

RRUUC Bazaar Stories by Tim Phelps

They say you never know what treasures you might find at the annual River Road Bazaar, and Pete Salinger has a story to back it up.

He and Dave Strauss (whose wife Lynn Strauss is a former RRUUC minister) were sizing men's clothes a few days before the bazaar several years ago when Dave tried on an elegant, old-fashioned herringbone dress coat.

Dave found a lump in a pocket, and reached in and said "Oh my gosh, Pete, there's money in here," as Pete remembers it. He pulled out a packet of 25 \$20 bills, then another, and another. When it was all counted it came to \$14,700.

Pete insists there was no thought that RRUUC would keep the money. They knew who had donated the coat, and it was returned to the heirs of a man who had recently died.

But as we prepare for the next bazaar coming up on Saturday, the latest in a tradition dating back 42 years, the moral of this story is clear. Check those pockets before you bring in dad's best suit, and buy everything you can in hopes of striking it rich.

The bazaar is not only River Road's biggest fundraiser, it may be the largest such church event in the region. More importantly, it is a time when nearly the entire congregation comes together for a common cause. Business executives test their ability to sell \$7 sports jackets, high powered government officials spend the morning parking cars, management consultants guard the door to make sure no white elephants go unpaid for, and doctors become auctioneers for the most precious of our discarded possessions.

The event is so well run, and so full of good quality, inexpensive merchandise, that people start lining up in the cold by 6:30 a.m., even though the doors do not open for another 90 minutes. By 8:00 the parking lot is full, the line is down near the street, and the rush begins.

"It's always a miracle what happens, and how it does happen," says veteran bazaar chair Sara Adams.

Sara Adams said that when the bazaar was started at the end of the 1960's the River Road congregation "had been falling on hard times. The minister had died and membership was declining. We were going into financial doom."

One of the solutions was to establish the bazaar as a fundraiser.

When Rev. Bill Murray became the minister at River Road in 1981, the bazaar was still a relatively small affair contained mostly in what was then called the auditorium, now known as the sanctuary. In those days it brought in modest amounts like \$13,000, but soon took off and became a major enterprise, raising several times that amount in good years.

Barbara Lewis remembers that when she started coming in the 1980's the bazaar usually had a theme, like the "snowflake bazaar" or the "star bazaar." She said that "somebody had to cut out gazillions of snowflakes and dangle them from everything."

It was Barbara who thought of providing the distinctive if undistinguished red baseball caps that mark the members from the customers.

There have been a lot of traditions around the bazaar and lots of stories that are told and retold. Barbara remembers one RRUUC member who had several sons and it became a right of passage for their family to bring the boys down to men's clothing for their first sport coat.

Barbara Murray, Bill's wife, used to collect dress-up clothes for children, even kimonos from Japan, and put them together in a trunk which she called "grandma's dress-up trunk" and set it up on the stage in a very elegant display with real dresses, costume jewelry and silk stockings. "They went for hundreds of dollars," she said, and one woman who must have had several children bought the trunk three or four years in a row.

Adams remembered that her husband, Jerry Temchin, was working on the auction one year when two ladies came in and started eyeing some really beautiful turquoise jewelry from New Mexico. "One said to the other, 'you didn't give away mother's jewelry did you?', Sara recalled. 'Well we didn't want it, did we?' the other said. She said the jewelry was returned to the family.

The section chairs, who have considerable autonomy over their fiefdoms and often have been running their operations for years are the heart and soul of the bazaar. One such team, Robin and Ken VanMechelen, figure they spend four hours a day for two weeks sorting books. "Ken and I have co-chaired books since 1992 or 1994," said Robin. "Unitarian Universalists love books so we usually get a good group of volunteers. You meet a nice group of people and it's a good way for newer members to get involved. It's a good way to kind of get integrated into the congregation."

While the books sell for just \$2 for hardcover and \$1 paperback, there are so many that the books section usually brings in nine or ten percent of the bazaar's take, Robin said.

Every year the VanMechelens "pluck out" a couple of the most interesting books and save them. One year they found a book titled "the US tax code" written entirely in Chinese except for the title. Another was a book of "pornogami" that "told you how to make folding paper origami genitals," Robin said. Once in the boxes and boxes of old books collected in the Fireside Room someone found a signed copy of a book written by Eleanor Roosevelt on her trips to India. It was in bad shape but sold in auction for \$325.

There have been some disasters at the bazaar as well, like the time a real fur coat walked away with no one paying for it. And Barbara Lewis remembers a particularly stressful moment about 10 years ago for her late husband Dan, who used to wire the entire building every year so announcements could be made over loudspeakers.

"We were setting up one evening and Dan was stringing wires in the balcony," Barbara said. "He decided to move some tables. But they weren't tables at all; they were pieces of plywood covered with table cloths. A whole table full of chotskies, glasses and china went crashing. The whole place took a collective gasp of breath. A lot of stuff got broken."

Veteran bazaar leaders like Sara Adams and Linda Gustitus say the most important thing about the bazaar is not making money, but rather serving the community and making a community at River Road.

"The really important message of the bazaar is you get to know people through working over days with them," said Linda, who was a patron of the annual sale even before joining the congregation in the 1980's. "Through osmosis you get to know people you just otherwise bump into at RRUUC."