

Fire sale!

Celebrities on the block for SWHFD

by Catherine Wargo

SOUTHWEST HARBOR — What do Sarah Jessica Parker, artist Richard Estes, a Munchkin, Miss Piggy, The New England Revolution soccer team and Al Gore have in common?

A place on a celebrity golf team? A box on "Hollywood Squares"? A clean air rally?

Nope. It's the Southwest Harbor Fire Association's First Annual Auction.

Local residents Beth Gaiser and her friend, Janet Patton, both wives of longtime area firefighters, have been working on a celebrity twist for this event since last winter. The auction is being held to raise money for Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)

for the Southwest Harbor Fire Department. Being auctioned are signed photos, books, soccer balls, Nascar models and other items sent to them by screen, TV, and sports figures, political bigwigs and just about every other sort of celebrity you could name.

Mrs. Gaiser, who works at the Christmas Spirit Shop in Bar Harbor, got the idea to ask these stars for donations last winter when actor Roy Doltrice — the father's voice in the animated film, "Beauty and the Beast" — came into the store.

"After he'd gone, I realized I should have gotten his autograph. It was probably worth a lot of money," says Mrs. Gaiser.

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To her surprise, a friend got her that very autograph through the mail, and it occurred to her that maybe other celebrities would be just as generous with their signatures and images for a good cause.

"I am writing on behalf of the Southwest Harbor Fire Association ..." starts the letter she and Mrs. Patton drafted.

Since then, they have written more than 500 e-mail and snail-mail letters to local, national and international celebrities.

"We just started picking names out of the blue and sent letters," says Ms. Gaiser.

The letter writing campaign, boosted by increased sensitivity to the importance of fire departments since 9/11, has brought a stronger response than the two women ever imagined possible.

"The auction items have

been arriving almost daily in the mail," says Mrs. Patton. "Every day feels like Christmas!"

The Southwest Harbor Fire Department is comprised of approximately 35 volunteers who have been helping keep the island safe since 1905. Mrs. Patton's husband, Wayne, joined the department after a fire in their apartment; Mrs. Gaiser can't remember a time when her husband, Rob, wasn't involved in fighting fires and responding to car accidents.

The money raised at the auction will help outfit the ever-expanding fire department's new volunteers. PPE is essential to every firefighter, and costs can be astronomical. A full suit of gear includes pants, jacket, hood, helmet, gloves, boots and an oxygen tank; the flame-resistant pants alone cost \$400, and an oxygen tank is \$3,000. Of course, the safety and support the fire

department provides to the community is priceless.

As pleased as they are with the success of their efforts this first year, Mrs. Gaiser and Mrs. Patton have great expectations for the future.

"We hope to make it bigger and better every year," says Mrs. Patton.

It would be hard to top this year's item list, which also includes a drum stick autographed by Creedence Clearwater Revival; an autographed copy of "Misery" by Stephen King; a "Thunder Alley" script signed by Ed Asner; lunch with governor Angus King; and autographed photographs of Elizabeth Taylor, Jim Carrey, Al Gore, Della Reese, James Earl Jones, David Copperfield, Paul Stookey and Amy Grant.

The auction will take place at the Southwest Harbor Legion Hall on Saturday, Aug. 10. Previews will begin at 11 a.m. and the auction is at 1 p.m. There will be additional silent auction items and door prizes. For information, call Beth Gaiser at 244-7388 or Janet Patton at 244-3465.

Catherine Wargo is a Times intern this summer. She is a senior at Middlebury College and is living for the next few weeks in West Tremont. ■