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Blazer Pub bartender makes St. Patrick's Day mean a little more for Friends of Karen

NORTH SALEM – Shamrocks lined with gold glitter hung from the ceiling and the bar, and dining rooms of the Blazer Pub in Purdys were filling up with lighthearted crowds to celebrate St. Patrick's Day when the bartender, Tommy Hunt, stood up on a box, banged on a cowbell and shouted, "Happy St. Patty's Day, everybody," to cheers from the crowd.

The day, Hunt told his customers shortly before 6 p.m. Thursday, was special for the Blazer because they were there to raise money for Friends of Karen, a charity based a short way up the road in Purdys that helps support families with sick children.

"Whatever you do, you've got to get involved," said Hunt, wearing a green knit cap in honor of the holiday.

And with that, he began auctioning the first item of the night, an art kit for children, hollering over the chatting crowd, which included many regulars of the Blazer, a well-loved local pub known for its hamburgers. A few minutes later, it went for \$65.

Hunt, who has tended bar at the Blazer for close to 29 years, started raising money for Friends of Karen 12 years ago by selling the shamrocks that decorate the bar. The idea for the auction started with a challenge: Hunt said that if he raised a certain amount of money, he would shave his head.

"It just went crazy from there," he said.

One year, he wore lederhosen, the German leather breeches, figuring someone would ask to buy them off him. Underneath, he wore American-flag boxers. When a woman said she wanted to buy the pants, he put them up for bid.

Over the years, the auction items have included a GEICO bobble head dolls signed by Brian Carney, a North Salem resident who plays the boss in the company's commercials; pro-sports tickets; T-shirts; and a lot of items that draw bids far and above their value.

"Community people bring in items and say, 'Can you auction this off?' " Hunt said.

Hunt, who lives in Brewster, knows what it's like having a sick child in the family. His sister developed epilepsy as a young girl and died in 1967 at the age of 11. She had a seizure while swimming off Cape Cod.

"The thing I remember the most was my mom coming home and seeing her face," said Hunt, who was about 15 at the time.

Now, from his post behind the bar, Hunt said he has a perfect forum for talking others into helping.

"There's a lot of families out there that can use help with children that are sick," Hunt said.

On Thursday, as the crowd gathered for the St. Patrick's Day celebration, Thomas Conklin, president and chief executive officer of Make-A-Wish Foundation of the Hudson Valley, sat at the bar, waiting for the auction. He said he was there to support Hunt and Friends of Karen.

"To have an establishment that is so popular to truly care about the community where they live and work, how could you not support it?" Conklin said.

Hunt took breaks from serving Guinness, and other drinks, to the growing crowd Thursday to hawk another item, pushing the crowd to dig a little deeper.

The money raised, expected to be \$8,000 this year, helps Friends of Karen pay bills for close to 260 families with sick children each month – for groceries, medical co-payments, electricity and other expenses.

Throughout the year, Hunt also talks up Friends of Karen to people who might be able to help. As a bartender at the Blazer Pub, Hunt meets a cross section of residents from North Salem and nearby towns, including painters, mechanics, CEOs and foundation board members.

"That's how Friends of Karen supports itself," said Judith Factor, the charity's executive director, "through amazing people who do something wonderful for us."

As of Wednesday, the sale of the shamrocks, which starts after the Super Bowl and lasts until St. Patrick's Day, had brought in \$3,800 and tickets for the Yankees, Mets, Rangers and other pro-sports teams were fetching close to \$2,000 in a silent auction. A customer had promised to make up any shortfall to get to the goal of \$8,000.

"It's all word-of-mouth," said Alice Kerrigan, the Blazer Pub's manager. "We don't advertise anything."

And no one there seemed surprised when Hunt started banging on the bell.

"People know what today's all about at the Blazer Pub," Conklin said.