

Dining in the Dark gala to benefit Foundation Fighting Blindness

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Ebby Halliday isn't one to leave details to chance.

Dallas' first name in residential real estate is being honored on March 27 at a unique event, Dining in the Dark, that benefits the Foundation Fighting Blindness.

Attendees will eat in pitch darkness – or at least as dark as the Fairmont Hotel's ballroom can get – and all the servers will be blind. The diners won't know what they're eating or drinking until it reaches their mouths. And they'll do it all in cocktail attire.

Ebby, who just turned 97, decided a run-through was in order.

Her co-honorees, entrepreneur T. Boone Pickens and Kern Wildenthal, president of UT Southwestern Medical Center, thought that was a grand idea. Mr. Pickens agreed to host a pre-fete meal in a storage room in his company's headquarters.

I simply *had* to horn in.

Rounding out the table of five for a late-morning brunch was Aaron Rager, events manager for FFB's Texas regional office in McKinney.

Dining in absolute darkness enhances taste, touch and sound, and gives sighted people insight into the daily difficulties of being blind, says Mr. Rager, who has retinitis pigmentosa.

"It really doesn't simulate blindness, because visually impaired people often don't experience the blackout effect," he explains. "Visually impaired often see bright white."

So it's the reverse of what we sighted think?

"Exactly."

Mr. Rager, 28, was diagnosed with RP at 12. His circle of vision is slowly closing like the shutter of a camera. "With this disease, you literally don't know if you will wake up the next day and still be able to see."

The foundation, which opened its office here last year, hopes to find a cure for RP, macular degeneration and other degenerative diseases that affect 9 million Americans.

Raising awareness

"Raising money with this event is almost a side-burner issue," Mr. Rager says.

"We're trying to raise awareness."

The concept of dining in the dark originated at the Blindekuh (Blind Cow) Restaurant in Zurich, Switzerland, which opened in 1999. It was brought to the States by Opaque, a restaurant in Los Angeles.

Opaque handles the logistics of the event for the foundation, covering exit signs, windows and anything else that emits light, setting up ropes and stanchions between tables, and training the blind servers. Work on fire codes begins a year in advance, Mr. Rager says.

The foundation's first Dining in the Dark was held in Orange County in February 2007. Instead of the 30 percent no-shows typical of most benefits, it drew an extra 30 percent at the door.

So far, about 250 people have paid \$500 to attend next week's event in Dallas. The fire marshal won't allow more than 350 in the room.

The organization hopes to bring in \$500,000, thanks to the help of the three honorees.

They agreed to help the cause at the request of the event's honorary chairman, U.S. Rep. Pete Sessions.

Dr. Wildenthal says it's the least he can do for the longtime supporter of UT Southwestern and medical research.

"There is so much on the verge of real breakthrough that will prevent many of these problems," Dr. Wildenthal says. "But that's not going to happen unless there's research. Pete Sessions is a very careful analyzer. And when Pete says this is an organization that he holds in high regard, I trust his judgment."

Close to a cure

Ebby nods in agreement. "We're so close to a cure for these diseases," she says, then smiles demurely at the men flanking her. "And I want to be part of anything that Kern Wildenthal and Boone Pickens are engaged in."

For Mr. Pickens, fighting blindness is personal. He was diagnosed with macular degeneration more than 20 years ago, and his father had the same disease.

"I had such fabulous sight that I could actually give the sex of a quail flying," Mr. Pickens says.

OK, I take the bait. "How do you tell that?"

"By the color of their heads," he answers.

Double vision

Mr. Pickens, who will turn 80 in May, now has double vision, which he seems to shrug off.

"Your brain adjusts. Seeing double is normal for me. When I see a covey of quail get up, I see twice as many birds. But I know the birds to shoot are the ones on the bottom, not the top."

As the lights are about to be switched off, Mr. Pickens' pressing question is whether it's OK to eat with his fingers.

I tell him, "It's gonna be dark, Boone. Who's to know?"

We laugh when Mr. Rager tells us that some people at an event he attended in California last month thought the butter balls were olives. When they popped them into their mouths, they didn't know what to do next.

We get to cheat. The meal of fresh fruit, a blueberry muffin and a wedge of quiche is served while the lights are on. The muffin is precut. The fruit is bite-size.

Mr. Pickens, who recently fell and broke his wrist, says he needed to rearrange his food for easier handling because of his injury. Dr. Wildenthal points out that it's Mr. Pickens' left arm in the cast.

Lights are doused

When the lights are doused, we truly can't see our hands feeding our faces.

"The quiche is wonderful," Ebby says.

"Are you using your hands or your fork?" Dr. Wildenthal asks.

I know what she's going to say and feel guilty for squishing off pieces with my hands. I cut the next bite with my fork (there are no knives on the table), but the fork lands in my lap as it misses the plate on its return. The good thing was that no one could see it.

"I have to confess," Mr. Pickens says, "I just bit my thumb."

"How did it taste?" Dr. Wildenthal quips.

When the lights are flipped back on, we compare plates.

Mine's a mess. So is my napkin.

"I did pretty good," Mr. Pickens says proudly. "I could lose some weight this way, but I won't starve to death."

No one dared drink

Our glasses of orange juice are full because no one dared drink from them.

The real deal won't be so easy, Mr. Rager assures us.

Then he lets us in on a secret: The foundation won't be serving chicken. Mr. Sessions doesn't like banquet poultry.

Forget spaghetti or Jell-O, we interject.

"Could be ribs," Mr. Rager says devilishly. "Wouldn't that be great? Everybody walking out with sauce all over their faces."

But Ebby has the last word: "We're also going to rule out shish kabobs," she says with her signature chuckle. "That could be dangerous."

WHAT TO EXPECT

When you get to Dining in the Dark, the lights in the ballroom will be on, and they'll stay on through the Visionary Award program and the salad course. Once dinner is served, here's what to expect:

1. They aren't kidding. The room will be completely dark, and the exit signs and anything that emits light will be covered.
2. The servers, who are visually impaired, will act as your guides. There will be one server per table who will describe the food on your plate, help you distinguish the wine bottles on the table, and escort you in and out of the room when needed.
3. The menu is a secret.
4. People are apt to do unusual things. (There have been rumors of flashers at other events.)
5. Go to the restroom before dinner starts.
6. Leave your cellphone at home. One phone can light up the whole room, so they are strictly forbidden.

Dining in the Dark is March 27 at the Fairmont Hotel. Tickets, which are \$500 per person, are still available by calling Aaron Rager of the Foundation Fighting Blindness at 214-566-9061, e-mailing arager@fightblindness.org or going to www.FightBlindness.org.

SOURCE: Foundation Fighting Blindness