

Napa Valley *Register*

A focus on children: Collective Napa Valley Barrel Auction raises funds for mental health

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Sasha Paulsen

Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena rolled out the red carpet on June 3 for the Napa Valley Vintners' Barrel Auction, the first in-person gathering of Collective Napa Valley. Guests bidding on 76 lots raised \$1.5 million for mental health services for Napa County children.

"We were ecstatic to feel the energy and vibration of our community raised to new heights," said Jean Charles Boisset who, with his wife Gina Gallo, hosted the event.

“The Napa Valley Barrel Auction has always been one of the best events in the wine world, and to see it return with passion and enthusiasm and to reconnect with our guests as we present the best of our region was a thrill,” Boisset added.

The Barrel Auction was formerly one component of a weekend of the Napa Valley Vintners' Wine Auction activities taking place the first weekend in June. The COVID-19 shutdown allowed the Vintners the time to re-envision their program that not only showcases the wines of Napa Valley, but raises funds for local nonprofits supporting community issues.

The result of the hiatus is the new Collective Napa Valley, a year-round program of events. Membership in the Collective is open to anyone, on a variety of donor levels.

Members of the new Collective Napa Valley could purchase tickets to the Barrel Auction as well as vintner-hosted dinners throughout the weekend. Fifteen hundred tickets for the Barrel Auction sold out promptly.

"The goal of Collective Napa Valley — to bring more wine lovers to connect deeply with our wines, our vintners and our region — is exciting," Boisset said. "It takes a daring vision to re-invent one of the wine world's most beloved occasions, and we love that the Napa Valley Vintners has evolved and expanding to events throughout the year — from intimate events, to community engagement and at the end, always, a focus on raising money to improve the lives of the people of Napa Valley."

Guests strolled the grounds of the Grove at Raymond, sampling fare from Napa Valley restaurants, while inside the winery, they could taste from the barrels and make their bids for cases of wines donated by vintners.

The pleasures of the afternoon event, from the smooth live music to welcome moderate June weather, almost belied the serious focus of the fundraising: children's mental health.

“Every dollar raised this weekend will have a meaningful impact on the life of a Napa County child,” said Jennifer Stewart, executive director of Napa Valley Education Foundation.

Stewart is the leader of a new collaborative effort of five Napa County agencies that provide mental health services: Mentis, Aldea, UpValley Family Centers and On the Move, in addition to the Education Foundation.

"It's a natural partnership," said Stewart, "just as is the partnership with the Vintners." The result, she said, is called SHINE — Student Health Improvement through Nonprofit Excellence. "We are building a countywide network, a collective model of all agencies aiming toward the same target — that every child gets the help they need."

All of the groups have experienced "skyrocketing" need for services, Stewart said. "Children in this valley have been through years of environmental trauma, earthquakes, wildfires and then the COVID shutdown."

The support coming in from the Barrel Auction will dramatically increase student access to mental health services, Stewart said. "The lion's share will go toward increasing services on campuses. We know that two-thirds (of Napa County children) get services through their schools."

The funds will also support student-led programs on campuses to reduce the stigma of seeking mental health help, and trauma recovery services for parents and providers.

Stewart, who attended the Friday Barrel Auction, recounted one conversation with a vintner. "I didn't get his name," she said, "but he was telling me that he hoped to raise \$80,000 with his wine donation. I said, 'do you know that this will pay for one more social worker or therapist? Do you know how many lives you might be saving?' He said he had never thought of it that way, but he was moved to make the connection."

"This fundraising campaign is just the first of more to come," said Linda Reiff, president and CEO of the Napa Valley Vintners. "In different seasons we'll raise funds for a specific cause."

Bidding was not limited to the guests on hand, as in the past, but was open to a global audience via the auction conducted by Sotheby's. The new format is promising, according to a post-event press release from the Napa Valley Vintners.

"Under the new model, bidders broke records at this year's barrel auction that raised \$1.5 million with average lot and case prices selling higher than ever before," the Vintners wrote. "Of the 75 lots up for auction, the average price per case was \$1,873, 9% higher than 2019, with a highest ever average lot price of \$18,683."

The breakdown of lots can be viewed at napa.sothebys.com/lots.

"We are humbled to have the support of so many bidders, wineries, businesses and volunteers who all contributed to the success of this fundraising endeavor," Reiff said. "We are thrilled with the results and feel fortunate to be able to contribute to such an important cause."

On Saturday the Vintners celebrated, hosting a community-wide, free-to-the-public party in Yountville with the recipients of the donors' and vintners' generosity.

Up next is the Vintage Celebration and Live Auction, taking place on Nov. 4 and 5, which will raise money for an environmental initiative.

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