

2004 Physics Nobel Laureate DNA Sells on eBay

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MIT Nobel laureate Frank Wilczek and his wife, Betsy Devine, recently found themselves the subjects of an unusual eBay auction: Some enterprising students from a Swedish high school saved the glasses the two had sipped from while visiting the school and then offered them for sale.

The sale offered buyers the chance to own some DNA from a Nobel laureate. And, it served a worthy cause: Proceeds would go toward a field trip for the senior class.

According to the eBay text, the Wilczek glass "was used to consume water by the famous physicist on December 16, only six days after he received the Nobel Prize in Stockholm. It has since not been washed, and the water that was still in it has been left to evaporate, leaving the DNA still in the glass."

Devine and Wilczek approved the auction in advance.

On a side trip after the Nobel ceremony, Wilczek and Devine visited the Rymdgymnasiet, or Swedish Upper Secondary School of Space Technology. "We had wanted to see the famous 'space high school' while we were in Sweden, so we were delighted to be invited there," Devine said.

About 20 minutes before their scheduled talk, they were told of its unusual format: the two would be queried by 15 "aliens" in front of an audience of about 100 kids. Devine, in her web log, explains that "the

aliens were planning to destroy all life on our planet, but their teacher had persuaded them to hold off if the visiting Nobel Prize winner and his spouse could give good answers to their many and diverse questions."

The scheme, devised by Rymdgymnasiet teacher Odd Minde, "was brilliant," said Devine. "The students were completely involved, not shy, and came away with much more information than they would have from a normal 'bigwig' presentation."

Among their questions: Does science prove that religion is wrong? Wilczek's answer, according to Devine: "when religion talks about our aspirations and our sense of morality, I do not believe that science can contradict it. However, when religion contradicts science on matters of fact, religion must yield."

In her weblog Devine reports that "fortunately, [the aliens] liked the answers we gave."

The eBay auction of the couples' drinking glasses attracted eight bidders; the final price was \$39.69 plus \$25 shipping.

Who won? Devine bought the glasses herself. She notes in her web log that she wanted "a souvenir of an unforgettable encounter with blue and green painted aliens at the Rymdgymnasiet."

Frank Wilczek is MIT's Herman Feshbach Professor of Physics. He shared the 2004 Nobel Prize in Physics with H. David Politzer and David Gross.

Devine's blog can be found at betsydevine.weblogger.com/

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