

Lending a Helpful Hand

Charity Storage rallies operators to give back to those less fortunate.

By Tom Comi

Lance Watkins is always present in a conversation, but you can't help but sense his business mind is always thinking two steps ahead when you're talking to him. And that probably explains his success with a storage business, an auction company, involvement with a hit reality TV show and the creation of a charitable organization benefiting the industry.

Watkins founded Storage Outlet in 1997 and StorageTreasures.com (an online storage auction information portal and facility directory) last year, and he played a big role in the launch of the popular A&E show "Storage Wars." But if you ask him what accomplishment he is most proud of, he'll most likely tell you about Charity Storage.

And when he was looking for somebody to help form the non-profit organization, he knew his good friend Barry Hoeven was the best partner he could have. You see, not only is Hoeven a smart businessman, but his well-documented bout with kidney cancer transformed how he views the world.

"Having stage-four cancer has had a profound impact on my life," said Hoeven, president of Westport Properties in California and founder of the non-profit organization Kure

It. "It has made me realize that your life can have more meaning if you can make a small difference in the world by helping other people. I have recognized that there are a lot of charities and good causes with funding shortages that need help, and in the end it's not what you make but what you give back."

Giving back is exactly what Charity Storage is all about, which is why the Self Storage Association has partnered with the group. Participating facilities designate an unoccupied unit as their charity unit, and items are donated by existing tenants, other auction buyers, those moving in or out, and even the community. At the next scheduled public auction, the items are auctioned off and the proceeds go to Charity Storage for distribution.

Ten percent of each Charity Storage auction's proceeds go to the Self Storage Association Scholarship Fund, thirty percent goes to the Kure It! Kidney Cancer Research Fund, and the remaining 60 percent is distributed to a nonprofit selected by the facility. Operators can submit their favorite non-profit 501(c)(3) local charity to be included in the program.

See Charity Auctions, page 24



A recent auction at US Storage Centers' facility in Norwalk, California, drew a large crowd and raised a great deal of money for charity.



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An Idea is Born

While some people have debated whether “Storage Wars” reflects positively on the industry, what can’t be disputed is the show’s role in launching Charity Storage. Watkins and Hoeven both have facilities in Southern California, where the program was launched with their guidance and at their respective facilities.

“Lance approached me with the idea to capitalize on the popularity of the reality show to benefit charities,” Hoeven said. “We started testing the charity auction concept at our facilities, and were amazed at how easily the program could be operated, even with minimal supervision. In the testing phase, we established best practices, created operating instructions and procedural documents, and got approved as a nonprofit. We also raised a lot of money for Kure It.”

Watkins said joining forces with the SSA has helped in terms of credibility and exposure.

“We believe the industry will benefit from the public having donation points within storage facilities,” he said. “It made sense to align with our national association to help market the concept and support the SSA scholarship fund.”

Both men said the reaction thus far has been great. In fact, Watkins said they have sold out their founder sponsorships and already have more than 300 stores participating.

“Managing the concept at a store level has been the easiest program we have rolled out to our stores, ever. The managers take great pride in helping tenants and others.”

In addition to raising money for charities, Hoeven said the program is also rewarding for the participating facilities. He cites Compass Self Storage as a chain that markets its charity auctions and partners with the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society as its chosen charity.

“It has increased employee morale, company image, and goodwill in the community,” he explained. “Managers and front-desk personnel truly enjoy being part of something that gives back to others, and the more they get involved in the program, the bigger an impact they make.”

Making a Difference

That impact has been felt by Julie D’Attilio, who manages the US Storage Centers property in Laguna Niguel, California. She said her company has held auctions at two locations (including hers), and they are looking to do more.

“In our opinion, the Charity Storage auction is very well received by all parties,” she said. “We know the buyers like them because we have had spectacular monetary results, and the donors are happy to see their useful items get a second life and gain a tax deduction while addressing an important cause.”

Despite the resounding success thus far, don’t think for a minute that Hoeven and Watkins plan to rest on their laurels.

“The major goal is to benefit a broad range of charitable causes,” Hoeven said. “The second goal is to promote a positive image of our industry. We are currently getting a lot of press for our auction process, but we also want the public to know that self storage is organized, professional, philanthropic, and community-oriented. Giving and helping has filled my heart in many more ways than making the next deal. I would encourage everyone to do the same on some level.”

Added Watkins: “We would like the industry to have a cause that supports many charities and to plant the seed in the public’s mind that ‘that storage facility I pass everyday might be one of those places that does nice things for those less fortunate.’”

What are the legal aspects to a charity auction? See page 31.

For more information on how you can get involved, visit CharityStorage.org, send an e-mail to info@charitystorage.org, or call 949-748-5923.

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