

# PEOPLE

## Stephen King, CFEE

I direct all efforts associated with the annual production of the Des Moines Arts Festival®. The Festival is celebrating its 15th year in June. Before moving to its current location in downtown Des Moines, Iowa surrounding the \$40-million dollar John and Mary Pappajohn Sculpture Park, it resided on the back lawn of the Des Moines Art Center for 40 years as Art in the Park. The Festival draws over 200,000 people annually. At its core, the Festival is a juried art fair, live performing arts, interactive arts-related activities, film, and live music. The Festival has gained international attention having won numerous awards including the prestigious IFEA/Haas & Wilkerson Grand Pinnacle Award!



### IN CONVERSATION

#### How did you get into events?

Clearly by accident. I have two degrees in Theatre and worked professionally in the theatre for several years before turning to a full-time teaching opportunity (teaching theatre!). When I went to graduate school I realized I could do what I had been volunteering to do or doing as “other duties as assigned” for a living – people would actually pay me for producing a concert or event! My wife and I moved to Fort Worth, Texas after I received my Masters and I was hired by Jay Downie to help manage the MAIN ST. Fort Worth Arts Festival. The combination of my organizational skills and the arts was a perfect match and I never looked back.

#### What has been your biggest professional challenge?

No one reading this would challenge the fact that as a festival and events professional, there are many challenges. Whether it's the economy and making the budget work or fretting about the weather, we all face numerous challenges to execute what we love doing. I learned early on that it isn't how you screw something up. What's more important is how you respond. And in the business of art fairs, every response matters. But, to answer the question...the challenge that stands out was in 2000 when I was the director of the MAIN ST. Fort Worth Arts Festival. Just 10 days before the Festival, a tornado blew through downtown Fort Worth and destroyed much of the inner city, including the Festival site. I could not get to the Festival site the next day because it was cordoned off with police tape to protect the people on the ground from falling glass. Within 24-hours we made a decision to move the Festival from downtown to the Cultural District one-mile away. We had about a week to pick-up and move an eight-city-block event to an area that had never hosted an event, install all the infrastructure necessary, contact any and all participants (sponsors, entertainers, artists, food vendors, etc), design and execute a site plan, and get the word out that we were in fact going forward as planned to host the Festival despite the massive clean-up effort. We opened the Festival on time to great crowds and even managed a profit when the dust settled. We closed the Festival a little early on Sunday because of the weather forecast...it was as if when the last person drove away from the site and we were pummeled with hail and hard rain.

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### FACTS ON FILE

#### Years in the Business:

20 plus

#### Degree:

B.F.A. (Theatre)

M.A. (Directing)

#### Family:

Married, three daughters

#### Last book read:

“Millennium Trilogy” by Stieg Larsson

#### Last business book read:

“The Upside of Irrationality”  
by Dan Ariely

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#### Executive Director

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**What do you do to relax?**

My favorite thing to do is hang out with family and friends. Most of our friends have kids, so we enjoy hanging out and letting the kids run wild. I live in a great city with great people and an abundance of activities at any given time. Even Saturday soccer matches are like a family reunion with our friends. Our family loves road trips, so we find ourselves on the road, usually heading to another event!

**Other Background Experience**

I've had a variety of amazing experiences along the way. Teacher for seven years in Houston, TX. I wrote and had a play produced in the Fronteras Play Festival in Albuquerque, produced the Closing Ceremonies for the Texas AIDS Ride in Dallas, taught theatre and directed at Interlochen Arts Camp in Michigan, directed the Special Events efforts at Camp Wekeela in Canton, Maine. Produced the first (and only) outdoor music concert in the University of New Mexico's Football Stadium.

**What's the best advice you've ever received?**

Good question. I've had so many mentors along the way that I don't know if it's any one thing. Two of my favorite people and most influential to me becoming who I am today were my grandfathers. My Grandpa would grab me in a bear hug and then grab my face (you know how Grandpas do), look me straight in the eyes and ask "are you doing what makes you happy? Are you? Are you? You better be doing what makes you happy." You can't argue with Grandpa.

**What is your personal philosophy?**

If the horse is dead, get off it.