

Cliff and Debbie Shuler build auctioneer business into a thriving enterprise — auctions at their compound in Titusville drawing hundreds of people

By Ken Datzman

TITUSVILLE — There is nothing like the atmosphere of a live auction — the thrill of the bid and the thrill of the chase for treasures. Auctions are a form of entertainment.

The cast of characters who make up an audience on a particular auction day represent what America is about.

Many see auctions as the last bastion of the competitive free enterprise system.

Pilgrims utilized auctioneers to establish commerce and auctions were used to sell crops, livestock, furs, tobacco, and other assets.

America's first president, George Washington, was an avid auction buyer.

Today, it is estimated that more than a quarter-trillion dollars in goods and services are sold by live auction every year in the United States, according to the National Auctioneers Association.

"Auctions are an efficient way to turn assets into cash quickly, whether it's household items, livestock, real estate, antiques, equipment and machinery, vehicles, and so forth," said businessman Cliff Shuler, who founded Cliff Shuler Auctioneers & Liquidators Inc. 41 years ago, in 1977. "Auctions have wide appeal. They are fun and entertaining."

Most consumers attend auctions because they think it's an exciting way to get good deals.

Shuler's company is known for conducting auctions at its compound here on Julia Street. They are held under a big tent and typically draw from 500 to 800 people. The events are widely advertised. Cliff Shuler Auctioneers & Liquidators conducts many different types of auctions.

"At one of our recent auctions under the tent, a piece of real estate (200 acres) in north Florida sold for \$1 million. That was a payday. We do a lot of real-estate auctions," said Shuler, who runs the business with his wife Debbie.

"I think the reason why our auctions at Julia Street are so large in the number of attendees is because we are very diversified with our merchandise," added Debbie Shuler. "We auction real estate, antiques, cars, trucks and vans, motor homes, boats, guns, timeshares, coin and stamp collections, and on and on. We have a wide range of items, something for every bidder."

Some of their recent auctions have even included Walgreen's stock (200 shares), Smith & Wesson stock (2,500 shares) and Disney stock (600 shares), burial plots throughout the United States, carnival rides, first and second mortgages, and 200,000 T-shirts, for example. To check for future auction dates at Julia Street and to view the listings, visit Soldfor.com.

Each auction has its own flavor. Through the years, they have auctioned jackasses in DeLand and pigs and hogs in Mims. At an auction in Florida, a gentleman purchased a number of baby goats.

"He had a brand-new Cadillac Escalade. He pulled up, opened the doors and herded those goats into his car and drove off. I wish I had gotten a picture of that. It was hilarious," said Debbie Shuler.

Cliff and Debbie Shuler have built Cliff Shuler Auctioneers & Liquidators into one of the most recognizable and successful companies of its kind in Florida and offer statewide services. They also operate Shuler & Shuler Real Estate Auctioneers Inc., which was established in June 1995.

They do on-site auctions and business liquidations. Their clients include bankruptcy trustees, municipalities,



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Cliff Shuler founded Cliff Shuler Auctioneers & Liquidators Inc. 41 years ago in Titusville and built its name throughout Florida, working with bankruptcy trustees, municipalities, the Small Business Administration, county tax collectors, attorneys, individuals and others. From left, the team includes: Andy Gomme, Debbie Shuler, Cliff Shuler, and Joe Borsey. The mural they are standing in front of at Cliff Shuler Auctioneers on Julia Street was painted by Mike McCloskey.

the U.S. Small Business Administration, county tax collectors, major lending institutions, individuals, CPAs, attorneys, and businesses.

In addition to being licensed real-estate agents and brokers, they hold a Motor Vehicle Dealer License and a Federal Firearms License. Their team includes clerks, cashiers, and assistants.

The last live auction Cliff Shuler himself conducted was seven or eight years ago. The auction in Cocoa Beach featured about a half-dozen items, including a DeLorean DMC-12, a sports car. It was the only model car ever produced by the DeLorean Motor Co., from 1981 to 1983. The DMC has gull-wing doors.

"I told Debbie before the auction got underway that we will be done in 10 minutes. We were actually done in 7.5 minutes and did \$168,000 in sales. That was the last live auction I called," he said.

Mike Farrell then stepped into the role as the auctioneer for Cliff Shuler Auctioneers and Liquidators.

He's been with the company for more than 30 years. "Mike has a photographic memory. He can walk through an auction site and recall everything that's there," said Cliff Shuler, whose company used to do 30 to 40 auctions a year at various locations.

Today, Cliff Shuler Auctioneers & Liquidators conducts about 10 auctions a year and most of them are held at its headquarters on Julia Street. There is always a lot going on. "People bring us all types of merchandise to auction. And we spend a lot of money advertising the auctions to attract bidders," said Cliff Shuler.

He added, "If you register 100 people for an auction, there might be 50 to 60 buyers. Years ago, our auctions under the big tent drew small numbers of people. It has totally changed. Now, we're seeing hundreds of people attend these auctions. We are getting a lot of new private customers, too."

Auctioneers are more than just fast talkers. They are also expert marketers who have knowledge of the

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products they sell, the demand for the products, and the target audience of buyers. "I often tell people we're not in the auction business, we're in the advertising business," said Cliff Shuler.

Cliff Shuler Auctioneers & Liquidators has won more than 50 industry advertising contests, in Florida and nationally.

Their auctions have become full-fledged events. "About 10 years ago, we started serving hamburgers and hotdogs and chicken sandwiches," he said. "We hired a licensed concession to do that. We probably give away \$1,000 in hamburgers, hotdogs and chicken sandwiches at each auction. But we charge for Cokes and we bumped our price up a quarter to \$1 per Coke."

Some of the most popular auctions are those that sell household items, or livestock, or antiques. But auctions involve so many more possessions: automobiles, office equipment, art, machinery, industrial equipment, and electronics, for instance.

One of the fastest-growing sectors of the industry is real-estate auctions, including residential real estate, raw land, and agriculture real estate. "We are doing a lot of real-estate auctions under the tent," said Debbie Shuler. "We are doing more and more each time, it seems, everything from single-family homes to timeshares. With all the ad dollars we spend, it's easier and cheaper for the seller to have the real-estate auction here than to do it off-site."

Cliff Shuler once owned a tool and die shop and also worked in real-estate sales. He worked for corporations, too, including JC Penney for eight years and Shoe Corp. of America for eight years.

"I learned the importance and the value of customer service working for Penney's and for Shoe Corp. I told myself 41 years ago when I got into this business that honesty and service would be the building blocks of my auction company," he said.

Cliff Shuler said a magazine article brought to his attention the auctioneering field as a career. At the time, he was working in real-estate sales and "the pickings were slim. I thought, man, I might starve to death doing this. Then I saw an article in a real-estate magazine that said: 'Learn How to be a Real Estate Auctioneer.' I followed up on that."

Shuler went on to graduate from the Jim Graham School of Auctioneering in West Palm Beach. Graham, who passed away in 2011, was known and respected worldwide in the auction profession. He formed one of the country's leading auction schools.

After graduating and becoming a licensed auctioneer in Florida, Cliff Shuler got a call from a moving and storage company. That company's regular auctioneer had relocated out of the area.

"They asked if I would do an auction for them. I believe it was in 1978. I had just bought a new Dodge pickup truck for \$3,000." He did the auction for the moving and storage company and was paid \$378. "I said this might be a pretty good way to make a living." That \$378 check would be about \$1,500 today, according to Saving.org.

"Success doesn't come overnight. You have to build relationships in this business. You have to be a good relationship builder," added Debbie Shuler, whose company has forged strong relationships with city and state governments as well as private citizens.

"We did moving and storage auctions for years," said Cliff Shuler. "We became known for doing those types of auctions. Then we started doing personal property auctions. Thirty years ago, we went to work for the bankruptcy courts. I would spend the entire day in Orlando doing appraisals for the bankruptcy courts. I would leave Titusville early in the morning and come back late at night."

About 50 to 60 percent of their work the last 30 years has been bankruptcy auctions, he said.

During the Great Recession, they saw their business surge as record numbers of consumers and businesses filed bankruptcy. "Wow! We were busy. It was sad. A lot of people were hit hard by the recession. But our business thrived. It was a challenge to stay on top of it," said Cliff Shuler.

The Shulers have been very active in various community nonprofit entities and industry organizations, including the Florida Auctioneers Associations.

"We were on the FAA board of directors together. I think we were the only husband-and-wife team to sit on that board together. We're proud of that," he said.

Debbie Shuler is a recipient of the prestigious

Lewis C. Dell Auctioneer Hall of Fame award from the Florida Auctioneers Association. The award is named in honor of the late Dell, a well-known auctioneer from Sanford who was instrumental in getting auction licensure required in the state.

Debbie Shuler has worked in every aspect of the industry, from clerk to cashier to ring person to book-keeper.

"We love this business and we work to support auctioneers throughout the state any way we can," she said.

"We have mentored a bunch of auctioneers through the years. We've given back to the auctioneer industry in Florida and to our community," said Cliff Shuler, who for 30 years has attended continuing-education workshops and seminars hosted by the National Auctioneers Association and the Florida Auctioneers Association.

Debbie Shuler is known throughout the state for her work with the Florida Auctioneers Association. She served on its board for several terms and has chaired or served on almost every committee, including by-laws and legislation, convention, public relations, newsletter, and more.

"Being a member of the FAA helps auctioneers to forge bonds with other auctioneers and provides them with tremendous resources for growth and improvement, both professionally and personally," she said.

Debbie Shuler is a former executive board member of the Titusville Area Chamber of Commerce. Both Shulers served on the Titusville Area Chamber of Commerce's board at the same time.

Debbie Shuler also chaired the Indian River Festival Art Show in Titusville for 10 years. The Titusville Area Chamber of Commerce and the local chapter of the American Business Women's Association both bestowed the "Woman of the Year" honor on her.

"Throughout the years, Cliff and I have been involved with many civic organizations. We always saw that kind of involvement as being part of our business model. The people around Brevard County and beyond have supported our auctions. Without buyers in attendance, it doesn't matter what's up for auction. We thank the community for their longtime support of our auctions," said Debbie Shuler.

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