



RED HAUTE NIGHTS

Chamber celebrates community, raises funds for nonprofits



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St. Helena Police Chief Jackie Rubin was urging the crowd of 250 people to raise their paddles for the St. Helena Family Center on Saturday night at Charles Krug Winery.

“C’mon, 50 bucks,” Rubin said, “that’s less than a parking ticket in St. Helena.”

That got a few laughs and a few more people to raise their paddles during the “Celebrate St. Helena” annual auction and dinner, sponsored by

the St. Helena Chamber of Commerce and benefiting St. Helena Downtown Renaissance.

Rubin started the “Fund-A-Need” auction lot at \$10,000 and two bidders, both from Trinchero Family Estates, raised their paddles. The St. Helena Family Center was named the 2012 Nonprofit of the Year, while Trinchero Family Estates was named the Business of the Year.

During a video discussing the business that has been in St. Helena for 60 years, Bob Trinchero said, “As you become successful, you assume the environment had something to do with it and you have to give back.”

Overall, the “Fund-A-Need” auction lot raised \$38,000 for the St. Helena Family Center. The live and silent auctions raised \$47,000 and the entire event grossed \$120,000. After expenses, the remaining funds will go to the chamber’s St. Helena Downtown Renaissance.

Pam Simpson, chamber CEO and president, said the event was for and about locals and honoring those who have made a difference in town. Since 1971, the chamber has been honoring its “Citizen of the Year,” and the chamber is “all about keeping that tradition alive,” she said.

Before the videos honoring the Community Service Award winners were shown, Simpson honored the late Mayor Del Britton with Frank Sinatra singing his signature hit “My Way,” and thanked Cindy Pawlcyyn, the master chef and local restaurant owner whose team catered the meal. Also thanked were the chamber board members whose service ended: chair Ann Marie Conover and board members Bob Beckstrom, Mike Fisher, Skip Lane and Steve Tradewell.

The theme of giving back to the community ran throughout the evening as the crowd congratulated the chamber’s 2012 Community Service Award winners. Joel Gott, who was named Citizen of the Year, said he was “surprised at how many people nominated me.”

One of those was Matthew Heil, who said Gott chaired the Montessori School’s annual

fundraiser and raised it to a new level.

Gott, who owns the Gott's Roadside Café locations in St. Helena and San Francisco, said he keeps his donations local and added, "It is neat for St. Helena to have two big school systems."

As his business took off, Heil said, Gott "gave back to the community."

Craig Bond, who has spent 35 years teaching music in the St. Helena Unified School District, and couple Bob and Kate Skupny, who have volunteered in the community for 20 years, were given Lifetime Achievement Awards.

Bond, who is known as "007" and "The Music Man," said on the video he was "blown away" by the honor.

"Music touches everyone in different ways," said Bond, who has taught "hundreds and hundreds" of children as St. Helena's music teacher.

He added he's grateful to the chamber and was honored to receive the award. One of his three daughters, Angela, said music "has been a part of our lives since the day we were born."

The nomination form listing the volunteer activities that the Skupnys participate in was two pages long, said chamber president Simpson. "We're honored to have them here tonight," she said.

Linda Reiff, executive director of the Napa Valley Vintners, said the couple has been volunteering with Auction Napa Valley for the past 20 years. And not just once a year in June, but continually, every week, helping with "all kinds of projects," she said.

Julie Spencer, executive director of the Rianda House Senior Activity Center, said the Skupnys act as greeters for the senior center. She said the running of the center is a team effort and the Skupnys are a "wonderful" part of the team.

Volunteer of the Year was Wendy Strachan, board chair for the St. Helena Farmers Market. She organizes the General Store, which raises money for healthy living programs at the schools, and promotes the store with student artwork, book signings and chef demonstrations, according to Kathy Foulger, who nominated her for the honor.

One of St. Helena's newest establishments, French Blue, earned the chamber's Civic Pride Award. Owners Howard and Lori Backen, who moved to St. Helena 15 years ago, said on the video that they built the restaurant, formerly the housewares store Vanderbilt's, for the people of St. Helena. Lori said she came up with the name because she liked the French blue doors and told her husband he had to keep them. The Backens completely remodeled the space to create a light and airy restaurant.

Alejandro Ayala, who is the executive estate chef for Meadowood Napa Valley resort, was named Employee of the Year. Ann Marie Conover said he began his career at Meadowood as a dishwasher and then learned to make crepes. Today, he is responsible for tens of thousands of meals a year and is a mentor to younger employees.

On the video, Ayala said he was shocked and surprised to be recognized. Conover commented that Meadowood is a family and Ayala "really knows what he is doing." She added he is a leader

who “puts his passion into every dish.”