

Going once, going twice...

Auctioneer Jena Baker deals mainly in antiques

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With their fast tongues and all-business approach, auctioneers aren't typically considered charming.

But then Jena Baker isn't a typical auctioneer.

"You're not going to let her get away with that, are you?" the long-haired, slender 26-year-old joked with her audience after a woman bid \$25 on a desk that originally started at \$300.

The crowd giggled and joined in the bidding, eventually completing the sale at \$50.

Baker, who recently opened Great Expectations Auction Company at the Ponce de Leon Mall, continued charming the crowd throughout the night, taking time to explain what she loved about each piece before opening the bidding.

When a cherry pitter didn't draw any bids, she seemed truly disappointed in her buyers.

"You guys must not know what this is. It's a beautiful, primitive piece. You wouldn't see it in a store for under \$100," she said.

And so went the night Saturday, during the third auction in Baker's second business venture.

The Jacksonville native moved to St. Augustine five years ago to open an antiques business at 56 San Marco Avenue. Jena's Antiques and Art has since become a regular stop for local antiquers. Several customers asked Baker to handle estate sales for them, so she decided to get her auctioneer's license and open her second business, the auction house, one month ago.

Looking even younger than her 26 years, she's often mistaken for a high school student. But, in fact, she's a Florida State University graduate with three degrees under her belt. She has bachelor's degrees in marketing, international business and cultural anthropology.

After graduating from FSU, Baker worked in Tallahassee for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Then, at just 21, she decided to leave government work and start her own business.

"I moved here to open the store. I love St. Augustine and the history. It's a great little town," Baker said. A longtime antique lover, she thought the antique business was a natural fit for her.

"The great thing about being in this business is that you can feed your habit and swap pieces out when you want a change," she said.

Baker gets her merchandise through consignments, estate sales, business liquidations and single item sales. Sometimes, she recommends selling through e-bay or selling to an individual buyer instead of auctioning a piece. But she said she's had a great response whenever she chooses to auction an item.

She typically charges sellers 30 percent of the final sale price unless she has to pick the item up herself. Then she charges an additional 5 percent. Her company also delivers.

Every auction begins with a one-hour "champagne preview," during which guests enjoy champagne and peruse the items. Once the auction itself kicks off, it lasts two and three hours.

During Saturday's auction preview, Baker was busy walking from piece to piece, showing potential buyers all the small details.

FYI: To find out more about Great Expectations Auction Company, view the event schedule or preview galleries of merchandise, log on to www.geauction.com.

She made sure spectators noticed the tiger-like stripes in her favorite item of the night, a Chippendale Tiger Maple drop-front secretary desk from the early 1700s. And she answered questions about everything from high-end furniture to old World War II uniforms.

She even found a way to make her audience laugh as she laid down the rules before the bidding began.

"Everything sold is as-is, where-is. If you drop your vase, the only guarantee I'll give you is that you'll get all the pieces," she said

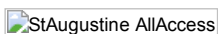
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