

# GOING, GOING, GONE!

BY ELIZABETH JANE WALKER

The National Auctioneers Association has given more than \$2 million for the children of St. Jude. And once a year, the NAA lets kids at the hospital participate in an action-packed auction of their very own.

This is no ordinary Monday morning in the cafeteria at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Absent are the clink of silverware and the scrape of chairs on linoleum. Instead, the room resounds with an undulating chant that rises and falls like



*Four-year-old Alec Inglett perches on his dad's lap to bid for the perfect toy.*

ocean waves. Children bounce and bob like buoys on the sea, popping out of their chairs to wave white placards. But this is more than child's play. It's an auc-

tion where savvy bidders plot their strategy with a seriousness that belies their years.

"I'm not going to bid on just anything," says an 8-year-old auction-goer, as she nervously counts her cash for the third time. "I'm going to wait for a certain watch." She runs to a table piled high with toys and points out a colorful timepiece. "That is the one I really, really want."

This is the sixth year that the National Auctioneers Association (NAA) has held a toy auction at St. Jude. Each pint-sized participant receives \$30 in "play money" and a card emblazoned with a bid number. Tables are piled with treasures ranging from race cars and jewelry boxes to cell phones, collectible dolls and baseball cards. At precisely 10:15 a.m., two world-champion auctioneers take the podium. JillMarie Wiles begins auctioning off the first item—a princess dress-up set. As the words spill forth in a melodious, high speed chant, the children gawk in amazement, their excitement building apace. "How can she talk that fast?" marvels one youngster. Within seconds the

PHOTOS BY EVANNE NEWMAN



*Molly Burns, a St. Jude patient since October of 2000, holds a videotape she obtained during the auction. With her \$30 in play money, Molly also purchased an electronic cash register and plastic food.*

children have overcome their awe and have jumped into the fray, bidding feverishly as spotters cry “Yep” and point to bidders. There

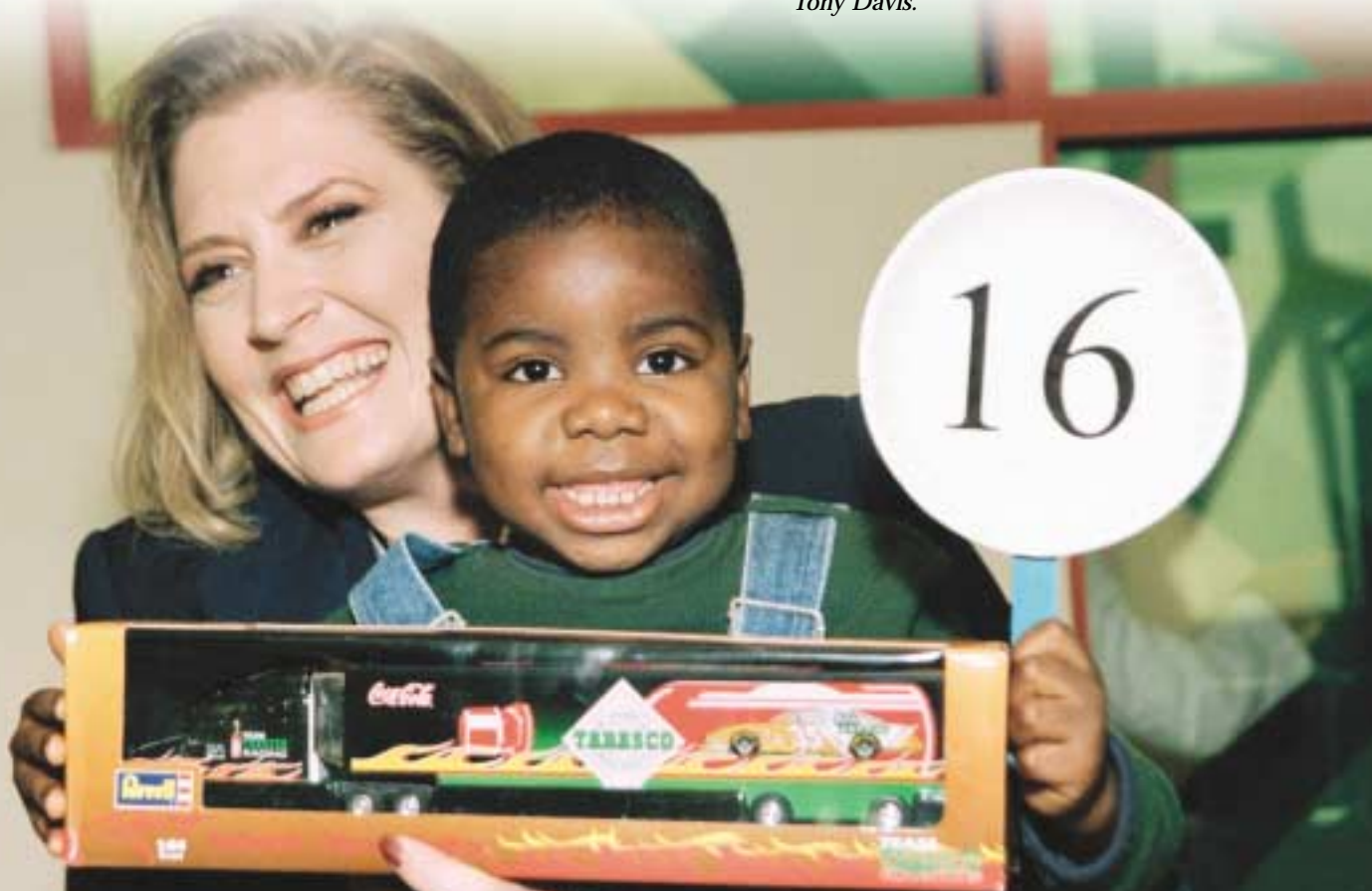
are no subtle bids here—no nods or imperceptible movements. Some bidders leap in front of the podium, holding their numbers high, waving their hands frantically, as they vie for toys. “Sold!” proclaims Wiles, as a patient hands over \$5 in play money to claim the first purchase of the day. For the next hour, Wiles and her colleague, Scott Musser, conduct a rollicking auction while ensuring that each child “purchases” at least one item.

Wiles and Musser have come to Memphis as part of their duties as the 2001 International Auctioneer Competition champions. As title winners, the two auctioneers traverse the country on behalf of the National Auctioneers Association and its charity, St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. The NAA has raised more than \$2 million for St. Jude, but Musser hopes the organization can increase that

amount exponentially. “We are encouraging each of our 6,000 members to raise money for St. Jude,” says Musser, who hails from Kennewick, Washington, and comes from a family of auctioneers. “It shows how powerful a group can be if you do something together.” Musser and Wiles, a self-avowed champion of children from Canby, Oregon, each received a \$10,000 prize package when they won the International Auctioneer Competition. “Touring the hospital and doing the toy auction is part of our responsibilities,” says Wiles. “But after today, I really believe it’s a part of the prize package.”

In 1995, Memphis auctioneer and past NAA president John Roebuck played a vital role in convincing the National Auctioneers Association to support St. Jude. Roebuck presided over his first St. Jude fund-raising auction in 1962, and has been an

*Auctioneer JillMarie Wiles celebrates a successful bid with St. Jude patient Tony Davis.*





*The action is hot and heavy as Scott Musser recognizes a young bidder. Musser and JillMarie Wiles conducted the high-energy event as part of their official duties as the 2001 International Auctioneer Competition champions.*

ardent supporter ever since. For the past six years, Roebuck and his wife have helped the NAA meet its philanthropic goals by hosting local golf tournaments that have netted about \$30,000 a year for the hospital. "We've got the capability of raising many, many more millions for St. Jude," says Roebuck. Joe Wilson, current president of the organization, expands on that statement. "We made a \$5 million commitment just recently as an association, and we're not going to stop there. I hope we can raise \$10 million, \$20 million, \$100 million in the future."

Money raised by the NAA and other organizations around the country helps St. Jude researchers and clinicians increase the cure rates for many diseases. But today the children at the NAA auction are not concentrating on cure rates or scientific discoveries. They are focused on the toys. Five-year-old Ryan Trahan of Louisiana holds his bidding num-

*Serious bidding is the order of the day for (from left) St. Jude patient Taylor McCain of Louisiana and her mother, Rachel; Jessica Gonzales-Vargas, sibling of patient Jose Gonzales-Vargas; and 4-year-old patient Nicholas Sanchez of Chile.*

ber on top of his head, in a ploy that earns him a truck and car combo. Delaney Barnes, age 4, successfully bids on a truck and a set of interlocking building blocks. "He got exactly what he wanted," says his mother, Teresa Barnes. Seven-year-old Molly Burns of West Tennessee arrived at the auction early to obtain a front-row seat for

the proceedings. As she exits the cafeteria for her chemotherapy treatment, Molly carries the electronic cash register she had eyed earlier in the day.

St. Jude patient LaToya Harp, 10, of Mississippi is attending her first auction. Her disease in remission, LaToya has returned to the hospital for a checkup and is attending the auction between appointments. With a shy smile, LaToya displays the commemora-

tive baseball jersey she purchased. "I got this for my brother," she says. A videotape LaToya obtained at the auction will also be given to a sibling. "She's always been selfless," says her father, Roy Harp, who is quick to express his gratitude to the hospital and to the donors who saved his daughter's life. "The people who donated and did this are just wonderful," he says, gazing around the room. "The first day we came to St. Jude, it seemed like LaToya's whole life was gone, but the doctors and nurses brought her through it. She's doing really good now. I never dreamed of a place like this before we came here. But it has been a blessing to me, and I thank God for it."

Tonight, LaToya will return home to her other family members and distribute the gifts she "purchased" at the auction. But the NAA's 6,000 members have given LaToya something far more precious than toys. Thanks to the auctioneers' selflessness and support, LaToya and thousands of other children like her have been given the gift of hope.●

