



Running of the Bulls... An Evolution of Challenges

By Randy L. Dewitz, CFM

Through my many years as an event professional, I have witnessed an increasing number of group interlopers that unless, “put in check,” can negatively impact an event: uninvited vendors, political and religious protestors and gang violence. The situation has only been exuberated by the proliferation of social media communications (running of the bulls).

One of the goals for this article is to provide information related to gangs, “running of the bulls” and steps to take that may help reduce the negative impact to your festival. I will also focus on ways to stimulate ideas within the industry that can enhance or provide greater conversation on this challenging topic. These issues need to be addressed in a preventative and positive way to build greater community.

I became involved with the issue of gangs and disruptive groups in 2000, when an incident occurred at one of my events and I was not prepared to deal with it. The police knew gangs or disruptive groups could attend the event, however, the issue was downplayed. This was startling to me as an event planner and started me thinking about how we need to address this issue and protect our events and guests? The police approach to addressing the issue at the time, was essentially to make a spectator show of it. This however, impacted our guests, the ones who financially supported our event, and therefore that approach made me feel uncomfortable. Back then, I had very little experience working with the various police departments as I was still an outsider and considered a “Promoter,” not an “Event Logistics Professional”, however I knew something needed to be done.

The first step was to determine what programming could be created to work with gangs and teens on the event site and how to build relationships with the police

department, community organizations and leaders. The officers that I worked with did what they were trained to do, in managing these issues: reactive verses preventative. The problem was that officers had no understanding of events. To discuss this as an impact to the event brought challenges from the police department whose typical response was “we know what we are doing and we don’t care about you making money... just making it safe.” I knew there had to be a better process to build a safer event and still meet the event objectives. This required relationship building with the various police departments, community organizations and leaders. Additionally, I had to understand their goals along with all the legal issues that came from dealing with gangs. Gangs have a tendency to become magnified at an event. You can’t combat these issues alone and the local community needs to participate in the process. So where do you start? Who do you connect with to get the ball rolling?

Start by determining what can be created at your event to diffuse issues along with building interactive programs for teens. Look to the local community center that provides programs for Youth and teens. Create a position on your committee to focus on teen engagement. Provide a venue on site with various professional sports teams to local sports groups and ask them to engage the teens coming on to the property. Create activities from 3-on-3 basketball, batting cages to soccer or other programs that fit your community. Provide a stage and have it managed by one of your community centers engagement team staff or other “like minded” volunteers in order to provide impromptu vocals to spoken word. Each teen could sign up that day and the community team member could discuss with them their stage interaction. This can be a

successful approach and a very healthy way to interact with teens. Additionally, provide a few performances on the stage directly related to those attending. These ideas are just a starting point. The next step is getting the youth and teens into the venue? What can be done at the event to drive teens to this location?

This is where involving community leaders becomes important. Why community leaders? Because they are an acknowledge group that has an impact on teens and, most importantly, their families. This “peer pressure” type can help manage teen behaviors while on your event site. To find these leaders, start with individuals within schools such as safety officers, coaches, principals or popular teachers in addition to community leaders, religious leaders, business professionals or civic leaders. Once individual leaders are determined, organize a meeting to encourage them to participate in a new peer program to support teen engagement at your event. This group could be defined as the community engagement team, community marshals or peer support group. This group is essentially your “Welcome Wagon” to teens at your event. They would work with the police, event management and teen engagement volunteers, therefore it would be helpful to create an orientation program with local officers and event management to help them define their parameters of engagement. Based on the size of your event, you should have one group for every one or two blocks. Leaders should engage with teens, guiding them to the teen zone, since most teens will want to find something to do at the event. This works most of the time, but not all will be interested in participating. However, if they recognize that someone in the leadership group knows them, it normally keeps them from causing challenges at the event.

Your event should also have a good relationship with the police department in addition to their gang unit if they have one or officers that work with teens. Organize a development meeting, between your organization and the police department, to determine resources and negative activity surrounding your event, in addition to any hot issues that are on the rise in the neighborhood. Additionally, find out if any outside gangs will be trying to engage gangs in your community and if the police are willing to generate warrants for specific gang members in your community. The purpose of generating warrants may help take out key gang leaders and have them under a 72 hour hold. It makes their job easier during the event if they can remove certain members in advance. If you develop a great relationship, the police department will want to help you build this program. Suggest an orientation meeting for these leaders. Ask your police if they are willing to provide radios to support this group. If they cannot do this, provide radios for each group of community leaders and one for the police department. Have this group on their own channel.

Once you have finalized your processes with the police, you can communicate your protocols to private security and your event staff. This base program can evolve over time and be helpful for other potential challenges at your event, like "running of the bulls".

The main difference between gangs and "running of the bulls" is that gangs may have weapons and are territorial in nature while "running of the bulls" are normally a few bad kids, sometimes gang members, mixed with many followers. Most times, "running of the bulls" don't carry weapons and are not territorial.

"Running of the bulls," a new phenomenon, has happened at many events over the past few years. This group is made up of young children to adults, from the ages of 13 to 21+. They gather in groups of 50 to over 300 through social media. They find an event that provides a platform to be notable. They normally don't have ties to the community or the event. Their only purpose is to run through the festival site and create destruction of property and create panic to volunteers and guests. I coined the phrase "running of the bulls" a couple of years ago, due to their mass movement through an event and damaging anything and everything in their path. This type of behavior came out of an App such similar to fight club. The ring leader is given a dare where they must create a specific type of disturbance to receive points from the App program. Certain individuals have the same communication. Once the dare is triggered, one of the leaders starts to run. The core group with that leader, also start to run. The remaining

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kids follow in a torrid run. As they move through the event, they grab, tear, pull and trample everything in their path.

How do you deal with this and what steps can you take to reduce this type of behavior? If you have developed your relationship with your Police department already through your community leadership program, you can enhance that program by gathering a variety of city departments including transportation staff. Invite the mass transit, public transit police, parole officers, gang units, horse patrol, bike units, community officers, community leaders, private security in addition to any park police and park engagement staff to a meeting which focuses on how to reduce, disseminate and clear this group from your event with limited impact to your guests.

The next step is creating an objective for each group and how that objective is then applied to a cohesive plan. Communications between each group needs to be established for days of show. You can provide each department with a radio or better still, have your local police department provide a frequency between the various city services. For the community leaders and other non-city staff, provide event radios and include a certain number of your radios to city staff, based on your plan.

Within the plan, request your mass transit staff/police communicate with your on-duty officers and any off-duty officers, if applicable in your community, when large masses of kids are travelling towards your event. This advance notification can determine how many access points there are or what primary points you need to place community leaders or park engagement team members (if in a park). They become your "Welcome Wagon". Keep all uniforms officers at a distance during this first phase. In addition, parole officers should be added to the mix as some of the key leaders may be on probation. These officers can normally identify an individual(s) that is not allowed to be in a large group and can detain them for possible parole violation.

The next phase is your engagement team and community leaders, such as Mad Dads or other groups that may relate to this audience. They are able to get a feel of the crowd that is gathering since they can mingle with the crowd and determine if an issue will "blow over" or additional steps need to be implemented.

If you have a great community leader group or engagement team, they should be able to manage any issue. Based on the interaction, the community leader needs to be in direct communication with the officer in charge of your event to provide a progress report if additional steps are required. If additional steps do need to be implemented, uniform patrols with horses come on the scene. Most groups can be managed with the horse patrol as they are able to direct the target audience to the exit. If the group decides to run, use your uniform patrol and the bike patrol to engage. Remember, once engagement occurs, your police department becomes in charge of the incident and can direct the proper resources to manage the issue. The key is to extinguish the situation so it does not impact your guests and reduce early closure of your event. During this whole process, you will need your private security to manage your guests, keeping them away from any potential harm.

Gangs and "running of the bulls" are just two challenges that events have to manage out of hundreds of issues. As an industry, we need to develop more conversation around negative public impacts to our events. The conversation has started, let's continue to move forward and build programs to keep our events healthy, safe and successful.

Randy DeWitz is the owner of Fanfare Attractions and has over 28 years of experience working with community, cultural, themed and special events. Fanfare Attractions provides seamless Operations and Consulting services for the Outdoor Festival Market. We provide services to such Events as; Saint Paul Winter Carnival, Cinco de Mayo West Side, Grand Old Day, Irish Fair of MN, Twin Cities Pride and many other Community based and Commercial Events. Over 30 years' experience in designing and implementing Festivals. Each Event that we consult and produce with our Partners Focus on Economic Development, Guest Experiences, Human Assets and Community Development.

randy.dewitz@fanfareattractions.com