

# A Rodeo for the Children of Anna House

Posted by Teresa on September 1, 2010



Angel Cordero, Jr., D. Wayne Lukas, and others with Arctic Cat live auction item.  
Photo credit Mark Bolles

“We’re here to thank you,” said Michael Dubb, chairman of the board of the Belmont Child Association, to the crowd assembled at last week’s benefit at the Gideon Putnam Hotel in Saratoga. “Tonight is more than financial. It’s the one time a year that we get to thank you for your support.”

The children who attend Anna House, he said, are healthy and safe and “drop dead adorable.” When they leave Anna House, he informed the contributors, they are ready for kindergarten: they have computer skills and they know English, and they are, according to Dubb, “an asset to and not a burden on the local public schools.”

He thanked the board members who “contribute tirelessly,” board president Fay Donk, and executive director Donna Chenkin and her husband Stuart. For them, said Dubb, Anna House “is not a job but a 24-hour passion.”

Of D. Wayne Lukas, one of this year’s honorees, Dubb said: “No one can separate people from their money better than Wayne.”

Trainer David Donk, Fay’s husband, introduced John and Leona Velazquez, this year’s other honorees, for their contributions to Anna House. “They are,” said Donk, “the greatest people I know.”

“Go to Anna House,” Donk exhorted those assembled. “You’ll see not just what’s happening today, but what will happen in our future.”

“The honor,” Leona said, “is ours. It’s an

honor to see so many lives touched by Anna House, and we want to give back any way we can.”

Leona and John Velazquez. Photo credit Mark Bolles

Approaching the podium in a cowboy hat in honor of the night’s Western rodeo theme, Todd Pletcher introduced a video tribute to his mentor, Lukas. He shared an anecdote about his early days working for Lukas. He was just out of college, he said, and characterized himself as “energetic, enthusiastic...and annoying.”

Lukas had given Pletcher detailed and copious instructions about a morning routine for a filly. “I wanted to make sure that I understand and that I got it right, so I repeated the instructions back to him,” detail by detail.

“He looked at me and said, ‘It’s not a freaking time bomb. Just get it done!’” [One imagines that Pletcher cleaned this up for a PG event.]

The video tribute included footage of Lukas’s Landaluce, Grindstone, Lady’s Secret, Thunder Gulch, Charismatic, and Winning Colors, and comments from those who know the trainer.

Kieran McLaughlin: “He was a great mentor, coach and teacher. I was his toughest pupil. He couldn’t teach me how to ride.”

Angel Cordero, Jr.: “I never saw a barn so neat.”

Bobby Knight: “No one goes about their job in sports with more detail.”

With ZZ Top’s “Sharp Dressed Man” playing, Lukas himself then took center stage, to speak about Anna House and to act, as he has for many years, as auctioneer.

“I’ve never,” he began, “encountered so many generous people as in Thoroughbred racing. People step up time and time again.”

Before beginning the auction, Lukas couldn’t resist one anecdote about one of his former

pupils. “One night,” he began, “Todd Pletcher gets into bed with his wife Tracy, and Tracy says to him, ‘God, you’re feet are cold!’”

“Pletcher said to her,” Lukas continued, “‘When it’s just the two of us, Tracy, you can call me Todd.’”

The live auction kicked off with a children’s ride-on Jaguar, donated by the Creativity Institute. It was purchased by one of Lukas’s owners, Joe Ford, who made the winning bid of \$2,000 and who immediately donated the vehicle to Anna House for the children.

Zenyatta halter and photo of Breeders’ Cup Classic win

A framed Zenyatta halter signed by Mike Smith and accompanied by a photo brought a whopping \$10,200 and was purchased by Wayne and Tina Evans, who donated the item to Anna House for display the new wing. Last year, they purchased a painting that they



donated and that now hangs in the main lobby of the child care center.

Jockeys Edgar Prado, Angel Cordero, Jr., Javier Castellano, Garrett Gomez, and David Cohen volunteered as spotters; in attendance were trainers Carlos Martin, H. Graham Motion, Seth Benzel, Dominic Galluscio, Jimmy Jerkens, Rudy Rodriguez, and Gary Contessa.

The New York Racing Association purchased a table and turned out to support Anna House. Julien Leparoux was in attendance, as were Nick Caras and Humberto Chavez of the Racetrack Chaplaincy and Paul Ruchames from Backstretch Employees Service Team.

The attendees were stunningly generous: an evening at a University of Kentucky Wildcats basketball game was purchased for \$4,600; Edgar Prado donated \$3,000 to fund a student’s education for a year.

On the list of purchasers of live and silent auction items were dozens of jockeys, trainers, owners, and racing executives, names that would be familiar to anyone who’s ever visited a NYRA track. And at the end of the evening, the BCCA’s coffers were more than \$300,000 richer, thanks to the generosity of the racing community that turned out to support the children.

Dubb shared with the attendees that the BCCA is seeking approval to put an extension on the current building. Anna House currently enrolls 50 students from infancy to pre-school; two more rooms would allow for an addition 20 children.

The plan is to open the new rooms by next fall; in addition to allowing Anna House to enroll more children, the expansion would allow the BCCA to operate before and after-school programs and activities, to put it, as Dubb said, “to the most use for the backstretch community.”

“The state of Anna House couldn’t be better,” said Dubb with pride and appreciation. “It is successful, vibrant, and full of love.”

Thanks to the time, generosity, and contributions of everyone who made this annual event such a success.

