

"On behalf of beautiful, fragile Esmee, thank you all"

Trustee Mike Norton on the Gromit Unleashed Auction

It was the hottest ticket in town. And I was there, just three rows from the front of expectant audience poised to bid for Gromit statues. But all I could think about was Esmee. Esmee is my niece. She'll be nine on her next birthday.

At first glance, Esmee seems quite normal. Her long eyelashes frame beautiful, pale green eyes on her round, pretty face. But Esmee's not normal. And, if you saw her, you would sense it. She's too still. Looking again, you'd notice that her eyes were open but flickering and strangely unfocussed.

In fact, the terrible truth about my niece Esmee is that, throughout her nine difficult years, this lovely little girl has been completely immobile.

Forget standing or sitting up, Esmee has never even co-ordinated a single movement, never spoken, never shown any sign of understanding. She has never even smiled.

She may be able to see and hear. She may be able to understand. Or she may not.

Esmee is utterly helpless. But if that wasn't enough, her real curse is epilepsy. Despite medication, Esmee has fits all the time. Sometimes her fits last for a minute but they can last for days. And when she fits, Esmee's eyes often seem to show a confused and inconsolable fear.

In short, Esmee is one of the most disabled children that Bristol Children's Hospital has treated. That's why I thought about Esmee. Because she is the reason I was at the auction.



Esmee

The hospital has never been able to diagnose what afflicts her. But the patient, caring and kind treatment she has always received at the hospital inspired me to agree to become a trustee of the Grand Appeal.

And that's how – before the event started – I found myself in a nervous huddle with my fellow trustees, daring to speculate on how much the evening might raise.

But none of us had any idea of how much the 92 lots were going to go for.

So the sale of the first Gromit – Patch – was nothing short of emotional. £10,000, £15,000, £25,000, £30,000...until the gavel came down on a final bid of £36,000.

It had taken less than two minutes. And, in that short time, we all realised that this was going to be an unforgettable night. And I realised, too, that I had a lump in my throat. I think it was partly relief, partly the sense that Bristol was not going to let us down, and partly because I knew the money would go straight to children like Esmee.

The auction passed some mind-boggling milestones. Nick Park's Gromit hit £50,000. Then we hit the million-pound mark. Then the Pixar Gromit reached £65,000. Then we hit the two million-pound mark.

The biggest cheers came at the end as we all tried to absorb the realisation that bidders had just spent more than £2.3m on 92 lumps of fibreglass.

Amid the excitement, I thought again about Esmee, so cruelly detached from the world that she will never be able to understand what Gromit Unleashed has achieved.

She will never be able to thank Aardman, or the artists, or the sponsors, or the volunteers or the generous bidders who made this historic auction so hugely successful.

So I will do it for her. On behalf of my beautiful, fragile niece Esmee, thank you all.



Mike Norton