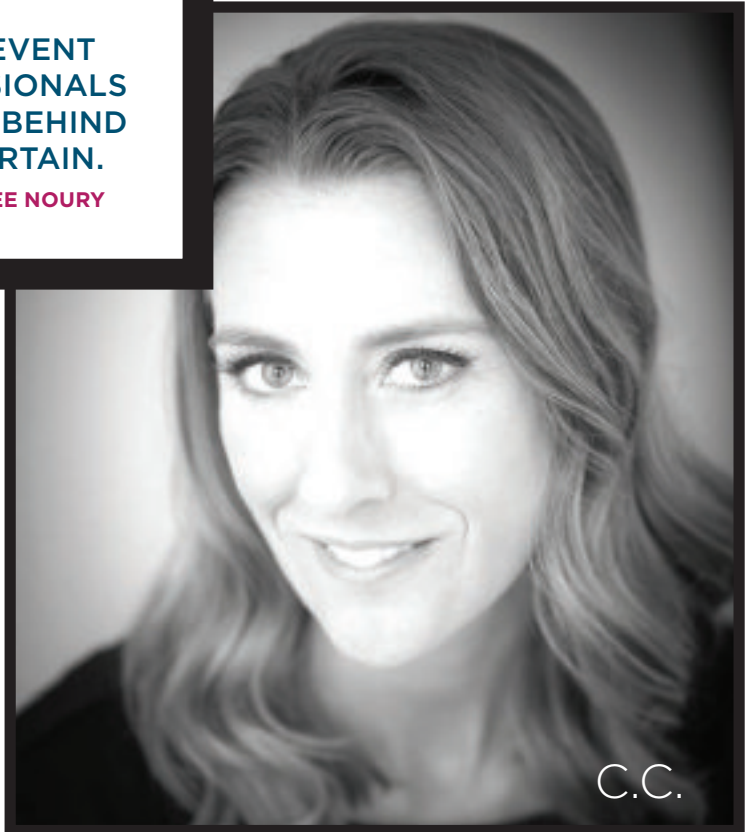




DAY
IN THE
LIFE

FOUR EVENT
PROFESSIONALS
TAKE US BEHIND
THE CURTAIN.

BY CAROLEE NOURY



HAVE YOU EVER WATCHED A DUCK ON A POND? *It looks so serene, yet just beneath the surface, that same duck is paddling furiously just to stay afloat. Event planners are a little like ducks—when done well, event planning looks calm and predictable, but offstage a different tale unfolds. Four event gurus share the intricacies of their days' work and how they came to love this intense field.*

➔ Amy Balestier

Communications Manager

Lancaster Area Habitat for Humanity

As part of the managerial team for Lancaster Area Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit that provides affordable housing through building and repair efforts, Amy Balestier coordinates event planning duties with her co-workers. Her background in event management and development makes the respective tasks almost second nature. "From past and current experiences, I found that I thoroughly enjoy the essentials of event planning from outlining each step to creating a memorable affair for attendees. In all things I operate most efficiently when I have my to-do list mapped out," she says.

Not only does Balestier have a passion for her work, she also values her team and her organization's mission. "We collaborate with members of our community to preserve homeownership in Lancaster County," she says. "It's incredibly meaningful to share that bond." It also means Balestier has reliable colleagues to turn to when her to-do list becomes unmanageable. "Sometimes it's a matter of having someone willing to cover your calls so you can go for a walk and clear your mind," she says. "Other times it's having someone to listen or brainstorm with."

When it comes to in-house event planning for a nonprofit, there are particular pressures. "One thing that's unique is managing event expenses. All event planners keep an eye on financials, but

for us it's especially critical for maximizing the funds we have to build and repair more homes," Balestier says. "To keep costs low, we really have to look at each expense and ask: Is this the best we can do? Typically, it's a matter of thinking outside the box. Do we have a volunteer who's a photographer? Can we design the floral arrangements ourselves? It isn't always smooth, but you use those trials to build on."

Balestier notes that her focus changes when events are on the horizon. "I shift from my typical duties of looking at the big picture and my long-term goals to a more narrow view of the specific details for the event, such as creating flyers and invitations and determining the deadline to get them printed."

Even with the swift pace of events, Balestier is in her element. "It's a lot like theater," she explains. "You spend most of your time planning and preparing as a team and then comes the big night. When you're done, there's a wonderful sense of relief, but it doesn't end there. Instead, we analyze the experience with an eye toward how to make the next even better."

Years ago when Balestier first started in the special events field, her employer demonstrated that when things go wrong and a guest is unhappy, it offers the opportunity to bridge a meaningful connection. "I learned that you have a choice between possibly alienating someone or earning a potential lifelong fan. When you commit to listening and addressing issues appropriately, you're inviting someone to know you and your organization better.

A.B.

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More often than not, you get a valuable outside perspective along with it."

Even with the most careful preparations, surprises happen. Balestier has found that facing those challenges has made her more confident. "I trust myself more," she says. "There's so much going on, you have to do the very best you can and sometimes you only have a split second to figure out how. I've learned to rely on my intuition and experience."

are, our one-of-a-kind field connects us."

Prior experience in event planning is a must, explains Condella. "You really can't just plan a single wedding and be ready for this field," she says. "There's so much more to event planning than what you get from even a handful of events. The most valuable skills are those you learn on the job: positive, effective negotiating; flexibility in your plans and ideas; and facing others' emotions without accidentally getting caught up by them, for starters. I recommend finding a job in the field first. And if that's not possible, volunteer at events. There's no better method to figure out if event planning is the right fit for you."

Condella hasn't had to invest in traditional marketing. Instead she dedicates that time to keeping in touch with other industry insiders, reading up on trends and attending seminars. Condella was surprised, at first, by how much time she spends on the road. "I have meetings with my clients, vendors and visits to the venues," she says. When she's in the office, she works on developing event-preparation and day-of-the-event lists, responding to emails and following up on the many details that go into each event. Realistic scheduling is a top priority. "One of the easiest mistakes to make is overbooking yourself," she explains. "Why do three OK events when instead you could do one that's amazing? I coordinate my schedule in a way that promotes my highest standards. My reputation and referrals depend on it."

ing up (and successfully pulling off) neighborhood block parties. "When I look back, it seems as though I've been preparing for this career my entire life," she says. Spradlin went on to earn several titles in the restaurant world, including waitress, manager and marketing consultant. Formal event planning clicked into place when Spradlin's husband suggested she consider making the move from planning weddings, birthday parties and more for family and friends to a career in event planning.

The daily challenges of disconnecting from email and unfinished business don't detract from the happiness this role brings her. For Spradlin, it's the interpersonal element that suits her most. "I am constantly meeting new people with fantastic ideas, but they need help figuring out how to bring them to life," she says. "As their event planner, I get to take on whatever they want and, in doing so, free them from stress."

Most event details are finalized well before that day. Those are the things her clients are often most relieved to let go of. "For me," says Spradlin, "business hours generally involve contacting vendors, writing and reviewing contracts, processing deposits, making phone calls and sending emails. During the busy season, I work four to six days a week and most of that time is spent gearing up for the events that usually happen on Saturdays."

Along the way, Spradlin has learned how to take care of herself by streamlining her event preparations and relaxing on her downtime. "I use lists to keep me sane," she explains. "A good night's sleep is critical. Then, on event day, I wear comfortable shoes, stay hydrated and eat quick, healthy snacks."

When asked for advice, Spradlin urges new industry professionals to be prepared for long days and weeks in the first couple of years. "It takes some time to grow a profitable business," she says. "During this time, let your clients see



Cindy Condella

Owner and Senior Consultant
Condella Consulting

Bussing tables in a restaurant at age 16 was the spark that lit Cindy Condella's passion for the hospitality world. She continued on to more senior positions, gaining as much knowledge as she could along the way. In addition, she earned a degree in hospitality management. Now, Condella works as both an event planner and consultant to restaurants and other hospitality businesses interested in improving their customer encounters. Her range of on-the-job training provided her with insight into how to exceed customers' expectations. "I truly enjoy all the nuts and bolts of the business. I've had such a variety of roles, I can identify the areas to improve and provide step-by-step solutions. From there I often conduct trainings, since it's hard for managers to free up the time in their hectic schedules," says Condella. And business is booming. "Each year, I get even more requests for facility assessments," she adds.

Her network has been expanding rapidly, likely due to how connected Condella is to her peers. "The hospitality industry is filled with a fascinating mix of people," she says. "The diversity in our backgrounds, expertise and lives makes for a wonderful community. Especially because no matter how different we



Lisa Petragrani Spradlin

Managing Partner
La Bella Vita Event Company

The path to a dream career began early for Lisa Petragrani Spradlin. At age 10, she was dream-

how passionate you are about their wishes. On the other hand, if they—or their visions—aren't the right fit for you, politely turn them down. At La Bella Vita Event Company, if we aren't positive the event will be able to meet our high standards, we don't accept the proposal."

Another tip: "Research your employees and the vendors you hire," Spradlin says. "Know everything you can and talk to their references. Expert help is crucial for smooth event days."

To deal with the pressures, Spradlin says she relies on her incredible team. One of six partners, she has a group of associates she trusts for suggestions and support; and when the event is done, to share a celebratory meal and glass of wine.

Which isn't to say there aren't plenty of challenging moments on the way there. "There are some very long days in our world, but at the end of the event it's always worth it. It's magical to pull off someone's perfect gathering," Woodrow says.

With a Tuesday-through-Saturday work week at the Hilton Scranton & Conference Center, Woodrow generally uses her nonweek-end days to address behind-the-scenes work, a majority of which happens by email. She notes that her Saturdays are varied. "It can be an event, tour, tasting, setting up or meeting clients. It also seems to be the day when I'm most creative."

Giving her customers an optimal experience is Woodrow's top priority. "When I'm with my clients, that's their time," she says. "I want them to get to know me and have a clear picture of what we'll be able to do for them. It's incredibly important to be reliable but also approachable." Part of delivering on that goal is Woodrow's time management abilities. "I've learned how to get everything I can get done before the event day arrives," she says. "I keep myself organized so I can quickly determine which things can wait and which must be done immediately. Luckily for me, I have an unbelievable team that is skilled, dependable and willing to help me juggle it all."

It's an exciting role, but it can also be an exhausting one. Woodrow says she's had to learn to stop working when she's not on duty. "Sometimes that means I have to actually turn off my phone," she says. "The more I unplug, the more relaxed I am." An added benefit? Often that downtime offers a solution for a problem she wasn't actively thinking about.

For Woodrow, each day is proof she made the right choice. "I'm living my dream job," she says. "I never expected to be able to say that so early in my career." 🍷

➔ Lacey Woodrow

Catering Sales Manager

Hilton Scranton & Conference Center

With over a decade in the field, it was the small events she planned at her first stint in the industry that lured Lacey Woodrow. "I loved planning baby showers, rehearsal dinners and happy hours," she says. "I worked my way to my current position by getting as much experience as I could and then moving on to the next step when I was ready. What spoke to me back then still does today: contributing to people's joy during their most significant events and celebrations."

The excitement of producing events that meet, and often surpass, her clients' expectations still delights Woodrow. "Despite all the years I've been doing this, that same sense of pride and accomplishment after an event lives on," she says. "We pour ourselves into creating a meaningful event every time. It's the best feeling."



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