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GLOBAL VOTE

Throughout my youth and continuing through my professional career, I have always followed a path that has been dedicated to and impacted by (knowingly and unknowingly), bringing people together – friends, classmates, professional peers, communities and countries. I have had the very good fortune to experience, first hand, many of the world's diverse cultures, traditions, religions, languages and celebrations and to share many of those same experiences with others through the events and organizations that I have been a part of. I have stayed with and been welcomed as part of literally hundreds of host families, from many countries and every socio-economic level, but without barriers to their sincere desire to share what they had to share. I have had the benefit of trained translators and the frustration of not being able to use words, but still finding that somehow the warmth and caring of those in the conversation was able to be conveyed clearly.

People often ask me what some of my favorite places and memories have been over the years. Interestingly, I have discovered that it is not often the memory of a geographic location or a particular event, but rather those unique opportunities when I have been able to spend time with the most diverse group of peers and friends and family, in a 'safe' setting where everyone knows there are no wrong questions, no misunderstandings or expectations that everyone should be aware of or skilled in every cultural situation or norm, and where everyone is respectful and open to learning from all of the others and their unique experiences and backgrounds. It is those settings that provide me with the greatest joy, the greatest hope for the world, and the strongest sense of belonging to a global community. It is those experiences that I hope we are emulating and recreating through the IFEA network and, in turn, through the events that we all produce and the communities that we serve.

Unfortunately, as a good friend and respected mentor pointed out in a recent communication, 'it seems we have entered uncertain times in which not everyone shares these values.' A real-world scenario where global elections and extremist viewpoints risk dividing us further; where new barriers, bans and walls are being constructed vs. conversations widened; where our differences are presented as something to be frightened of and protected against vs. embraced, celebrated and supported; and

where we are adding far too many locks to our proverbial doors, when we should be placing welcome mats and encouraging more of those diverse and 'safe' gatherings of friends (old and new).

In such uncertain times, I believe that the events we produce and provide to our respective communities and countries and world offer us a powerful outlet to respond. Not to ignore real world concerns, but to continue bringing people together, highlighting who we would like to be and who we are when we are at our best. To use the power of our global industry to keep the world on course and grounded in our commonalities.

In Dubai, several years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting another proponent of positive response to the changing world around us. Simon Anholt, an independent policy advisor based in the United Kingdom and founder of The Good Country, believes that we should all be voting on the leaders of every country, because their actions affect us all around the world and because no one country or leader can solve all of the world's problems on their own. Toward that goal he created The Global Vote, a chance for us all to increase our international awareness and to have a perceptual voice in the future of our planet. For now, this unique exercise is one further reminder of how we all affect each other and a singular opportunity to feel like we are a little part of the solution looking forward.

As we are focused on planning for the IFEA 62nd Annual Convention, Expo & Retreat, September 14th-16th, in Tucson, Arizona, we are aware that some of these new world challenges – travel bans, personal comfort and safety concerns, airline security policies, international acceptance levels, et al. (whether in your own country or others) – may (rightfully) be a new consideration for each individual. For that reason, we want to be a part of the solution by underlining that the IFEA is, and will always strive to be, one of those safe and welcoming settings for everyone, as described above. An industry home where friends and peers of all backgrounds and beliefs can gather together to learn, network, share and grow. An accepting place where there are no wrong questions. Where tomorrow's real-world scenarios begin. In fact, today's new challenges may be more of a reason to gather together than ever before, making the statement that we always will. I look forward to seeing everyone in Tucson as our way of casting our own global vote for what we want our world to be.