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Patrons enjoy royal-themed Vintage Affair

*Column by Deborah Hayes Moore
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Recognized as a top gala fundraiser among those hosted in the Mid-South region, the American Cancer Society's Vintage Affair has seen numerous changes and unprecedented success over its 16-year history. This year, organizers, volunteers and patrons raised the bar in the effort to "chop off the head of cancer" during the gala, which grossed over \$420,000.

A series of wine-related events and activities that began in August culminated in the grand evening at the Wynlakes Golf and Country Club, with beheading gently referenced by those summoned to "Spend An Evening with Henry VIII."

The king sent his messengers about the city and beyond to deliver invitations developed by Bill Cunningham and the Cunningham Group. Sealed with red wax embossed with the Vintage Affair logo, guests were invited to serve as warriors in the fight against cancer, and to experience the royal treatment during an event for which a majestic ambiance was designed by Bob Vardaman of Events Management.

With at least 80 supporters on a waiting list to support the gala, more than 460 patrons eagerly answered the call to enjoy a night of fabulous food and libations, and to cast bids for great wines and indulgences that were scheduled to go "on the block" -- the auction block, that is. In the process, guests also were given the opportunity to spend the evening with old and new friends, and to taste more than 100 specially selected vintages poured by representatives of more than a dozen wine distributors.

The Vintage Affair castle

Having designed the look of Vintage Affair for several years, guests have come to look forward to the surprise and magic of each evening Vardaman designs for the fundraiser. He was inspired to develop the Henry VIII theme for the 2010 event after watching the Showtime hit "The Tudors."

Everyone said, "he outdid himself" as a cast of characters helped him roll out the theme. Outfitted in costumes provided by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, they added true royal flair as they executed the king's commands throughout his castle during the night.

The country club had been transformed into Henry's castle, including outside where the porto cocheire was draped with volumes of red fabric with special lighting projecting the Vintage Affair logo. Steps away, Booker T. Washington Magnet High School students Colby Smith, Isaac Bell and Xavier Molina were dressed as trumpeters to the king, each heralding the arrival of guests with great fanfare.

Inside, the lobbies and walkways within the castle's most recent addition were draped with black velvet fabrics, and complemented with spotlights and regal arrangements of roses, orchids and lilies designed in elevated urns. Breathtaking on their own, the accents were only hints to the surprises that unfolded for each guest as they turned the corner to enter the king's court.

Guards Wesley Welch and Albert Owens held the king's standard and surveyed the scene from pedestals. As the court's minstrel, Sam Boswell was seated on a royal bench to play medieval-inspired music on his guitar.

A royal welcome

Wearing a majestic cloak, Mark Bullock served as the king's ambassador and dramatically announced the arrival of every lord and lady as they entered the court area, including Lord Todd Strange (better known as the mayor of Montgomery), and his wife, Lady Linda.

Jacob Folmar, dressed as a cardinal in a bright red robe with gold trim, gave his blessing to the Stranges and each guest that followed as they were greeted by Dee Coleman and Karen Northcutt, Vintage Affair co-chairs for the last 11 years. Having spent all year planning the fundraiser, the ladies were outfitted as court jesters and relegated to spend the night sending each guest along a long walk amid the castle scene to pay their respects to the king.

Connie and Carl Barker, Amy and Bruce Crawford and Gage and Mark LeQuire were among those met with majestic bows and curtsies from a long line of lords and ladies of the court, including Mary Austin Geddie, Barrett Bailey; Laura Lee Blackwood, Jake Griffin Carmen Scarbrough, Evan Mills, Allison Weverink and Logan Simmons.

All were dressed in spectacular period costumes, impressing guests such as Carrie and Craig Banks. Their regal greetings lasted for more than two hours, with the characters making every guest feel like royalty as they were welcomed to the court.

Seay Earhart played the role of King Henry VIII for the night, sitting on an elevated throne at the end of the castle walkway, where he expressed his appreciation to each arrival for supporting the worthy cause. Just beyond the king, floating candles glowed in a Circle of Hope as memorials and honorariums to those remembered by the court.

Along the castle's loggia and in the many rooms beyond, the first segment of the evening unfolded as a wine tasting and super silent auction continued to the outside amid a specially constructed tent.

Something new

As has become a custom in the last few years, patrons received insulated, reusable "essential sacs" containing wine-related gifts as theme enhancers underwritten by area businesses. Each was also presented with a wine glass etched with the Vintage Affair logo to use during the tasting portion of the silent auction.

King Henry would have never imagined the technology element that was added to the event to help organizers keep track of all the treasures accumulated for the night. Instead of pen and paper of years past, patrons were given hand-held IML machines to make their bids. The IML was created for another royal, Prince Charles, and has been used at events hosted by Tom Hanks and Oprah Winfrey.

Vintage Affair patrons were excited as a group of Huntingdon College football players, who served as volunteers for the evening, explained how to use the machines, which had cell-phone styling. Many guests were quick studies, and enjoyed being able to stand anywhere on the castle's premises and still have the ease of making and checking incremental bids on the items they desired.

Not having to jockey for positions over tables and bidding sheets, guests found themselves building an electronic competitive spirit with an aura of royal secrecy because (void of paper and pen bidding), they didn't know who was bidding against them.

They enjoyed visiting with friends, sampling the wines, and the ability to continue to bid, as they glanced at flat-panel wide-screen televisions that were placed in every room. The screens provided a rolling update of the bids placed on each item, and a running total of all silent auction proceeds.

King's wines for ransom

The handheld devices were simultaneously shut down at the appointed hour, but for more than two hours their numbers were eagerly pressed as guests reviewed and cast their bids on more than 200 bottled vintages, which included Methuselah 6-liter bottles of champagne, 20-year-old ports and select

lots of wine varietals, as well as special spirits such as 25-year-old single malt scotches.

A series of wine-related events had been hosted over the last five months, with guests at Cellar Club, Sommelier's Evening, Special Spirits Soiree, generously selecting bottles for purchase and donation for the big night.

Other individuals and businesses donated more than 90 additional items. Among them were trips, parties, antiques, jewelry, home décor items; themed gift baskets and bins that were displayed or referenced last Saturday in each room of the club's main level, and beyond to the king's tent.

Jill and John Mastin and Sue and Jerry Spencer were among the hundreds to enter the area where long red banners bearing the names of the fundraisers' major sponsors were draped along the perimeter of the tent.

A treasure trove of gifts

Henry VIII's image was captured on all the tent cards describing the auction items. As Allison Ingram monitored the gifts and trips, her husband, Mike Ingram, had his eye on his IML monitoring the bids for the package for two at the High Museum Atlanta Wine Auction. While enjoying the moments with John Reardon, Mike kept an eye on the package, which received the highest bid of all the silent auction items.

Susan Heck wore a ravishing red dress for the special February night she enjoyed with her husband, Chris, and a multitude of Vintage Affair volunteers. Others seen there included Cindy and Ham Wilson, Nicky and Bubba Armstrong, Laura and Barrie Harmon, Debby and Roger Spain, Janet McQueen, John Mark Vermillion, Ashley and Scott McDaniel, Suanne and Steve Samelson, Peggy and Darrell Warner, Jeanie and Duncan McRae, Karen and Marvin Campbell, Doug Rice and Guy Wallace, Nancy and Lee Ellis, Jim Scott, Joan Ensley, Dan Morris, Donna and Cecil Robins, Jeanie Holloway; Becky and Lee Youngblood of Selma, Rusty Gregory, Linda and Julio Rios, Sherry and Chuck Nath, Kathy Lenn, Lynn Ray, Shannon Ensley, Louise Cunningham and Sara Bozeman.

Judy and Rick Heinzman were attending Vintage Affair for the first time, as were Susan and Dick Morris, who were excited about guests response to Regions Bank's creative donations to the fundraiser. Those items included a "Barbecue and Beaujolais" gathering for 40 and a "Burgundy and Basketball" package centered around attendance at the SEC Championship.

Angie Carroll was excited about the dinner parties up for bid at SaZa, Michael's Table and the Chop House. Other guests were excited about the opportunity to serve for one game as guest coach of the Auburn Tigers men's basketball team; while others were attracted by the creative displays that supported many of the other items up for bid.

Spa robes, flip flops and soothing oils were displayed for spa services. Toy horses and a corral were displayed to encourage bidding on the get-a-way to the Steeplechase at Callaway Gardens. Poker chips, playing cards and dice were stacked and scattered leading to the Bellagio Blast for 2 in Las Vegas.

Lots to taste, lots to bid on

Vintage Affair patrons are among those who love and appreciate wine, so a two-hour wine tasting of more than 80 varietals was a large attraction to the event. It was extended as guests enjoyed red, white and sparkling vintages poured by several distributors amid rooms with roaring fires and scenic views.

With wine lots to review and lots of wine to taste, Sue Groce was among those enjoying the festivities. She visited with friends near the country club's main entrance, where Brian Ensley and others of Alabama Crown Distributing captivated a large crowd of supporters during the night with red and white varietals at two tasting stations.

Representatives of Bama Budweiser offered tastings of imported microbrews, while representatives of

Rush Wines encouraged guests on the other side of the tent to taste their pinot noirs that are produced in Alabama.

Representatives of Johnson Brothers Wine and Best Cellars International offered more than a dozen French Wines, while representatives from McCormick Distilling provided tastings of 360 Vodka in the Sun Room, as bid watchers gathered near one of the big-screen TVs.

Charles Brammer represented his family of winemakers at Morgan Creek Vineyards, located in Harpersville, which specializes in muscadine wines and Chilton County peach wines. Others represented

Allstate Beverage Co., Grassroots Wine Wholesalers, Ingenium Wines, International Wines, MBC-United Wholesale, Morgan Creek Vineyards, and Pinnacle Imports, whose representatives poured French champagne that received "Best of the Year" honors by *Wine Enthusiast* magazine.

This year, guests enjoyed the tastings throughout the silent auction period with passed hors d'oeuvres that included crostini with goat cheese and orange marmalade; crab salad stuffed vegetable brioche; and bacon-wrapped figs with bleu cheese that was such a big hit, the chef ran out of the delicious delicacies.

One sip led to another as guests were put in the mood to make judgments about their favorites, and to place bids until the last second on other bottles and lots of wine displayed from room to room.

A feast fit for a king

When the king's trumpeters sounded the conclusion of the silent auction, the doors of the Swan Ballroom were opened for the night's grand auction and dinner. The black velvet panels that lined the king's court were draped over the doors, and the sounds of Praetotius, a collection of 16th-century English consort music, wafted through the room.

Kiki and David Hughes were among the more than 388 guests who enjoyed the music written for a king's coronation amid the ballroom's Vintage Affair ambiance.

This year Bob Vardaman had designed tapestries featuring coats of arms that were suspended around the room's perimeter and flanked by gold silk panels and beautiful standing candelabras.

The floor was filled with a sea of tables and chairs, which had been given a special medieval-inspired look by teams of Vintage Affair volunteers two days before the gala. Burgundy floor-length linens had been topped with velvet and silk patchwork-inspired overlays, while chairs were covered with burgundy l'amour, and tied with gold ascot-style sashes.

Pillars glowed around cypress wreaths that surrounded armillary sphere centerpieces. A coat of arms was included on the dinner's menu card, placed atop gold l'amour napkins and next to plates of herb-crusted brie and winter greens garnished with roasted red peppers, marinated cucumbers and fennel vinaigrette. Presented with this first course, Saddle Rock Chardonnay by the Malibu Family Winery was provided by Alabama Crown Distributing Co.

When the entrée appeared, it was a king's bounty of filet mignon and Airline chicken breast with spinach bacon cream and a red wine reduction, accompanied by potato and mushroom au gratin and a medley of haricot Verts and peppers. An Arancio merlot sauvignon blanc chardonnay blend was served with this course as well as a Murphy Goode Liars Dice. Both were provided by MBC United Wholesale.

Scott Dillard came from Birmingham to enjoy the fundraiser, as did Ed Partridge, the president-elect of the American Cancer Society's national board of directors. They joined Imperial, Master and Grand Vintner sponsor representatives for the stellar event. Those sponsors included the James W. Wilson Jr. and Wynona Wilson Family Foundation, the Montgomery Cancer Center, the Caddell Foundation, Reinhardt Lexus, the Central Alabama Community Foundation, Hyundai Motor Manufacturing of Alabama, Merrill Lynch and Plastic Surgery Associates of Montgomery.

Suzanne and Steve Davidson and Cindy and Gaeton Lorino were among those who enjoyed the night with Partridge, Allison and Mike Ingram. Among others supporting the night's main event were Loree and Owen Aronov, Amy and Bruce Crawford Beverly and Reese McKinney, Martha and Riley Roby, Beth and Joel Dubina, Peter Fromader, Donna and Bill McGuffin, Vickie Jones, Lisa Capell, Lisa Beers and Judy Stewart, who reminisced about being a runner at the first Vintage Affair.

They were among those who enjoyed dessert that was designed as a tribute to the king's history of amore. Developed as a tri-level confection, Six Wives Chocolate Seduction was served with a medley of berries and mounted on a king's fluffy bed of royal chocolate. Chocolate-dipped strawberries and sugar-dusted truffles were layered with a bit of Henry VIII irony, through a skewer with a gold ribbon symbolizing the beheading of a well-known queen, as well as the dreaded disease, cancer.

"A feast is made of laughter, and wine maketh merry; but money answereth all things" was a verse captured from Ecclesiastes to support the night's theme.

With laughter and wine energizing the spirit of merry-making during dinner, the king's trumpeter announced the commencement of the grand auction and the arrival of renown auctioneer David Reynolds. Reynolds, who returned to support Vintage Affair for the seventh year, was given direction from the king to encourage guests to "drink up and spend up" for the 40 special items on the auction block.

The ultimate experience

A magnum of wine each month for a year, and a Porsche Driving Experience on a Grand Prix style-course outside of Birmingham, were just a couple of the special packages offered. Lucky bidders also walked away with a single malt scotch tasting evening for eight; and the premier of a Cellar Crawl package that featured 25 bottles of wine.

Reynolds promoted a \$6,000 bidding frenzy for a dinner party to be planned for 10 guests at the Lake Martin home of Jim Scott. A Springhouse Wine Pairing Dinner for 10 at Lake Martin, and a Jackson Hole Wine Auction package for two in Wyoming, received the next highest bids.

The night's Fund-A-Need experience was what Reynolds called, "an example of turning the passion for a cure into cash" as dinner guests spontaneously raised their hands and pulled out their checkbooks to pledge a king's ransom to support life-saving and life-changing cancer research projects.

As time was drawing nigh, guests departed having captured some of the fruits of several vineyards during the silent and live auctions, and having served during the night as Henry VIII's warriors in the fight against cancer.

Visiting winemakers honored

During the dinner, several visiting winemakers were recognized as Vintage Affair's special guests of honor. They included Michael Keenan of the Robert Keenan Winery; Clay Fritz of Fritz Winery, Vintage Affair's 2010 Angel Juelle Fisher of Fisher Vineyards, Susan and Tom Curlin of DuMOL, Doug Berloger of Falcor Winery and Julie and Charles Atkins of 5 Points Cellars.

Earlier in the day, Jamie and Winston Ashurst hosted a luncheon at their Greystone home to honor many of them and their Montgomery hosts. As a new Vintage Affair component this year, each host brought two bottles of wine from their winemaker, and the luncheon's food and preparation were donated by Shari Rossman of Cool Beans Café d'Art, who added an espresso-flavored panna cotta that everyone raved about.

Among those joining the visiting winemakers were Cheri and Mark Jordan, Natalie and Mark Mussafer, Gage and Mark LeQuire, Ken Reynolds, Sarah and Lee Moore, Roger Setzler, Jeri Breiner, Lorri Brown, Robin Rowe, Colleen and David Reynolds and Nicky and Bubba Armstrong.

While guests had dined sufficiently on the king's cuisine that night, on the eve of Vintage Affair several

generous patrons had enjoyed distinct winemakers' dinners in two Montgomery area homes as supporting fundraisers and celebrations.

Juelle Fisher of Sonoma, Calif., joined Gage and Mark LeQuire at their exquisite Montgomery home to co-host their fifth annual Fisher Vineyards Vintner's Dinner. James Farmer had arranged orchids and calla lilies throughout the house where guests mingled to enjoy the seven-course event that began with appetizers and cocktails, continued with dinner on the main level of their home, and concluded with after dinner drinks and artisanal cheeses in the cellar.

Ted Nobles of Nobles and the Olive Room donated and prepared the night's meal, with dishes paired with extraordinary wines selected by Juelle Fisher.

Janice and Roger Setzler of Mobile and Jeri Breiner and Lori Brown came from Atlanta to enjoy the dinner with Montgomery area residents Linda and Julio Rios, Jamie and Winston Ashurst, Pam and Michael Strickland, Keven and Katrina Belt, Laura and Barrie Harmon, Donna and Bill Knox, Dianne and Glen Pinkston, Loree and Owen Aronov and Juelle Fisher's sister, Robin Lamb Rowe, who had served on Vintage Affair's wine acquisition committee years ago.

On the same night, Sarah and Lee Moore hosted a new Winemakers' Dinner for Vintage Affair this year. Michael Keenan was the special guest at their stunning home for the Keenan Winery Wine Dinner. Wines were provided by Grassroots Wine Wholesalers from his family's vineyard.

Among the patrons joining them were Jennifer and Glen Crumpton, Daniel Haddox, Charles Spurlock, Mary Nelms and Will Parsons, Ken Reynolds, Derk Lyerly, Martha Demere, Shana and Paul James, Pam and Jodie Hughes, Gayle Hudgens and Joe Leuschke, Jenny and Johnny Ives and Robin and Jeff Blitz.

Vintage Affair co-chairs Dee Coleman and Karen Northcutt made an appearance to thank guests for their support just as they were seated to savor the culinary experience designed, prepared and donated by Gary Garner of Garrett's restaurant.

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