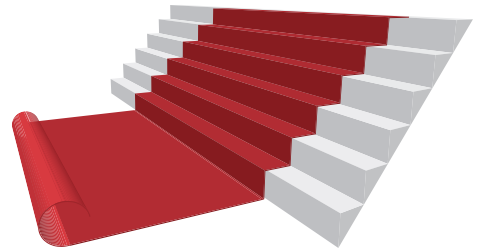


Off the Red Carpet

Celebrities' fashions get a second life through **auctions benefiting children's charities.**



by Beth Douglass Silcox

Jane Kaczmarek sat in her bedroom, phone in hand, and started dialing. The co-star of *Malcolm in the Middle* was up for an Emmy, with the awards ceremony just a week away. Clothing was what she was seeking—but not just any clothing, and not for herself.

In a week, paparazzi would swarm the red carpet, taking aim at television's brightest stars clad in exquisite gowns and tuxedos. The Emmys provided a marketing frenzy for fashion designers, to be sure, but from Kaczmarek's perspective, it could be so much more.

Kaczmarek and actor-husband Bradley Whitford, both Wisconsin natives, grew up with no-nonsense Midwestern sensibilities and ingenuity, and as the Emmy Awards approached in 2002, they saw a way to tap their celebrity while applying their resourcefulness, creating the Clothes Off Our Back Foundation to benefit children around the globe.

"I grew up in a Polish family," Kaczmarek says. "Wasting anything was just not done in our house. We ate leftovers until they were gone. We had hand-me-downs. When we carpeted the house, any leftover carpeting would go into the garage to catch the snow when it melted from under the car."

She and Whitford had long since traded the harsh, 35-below winters in Wisconsin for



California's sunnier disposition. In 2002, their careers took off simultaneously, with her success as mom Lois on *Malcolm in the Middle* and his as Josh on *The West Wing*.

"We started getting what was truly an embarrassment of riches arriving at our doorstep," she recalls. "Designers send you so many things that they want you to wear because it is advertising for them. They wanted a celebrity to be seen wearing an article of their clothing."

She bristled at the notion that the life span of these sequined gowns and perfectly tailored tuxedos would expire after an evening's photo-op. So one week before the 2002 Emmys, Kaczmarek pressed those numbers and asked people she knew in television for their clothes.

Brad, on the other hand, was busy hanging around the set of *Friends*, waiting for the opportunity to talk to the cast about donations. "We knew Jennifer Aniston a little bit, and he asked her for her Emmy dress and she said, 'Yes,'" Kaczmarek tells *SUCCESS*.

The deal was simple and it resonated with other celebrities. Stars donated their Emmy attire and Clothes Off Our Back auctioned it online for charity—children's charities. The foundation took aim to impact the welfare of as many children as possible with the charities it supported.

As it turns out, that first Clothes Off Our Back auction, thrown together in just a week, netted an impressive \$87,200 for children's charities.

The sale of Jennifer Aniston's Emmy Awards dress funded immunizations for 50,000 African children.



Star Power

Jane Kaczmarek and Bradley Whitford leveraged their celebrity to solicit donations of fashions from other stars, including Jennifer Aniston's Dior gown, opposite, and Tina Fey's little black dress.

Jennifer Aniston won the Emmy that year, edging out Kaczmarek. "It was disappointing to lose, but what was OK was that I would get the dress for charity," Kaczmarek says. "That dress sold for \$50,000, and it was a real surprise. I had no idea that it would go that well."

The sale of Aniston's dress funded immunizations for 50,000 African children. That was exactly the kind of impact both Kaczmarek and Whitford were looking for. Each year since, Clothes Off Our Back selects three children's charities—one international, one national and one local to the Los Angeles area—to which they can deliver the most impact. The 2009 beneficiaries are Hope North, a rehabilitation center for Uganda's child soldiers; Feeding America (previously Second Harvest), a U.S. food bank; and The Art of Elysium, an L.A.-based program for critically ill children.

Michel Schneider, Clothes Off Our Back executive director, has worked with Kaczmarek and Whitford since the foundation's inception to build a brand whose popularity with celebrities is ever-increasing and includes far more than formal wear.

While Aniston's dress still holds the foundation's record, Keira Knightley's beautiful green gown worn in the motion picture *Atonement* was donated by the studio and sold for \$35,000. Kaczmarek jokingly wonders aloud, "I don't know who's going to fit in Keira Knightley's dress because she's so slender."

Clothes Off Our Back auctions aren't exclusively for evening gowns; male ensembles and tuxedos are also popular auction items. Clay Aiken's Emmy suit brought \$28,000 at auction, and a white suit worn by Barry Manilow sold for \$13,000.

Kaczmarek says there's an old saying in Los Angeles: "There are three seasons here: fires, mudslides and awards shows." For the first few years, the Emmys were the foundation's focus. But when the tsunami tragedy struck a few years ago, Kaczmarek says, "Everyone was trying to figure out ways to raise money for those victims, and it was right around the Golden Globes so we decided to do an auction to help."

Clothes Off Our Back worked with *In Style* magazine for that auction, and since then the partnership has offered the foundation many opportunities to diversify and broaden its reach beyond those who can spend \$50,000 on a gown.

Kaczmarek says she learned a long time ago not to turn up her nose at any donated item. The simplest things, like a white shirt worn to the Golden Globes by Matthew McConaughey, sell for \$1,000. "A lot of times, if you don't know what to get somebody as a gift and you know that they have a celebrity who they're



passionate about, come to Clothes Off Our Back, because you're likely to find something," she says.

When Kaczmarek spotted a Jordin Sparks autographed cereal bowl benefiting Feeding America on the Web site this winter, she leapt at the chance to buy it for her little 9-year-old son. "He is just crazy for Jordin Sparks!" she says, and something signed by her was a perfect Christmas gift.

Modestly priced, "little black dresses" owned by celebrities are often up for auction, as are autographed bottles of wine. Recently, women's apparel retailer White House/Black Market, where first lady Michelle Obama has been known to shop, auctioned four inaugural gowns, accompanied by design sketches and store gift certificates.

Celebrities like Jennifer Garner of *Alias* and Patricia Heaton of *Everybody Loves Raymond* have donated from the beginning, Schneider says, and "Ellen DeGeneres has cleaned out her closet for us a few times as well." Clothes Off Our Back also encourages celebrity-specific auctions, like those recently run for Natalie Portman and Lisa Loeb.

"Ninety percent of the people who bid on items wear or use them," Schneider says. "Bidders come back to us over and over, because once you get the bug, there's literally something for every size and pocketbook."

As the Clothes Off Our Back Foundation grows, so does the good fortune of children around the world, with auctions bringing in almost \$3 million so far. "After this year, we're pushing on toward \$4 million," Kaczmarek says. Admittedly, she and

Whitford had no specific monetary goals in mind when they began the foundation, but she wholeheartedly

agrees with Marian Wright Edelman, head of the Children's Defense Fund, when she said, "Service is the rent we pay for living. The higher your financial or intellectual gifts, the higher your rent." With a beautiful family, including three healthy children, as well as successful acting careers, Kaczmarek and Whitford gladly offer up their rent. **S**



Classic Looks

Keira Knightly's gown from *Atonement*, which sold for \$35,000; left, couture gown inspired by First Lady Michelle Obama created by retailer White House/Black Market.

Alex Bailey/Focus Features