

CREAM CITY/People



15 MINUTES WITH: DAN PRONLEY

BY LAUREN SIEBEN
PHOTO BY DAVID SZYMANSKI

By day, Dan Pronley works in software sales. But after hours, he moonlights as an auctioneer, using his stage presence and fundraising experience to help local nonprofits, schools and churches raise money. He tells MKE Lifestyle how he broke into auctioneering and shares his top tips on planning a successful auction.

How did you get your start as an auctioneer?

I've always been involved in theater in some shape or form. I'm very comfortable in front of people, which gives me a plus, because most people are not. Twenty years ago I was on a committee at my local parish; we've been doing an auction there for almost 30 years now. One of our committee members left, and the committee turned to me and said, "OK, Dan, now you need to be the auctioneer!" I'd never done it before, and I actually had a ball. I had so much fun with it that I decided it would be a great little side gig.

You only work with nonprofit organizations. Why is that?

A nonprofit fundraiser has a very different style than, say, farm auctioneers or auto auctioneers. Not only do you have to raise as much money as possible, but you have to be entertaining and you have to understand how the bidding and the value of the organization's mission come into play. I didn't like farm auctions — it just didn't fit my personality. I'm much more engaged with nonprofits. A lot of my interaction is consulting beyond just showing up and doing a live auction.

How have auctions and fundraising events evolved over the years?

The old way, 20 years ago, you might have a live auction that might have 20 to 30 items, and it would last all night long. People would spend the entire evening socializing and bidding. Within the last decade, the audience's attention span has become shorter. The items they're auctioning off are changing, especially for the young people. They want more experiences, rather than things.

What goes into a successful live auction?

A successful event is when people had fun. If they had fun, they're going to talk about it, and there's an opportunity for them to come back again. In an auction, you never know what an item is going to go for. You hope you get the top dollar and you hope there are two people bidding, because if there's one person bidding, they're going to get the item for the lowest price. A lot of it has to do with momentum. You create a bell curve: How do you put the right items in the middle so that excitement is generated and you keep going from there? All of that comes into the consulting.

When you're onstage, how do you keep an audience engaged?

You have to interject some jokes along the way. You have to be interactive and likable. I always ask for a cordless microphone; I do not stand behind the podium much at all. I get down off the stage, I'm running across the room, and I make a joke about, "Oh my God, I needed my steps today anyway." If you're not doing a good job and the auction is a spectator sport — meaning all they're doing is watching and not participating — then you haven't succeeded. **MKE**

MY FIVE FAVORITE THINGS!

1

Enjoying family time. Life is too short to not laugh with family as much as possible!

2

Being positive. Smiles are contagious.

3

Giving back. Volunteering both time and talent to help others.

4

Being a director for local school and community theaters, where I can be part of a team and mentor others.

5

Working with my hands: gardening, playing guitar and building things.

