



International Festivals & Events Association

Mike Berry 2008 IFEA Hall of Fame Inductee The Kentucky Derby Festival



From his early days, Mike Berry has always been interested in “planning things.” Whether a high school homecoming dance, a youth organization retreat or a college fraternity rush party, events were often the reward for Mike’s involvement. A 1983 graduate of Georgetown College with a B.A. in American Studies, Mike moved to a larger stage to begin his professional career as an Administrative Assistant to Kentucky Governor Martha Layne Collins. This fresh-out-of-college neophyte gained an appreciation for promotion and advertising when he coordinated many of the special events for the Governor as she chaired the 1984 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco. So it came as no surprise to anyone that, when the opportunity presented itself, Mike hurried back to his hometown in 1986 and immersed himself in Louisville’s largest event and first love, the Kentucky Derby Festival.

Since February 1997, Mike has overseen one of the largest community festivals in the United States as President and CEO of the Kentucky Derby Festival, Inc. Producing nearly 70 special events that annually attracts 1.5 million people and utilizes over 4,000 volunteers, Mike manages a full-time staff of 22 employees with an annual operating budget of \$6 million. In addition, Mike also serves as the President and CEO of the Kentucky Derby Festival Foundation, a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit charity that receives and manages charitable contributions on behalf of the Festival.

When Mike became President and CEO of the Derby Festival, the estimated economic impact of the Festival was \$53 million (based on a \$4 million budget). In 2001, a study released indicated that the economic impact had nearly doubled – to \$93.6 million (on a \$5.5 million budget). With current corporate sponsorship at an all-time high and a 2008 budget of \$6 million, it’s safe to say that the economic impact generated by Derby Festival events is now well in excess of \$100 million. Mike Berry’s capacity to make mission, and value consistent decisions, during his tenure as President and CEO, has been a guiding force in the tremendous growth and success of the Kentucky Derby Festival.

Financial figures are certainly an important indicator of the Kentucky Derby Festival’s contribution to the tourism industry, but the community camaraderie and goodwill generated by its events is immeasurable. Without question, the Derby Festival has established itself as leader in its field, as well as being viewed as one of the community’s jewels. Mike’s longstanding desire to develop, promote and protect tourism within the Commonwealth of Kentucky over the past 20 years is both a product of being a native Kentuckian and a dedicated event professional. When the inaugural Derby Festival was first held in 1956, its main focus was to create some unique activities to entertain the local population during Derby Week. As the Festival continued to grow over the years, more emphasis was placed on attracting visitors from outside Kentucky, as well

as from all over the United States. Mike Berry has helped the Kentucky Derby Festival take that mission to a new level over the past decade.

Not only has the Derby Festival become a significant draw for out-of-town visitors, Mike has marshaled efforts to ensure that events are offered which appeal to the entire community with a specific emphasis on diversity. In spite of challenging economic times, the Kentucky Derby Festival has continued to produce a world-class event schedule, the majority of which are free to the public. The Derby Festival's Opening Ceremonies – Thunder Over Louisville – has developed from a modest daytime pyrotechnic display into the largest annual fireworks show in North America and one of the top five air shows in the country.

This success has not gone unrewarded. Civic awards for the 53 year old Kentucky Derby Festival have been plentiful under Mike's leadership as the Festival has been recognized by the Better Business Bureau, the Kentuckiana Minority Business Council, the Greater Louisville/Metro Chamber of Commerce, the Louisville Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Kentucky Tourism Council and Business First Newspaper as a vital part of the economic fabric of the Louisville and Kentucky. The Festival is recognized internationally, too. In fact, for 4 consecutive years, (2002 – 2005) the Derby Festival was bestowed the Grand Pinnacle Award by the International Festivals and Events Association and have been runners-up the past two years.

Mike's personal involvement with the International Festivals & Events Association has not gone unnoticed either. Under the leadership and mentorship of 1992 Hall of Fame inductee Dan Mangeot when he first started at the Derby Festival, Mike learned that the best educational and networking resource available was IFEA and for more than two decades, Mike has been very actively involved. A mere three months into his job at the Kentucky Derby Festival, Mike attended his first IFEA convention, the 1986 gathering in London, England. From that point forward, he was "hooked." By 1992, Mike was serving on the organization's Board of Directors and when he completed his tenure as the 2004 Chair, he had served a total of 12 years. Currently, Mike is a proud member of the IFEA Foundation Board – the educational and charitable arm of this premiere special events organization.

During his leadership, Mike has taken pride in the watching the organization grow and prosper. While the Festival's standing in the community has never been stronger, Mike has been equally gratified by the satisfaction reflected by its staff and board members. Over the past several years, Mike has taken steps to create a professional career path for those who wish to make the Derby Festival their life's calling. These efforts help make the Derby Festival workplace feel much less like a corporate environment than other organizations of similar size. Mike is also continually looking for ways to improve the Derby Festival, and is fully supportive of any staff member wanting to attend the annual IFEA convention. Several Derby Festival employees have taken advantage of the convention to gain their CFEE certification. Likewise, KDF board members regularly attend the IFEA convention, increasing their awareness of the industry and gathering information on how to enhance individual events and committees.

Mike is also involved in numerous other organizations and projects locally and nationally. He currently serves on the boards of the Louisville Theatrical Association and Music Theatre of Louisville as well as the Greater Louisville Sports Commission and the Greater Louisville/Metro Chamber of Commerce Community Branding Committee. Actively involved in several Masonic-related fraternal organizations, Mike is serving a 9 year term on the Board of Trustees of Eastern Star, an international organization with over 1 million members. He is also an active member of St. Luke's Episcopal Church having served on the Vestry for 3 years.

Mike and his partner of 20 years, Bill Petter, have two sons – Chris and Josh. The most rewarding events he plans now are those that involve their 3 grandchildren – Samantha, Hayden and Raygan.

All of the aforementioned elements are what make Mike Berry's management style at the Kentucky Derby Festival so successful. It's safe to say that there would be a significant void within Greater Louisville – and the IFEA as a whole – without his commitment to engaging the staff, board and volunteers for the betterment of the entire community.

A number of years ago, Mike had a former Derby Festival Board Chair once tell him that he possessed too much passion for the organization. Mike respectfully challenges that statement as being utterly impossible! Passion for his job is what keeps him dreaming when he's too tired to sleep; selling when there is no inventory left; and laughing when it seems that the joke is on him. In 1998, his classmates in Leadership Louisville described Mike as knowing how to throw a party; the best publicist and seriously funny. Yes, Mike is very competitive, but like the race horses that compete in the namesake event, Mike knows that winning is a team effort. More than one mammal, one jockey, one trainer or one owner - it truly takes a village to do what we do in the special events industry.

Mike's inspiration for achieving even greater goals is summed up in a core belief that there are few other vibrant examples of a community's cultural fabric than the events that bring people together in celebration. He states, "It's important that we in the festivals and events industry embrace this opportunity to unite people through our work. Our role now is more vital than it's ever been. With all the uncertainty and division in the world today, people are hungry for something they can count on for pure entertainment; in a sense, to help them forget their labels as well as their worries. How fortunate we are to be a part of this special industry. What we do, arguably, has a greater impact on the life of the average person than the affairs of state. That is why we should always be proud to tell people that we are in the business of fun!"