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Tim Bower

## **Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner**

**More charities are auctioning dates with the stars, but what do bidders really get? Our reporters on endless waits, no-shows -- and \$95,000 for a 15-minute 'dinner.'**

**By NANCY KEATES and JON WEINBACH**

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Miami entrepreneur Heynard Paz-Chow is always game to pick up tips from successful executives. So when he heard a charity was auctioning off a lunch with rap-world star Russell Simmons, Mr. Paz-Chow raced to top his rivals in a frenzied online bidding war. He won the meal for \$1,625.

But when Mr. Paz-Chow called Mr. Simmons soon after to arrange the rendezvous, Mr. Simmons's office hung up on him -- not once but three times. "They said they didn't know who I was," says Mr. Paz-Chow. The charity, Communities in Schools, was finally able to arrange a date, and next week Mr. Paz-Chow is flying to New York, on his own dime, for the meal, a year after winning the auction. "I guess they're going to bring Chinese food in," he says.

Going, going, gone...good luck. As charities increasingly put celebrities on the block, winning bidders sometimes don't get all that they bargained for. It can take months or even years to schedule one of these outings, and sometimes the stars don't even show up. Caroline Rhea, a comedian who lives in New York and Los Angeles, bid \$22,000 at a charity auction for a golf game with Bill Clinton -- but President Clinton couldn't make it. "I think he was intimidated because I told him that I got a hole in one at a par-three course," says Ms. Rhea. (She still made a donation to the organization, Seeds of Peace, which works with children from regions of conflict.)

Sanford Edward, a land developer in Newport Beach, Calif., said he didn't plan on making a big pledge at last year's gala for the V Foundation, an organization that supports cancer research. "I told my wife, 'Don't even take a paddle,' " he says. But when an offering came up that included tickets to a Duke-North Carolina men's basketball game and a dinner with Duke's famous coach, Mike Krzyzewski, the 52-year-old couldn't resist. He bid all the way up to \$95,000.

Mr. Edward went to North Carolina last month to collect his prize. So much for the "private dinner": The coach appeared for about 15 minutes, and Mr. Edward spent the rest of the meal hanging out with Mr. Krzyzewski's wife, daughter and son-in-law. "They were very gracious," says Mr. Edward, who admits he didn't know beforehand how busy Coach K would be that weekend. "I mean, it was the night before the game."

Some buyers would be grateful for even 15 minutes with fame. Rita Tateel, founder of the Celebrity Source, a Los Angeles company that specializes in wrangling stars for corporate and nonprofit events, says cancellations are common. Every year, Ms. Tateel gets about a dozen celebrities to drive in the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach race, as part of an eight-day "Racing for Kids" program that raises money for children's hospitals. Most years, she says about half of the celebrities who initially expressed interest wind up pulling out later because of scheduling conflicts. She says she's been turned down by A-list names such as Ben Stiller and director George Lucas. "It's easier to get the celebrities to say yes than it is to fulfill the request," she says.



Auction winner Jody Lang, right, with Ricky Martin and chef Allen Susser.

Larry David, for one, says he does his best to show up -- but he still can't figure out why people pay so much for his time. The comedy writer and actor has even lampooned the auction trend in his HBO series, "Curb Your Enthusiasm." In a 2001 episode, Mr. David's character allows himself to be sold off for a lunch date at a benefit for a (fictional) malady called "Groat's Syndrome." At lunch, Mr. David's character offends the donor, gets in an argument and finally ends up in a fight with the donor's hyperactive daughter. "It's insane. I think you've got to be crazy to want to have lunch with me," he said yesterday by telephone from Los Angeles.

All told, Mr. David figures he's been on the block about eight times. Last month, a real-life bidder pledged about \$30,000 for a package that included a hotel stay, tickets to "The Tonight Show" and a golf outing with Mr. David at the Riviera Country Club in Los Angeles, on behalf of New York's Riverdale Country School. ("A rich white school really needs more money," he says.) The hardest part, he adds, is planning a time to meet the winner. "I'll try to get the wife to give me a green light for a Sunday," he says. "I'm not very funny or entertaining on the golf course. I know they're saying to themselves, 'I paid 25 grand for this?'"

Yet a brush with greatness is an increasingly powerful fund-raising tool, charities say. The Moyer Foundation, run by Karen Moyer and husband, Jamie, a Seattle Mariners pitcher, held an auction last month in which more than half of the packages offered celebrity encounters. Among the lots: an invitation for four to Elton John's Oscar party in Los Angeles (winning bid: \$25,000) and a group Japanese dinner with Mariners outfielder

Ichiro Suzuki (nearly \$20,000). "These experiences have become the things that attract the highest bids," Ms. Moyer says. All told, the one-night auction raised \$1.2 million for the children's charity. That's a 40% increase from what it raised last year in five separate events.

At last year's gala in Cannes, France, for Amfar, an AIDS research organization, the auction included private tennis lessons with Monica Seles and Boris Becker and a performance of "New York, New York" by Liza Minnelli. The event raised \$1.9 million, more than double what Amfar raised in 2004. Communities in Schools, meanwhile, says auctioning off lunches with the likes of John Cusack, James Carville and Mr. Simmons has been a fund-raising boon. The Alexandria, Va., group, which promotes keeping kids in school, offered more than 200 celebrity lunches last year and raised \$167,000 -- up from the \$90,000 it earned from about 50 celebrity lunches it put on the block in 2001.

### Weepy Speeches

Charities have been touting the celebrity schmooze since Make A Wish foundation began convincing stars to reach out to sick children. Agencies specializing in recruiting and coordinating celebrities for nonprofits sprang up as more organizations started adopting the idea. "In the end, anyone can buy a yacht," says Andy Boose of New York's AAB Productions, which produces nonprofit fund-raising events. "But they can't buy a yacht ride with Sharon Stone."

The trend is particularly prevalent in the sports philanthropy circuit, which until recently was often a parade of rubber-chicken dinners and weepy speeches, with little interaction between donors and athletes. Now corporations often donate money to charities so their top executives can get playing time with the likes of Michael Jordan or Lance Armstrong. "Plenty of people really just want to beat the pants off" sports celebrities, says Stephanie Sandler, CEO of the Giving Back Fund, which serves as an umbrella organization for many athlete charity foundations. "We've been toying with how competitive to make it."



Gretchen Wilson, center, with Paul and Tonya Hohmann.

Bring it on, says Jamie Majeski. Last year, the 42-year-old marketing and technology executive from Princeton, N.J., won an online auction for a chance to spar against boxer Al "Ice" Cole, a former cruiserweight champion. Mr. Majeski says he used the event to raise additional charitable contributions: He raised about \$50,000 from friends, directing the money to an organization for retired boxers as well as to his own foundation, which supports families with special-needs children. When he hit the ring last August, his 5-foot-11-inch, 170-pound frame was no match for Mr. Cole, a 6-foot-4, 246-pounder. Mr.

Majeski suffered a broken nose and bruised ribs.

Still, it won't be his final brush with stardom. In late 2004, Mr. Majeski paid \$3,500 at a charity auction to play a 2-on-2 basketball game against NBA Hall-of-Famer Bill Walton and Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz. (The money went to the Giving Back Fund and the Starlight Starbright Children's Foundation.) Mr. Majeski says he hasn't been able to set a date yet that works for everyone, but adds that for the past year Mr. Walton has been sending "intimidating" emails full of trash talk. "That's what you're paying for -- the jock mentality that makes you feel like you're one of the dudes."

Charities that organize celebrity events say winning bidders can't expect things to go perfectly, and they should read the fine print. In the case of Mr. Edward, who had the 15-minute dinner encounter with Coach Krzyzewski, the auction catalog disclosed that the meal would be with "members of the Krzyzewski family." A spokesman for President Clinton says Seeds for Peace misunderstood the president's commitment, and that in general he doesn't auction his time. Mr. Paz-Chow, the entrepreneur whose calls to Mr. Simmons's office went unanswered, should have made his plans through the Communities in Schools office, the charity says. It's "not uncommon" for celebrities to reschedule dates several times, a spokeswoman says. "That's just kind of how it goes."

Some companies are starting to auction celebrity experiences online as an advertising tool. Godiva Chocolatier Inc. has launched new products over the past two years by tying them to auctions for dinners with celebrities including Sarah Jessica Parker, Leonardo DiCaprio, Ricky Martin and Benjamin Bratt. (Mr. Martin scored the highest bid, \$47,200; Mr. Bratt went for the lowest, \$6,550.) "It's a more hip, more fashionable way to announce new products," says Gene Dunkin, president of Godiva North America. The hook to draw the celebrities: The stars can choose which charity gets the proceeds.



Don Friedman, who won lunch with Patti LaBelle.

That worked for Jody Lang, a hospitality consultant in Miami, who won the dinner with Mr. Martin. The money went to Mr. Martin's own children's charity, the Ricky Martin Foundation. Ms. Lang invited seven friends to attend, and Mr. Martin dined with them for four hours. "He couldn't have been greater," says Ms. Lang. "He was so friendly, open, funny and charming to all of us."

### **Concert for \$20,000**

Some stars say it's the least they can do -- and it's flattering, to boot. At this year's Seeds of Peace auction, R&B singer John Legend, who recently won three Grammy awards, offered a 20-minute concert at a private home for 20 people. Mr. Legend says he normally would charge more than the \$20,000 minimum bid, but this was for a good cause. Plus, he drew higher offers

a date auction in college. "I went for about \$20 then," he says.

Of course, some brushes with celebrities veer off the script. Joanna Saada, a 35-year-old manager for Lionsgate films in Santa Monica, Calif., and her mother paid about \$6,000 in 2001 to accompany the Los Angeles Kings of the National Hockey League on a two-game road trip. First, they weren't allowed on the team plane, which was promised beforehand. Then during the trip, a broadcaster from a regional sports network played a practical joke on them -- and sent the two women straight into the Kings' locker room after a game in Vancouver. "It was funny for him," says Ms. Saada. "But not for us. One guy was totally nude. We felt a little bit like stalkers."

--Christina S.N. Lewis contributed to this article.

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## The Price of Fame

How much for a private tennis match with Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf? Here, ordered by the size of the winning bid, is a look at some high-profile personalities who have auctioned their time in the name of charity, and what happened on the celebrity date:

| CELEBRITY/CHARITY   | WINNING BID/EXPERIENCE  | COMMENT   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Bill Clinton and Mike Weir</b> Robin Hood Foundation       | \$300,000 golf with stars, lessons with a pro and time with sports psychologist | Julius Gaudio, a hedge-fund manager who is also on this New York-based poverty aid charity's leadership council, won this package two years ago but still hasn't booked its highlights, rounds with President Clinton and pro golfer Mr. Weir. (He blames it on his own crowded schedule.) He has managed to take his father-in-law for a round with Australian pro Adam Scott. |
| <b>Wolfgang Puck, Emeril Lagasse, Nobu Matsuhisa</b> Lou Ruvo | \$275,000 for private dinner for 60, prepared                                   | This package wasn't in the auction catalog for  |

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| <p>Alzheimer's Institute</p>  | <p>by the three chefs</p>  | <p>the institute's February gala, but the chefs offered it at the event. (Other lots included dinners with Katie Couric and Michael Milken.) The chefs will be busy: Four different donors, including casino magnate Steve Wynn, snapped up the dinner at \$275,000 each -- for \$1.1 million in total donations.</p>   |
| <p><b>Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf</b> Lou Ruvo Alzheimer's Institute</p> | <p>\$165,000 for private tennis match</p>                            | <p>Agassi and Graf have become semi-regulars at the home court of Jane Gale, whose family owns Las Vegas media and real-estate companies. Ms. Gale and her husband, Jeff, a photographer, recently won their third play date with the married former No. 1 tennis players, and have now donated nearly \$500,000 at auctions for a chance to play mixed doubles with them. On court, says Ms. Gale, "Steffi's a much harder competitor than Andre."</p> |
| <p><b>Patrick Dempsey, William Shatner and others</b> Racing for Kids</p> | <p>\$50,350 for Grand Prix racing at track in Long Beach, Calif.</p> | <p>Before placing the winning bid, Thom Naito, a business analyst in Los Angeles, had watched this children's-hospital fund-raiser for years and says it looked "amazing": The eight-day event includes four days of training and racing against pros and</p>   |

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|   |   | actors. (Last year's winner, Jill Pasant, bid about \$71,000 for the event -- and her husband, Dave Pasant, won the three previous years.)   |
| <b>Dalai Lama</b> The Moyer Foundation                      | \$32,000 for face-to-face meeting with spiritual leader | Everything's cyclical: At last month's auction of this Seattle-based children's charity -- run by Mariners pitcher Jamie Moyer and his wife, Karen -- Betty Tong scored a meeting with Tibetan Buddhism's supreme head, though she'd met him a few times before. "I just love the guy," says the Seattle real-estate executive.  |
| <b>Ben Affleck</b> Ataxia-Telangiectasia Children's Project | \$28,300 for dinner with the actor                      | "It seemed like a fun thing to do," says Mark DeNyse, a 41-year-old Web developer who took seven friends to the meeting at a Boston restaurant. Mr. Affleck brought his mother and aunt; talk ranged from health care to the Red Sox. "I didn't have any illusions of suddenly becoming buddies," says Mr. DeNyse. "I did it for the charity." (The group supports research on A-T, a degenerative disease.) |
| <b>Stanley Tucci</b> Amfar                                  | \$17,500 per couple for lunch                           | Last year two couples won this package, which included a meal with Mr. Tucci -- he starred   |

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|  |  | <p>in "The Terminal" and "Big Night" -- as well as a private tour of MoMA by Sotheby's Vice President Jamie Niven. One of the winners, Dallas car-dealership owner John Eagle, says his main aim was to help Amfar, which supports AIDS research. "I don't know if we'll ever have that lunch," he says.</p>   |
| <p><b>Big &amp; Rich and Gretchen Wilson</b><br/>Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum</p> | <p>\$10,000 per couple for dinner, concert and a post-show party</p> | <p>Eight separate couples bought this package, which included seats at a benefit concert, dinner with singer Ms. Wilson and country duo Big &amp; Rich, a guitar autographed by the artists and a reception, plus hotel and air fare. "It was a great bargain," says winner Paul Hohmann of Plano, Texas. Ms. Wilson couldn't make it to dinner but hung out with the group on her tour bus.</p> |
| <p><b>John Cusack</b> Communities in Schools</p>   | <p>\$5,525 for lunch</p>   | <p>Lynne Scott, a 39-year-old widow who owns a dog-care business in Ohio, won this auction last year on eBay. She paid her way to Los Angeles for a one-hour lunch at a Beverly Hills restaurant, where Mr. Cusack brought staff members and talk centered on his next movie project. The actor</p>  |

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|  |                                      | was gracious, Ms. Scott says, but she wouldn't bid on a celebrity experience again.  |
| <b>Thomas Friedman</b> Seeds of Peace  | \$4,850 for lunch                    | Author and New York Times columnist Mr. Friedman chose the restaurant for lunch with New York private equity-fund executive Steve Shenfeld, his wife and two friends. When the party arrived, they saw Mr. Friedman dining with someone they knew; the writer had booked back-to-back auction winners, and Mr. Shenfeld got the dessert course. (The conversation was great, Mr. Shenfeld says.) |
| <b>Patti LaBelle</b> Communities in Schools  | \$3,550 for lunch with the singer    | Chicago realtor Don Friedman won this lunch two years in a row through the Alexandria, Va., charity's auction on eBay. Mr. Friedman, who describes himself as a long-time fan, says he and Ms. LaBelle are now friends -- though "I don't just call her to talk about the weather."  |
| <b>Bill Walton and Alan Dershowitz</b><br>The Giving Back Fund and Starlight<br>Starbright Children's Foundation | \$3,500 for a 2-on-2 basketball game | Jamie Majeski, a former marketing executive in Princeton, N.J., and a pal won a chance in late 2004 to play a half-court game at the San Diego home of NBA Hall-of-Famer Mr. Walton, along with Harvard law professor Mr.  |

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|  |  | <p>Dershowitz, who played hoops in high school. They haven't set a date yet, but meanwhile Mr. Majeski says Mr. Walton has sent him "intimidating" emails. "Walton does talk a lot of trash," says Mr. Majeski. "That's what you're paying for."</p> |
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