

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Steven Wood Schmader, CFEE

“FESTIVALS & EVENTS: THE CORE OF OUR GLOBAL COMMUNITY”



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Sometimes I worry about our world. Over the past two years, particularly with the addition of the Presidential election cycle to the mix here in the United States, I have come to question whether-or-not I know our country as well as I thought I did. During that time, I have seen far too many examples of both individuals and collective groups acting (or refusing to act) with and out of hatred, malice, fear and contempt for anyone different from themselves. And it seems to be far from the minority perspective that I somehow imagined it to be.

Exponentially increasing that worry, as I follow the global news and talk to friends – like yourselves – around the world, this trend seems to not be limited to any one singular country, community, part of the world or identifiable setting (i.e., political), nor does it seem to have any reasonable or predictable boundaries. Even within the safe and welcoming hallways of the IFEA Convention & Expo this year, I witnessed the unacceptable, unprofessional, and uncharacteristic tirades of a singular attendee, with the absolute intent to disrupt the activities at-hand and disrespect their global peers in a public setting, standing behind the passion of their beliefs as justification.

That reaction; that singular, blindered focus; that inability to recognize a non-threatening setting where far more could be learned, shared and accomplished through respectful dialogue and perhaps even by laying the first block of a new foundation for friendship, reminded me more than ever of the critical role that we – the individuals, events and organizations who make up our global industry – have (and need) to play in holding the fabric of our communities, cities and world together.

Just a few short months ago, 3.5 billion people around the globe – half the world's population – tuned into to watch the games of the 31st Olympiad in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Certainly, they tuned in to enjoy the excitement and energy of the athletic competition, but far more importantly, they tuned in to be a part of what our industry does better than anyone else...bringing people together in peaceful celebration. Sharing with us the back stories and challenges and triumphs of individuals from around the world. Personalizing them, giving them a name and

a face. Connecting us to places unknown and allowing us to cheer on their successes, empathize with them in moments of defeat, and bask in a world that (even if only for a relatively short window) proves that such humanity can exist and thrive. Where accepting and embracing a global refugee team – each responding to situations that none of them would have ever imagined for themselves or their families, especially as they prepared for the greatest moment of their lives – seemed like the most natural and obvious action that we could expect from all participants. Where the event itself moved us to lower our defenses and perceived prejudices to learn more about the competitors – their personal, cultural, religious, political and geographic backgrounds – and to realize how little those differences seem to matter when we see everyone as individuals like ourselves, striving for common goals and visions and dreams. That is the power of events...not just the Olympic Games...but events (including your own) in every community and city around the world. A power that we now need to tap into as a global industry, from a different perspective than ever before, but with the same global vision that we have always shared: to touch lives, communities, cities and countries in a positive way through celebration.

In the months and year ahead, I hope that each of you will reflect on the unique responsibility and opportunities that we in our industry have all been given, to provide the venues, the canvases, the gathering spots, and the opportunities that make anything possible and every moment memorable. To serve, as *New York Times* writer Michael Kimmelman noted, as 'City Squares,' where people can gather "to share a sense of community, a sense of shared values, a sense of creative possibilities and a sense of humanity."

Our world today is facing new challenges that are impacting our communities, cities and countries every day. And there is a critical and growing need to get ahead of those problems...to embrace our diversity; to support our law enforcement representatives; to build and strengthen relationships that can survive and deflect unforeseen tragic circumstances; to bond our communities and countries together

at every touch point; and to celebrate who we are when we are at our best.

I would offer that, at this critical time in our global history, the events and organizations that our industry represents – all of you included – may very well be among the best tools / voices available to our cities and our world to bring all stakeholders proactively together. To spend some of the 'community capital' that we have built to help initiate new conversations; build bridges of understanding; provide safe, educational and experiential learning opportunities; and serve as conduits of positive change and dialogue, throughout the year, and beyond the finite dates of our events.

Because our individual and combined global events have created such unique, natural, positive, far-reaching, creative, inclusive and trusted root systems...including business and government leaders; volunteers; educational and religious institutions; service organizations; the media; as well as generational and cultural groups throughout our cities, neighborhoods and often stretching well beyond our geographic boundaries...I believe that this is our moment.

Our moment to use our networks and the 'community capital' that we have built to instigate and drive new conversations between diverse and dependent community groups; to bring people together before they face the unforeseen challenges of division; to educate our communities and provide opportunities for them to meet themselves; to showcase our law enforcement officials in positive settings that connect them to the community; and to build new foundations of trust and expectations across our cities that will be strong enough to bend, without breaking when the winds of change come through.

Now, we don't have all the answers as to what that may include, but over the course of the coming months and year, I challenge everyone to identify and create opportunities for new conversations and creativity.

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Opportunities to challenge our thinking and creativity and to open up all of the new possibilities. Opportunities to leverage your own event resources and network toward the goal of strengthening your respective cities and communities, together with our common world, in the year ahead.

Each day, growing up, I challenged my son to: *"Have fun; learn lots; and make the world a better place for humanity."* If we can all do the same, our communities, cities, countries and world, will thank us.