But fun, at a charity auction, must also do the hard work of raising money. Martin's got that part down, too. In 2008, he raised more than \$2.2 million for charities through live auctions and "direct appeals" -- cash auctions in which Martin coaxes participants to give money to support a particular program for a charity. He planned to do about a dozen charity events when he started in the business, but last year chanted his way through 34.

"I'm really lucky," Martin says. "I work six months out of the year, on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. It's like playing in the (Professional Golf Association): You ask yourself, 'I really get paid for this?'" He'll work with any size charity, having raised amounts from \$5,000 for a small Boulder wildlife organization to \$275,000 for National Jewish Hospital in direct appeals alone. But, Martin says, he's choosy about his clients, picking organizations whose missions mesh with his personal ethics and interests - primarily women's issues, children at risk, kids' education and animal causes. In Boulder County, he's worked with the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, the Boulder Community Hospital Foundation, the Boulder Philharmonic, Impact on Education, the Longmont Humane Society and smaller groups such as the Prairie Dog Coalition.

Martin says his preferences each have a foundation in his personal experiences. Eyes tearing up, he recalls losing everything, being homeless and in need of help, and when "I was a very bad pet owner as a younger man."  
"It's not like I'm doing penance. But this is my way of trying to rectify some of those things from the past," he says. "No one knows the impetus for the things we do as human beings. People say I'm bold and brash, arrogant and cocky, and they're probably right. But they don't necessarily understand all the things that make me tick."

VIDEO: AUCTIONEER DON MARTIN

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"Jersey-guy sense of humor?" Hopefully whatever happens in Longmont stays in Longmont.

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