



International Festivals & Events Association

**Karen Churchard, CFEE
2013 IFEA Hall of Fame Inductee
Arizona Office of Tourism, Phoenix, AZ**



For many, playing in the pros is a dream. But Karen Churchard has been working with the big boys for years, with a career trajectory that has led to prominence in multimillion-dollar football circles and landed her a key role in Arizona's tourism industry.

Karen's love of sports goes beyond regular participation—it goes as far back as her late father's involvement in Little League. "I always kept score for baseball teams—Little League, High School and even college at Northern Arizona University." While in high school, another vocation emerged. "I was always organizing events."

Later, at NAU, Karen learned more about special events and thought, 'Wow, if I can get paid for doing that ...' So, a sports-minded public relations major was born. While working for the mass communications department as a student, Karen proved Pasteur's axiom that chance favors the prepared mind. "News of internships would come across my desk first and I learned that the Fiesta Bowl was looking for an intern." Soon after, mentor Bruce Skinner hired her as the first intern to work for the Fiesta Bowl.

In 1981, the Fiesta Bowl hadn't yet become the mega-event of today, but it was on the cusp. Karen began her internship the fall before the bowl's New Year's Day debut. As the Fiesta Bowl took off, Karen's job followed, dramatically expanding and changing its focus. Her role as events intern matured into director of special events, and finally vice president of operations, overseeing all 50+special events, two college bowl games, staff and volunteers. Karen was also instrumental in writing persuasive bids that earned Arizona and the Fiesta Bowl the opportunity to host major national events including the Bowl Championship Series and the 1993 U.S. Figure Skating Championships.

After 21 years, Karen left the Fiesta Bowl to open her consulting business where she was quickly tapped by the Greater Phoenix Convention & Visitors Bureau to write Arizona's Bid for Super Bowl XLII (42); which was awarded and held in February 2008. Additional clients included Elite Racing producers of the annual Rock 'n' Roll Marathon as well as the City of Glendale where she assisted staff in the planning and preparation for hosting three major sporting events—the Bowl Championship Series National Championship, Super Bowl XLII and the annual Tostitos Fiesta Bowl.

Karen's preoccupation with the well-being of Arizona's economic prosperity didn't end with successful bids and consulting on major events. While continuing her consulting, she was hired in 2004 as President and CEO of the Arizona Tourism Alliance. In her position, she was entrusted with nothing less than shepherding the momentum of the state's travel and tourism industry and advocating its importance. While there, Karen also created the Arizona Tourism Unity Dinner now in its ninth year and elevated the annual Arizona Governor's Conference on Tourism in both attendance and sponsorship.

In 2007, Karen was appointed by then Governor Janet Napolitano to establish the Arizona Centennial Commission serving as its Director and ultimately to plan and direct the state's 100th anniversary of Statehood. In addition, she formed the non-profit Arizona Centennial 2012 Foundation organizing a high concentration of Signature Projects, Events and promotions that began in July 2011 and culminated with Arizona's 100th Statehood Day on February 14, 2012.

The Arizona Centennial planning came in the midst of extremely difficult financial times. With no state appropriated funding, the Foundation was required to raise all monies for the Signature Projects and Events. Through private corporations, foundations and individuals Karen and her board raised \$10.5 million and secured an additional \$5 million in Federal Transportation Funds for the Centennial Way Signature Project.

Major highlights of the Arizona Centennial celebration included:

- creating a “mascot” the Arizona Copper Chopper and its traveling exhibit which traveled for 18-months and were displayed at festivals and events throughout the state;
- producing large scaled and free to the public Best Fest events held in Phoenix and in Prescott—the largest event ever held in their town;
- creating the largest organized motorcycle ride in Arizona history with 4,000 participants stretched out more than 20 miles;
- refurbishing the state’s historic capitol dome through a statewide children’s penny drive;
- the creation of the national award winners Centennial Way and the Centennial License Plate.

Encouraging statewide involvement was another major initiative and through the “Official Centennial Event” application process, 250 events were sanctioned and held throughout Arizona.

Karen continues to work in state government as the Assistant Deputy Director of the Arizona Office of Tourism overseeing Strategic Planning and Research for the state agency. In her role, she also consults with the agency’s director on sponsorships of major events in Arizona and is assisting the Arizona Super Bowl Host Committee with the planning of Super Bowl XLIX (49) in 2015.

Much of Karen’s expertise is credited to her years of being actively involved in IFEA. Under the leadership and mentorship of 2001 Hall of Fame inductee Bruce Skinner, her first experience with then “IFA” was in both planning and attending the 1983 convention held in Phoenix. From that point on, Karen served as a volunteer in many capacities for IFEA conventions and conferences including being a speaker and providing written articles on many different subject matters. Karen was one of the first to achieve status as a Certified Festival Executive (later CFEE) in 1986. She was also the driving force behind a second Phoenix IFEA convention in 1999.

A long-time member of the IFEA Presidents Council, Karen was elected to the IFEA Board of Directors in 1993 and served in several capacities including Chairman of the Board in 2000. Karen also served eight years on the IFEA Foundation Board.

In 1992, Karen formed an IFEA state chapter, the Arizona Festival & Events Association. The organization still exists today as the AZ Festival People.

Karen says she’s blessed beyond words having had the opportunity to be so involved in the sporting, festival and tourism business. Her Arizona peers who collectively nominated her for this prestigious award said she is the ultimate event professional, has been a huge difference maker to the industry and they couldn’t even begin to describe the void that would exist if she had not dedicated her life’s work to the field.

“It’s all so humbling,” Karen says. “I’m touched by my peers in Arizona for nominating me. And, I know I would not have accomplished much without the advice, networking and camaraderie I experienced for so many years by such an amazing group of individuals and the incredible organization that is IFEA.”

Please help us congratulate our 2013 IFEA Hall of Fame Inductee, Karen Churchard, CFEE.