

“WHAT WE DO ISN'T ROCKET SCIENCE,
**BUT WHEN DONE WELL,
 IT TAKES US PLACES
 WHERE ROCKETS CAN
 ONLY DREAM OF.”**

- ERIC MARTIN

Have you ever sat there and wondered why we do this? The long hours during peak season, the pay of a non-profit, the stress of managing sponsors, the threat of severe weather, and writing plans to prevent acts of terror? During a speech I gave at the North Carolina Festival and Events Association conference this January in Charlotte, NC, I asked that very question. Why did folks work for a festival or event? I'd say most of us could probably head to the private sector and make more money. One of our employees at KDF did just that and doubled his salary. But he pines to be back in the action again. What is it that makes us tick?

As I sit at my desk 16 days before Thunder Over Louisville launches, with a stack of papers and emails to answer, I ask myself this question. My background of working in electoral politics and as a defense attorney prepared me in many ways for my work at KDF. There's just always been a pull for me to try and do my part. To contribute and serve the greater good in some measure. In politics it was about believing in issues and in turn, working for candidates who shared those views. About knowing that elections have consequences and that if you want to change something you have to win. As a lawyer, I wanted to make sure the system treated folks fairly. Even those without a lot of money. By making sure that a police officer used the proper technique and process to search a kid's car for marijuana. Because those techniques and processes are the core of our Constitutional rights and are upheld by the Supreme Court.

In the Festival and Event Industry, I've gathered there are two common themes that make event people tick. The first is our desire to be happy and to make people happy. We like producing things that are cool and people enjoy. Events are fun. We can dive into economic impact and multipliers and whatnot, but at our core we produce events because they make people happy. The second is our desire to bring people together. In Louisville that means folks from the west end looking folks from the east end in the eye while standing next to each other at the event. It allows people from all walks of life to join together in

celebration. Coming together shapes the soul of a community.

At the Kentucky Derby Festival, it was decided we could do more to increase our “fun” factor and also bring everyone to the same place. To come together. For years, the Chow Wagon, which is a music and food venue (think corn dogs, etc.) had pop up locations throughout the city. Folks would go to the Chow Wagon near their house and enjoy their piece of the Festival. After conducting a Market Research Survey in 2006, it was decided to combine all of the Chow Wagons into one giant Festival venue. The location was Waterfront Park and “Kroger's Fest-a-Ville on the Waterfront” was born. The current version of Fest-a-Ville provides nine days of programming including national concert acts, a diverse variety of food options, beer garden, and carnival rides. It literally has something for everyone and all we charge to enter for any of the concerts or to just hang out is a Pegasus Pin!

So, Eric Martin is right. While we event specialists may not build rockets, the work we do at its core is just as vitally important. Providing a community with a safe and affordable way to come together means something. And it takes a special group of people to do that with such skill and expertise. Because when it's done at a high level, the smile on a child's face or teenagers dancing instead of texting or families of all races from every part of town enjoying fireworks together is certainly something special. It's that human experience of being together in celebration that takes us to the stars.

Jeff English, CFEE is the Sr. Vice President of Administration/General Counsel of the Kentucky Derby Festival. After graduating from Washburn University School of Law (Topeka, KS) in 2004, Jeff worked in politics and practiced law before joining the KDF staff. He is charged with overseeing all of Festival's legal issues and serving as its risk management officer. He also manages the Merchandise Department and the 501(c)3 not-for-profit Kentucky Derby Festival Foundation.