

## BILL, THE LUNCH WAGON GUY

Bill and his wife, Dortha Suboski, were my lunch wagon people and had provided the food service for my auctions since the beginning of my career. I have had people tell me that at times the deciding factor in deciding whose auction to attend were the words, "Lunch by Suboski" at the bottom of the auction flier. Bill was a "self made" man, an entrepreneur who thrived on the challenge of creating a business and working for himself. He had owned and operated a truck repair business for many years, was in the restaurant business, raised a family and had accomplished much in his lifetime, but to me he was my "lunch wagon guy".

I learned a lot over the years from Bill. I learned about keeping your word, providing good, honest service, and understanding that your best customer was the one you were talking to at the moment. Bill always made sure he was on site, set up, and ready to serve an hour before sale time. It was not unusual for me to arrive at an auction site early in the morning and find Bill patiently waiting with my first cup of coffee in hand. It never mattered how far he had to drive. This was his job and he did it well. Bill Suboski was a dependable, honest, and hardworking man. Blessed with an engaging personality, Bill had never met a stranger, only new friends.

I can still remember Bill walking past the lines of furniture, viewing all the items laid out for display on the tables, searching and looking for any hidden treasures. While doing all this, he was also busy studying and observing potential buyers as they were viewing the auction items. At some point before the auction started and usually at the moment I was at heightened nervousness, Bill would walk up, look me in the eye and say. "Lyn, you have a good crowd, you have some nice items. I don't know if you know

this, but you're going to have a good day." I never knew if he realized it or not, but often those were the exact words I needed to hear, to know someone had confidence in what I was trying to do. What a calming influence.

Bill could also be brutally honest. He came to one of my auctions one time and after the auction was over, he told me, "Ya know, Lyn, I don't think I've ever seen an auctioneer who can get better prices out of pure junk. You have a real knack for selling stuff that no one should even want to buy." It was a great complement, but I always wished he had said something similar when I was selling the good stuff!

At the beginning of my auction season in 2002, Bill took me off to one side and in his typically casual and offhanded manner told me he had been diagnosed with lung cancer. He told me this as if it was no more serious than a hangnail and assured me he would be fine. Just a minor "bump" in the road. I am sure he informed me and many others in this manner because Bill was not the type to want a lot of hoopla and fuss made over him. A few weeks later, he was in the hospital having the cancerous lung removed and after a very short recuperation period was back working the auction circuit. Bill passed away several months later. Like the old Frank Sinatra song, My Way, Bill was determined not to give in to the cancer and he chose to confront this terrible disease on his terms and do it his way. Bill was out of state when he died, doing what he loved best, working an auction and taking care of the needs of his customers.

I received a phone call from Bill's wife Dortha giving me the news of Bill's passing. My wife Rebecca, her daughter Wendy, grandson Garrett and I found ourselves heading for the small town of West Unity, Ohio. We had decided to go to the visitation, as we were not sure our scheduling would permit us to attend the funeral. As

we had expected, there were a large number of people at the funeral home that day. We found Dortha greeting everyone as they arrived. We expressed our sympathies and then quickly became immersed in a crowd of relatives, friends and auctioneers, joining in the usual uncomfortable mingling and visiting that takes place at funeral visitations.

As we were leaving, Dortha came to me with a rather unusual request. A request I was honored to receive, frightened to try, and one I knew I would be obligated to fulfill. Dortha told me that Bill did not want a traditional funeral and there would not be a minister to officiate at the services. She asked if Cal Short, another auctioneer, and I would consider conducting a funeral service. We would get up and share some memories of our friendship with Bill and the hope was that others would feel encouraged to do the same. She asked that the service be two hours in length. Of course, I gave her the only answer I could. "Yes Dortha I will do this for you", I said.

I immediately called Cal and told him what I had committed him to. Cal is not only an auctioneer friend; he has always been somewhat of a mentor to me. I knew Cal would be there to bail me out in case I could not do this.

Rebecca and I returned the next day for the funeral. You would have thought I would have been up all night preparing for what lay ahead, trying to come up with the right words, the right format. Not being that smart, I arrived totally and absolutely unprepared. Realizing I was not a minister, public speaker or even a moderator, I decided I would simply be an auctioneer. Auctioneering is what I do. How can you possibly prepare for something you have never done before? I decided I would try to interact with the gathering of mourners, much as I would interact with an auction crowd. Most importantly, I would put my trust in the Lord, as Dortha had put her trust in me.

The only preparation on my part was praying for guidance and knowing my wife Rebecca and friend Cal would provide all the strength and emotional support I would need.

As I waited for people to take a seat in the viewing area, I realized there appeared to be some reluctance to do so. Everyone seemed quite content to move around from group to group in the outer rooms. It appeared as if no one was going in to take a seat. I told Rebecca; "I don't know what to do and I don't even know if I can pull this off, but somehow we have to figure out a way to get the people into the viewing area and seated." My "take charge" wife immediately went out on the front lawn and started rounding people up. I stayed inside and began searching for people who had a family resemblance. I figured close family members such as brothers or sisters would better understand what Dortha had asked me to do, so I began going to those folks, introducing myself and explaining what we needed to do. What an unusual way to meet people!

It was not long before Rebecca and I had everyone together and seated in one area. I found myself standing in front of a group of people who apparently assumed that if I was there I must be a person who was knowledgeable in comforting grieving family and friends and no doubt knew what I was doing! Little did they know I had never done anything like this. Hidden beneath the calm exterior was a terrified auctioneer. I remember standing in front of all those people, sharing a memory of Bill with them. Cal stood up and told one of his favorite "Bill" stories. No one else stood up and no one spoke. Dead silence filled the room. With my heart pounding in silent desperation as I looked around the room, I realized it was my responsibility and my responsibility alone

to chase away the deafening silence with words of comfort. I had been asked to conduct a service. I had agreed to do it and somehow, in spite of my fears, this was something I must do. Hating dead silence and empty air, I stood up and again found myself talking to complete strangers, encouraging them to speak and share a story about a man they all had loved. Even though every person in that room wished to learn more about the life of Bill Suboski, few knew how to start. You would not think it would take courage to do something like that, but it does. The words were stumbling in my mind but somehow when I spoke they came out calm and reassuring. I had this eerie sensation as if I were standing off to one side watching the stranger who was wearing my clothing and using my body, reaching out to the congregation in such a calming manner. I could not believe I was capable of the task I had undertaken.

I found myself working this gathering of people almost like I was working a crowd of auction buyers. A little more serious and dignified, yet inserting comforting smiles and quiet humor. Helping everyone to “connect” with the life Bill Suboski had lived and encouraging each of them to share a favorite remembrance was very similar to getting auction goers to participate in the auction process. Gradually different people would tell a story. Some brought a chuckle, others brought a tear, and many brought both. Whenever there was hesitation or a pause, I would stand and tell a story about Bill. All the while I was scanning the crowd, reading their faces, watching their body language, searching for a person who wanted to say something but needed some encouragement. I discovered that if I could make eye contact, speak as if I were speaking to them alone, as if there was no one else in the room and nod ever so gently they would look up and quietly begin to tell “their” story, their memory of Bill. I have used the same technique

many times getting people to bid who either were unsure whether they should or sometimes had no idea they were going too! I guess I had never really appreciated the talent I had nor had I expected my talent would ever be used in this way.

One by one, they spoke of Bill. Of the love he gladly shared and how he had helped them all at one time or another. Wife, mother, children, brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces, nephews and friends, each had a memory to share that we all hungered to hear. We learned many new things about Bill that afternoon and we learned about the impact Bill had on each of us. We learned that each of us had had our lives enhanced, in many different ways, just from having had the privilege of knowing Bill Suboski. This service, or sharing of memories, was something Bill would have liked and it was something that everyone there, not just Dortha, needed. We all needed the validation that while Bill Suboski had left us physically; the memories of his life would live on.

When I first started, I thought it would be impossible to do this for 15 minutes, let alone two hours. I had underestimated myself, and the people who gathered there. We finally hit a lull, where seemingly there was nothing left unsaid, no more words to say. I remember looking nervously at my watch, hoping against hope Dortha would not be too upset at my failure to make this service last the two hours she had requested. I was amazed to discover that we were just minutes from completing the two hours. The time had gone by faster than I could have realized. Silently I thanked the Lord for the strength he had provided and then brought the service to a close.

What I did that day was well received, not only Dortha, but also other family members and friends came to me later that day and thanked me for what I had done. I

believe they felt that I had given them a gift. I knew, however, the gift had really been given to me. When you do something for someone, when you give from the heart, it is returned to you. The feeling of goodness multiplies, engulfs, and warms your soul. Conducting this service was not a gift I had given; it was a gift received.

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