



International Festivals & Events Association

Charlotte DeWitt 2009 IFEA Hall of Fame Inductee International Events, Ltd.



Charlotte DeWitt always wondered what it would be like to be an elephant. After nearly thirty years working with festivals, she finally got her chance when she produced the opening carnival-style parade of the Kuala Lumpur International Buskers' Festival in Malaysia, and in the process, tried out as a 10-foot-tall (3M) inflatable blue elephant.

In the course of her career, she has dealt with a three-story-tall dinosaur float catching on fire during dress rehearsals in Singapore, an autistic man from a mental hospital taking off all his clothes during an outing to one of her first Waterfront Festivals in America, and being sued for "loss of conjugal affection" when an amorous couple tripped over a tent stake.

Over the years, she has picked up a lot of useful skills. While consulting in Saudi Arabia, she learned how to get camel's milk fresh from the source. (The camel actually wears a little bra, and hirsute Arabs drive up, park their SUVs—gas is 60 cents a gallon—and hold a bowl under "the source." The hirsute Arabs, of course, are men, since women are not allowed to drive in the Kingdom.)

In Nice, France, she marched in that city's carnival parade with the *Balloon Platoon*, two dozen fat, funny retired naval men from California who achieve girth via inner tubes under their sailor costumes. This was followed by a trip to Brazil, where she studied the "how" of Rio's Carnival. (The "why" was obvious—so obvious, in fact, that there was no chance whatsoever of re-inventing herself from an elephant to a Rio dancer.)

Charlotte joined IFEA (then called IFA) when the leading technological wonder was a semi-self-correcting typewriter. Calculators were giant (some still used paper), and the concept of community celebration didn't mean posting to YouTube.

It was an era without internet and websites, when overseas communication was done primarily by telex, and experiential learning (meaning trial and error) and networking were the only sources of information for a festival professional. No "tweets," no "blogs," no "LinkedIn."

Letters were dictated and typewritten by secretaries (not personal assistants), who wept for joy when the word processor came along, followed shortly afterwards by the fax machine. Amazingly enough, people still used telephones as the fastest means of communication—big landline telephones, not streamlined, multi-function portable devices—and paper was king.

In these primitive conditions, Charlotte DeWitt produced her first festival, the *Newburyport Waterfront Festival* (USA), in 1979, pioneering a new concept of waterfront marketing through the use of festivals and events. Little did she know that she was about to embark upon a 30-

year journey that would ultimately see her working in 29 countries on five continents. Today, some 150 festivals and events later, she reflects on how she got started and what keeps her going.

In 1979, Charlotte was directing a feasibility study to convert an unused, historic building north of Boston into a cultural center, but the city was reluctant to release the building for such an untried concept.

“It was January,” she recalls, “and I was freezing cold... and frustrated. The city fathers obviously couldn’t imagine what this idea was all about, so, in my great brilliance, I decided to show them—without a building—by taking the whole concept outdoors during the summer, along the newly completed riverside boardwalk. I had never seen a festival in my life! They thought I was crazy—until they saw that the event doubled the population of the city.” Nonetheless, it still took them eighteen years to get the point.

Waterfront restoration was at its zenith in America, and after seeing her work, other cities caught the Waterfront Festival fever. By year five, Charlotte was producing a touring summer series of Waterfront Festivals® as a visitors’ magnet to America’s revitalized eastern seacoast, and later, marketing the world’s only *Floating Cinema*®. “The whole operation was turn-key,” she said. “It never occurred to me that it wouldn’t work, so of course I must have been crazy, especially knowing what I know now.”

In 1985, she went international. Europe had heard of this idea of merging cultural activities and waterfront marketing and wanted to do the same. Her first job was for the Thames Water Authority (UK), the largest single water authority in the world, which was about to privatize.

“It was a pretty lonely business,” she says in hindsight. “I was the only person I knew doing this type of work. It wasn’t like being a lawyer and being able to pick up the phone to ask a colleague how he handled his last case-- and ‘intellectual property rights’ hadn’t even been invented.”

But then she discovered IFA (now known as IFEA).

“Wow! It was like a breath of fresh air—a real lifeline! I thought I had discovered life on the planet,” she says. “These people spoke my language!” It was a discovery that would profoundly change her life.

Charlotte’s first IFA conference was in 1985 in Knoxville, Tennessee (USA). She was initially drawn by the implied international aspect of the association’s name, but what impressed her most was how friendly and generous everyone was. “People came together to openly share their best ideas. My passion for IFEA began then, during that very small conference, and it has never diminished. It is the individuals you meet, such as my dear friend the late Don Whiteley, and their incredible kindness that make all the difference.”

In the fall of 1987, Charlotte joined the IFA Board as the representative of the association’s commercial members, who could pay dues, but not vote because they were not festivals. Charlotte’s company, however, represented a new hybrid: the for-profit festival company.

One of her first acts as a new Board member was to initiate a by-law change creating one class of membership, where everyone had a vote and could participate equally in the association’s activities. The proposed amendment was approved at the Ottawa convention in 1988.

Ottawa was a turning point for IFA's commercial members in other ways. Charlotte also initiated the first formal trade show, today known as the IFEA EXPO, working closely with a dynamic young French- Canadian, Thérèse St-Onge.

Ottawa was also the place where, in all earnestness, Charlotte asked the question others were afraid to address: Why was there an 'I' in IFA? "We had one member in Mexico, a few in Canada, and *the Royal Tournament* in London. The London conference in 1986 had been such an eye-opener – what an amazing opportunity we all would have if we truly tried to put the "I" in IFA!"

Meanwhile, Waterfront Festivals, Ltd., continued to grow, adding to its waterfront consulting services a new sponsorship consultation service via *DeWitt, Mangeot, Skinner*—a collaborative team with the late Dan Mangeot (CEO of the Kentucky Derby Festival/USA) and Bruce Skinner (then past- CEO of the Fiesta Bowl in Phoenix/USA). Charlotte's son Christopher Hansen, who had literally grown up in the business, took over the management of the summer festivals.

Charlotte was elected IFA Chair from 1991-92. She traveled to Europe frequently, where she soon learned that European festivals were different than American, both in content and in the way they were run and funded. From this, came the idea that Europe needed its own branch of IFA, and in 1992, she began circulating a position paper to see if there was interest—both on the part of the Board of IFA, and also, on the part of the Europeans she had met. (Remember, no Twitter, no email, only faxes and postage stamps!) The answer was an overwhelming YES!

The 1992 IFA worldwide convention in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, marked the beginning of IFEA's globalization that today spans five continents. Sixty-five Europeans became charter members of IFA Europe, the association's first affiliate organization, with major start-up assistance through conference chairman Drs. Hans Horsting, who later became IFA Europe's Chairman of the Board for a number of years.

Following the convention, Charlotte participated in writing the by-laws and articles of incorporation of the European association at the House of Lords in London, hosted by Honorary Chair, the late Lord Parry of Neyland.

In 1993, IFA Europe hired her to organize a conference at EuroDisney, just outside of Paris. That same year, she also successfully bid to bring the IFA worldwide conference to Boston in 2001, (later postponed until 2004 due to September 11th).

In 1994, the Stockholm Water Festival offered an office, and Charlotte moved to Sweden to produce IFA Europe's next conference, "Behind the Scenes of the Stockholm Water Festival." She began studying Swedish, slightly more useful than Latin, and mastered "Lilla Kanin" ("Little Rabbit") through the expert coaching and laughter of a colleague's 8-year-old son. It took her two weeks to buy her first light bulb, since she didn't know the intricacies of Swedish light bulbs.

During her tenure as President/CEO of IFA Europe, Charlotte produced two European conferences each year and grew the European membership from IFA's original five members in 1985 to 135 members in 21 countries by 1997. She wrote the first grant that gave IFA Europe funding by the European Union.

The association's board had representation from 19 countries, but English was no one's first language except the British. The fax machine was slowly being augmented by this new thing called the internet, but not everyone in Europe had IT connections.

She left IFEA Europe in 1997 to start International Events, Ltd., producing "Towards 2000: Behind the Scenes of the Millennium" in Greenwich, England, as a global summit meeting of Millennium celebration planners in 1998, and then, heading on to the Millennium herself.

IFEA again was a turning point. At the 1998 convention in Denver, she and Dr. Annie Sidro met a representative from the Singapore Tourism Board and were hired to create and produce the finale of its Millennium Chinese New Year's celebration, *Chingay*. "It was a career 'high' for both of us," Charlotte says, "to have the opportunity to put into action this idea of multi-cultural collaboration. We brought in performers from fourteen countries, many of them our friends from IFEA Europe." With international rebroadcasts, the event was seen by 33 million people over the next two years, and they were invited to return again to design and produce another finale in 2001.

Event production, speaking engagements, consulting, and teaching activities have taken Charlotte to some twenty-nine countries on five continents, her global reach paralleling that of IFEA's... and the growth of the internet. Although she repatriated to Boston in 2004, her environment is still international.

In addition to designing and producing festivals and events, she now edits the global perspectives section of IFEA's official magazine *i.e.: the business of international events*, and writes a regular feature story for each issue.

After thirty years, what keeps her going? "I love people," she says with a smile, "and I have always believed if you can imagine something, you can make it happen." Her advice to those entering the profession? "Be curious, and never, ever, give up! IFEA puts all these resources at our fingertips. We simply have to reach out and connect. This is truly the honor of a lifetime.