

From the West Coast to Washington

by Toni Holt Kramer

Busy? You betcha! But who would have thought that the most gala of recent galas would find me in Minnesota. We found out why the state is called the Land of Lakes. When it rains, it really rains, and all that water uses those lakes like buckets to catch the deluge. I felt like Hiawatha's baby sister maneuvering my way without a canoe or a limo.

But the good news is that the Starkey Gala in St. Paul was indeed fabulous. Bill Austin, the warm and caring silver-haired charmer, founder and CEO of the Starkey Hearing Laboratories and Foundation in Eden Prairie, MN, throws an annual G-A-L-A that draws a glitzy, global mix of VIPs which raises millions of dollars to help The World To Hear. In addition to hosting this star-studded event, Bill and his equally dedicated wife, Tani, gave a series of parties at their beautiful lakeside estate. Yet even with this back-breaking schedule, Bill was at Starkey's Laboratories, America's biggest hearing aid company, every morning in a black suit, white shirt and a tie with an ear on it (well, what else?) doing his "hands on" best to fit celebrities and many others in an effort to make their lives a lot better.

On the walls in his many offices at Starkey you can glimpse photographs of hundreds of instantly recognizable icons including politicians from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton to George Bush, Sr. and Jr. Junior did not need a hearing aid. Bill just made him a gizmo to deaden the sound of guns while hunting. The celebrities on those walls touch every walk of life from racing car drivers like Sir Jackie Stewart western stars, old movie legends and some of today's biggest names.

The Gala itself raised nearly \$5,000,000. Many of the millions were spent by eager friends and business associates to support the many missions all over the world that Bill and Tani and the Starkey staff go on every year. Their goal in life is touching lives around the globe "so the world may hear." Together they bring the gift of sound to the ears of thousands of hearing impaired children. Last year the Foundation distributed more than 20,000 hearing aids to needy children in 70 countries including Mexico, the Ukraine, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Guatemala and the United States.

Some of those on hand at the St. Paul Convention Center: Norm Crosby, who emceed, and Jay Leno, who not only entertained, but also was creative along with the auctioneer, Drew Donen. When Jay spotted Willie Mays in the audience, he grabbed a little old saucer, asked for a Sharpie pen, had Willie scribble his name on it and a minute later he had auctioned it off for \$40,000. The Sharpie went for a mere \$10,000. When a lady rose from the audience and asked Jay Leno to autograph the shirt he was wearing and then auction it off, he looked down and scribbled his autograph backwards and exercising great restraint, he went backstage to remove it. A little shy, our Jay, huh? Dione Warwick, John Mellencamp and Freda Payne were among the star talents that thrilled the audience with their entertainment turns.

At the Gala the first bid on the first mission went for \$225,000 and from then on the six figures kept rolling in. The last auction item was overwhelmingly beautiful

— three huge framed autographed photographs of Presidents from Franklin Delano Roosevelt up to George W. Bush, Jr. We were lucky enough to have the winning bid to add to our Kramer political library room.

Some of those who came in from California included publicist Warren Cowan, wife, Barbara (mother of Melissa Gilbert), Marie Osmond, Daily Variety columnist, Army Archerd and Selma, Pat and Joe Manhart, columnist Frances Allen and hubby, Sherman Fridman, also Nancy Tapick, singer Frankie Randall, and handsome movie star-director-and great golfer Fred Williamson and his Linda, the gal with the decorative magic imbued in her little fingers.

Also cheering on the event were Lou and Karla Ferrigno. Lou, though hearing impaired, always wanted to be a Sheriff. Now, thanks to Bill and the Starkey Foundation, a device was created that allowed Lou to pass the hearing test and at long last, he is Sheriff Ferrigno. Some people refer to Bill Austin as the male Mother Teresa and Bill, himself, has said you must believe that Angels walk among us. Well, goodness knows, Bill and Tani engender that thought.

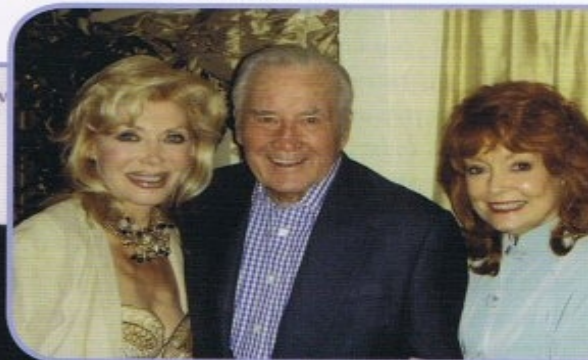
In closing, Bob Petersen hosted a great event to celebrate the birthday of his beautiful wife, Margie, as well as Jack Carter's. The group of us gathered in a private room at Il Cielo included my television partner, Ruta Lee and Webb Lowe, Paula Kent Meehan, Joni Berry, Roxanne Carter, and son, Chase Joan and Norm Crosby -- back from Minnesota just in time, Arthur Kassel and friend, Helen, Ruth Buzzi and hubby Kent Perkins, Debbie Reynolds, my hubby, Bobby and me. The memory of this lovely evening will linger on.



Bill Austin & Toni Holt Kramer



Bill & Tani Austin with Jay Leno



Toni Holt Kramer with Bob & Margie Peterson