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Power of the Purse raises money for children's education

United Way fundraiser auctions high-end purses to benefit programs

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Tracy Shiller works to get a higher price for a purse Saturday night as he models for auction during the Power of the Purse fundraiser.

BECCA OWSLEY/The News-Enterprise

High-end purses filled with surprises were auctioned off Saturday night during United Way of Central Kentucky's Power of the Purse fundraiser at The Garage in downtown Elizabethtown.

The models for the purses, however, held more surprises than the purses themselves.

"We have some really great recruits," Katie Kurtz, director of development and communications, said of the night's models.

Former Elizabethtown Police Chief Tracy Shiller is the campaign chairman, she said, and he was tasked to get the men to model. Many of them already partner with United Way, she said.

"It's the relationships that we build in our community that we tap into," she said.

She said the models go all out and put on a show.

"It's not just modeling the bags. They have a whole skit they put on," she said.

Designer handbags are purchased by sponsors of the event and each is valued between \$600 and \$1,000, including the items inside that were donated by local businesses, she said.

Elizabethtown Mayor Jeff Gregory, a model for the night's event, said sometimes the money earned in the auction is more about the presentation than the actual purse.

He chose Aretha Franklin's "Respect" to walk out to while carrying a pink Michael Kors purse.

"I plan on getting a whole bunch of money for it so we can benefit these projects," he said. "We'll see what kind of response I get and see how well I'm liked by the bids I get."

It's his first time participating in the event but said if you're a good purse model you can identify someone in the crowd you can get a lot of money from. He joked you can shame them into bidding high on your handbag.

The goal is to get more money for the purse to have more money to contribute to the programs, he said.

"It's an all-around great thing to help out with," he said. "United Way is a great organization and, from a city government standpoint, we hope to continue to have a great relationship with them."

Brian Kerr, president of Kerr Workplace Solutions in Elizabethtown, said last year's event was the first year and it was pretty well attended but it grew this year.

"It's a great event and it's become a premier event for E'town," he said. "It's just something fun and something not really done around here but most importantly, it raises funds for United Way and early childhood education."

Kerr was one of the models and his routine was to the song "The Git Up."

"It has some dance moves that maybe I can actually do," he said.

Kerr said when he was in eighth grade at Hardin Central Middle School, he almost got kicked out by choir director Andy Zager because he couldn't grasp one of the moves.

"I'm not sure how I'll do tonight. It may be all downhill from here," he joked.

Gregory joked Kerr might get the lowest bid of the night depending on his dance moves.

"I've really got to work the crowd," Kerr responded.

Money raised from Power of the Purse benefits early childhood education in the community, specifically Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and United Way's Born Learning Academy, Kurtz said.

"We're here to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and raise money to support the programs that United Way of Central Kentucky funds through our annual allocation process," she said.

The need for early childhood education is great, she said.

"In our region, 51 percent of children enter kindergarten unprepared to learn," Kurtz said. "What that means is later in life, that could lead to some challenges."

Children who are not reading at grade level by third grade are less likely to graduate and less likely to become contributing members of the community, she said.

This year's event sold 170 tickets. Kurtz said her goal was to raise \$20,000, which was surpassed with a total of \$23,428.69 raised for the night. Down the road, she hopes future events can raise more than \$50,000.

She wanted everyone to leave the event knowing they had a good time but also have a better understanding of the work United Way does in the community.

“I want them to know they left tonight supporting a great cause,” she said. “It’s all about supporting the kids in the community.”

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