

WHAT PREP WORK GOES INTO

GETTING CELEBRITIES TO PARTICIPATE IN DERBY FESTIVAL EVENTS?

While it may seem like a simple task, the art of luring celebrities to participate in Derby festivities can be a challenge. Hollywood is known for its glitz and glamour, and it's also the home of many "A" list stars. There are numerous celebrity events in their back yard, so what makes Louisville appealing at Derby time? We've asked Stacey Robinson, Senior VP and Chief of Staff for the Kentucky Derby Festival. In addition to her roles with HR and finance, Stacey works to identify celebrities & VIP's for Festival events. Here's what she had to say....

How do you determine who to invite for the Republic Bank Pegasus Parade?

Stacey: Typically, I'll sit down with the Event Manager for the Parade and brainstorm ideas. We think about shows that are getting good ratings and those celebs that likely have a good fan base. And then there's the Parade theme – we sometimes try to identify someone who will fit well within the overall theme of the Festival.

Who do you work with to get invites to the celebrities?

Stacey: Over the past few years, I've coordinated with a number of publicists in both L.A. and NYC. I usually reach out to them right before the holidays to see who might be interested in participating. Some of those publicists contact me and "pitch" names for our consideration.

I've heard that some publicists can be difficult to work with and sometimes you aren't even able to get past the gate keeper – is this true?

Stacey: (as she chuckles...) Well, let's just say not all publicists are alike. And yes, it's true that the gate keeper can lock it down and throw away the key! Fortunately, the majority of the publicists are nice people. You can only imagine how many invitations some of these celebs receive over the course of time. I believe most of the invitations hit the radar of the celeb though I suspect there are some that never see the light of day.

Diane Lane was Grand Marshal of the 2010 Parade – how did that come about?

Stacey: It was a combination of timing, tenacity and luck. We were fortunate to have a friend of the Festival (Leonard Lusky) help make the pitch to the folks at Disney. Leonard also put us in contact with Penny Chennery who was very instrumental in getting Diane Lane to accept our invitation. From a timing standpoint, it could not have been better. "Secretariat" was due to premiere in the early fall and Disney determined that the Parade would be a good way to promote the movie. I think the rest was pure luck.

How was it to work with Diane Lane?

Stacey: Diane Lane was very sweet and approachable. It was almost as if she left her Hollywood persona behind and became a Louisvillian for a few days. She seemed to really enjoy attending the Celebrity Luncheon and I think she was surprised by the number of fans who came out to see her in the Parade.

So, you say Diane Lane was nice and approachable. ... Have there been others who haven't been so nice?

Stacey: (laughing...) Without naming names....yes! Really, it hasn't occurred much but there have been one or two that were difficult. On one occasion, someone arrived in Louisville and immediately started to complain about the pollen and his allergies. He then decided that he didn't like his hotel and insisted upon moving to another location with the Festival footing the tab. I pretty much told him that he needed to stay put and stop complaining OR he could go back to L.A. Needless to say, he made a miraculous recovery!

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Who has been your favorite Derby Festival celebrity to date?

Stacey: I've had a few favorites but I would have to say Dominic Chianese (Uncle Junior from The Sopranos). He was super nice and very accommodating. When he arrived, I didn't even recognize him as I expected to see a curmudgeonly little man with thick black framed glasses. He brought his guitar with him and invited several of our staff to his hotel suite after the Boat Race to hear him play. We were belting out Tina Turner's "Proud Mary" while he strummed...it was great.

Do you pay appearance fees for your celebrities & VIP's?

Stacey: No, we don't pay appearance fees. The Festival is a non-profit organization and our resources are sometimes limited in this regard. We're always hopeful that we can attract those who are looking for some exposure while doing little more than having a great time. In these cases, the celebs aren't looking for a fee.

What has been your biggest challenge in getting celebrities to participate in Derby Festival events?

Stacey: Honestly, I think the timing of our events creates a challenge for most. In order to justify the invitation, we need the celebrity to participate in our Celebrity Luncheon and Parade on Thursday of Derby week. Since many of the celebs are coming from L.A., they need to travel on Wednesday in order to arrive in enough time. I'm frequently told that it's impossible for them to take three days out of their work week to participate; particularly, if it's someone from a current show. That means we have to find someone whose production is on hiatus. If the Parade were moved to Friday morning, we'd be in great shape....just kidding, Chief White!

English 101, normally written by **Jeff English, CFEE**, Sr. Vice President/General Council at the Kentucky Derby Festival, was written by **Stacey Robinson**, Executive Vice President/Chief of Staff at Kentucky Derby Festival for this issue.