

# Brethren Disaster Relief Auction Puts Faith Into Action

## Concern For Others Generates Giving, Buying, Selling

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MANHEIM (Lancaster Co.) —  
What does a cookbook, a newly-built house, and a heifer have in common?  
The result of that strange combination will be discovered by all

to her house one day. She was very poor and had only the bare necessities to live. She felt she had no talent to make money, but for one year, whenever she prayed for the upcoming relief auction, she laid aside fifty cents or whatever change she had. At the end of the

The auction draws crowds of 8,000-10,000.

Every cent raised at the auction goes to help those who suffer from natural disasters such as fire, flood, hurricane, tornadoes, earthquakes, and famine. A board determines where the money will be used. A portion is distributed to what is called the TURF fund in the Lancaster, York, and Harrisburg areas, and the remainder is forwarded to the church office to determine where it is needed for world disaster.

Although there is considerable expense for renting the fairgrounds, equipment and chairs, and for advertising the event, these expenses are all met through an annual kick-off dinner held in June. The dinner is held under a white tent set up on the lawn at Witman's home. Witman provides a lavish feast on tables set with linen, china, stemware, and flowers.

About 500 tickets for the kick-off dinner are sold for \$10 each on a first-come basis at a booth at the auction. The money from ticket sales and from an offering collected at the dinner goes to cover the cost of the auction. Donations at the dinner this year amounted to \$15,952.

This year, the booklet advertising the sale is dedicated to Witman in appreciation for devoting "his time, energies, spirit, and resour-

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who attend the Brethren Disaster Relief Auction at the Lebanon Area Fairgrounds on Friday, Sept. 22 and Saturday, Sept. 23.

The reason for combining a cookbook, a house, and a heifer had its beginnings more than 19 years ago.

That was when Jay Witman, an auctioneer, the late Jacob H. Ruhl and James Gibbel, insurance brokers, decided to hold an auction with all proceeds going to help people who were victims of disaster.

*Witman suffers from Crohn's Disease, an incurable intestinal illnesses in which the body destroys the intestines and the body gathers little nutrition from the food eaten.*

They hoped to raise \$10,000, which they did. But the contagious enthusiasm shared by so many people concerned with helping others spread. Since then, the disaster relief auction has been held annually and raised more than \$3 million for victims of disaster.

The auction is sponsored by the Atlantic Northeast and Southern Pennsylvania districts of the Church of the Brethren (COB). The districts encompass 119 congregations with more than 24,000 members.

In addition to donations for auctioned items, participants offered unique services for raising funds for the needy. Some of these include Share-A-Meal, which is selling tickets for meals served in their homes, and Gro-Money in which local businessmen donate "seed money" for people to use with their talents to earn money that they contribute to the relief fund.

"Some of the biggest inspiration comes from seeing how people give what they can," said Witman. "A widow lady asked me to come

year, she handed me \$500. It brought tears to my eyes to see how someone with so little was willing to sacrifice."

This year, the committee wanted to come up with some new ideas to generate money for relief. They came up with three. One was to build a house using mostly volunteer labor and supplies. Hundreds of people and area businesses worked together to complete the house that sold for \$240,000 recently. After paying for the building lot and other expenses,

the project resulted in a net profit of \$138,000. This amount will be tallied in with the money gamed from the auction.

The second idea resulted in a just-off-the-press printing of the first Brethren Disaster Relief Cookbook. The spiral-bound, hardcover cookbooks with 1,014 recipes from church members will be sold at the Share-A-Meal booth during the auction.

The third idea is a livestock auction. From the beginning, a heifer auction was included, but this will be the first year for selling pigs, sheep, goats, ducks, and other livestock.

"I don't know what we will end up with, but I heard we have at least 25 head of cattle," Witman said.

The thrill to Witman and other committee members is to see how everything comes together on the auction days.

"We don't know what we will end up with because anyone who wants to donate items takes them to the fairgrounds on Friday," Witman said.

*Witman continues to live with constant pain that he describes as the 'biggest belly ache that won't go away.'*

ces to the auction far beyond what might be expected."

Witman brushes off the tribute by saying, "I don't like the publicity. So many other people contribute to this and without their help, this would not be a success. The hours that a volunteer puts into quilting a quilt for the auction is just as important as what I do."

The hundreds of people who have served on committees during the past years are well aware and grateful for Witman who volunteers his time as an auctioneer, as chairman and member of the executive and publications committees, as a host for the kick-off dinners in his home, as a speaker, and as a generator of ideas for the auction.

The committee wanted to show their appreciation for Witman while he was still alive.

Although Witman is only 42 years old, he almost died several weeks ago.



Jay Witman holds a copy of the recently released cookbook that will be sold to raise money for disaster relief. This is only one of the projects that Witman started to raise funds for the Brethren Disaster Relief Auction, which has raised more than \$3 million since its inception 19 years ago.

It wasn't the first time Witman defied death. Eight years ago, he was told he had only three weeks to live.

and his affiliation with numerous committees.

Of the team of eight doctors who treat him, most call his recovery miraculous.

Witman attributes his recovery to God and the prayers and support of thousands of people.

Because his body digests less than 15 percent of nutrition from the food that he eats, Witman has a "Hickman shunt" inserted through which he receives supplemental feeding and treatment. This is experimental, temporary treatment, which does not cure the illness. Witman continues to live with constant pain that he describes as the "biggest belly ache that won't go away."

He lives with the knowledge that each day might be his last.

*'I have a great life,' he said. 'I love the feeling of completing public sales, but the Relief Auction is a project that I feel is the greatest accomplishment of my life.'*

ly a complication from the treatment that poisoned his blood. Doctors said that he would never be able to use his legs again, but today, Witman can easily walk and anticipates being able to jog again. He can fulfill all his responsibilities as an auctioneer, bank director,

"If it is my last day, then my biggest day is tomorrow because I'll be with God," Witman said.

His optimistic, upbeat attitude is not something that happened overnight, Witman said. The illness first began when he was 12 years old. Over the years, he learned the futility of asking, "Why me?" and of feeling sorry for himself.

He said, "We're all here on borrowed time. God knows our days. My problems are no greater than those of other people, only in a different area. I strive to live and work for God just like many other people."

He shuns pity. "I have a great life," he said. "I love the feeling of completing public sales, but the Relief Auction is a project that I feel is the greatest accomplishment of my life."

A spokesperson for the executive committees said of Witman,



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