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January 25, 2009

Economy impacts Charity Preview

Singing actor Jeff Daniels and the Brothers and Sisters in Christ Gospel Choir set a joyous tone for the ribbon cutting ceremony that opened the North American International Auto Show Charity Preview. But despite the formal clothes and great show, the sad states of the economy and the auto industry could not be denied.

Attendance was down to nearly 7,000 from the sold-out crowds of 17,000 four years ago. Income for the 12 charities was down from \$7 million to \$2.6 plus million. And senior show chair Joe Serra was very earnest when he told the loyalists gathered for the ceremony, "You mean more this year than ever."

Hands-on exhibits were popular. There was even space on the lower level for rides around a 1/8th-mile landscaped roadway in alternative energy-powered cars. Lowell Boileau, after riding in a Chrysler Aspen Hybrid, said "I heard what I wanted to hear. Nothing."

Some 450 of those who attended the auto show Charity Preview began and ended the evening at the 17th annual AutoGlow! Children's Center fund-raiser (\$250 tickets). Honorary co-chairs Bill and Lisa Ford and Nicki and Alan Mulally were in the crowd cruising the international buffet stations and dancing up a storm at the Westin Book-Cadillac. Ford Motor Co. was the presenting sponsor of the traditional party. It was expected to raise \$100,000 for the 80-year-old social service agency.

Road & Travel Magazine's 13th annual black tie award ceremony brought 600 industry leaders to the MGM Grand on the eve of press week. The International Car of the Year (ICOTY) awards by a panel of 16 auto journalists, were presented by RTM editor Courtney Caldwell and Edmunds.com's Kevin Smith. You can find them at www.roadandtravel.com.

However, the remarks of Lifetime Legend Award winner Warren Brown were the most memorable part of the evening. The veteran Washington Post auto journalist, who grew up in New Orleans' ninth ward, called it "... a place where the value of movement and the tragedy of its absence were on constant display ... If you lacked transportation you were stuck in poverty."

He noted that cars facilitated the bus boycotts of the civil rights movement and that they are the base of movement, leading to different ideas, better neighborhoods, schools and education. "The automobile industry, by implication, is a leading voice of freedom," said Brown. Not surprisingly he got a long, standing ovation.

Speaking of the auto show, the history of the show's product specialists has been chronicled by Margery Krevsky in her book Sirens of Chrome. The Enduring Allure of Auto Show Models. The book, released just before the holidays, has been named one of 20 Notable Books of 2009 by the Library of Michigan.

The author, owner of Productions Plus Talent Agency and former Eccentric fashion writer, signed books for many of the 350 well-wishers at the opening of a photographic exhibit inspired by the book. In the throng were Krevsky's former business partner and model Harriet Fuller and 10 product specialists wearing garb from years past. The exhibit runs through April 30 at the Skillman Branch of the Detroit Public Library.

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