

Including People with Disabilities

by Laura Grunfeld

At the IFEA's 61st Annual Convention, Expo & Retreat in Tucson, AZ this past September, after I presented my session entitled "Is Everyone Invited? How to Include Fans with Disabilities," the IFEA asked if I would be interested in sharing my knowledge on event accessibility by writing a regular column for "ie: the business of international events" magazine. Of course I said "Yes!"

My mission is to see every festival, all around the world, become accessible to people with disabilities. I know I am reaching for the stars, but even if I only reach part way around the earth it is worth the effort. The IFEA is a great conduit for spreading the word.

Purpose of this Column

My expertise is with accessibility for people with disabilities at outdoor festivals and events. We will focus on that but much of what you will read about in this column applies to all events. I have many ideas for topics but I want to hear from you. What are some of the pesky problems plaguing your event when it comes to accessibility? I'll try to incorporate answers to your questions in coming columns.

For my first column I am considering writing about language; "I know it's not cool to use the word 'handicapped' but what do I say instead?" as many people are confused about what words are best to use when referring to people with disabilities. Then I might write about how to get started designing a comprehensive Access Program. Later we might tackle service animals, access training for particular teams, "Everything you've ever wanted to know about accessible portable toilets," and other more specific topics. You tell me what YOU want to know! Write to Laura@EveryonesInvited.com with your thoughts.

How Did I Get into This Biz?

While working as the Human Resources Director at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival in the 1990's, many people, both patrons and staff, asked me questions about our accessibility for people with disabilities. At the time, there was no one person that

knew the answers to all of the questions and I saw that we needed a centralized Access Program. I asked each department what they were doing, generated a list of the services we provided, added my contact information, and sent out that document to organizations that served people with disabilities.

That simple no-cost beginning made a difference for many people who now realized that they were welcome at the festival. I will never forget the woman who told me about her young daughter in grammar school who used a wheelchair. The school had told her we were not accessible but, in truth, they did not want to spring for an accessible bus. Because we publicized the Access Program, the school had to provide an accessible bus and her daughter got to visit the Jazz Fest for the first time. We fine-tuned the program over the years and became an award-winning model festival for accessibility.

Universal Design

I am a big proponent of Universal Design. This is a concept that, when boiled down to its core, simply means that whenever you design or build or create something make it so that as many people as possible are able to use it. Let's design our festivals for everyone. Plan the physical environment, our cyber presence, our services, activities and programming, and our policies and procedures so that everyone can participate. It takes forethought, awareness, and caring. It takes an investment of resources and support of the producers.

Why Should Festivals be Accessible?

There are many reasons, but here are a few:

1. When people attend a festival they leave their troubles behind. It is a few hours or a few days of releasing the things that weigh heavy on their minds. In my way of thinking, we would be dreadfully remiss if we did not afford this opportunity to people with disabilities.
2. There are laws requiring that events that are open to the public be accessible to people with disabilities. Complying with the law will help you avoid litigation.
3. More and more baby-boomers are entering their elder-years. They may develop disabilities as they age but they do not want to sit home in their rocking chairs. They went to Woodstock and want to keep hitting the festival circuit. Make sure your doors are open to them and that you are benefiting from their attendance!

Laura Grunfeld founder and owner of Everyone's Invited, LLC has worked in event planning since 1983 and since 1999 has focused on improving event accessibility. She provides consulting, training, and production services to help festivals become more accessible to people with disabilities. She has worked with the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, Bonnaroo, Governors Ball, Outside Lands, Rothbury, Electric Forest, TomorrowWorld, Firefly and many more. www.EveryonesInvited.com, www.linkedin.com/in/lauragrunfeld, www.facebook.com/everyonesfestival, www.instagram.com/everyonesfestival.