

Flamingo fundraising soars to \$1 million for Aspen Education Foundation

By: Rick Carroll



Auctioneer David Goodman with Olympic Champion Alex Ferreira and Lance Armstrong

The Aspen Education Foundation hauled in a record \$1 million at its annual fundraising gala Saturday at the St. Regis, where the organization also affirmed its commitment to helping fund campus-wide mental health services.

The sold-out event — 470 tickets went at an average price of \$225 each, while VIP tables fetched \$12,000 — included a live auction as well as a video presentation that highlighted AEF’s new pledge to fund the hiring of a full-time counselor at Aspen Middle School and provide financial support to Aspen Family Connections.

“People were clapping when the video said we were going to add mental health to our priorities,” said Cynthia Chase, executive director of AEF. “And the paddle raises (for the live auction) reflected that. The whole message of our video was that we have our core list of programs (outdoor and experiential education, college counseling, STEAM, robotics, math and literacy support) and we’re committed to those programs. And the message in our video is that we’ve added mental health and now these programs will only get better.”

AEF announced in October it would also direct its focus toward mental health support at the schools. The announcement was in response to a request from the Aspen School District, which is a partner AEF financially supports.

The middle school has one counselor for 486 students. Chase said adding another counselor will double the support and put the school in line with the recommended ratio of one counselor per 250 students.

AEF plans to fund that second position in perpetuity, Chase said.

The seven-figure amount raised Saturday topped last year's Flamingo event, which brought in \$850,000, Chase said.

The fundraiser was active with teachers, parents and grandparents of children in the district, students, graduates, empty-nesters and even those without children. The turnout was encouraging and showed the community's devotion to public education, Chase said.

"I can't say enough about how incredible the whole community was," Chase said. "There are so many terrific nonprofits in our valley, but to see everybody cross barriers and generations for our kids is why we have a great public school system."



David Goodman – Auction Results, LLC

The live auction conducted by David Goodman of Auction Results, LLC was one of the more popular events and included a celebrity appeal. People bid on chances to play golf with 1997 Open Championship winner Justin Leonard (\$40,000), take a Snowcat excursion on the backside of Aspen Mountain with local rippers Gretchen Bleiler and Chris Davenport (\$39,000), or host a pickleball tournament with Lance Armstrong, halfpipe skier Alex Ferreira, tennis great Chris Evert and two-time Olympic downhill racer Andy Mill (\$27,000).

Aspen-area restaurants also donated gift certificates, a dentist donated braces, and **a Super Bowl package was up for bid (\$75,000).**

"It was really great money-wise, which is good news," said Susan Marolt, vice president of the Board of Education, at the board's meeting Monday. "And it was just a good community feel."