IFEA HALL OF FAME

Stephen M. King, MA, CFEE
Executive Director
Des Moines Arts Festival
Des Moines, IA, USA

Throughout a career spanning more than 35 years, Stephen King has dedicated his professional career to building community and creating meaningful human connection. For Stephen, success has never been measured by what was accomplished yesterday, but by what could be imagined tomorrow. The question, "What's next?" has become synonymous with his leadership.

His curiosity was shaped early by the words often attributed to George Bernard Shaw: *"Some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream things that never were and ask why not."* That philosophy inspired him to embrace calculated risks and pursue ideas others believed impossible, a mindset that has defined his career.

Stephen's journey began as a theatre educator at Saint John's School in Houston, where he directed productions while creating opportunities that extended well beyond the classroom, including educational expeditions to Big Bend National Park and the International Schools Theatre Association Festival in Germany. Summers on the faculty at Interlochen Arts Camp and directing special events at Camp Wekeela in Maine further developed the leadership, logistical expertise, and collaborative style that would become hallmarks of his career.

While earning his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Sam Houston State University, Stephen combined creativity with service by organizing campus events that raised scholarship funds, including a memorable Air Guitar Contest. Years later, he received the department's inaugural Distinguished Theatre Alumni Award.

Graduate school proved to be a turning point. While earning a Master of Arts in Theatre Directing from the University of New Mexico, he coordinated the Southwest High School Theatre and Dance Festival, served as Assistant Artistic Director of the Fronteras Playwrights Festival, and produced major concerts and university events. Producing a Metallica concert introduced him to the complexity of large-scale event management and confirmed that his true stage was no longer inside a theatre, but in the world of public events.

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In 1995, Stephen joined Downie Productions, where he worked on many of America's premier festivals, including MAIN ST. Fort Worth Arts Festival, Tall Stacks in Cincinnati, Bastille Days in Milwaukee, Red, White and Boom in Columbus, and numerous civic celebrations. Three years later he became Director of Festivals and Events for Downtown Fort Worth, overseeing MAIN ST., Fort Worth Fourth, Parade of Lights, and other signature events.

One defining moment came in 2000 when a tornado devastated downtown Fort Worth only days before the load-in of the arts festival. Rather than cancel, Stephen and his team relocated an event spanning nine city blocks and welcoming nearly 400,000 guests to an entirely different district, opening on schedule despite extraordinary obstacles. The Fort Worth Star-Telegram later wrote that while the festival was known for art, music, food, and entertainment, that year's event would be remembered for something even more important: determination. The experience reinforced his belief that challenges exist to be solved, not accepted.

Stephen brought that same spirit of innovation to the Des Moines Arts Festival in 2006. Under his leadership, the organization expanded its artistic vision while introducing initiatives that demonstrated how festivals can strengthen communities in lasting ways.

When he proposed building an entire Habitat for Humanity home during the Festival, many questioned whether it could be done. Eight builds later, the project is a powerful example of how festivals can build far more than memories.

Stephen introduced monumental collaborative art projects that invited the public into the creative process. Those installations now live permanently in schools, public buildings, and the Des Moines International Airport. He expanded programming through the Interrobang Film Festival, literary arts initiatives, sustainability efforts, enhanced sponsor experiences, and educational programming that broadened the Festival's impact beyond a single weekend.

Perhaps no initiative better reflects his philosophy than Quincy's Sensory Space. Developed through partnerships with medical professionals, educators, designers, artists, and disability advocates, the immersive environment allows guests with sensory sensitivities to fully experience the Festival, representing Stephen's belief that the most meaningful innovation removes barriers and invites everyone to participate.

Stephen's influence extends well beyond the festivals he has led. As a co-founder of ZAPPlication, he helped revolutionize the art fair industry. Launched in 2004 through collaboration among festival leaders and artist organizations, ZAPP created a standardized online application and jury system that fundamentally changed how artists and festivals connect. More than two decades later, it remains the industry standard and has benefited thousands of artists and hundreds of festivals throughout North America.

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Service to the profession has been equally important. Stephen has served as Chair of the International Festivals & Events Association World Board of Directors, a member of the IFEA Foundation Board, instructor at IFEA's Event Management School, conference speaker, affinity group leader, committee chair, and advisor. He rarely declines an opportunity to contribute, believing that strengthening the profession is both a responsibility and a privilege.

When the COVID-19 pandemic silenced festivals around the world, Stephen again asked, "What's next?" Rather than focusing on canceled events, he collaborated with industry leaders through IFEA and in his community to share ideas, develop best practices, and help festivals and events safely return.

Stephen often says, "There are few things in the world more joyous than bringing family and community together." That belief has guided both his career and his personal life. He and his wife, Shamaine, have always considered themselves fortunate to earn a living doing work they love. Their three daughters grew up at festivals, learning to hang banners before they could drive and becoming part of the extended festival family. Today, watching them teach volunteers and interns those same skills reminds him that festivals are, at their heart, family gatherings on a community scale.

That sense of family is also what Stephen treasures most about IFEA. Whether representing IFEA at Canada's 150th anniversary in Ottawa, participating in the ribbon cutting for South Korea's Festival Foundation and extending learning opportunities for young people in South Africa, or attending the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the Rose Parade and Rose Bowl, the National Cherry Festival, the Indianapolis 500, Beale Street Music Festival, or mentoring emerging artists at the Saint Louis Art Fair, the greatest reward is witnessing colleagues create experiences that reinforce a simple truth: every community has a story to tell, and festivals provide the stage on which those stories come alive.

More than three decades after producing his first events, Stephen King remains driven by the same curiosity that launched his career. Every festival ends the same way. There is a brief moment to celebrate, another to reflect, and then his attention turns toward the future.

He smiles, looks around, and asks the two words that have become both his trademark and his challenge to everyone around him:

"What's next?"

Please join us in congratulating our 2026 IFEA Hall of Fame inductee, Stephen M. King, MA, CFEE.