

Livingston County Daily Press & Argus

By Dan Meisler
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A museum focused on the history of racism - using money from the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council - purchased one of the Ku Klux Klan robes at the sale at the Ole Gray Nash Auction House Saturday evening and plans to keep it at its Big Rapids facility.

By the time the Daily Press & Argus was printed Saturday night, most of the 10 robes for sale had been purchased, the most expensive one for \$5,400. It was a blue robe with a hood, from Kentucky in 1926, and the purchase price included a sword and a certificate.

Robert Bailer was the successful bidder, and he also bought a another robe for \$1,200. He wouldn't say where he lived, but said the purchases were "for historical purposes."

The robe that started all the controversy, which had a pink sash and came from Florida, went for \$1,425. The purchaser, an African-American man, refused to comment. He said he was from out of town.

Kevin Miller, a professor of English at Ferris State University, successfully bid on a women's Klan cape. He was representing the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia on the college's Big Rapids campus, and said the \$700 he bid would be paid for by the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council.

"We were looking for a positive way to dispose of the items," he said. "One place is a trash can, the other is our museum."

Media attention in the weeks before the sale prompted more buyers than a typical auction to show up - and sellers to bring more Klan material.

By the time the auction took place, the original pink-sashed robe had been joined by nine others and several tables full of other material - from shirts to books to buttons to bumper stickers to knives.

Miller said he suspected the African-American man who got one of the robes had a "similar agenda" to his own - historical preservation.

Two of the people in attendance wore jackets with Nazi swastika patches, and they appeared to be accompanied by several friends. One of them successfully bid on a few items.

The demonstrations from the street briefly spilled into the auction house a few minutes before the sales began, with protesters chanting "No Nazis, no KKK, no fascist U.S.A."

One person in the room, who wouldn't give his name, yelled back: "Go back to Israel."

Other than that, there was little indication of the controversy the auctions of the robes had caused. The sale went smoothly, with a lot of bidding on many of the items.

An old automobile light with KKK glass went for \$1,000, several knives with Klan insignia went for between \$200 and \$400. The sale also included T-shirts, patches, videos, vinyl records, literature - and a bottle of "KKK liniment" which fetched \$70.

A photograph of Robert Miles, the former Grand Dragon of the Michigan Klan who lived in Cohoctah Township until his death in 1992, was bought for \$420. David Pilgrim, curator of the museum that bought one of the robes with help from the Diversity Council, said the museum has two other Klan robes already.

"I assure you, we use these items to teach tolerance," he said. He went to another auction of Klan collectibles in 1992, and said the police presence was more visible then than it was Saturday in Howell.

"I'm glad to see the vigil here," he said. "This has sparked a lot of conversation. Today, people don't talk openly and honestly about race." Twelve-year-old Mitchell Tucker of Howell went to see the auction with his mother, and was looking inside at the bidding through the window.

When asked what the auction meant to him, Tucker, who is white, said, "It is about hatred against the black people ... It's a terrible thing. It's making Howell look bad."

Ken Bey, a middle school teacher from Lansing, who is black, said he wasn't offended by the auction.

"It's part of history. I'd like to see those items go in a museum as a teaching tool," he said.

Pilgrim, from the museum of racism, said he hopes something positive can come from the whole affair.

"I won't say it's a good thing; hopefully something good can come out of it," he said.

"Maybe I have taught more people about history, at least this week, than some schools," said auction house owner Gary Gray.

Daily Press & Argus staffers Susan Demas, Lisa Roose-Church and Mike Malott contributed to this report, as did The Associated Press.
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