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IFEA 50th Anniversary History

IFEA in the 21st Century

Steve Schmader's tenure as president and CEO of the IFEA didn't start out quite as he had expected. Less than six months after assuming leadership of the Association in 2001, Schmader had to cancel the IFEA's annual convention when terrorists crashed airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, creating dramatic and unexpected new challenges for both the association and the industry, with economic and protocol ripple effects reaching into the areas of sponsorship, membership, travel and tourism, safety and security, programming and beyond.

"As we watched those still unimaginable images unfold before us on television, I don't think that anyone could imagine their impact on the world in so many ways. We had to cancel our convention for the first time in the 46 year history of the Association," Schmader said. "It was originally scheduled to be in Boston four weeks after 9/11."

Schmader noted that the convention is the Association's biggest money-maker. "Given that fact, we decided to postpone it until January 2002 in Las Vegas," Schmader said. "That meant we would also have a convention in the fall of that year, as well; But we couldn't afford not to have it, even though attendance still dropped dramatically."

In the nearly five years since the nation's festivals and events community was turned upside down by

the terrorist attacks, IFEA has recovered strongly from its early 21st century setbacks. Schmader noted that as IFEA celebrates its 50th anniversary, "we've been pretty successful at pulling ourselves out of that hole. We just finished our most successful year ever and the future is looking much brighter."

'The Next Herb Alpert'

Steve Schmader had unknowingly prepared for his 2001 assignment as IFEA's president and CEO for most of his professional career. A Charleston, West Virginia native, Schmader was accepted to travel and perform for a year with Up With People, the international, educational and musical program. That experience turned into a direct route to a career in festival and event management.

"I had played trumpet since third grade," Schmader said, "and my goal was to be the next Herb Alpert. I went on the road with Up With People, and they sent me out on an advance promotion team to set up cities for UWP's appearances, which opened up a whole new door for me."

Schmader noted that "In those days very few people purposely planned to go into event management as a career. Most people didn't think about it as a business or an industry. But I liked it, was good at it, and was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to pursue it."

Before degrees in event management were a reality, Schmader

was allowed to design a customized degree program, under the umbrella of Business Management/Marketing, that helped prepare him for his career. While working, he attended West Virginia State College, the University of Arizona, and graduated from the University of Phoenix, who asked him to produce their graduation ceremonies.

Up With People soon hired Schmader full-time, and he spent the next 12 years with the Organization. "I became their director of special events," he said, "arranging for and coordinating productions for Super Bowl halftimes, presidential inaugurations, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and others, at a far younger age than other organizations would have allowed me those opportunities."

Schmader helped produce UWP's 25th anniversary in Denver, and other corporate celebrations for Kodak, General Motors, Tenneco, Honeywell, Allstate and General Mills. It was during the General Mills program that he became close to a man he considers one of his mentors.

"I met Bob Jackson on that project," he said. "Bob had been on Walt Disney's personal staff when Disneyland opened in 1955. He was with General Mills when we met, and he hired Up With People to do a special event on the bridge between Minneapolis and St. Paul, with (famed choral director) Mitch Miller."