

Common Ground: Auction provides stunning start to Ski Hill fundraising

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Photo by Corbin Crimmins

The Leavenworth Festhalle was jammed with more than 400 people Wednesday evening for a fundraiser in memory of four extraordinary young men who lost their lives skiing.



Artists rendition of the lodge at the Leavenworth Ski Hill with a patio. More than \$120,000 was raised Wednesday evening toward a goal of \$500,000 to renovate the historic Leavenworth Ski Hill complex.

The Leavenworth Festhalle was jammed with more than 400 people Wednesday night to pay tribute to four extraordinary young men who lost their lives skiing and to kick off a \$500,000 fundraising campaign to reinvigorate the historic Leavenworth Ski Hill complex for the next 100 years.

This is a campaign that is all about the future, said Rob Fallon, one of the event organizers. He said they raised at least \$120,000 in the auction, a stunning amount for an organization that does one fundraiser a year and worries more about operations than donations. What was interesting was that a lot of the contributions came from individuals in their 20s and 30s, which is rather unusual for major fundraisers.

It shows how beloved the four were in the Bavarian Village. Johnny Brenan, Chris Rudolph and Jim Jack were killed in an avalanche at Stevens Pass in February. The previous year, Dan Zimmerman was killed in an avalanche on Mt. Cashmere. When you log onto the Leavenworth Chamber of Commerce web page, you see the smiling visage of Jim Jack in one of the photographs. They remain larger than life and the community is still deeply affected by their loss.

Last spring, a group of their friends got together and started talking about finding a way to bring the community together to build something that would last. The quaint and community-focused ski hill, with its rope tows, ski jump and historic lodge, jumped out as an opportunity. "Johnny Brenan taught his kids to ski there," observed Fallon, who is known as the unofficial "minister of stoke" in the community for his enthusiasm for getting things done.

The last significant renovation work at the ski hill lodge happened in the 1930s, said Fallon. They improvements that they envision will make it a key part of the community and the local economy for future. So, it is far more than a memorial project. It's about community. The first phase will include some basic infrastructure needs, such as electrical and septic systems, plus a remodel of the lodge that will include the addition of a large patio. That's a fitting addition, since the four skiers were known to enjoy a cold beverage or two after a hard day of skiing.

The auction was extraordinary in a number of ways.

First, it brought together people from a wide spectrum of society. There were people from all over the region, not just the upper valley, and included individuals as disparate as ski bums and doctors. The new owner of Steven's Pass Ski Area showed up and was an active bidder. Stevens Pass is donating the proceeds of ticket sales next Feb. 19, the anniversary of the avalanche, to the Ski Hill Project.

But the story Fallon told that I found most gripping involved a piece of art symbolizing the four fallen skiers. Laurie Brenan, the widow of Johnny, stuck her bidding paddle up and was intent on buying the piece. Fallon said people were incredulous that someone was bidding against her, but when the person eventually won the auction, he turned around and gave it to Brenan. "I don't think there was a dry eye in the house," Fallon said.

Leavenworth is known for being a resort town but it is much more than that. As Fallon says: "It's got a really good backbone to it."

That was proven once again Wednesday night.