

Silicon Valley/San Jose Business Journal - March 11, 2002

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SILICON VALLEY / SAN JOSE
BusinessJournal

From the March 8, 2002 print edition

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Pause

'Megabyte' leads the way at \$250,000 SharkByte auction

Mary Duan

While other sharks may be flashier, in the end it was a simple grey-and-white model adorned with a San Jose Sharks jersey that commanded the top price at the March 2 SharkByte charity auction. After a frenzied bout of bidding that had the Saturday-night crowd gasping and cheering, one of the hockey team's new owners snapped up the fiberglass beast titled "Megabyte" for \$20,000.

Greg Reyes, CEO of Brocade Communications Systems and one of the group of executives that agreed last week to purchase San Jose's National Hockey League team, also bought three other sharks during the auction. He did not attend the event, and his representative, who declined to give her name, could not say what he planned to do with the sharks.

In all, more than \$250,000 was raised for area charities during the lively, nearly three-hour auction held in the ballroom at the San Jose Convention Center. About 600 people attended -- for \$50 per ticket at the door (or \$20 pre-paid). They drank champagne, nibbled from a dessert buffet and rubbed shoulders with the artists who created the 100 fanciful sculptures.

Mayor Ron Gonzales opened the program, saying the sharks had provided San Jose with "countless smiles." Auctioneer David Reynolds kept things running smoothly, quipping that husbands and wives were not allowed to practice "spousal restraint" should one decide to bid against the other's wishes.

"The offending spouse will be fed to the sharks," he said. Later, when bidding was moving slowly on a piece titled "Shark With Balls," he egged the crowd on, telling it "Your friends are going to spend years asking why you did it."

With themes ranging from "Loan Shark," to a Barry Bonds-inspired shark titled "Bondage," there was a shark to suit every taste. Sponsors paid \$3,500 for a 6-foot, 35-pound undecorated fish, fabricated in Spain. After 250 artists submitted their ideas, 100 were chosen and given a fish.

Most were put on public display at various downtown locations and several near-downtown business districts last summer.

Standing next to his sculptural weather vane "N.E.W.S. Shark," artist Carlos Perez said he almost didn't participate in the project because he was too busy with other commissions and with planning his own wedding. Silicon Valley Community Newspapers and The Metro asked him to do it anyway.

"I was getting ready to get married and my [fiancée] was not happy with me" for taking on the project, he said. His sculpture went for \$6,500 to an unidentified buyer. At that price, it was one of the more expensive pieces of the night.

Artist Marilyn Pratt Leberz waited anxiously all night for the auction of disco-inspired "Mirror Ball Shark," which was one of the last on the program. While most sharks went for less than \$2,000, she was happily

surprised to find her sponsor, the West San Carlos Street Neighborhood Business Association, purchased it before the auction for \$6,000.

"Of course I think it could have gone for more," she said, grinning. "But I'm happy with the price."

Artist and sculptor Greg Hill spends three days a week working on construction projects -- his specialty is paving. He used recycled nails to hold together wooden concrete forms on his shark, "Sun on your skin, ache in your bones." It sold for \$5,200.

"I think it speaks to the idea of persevering, of working through pain," said Mr. Hill, a former San Jose State University wrestler. The proceeds from his shark will go to the Yosh Uchida Endowment Chair -- inside the shark's mouth, Mr. Hill painted the Japanese symbol for Judo.

Artist Sonya Paz had two sharks in the show, "Loan Shark" and "Definitely Downtown." An Adobe Systems Inc. Web technologist by day, she submitted six shark ideas. In retrospect, she's glad only two were chosen because of the sheer amount of work that went into her creations. "Loan Shark" sold for \$3,400, "Definitely Downtown" for \$3,200.

"I've been drawing and painting since I was a little kid, and I finally decided to start doing the kind of art I liked," she said. "I wanted to fill my house with color."

The whole purpose of SharkByte was to bring more people downtown. Judging by the auction attendance, the event's sponsors, including IBM and the San Jose Downtown Association, accomplished that.

Yvonne Head and her 8-year-old grandson Joseph, for example, spent a portion of last summer photographing Joseph with each shark and designing a book based on the pictures. They arrived at the auction's pre-show, toting the book and a camera with them to shoot the few remaining sharks they had missed on their outings.

"We're Sharks fans, and we heard about this and it seemed like a fun thing to do. We have details on all of them, and Joseph made a small shark for his parents for Christmas," Ms. Head said. "We would go out every weekend and meet people on the streets who were out to see each shark too. We had a very good time."

While the sharks will live on in Joseph Head's book, several of them will live on in the Cupertino backyard of Pizza-A-Go-Go owner Chuck Hammer. He bid on 26 of the first 30 sharks, and landed "Perfed Shark in the Dark" and "School Me" for a total of \$2,600.

"I think this has been a great program. A major art program is good for the city. I don't think San Jose does enough art things," said Mr. Hammer, who along with his wife Mary collects sculptures and paintings. "A year ago, when the economy was still good, I think you would have seen five-figure prices on a lot of these."

Asked how he planned on getting his sharks home, he said they would be placed in the back seat of his convertible and his wife would hold them down. She was surprised to hear of that plan.

Real estate developer Bill Baron went home with two sharks as well, the cow-inspired "Moo" and "The Patriot 2." He liked the fact that "Moo" was inspired by the Chicago and New York public art shows "Cows on Parade."

"It's marvelous to see so many people come out here and show civic pride," he said. "The people who put on this event should really be proud. It's a great, great first effort."

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