



International Festivals & Events Association

Kirk Hendrix 2010 IFEA Hall of Fame Inductee 500 Festival



If you were to ask Kirk Hendrix about his introduction to the festival and events business, he might answer...“you had me at hello.”

Seems once he tasted it, he never let go. Now, 33 years later, he has amassed a body of work worthy of high praise from his peers and resulting in his induction into the IFEA Hall of Fame.

Hendrix is quick to credit others with his enthusiasm for the industry. “I was lucky to be introduced to events early-on and I just loved it. I didn’t want to do anything else. I always had a strong work ethic, so I just kept showing up. Sooner or later, people put me to work. I had great mentors. People cared enough to give me a

chance...sometimes even before I thought I was ready.”

His tenure includes running some of the largest events in some of America’s largest cities. He has served as CEO of three of the IFEA’s largest member organizations -- collectively 18 years at the helm of the 500 Festival, Las Vegas Events, and The Parade Company. He has had major impact in the jobs he has held and in the communities he has served. And he has willingly shared his expertise in the development of others.

For Hendrix, his work became as much of a lifestyle as it did a career. When not employed by it, he volunteered in it...such as serving as Co-Venue Press Chief for the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. He and friend and mentor, Bruce Skinner, were responsible for media operations which included Opening and Closing Ceremonies and Track & Field events. “You can learn a lot in this business,” Hendrix said. “I didn’t know the shot put from the javelin but soon learned you didn’t want to be on the receiving end of either.”

To some degree, taking on the unknown is what drives him. It was common for Hendrix to tackle projects in which he was unfamiliar. Yet, he was able to lead them to great success, like running the National Finals Rodeo and World Cup of Equestrian Show Jumping in Las Vegas. “I’ve certainly worn a lot of different hats...literally,” Hendrix said.

While serving as Vice President of Travel, Events and Tradeshows for Affinity Group in Ventura, California, he was responsible for more than 100 annual RV and motorcycle events across the U.S., Mexico and Canada. He knew little of either industry, yet built a strong team to meet the challenges and complexities. “The beauty of his industry is that you can do some unique things, meet some great folks, and basically avoid having to get a real job,” Hendrix says jokingly.

Hendrix’ contributions to the events industry came through intercollegiate athletics early-on. While a 19-year old student at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, Hendrix served as the school’s Sports Information Director. He became Sports Information Director at New Mexico State at 21; and at Iowa State at 23. And...never slowed down. He was Assistant Commissioner of the Midwestern Collegiate Conference; spent time as Associate Executive Director of the Freedom Bowl Football Game in Anaheim where he contributed to the development of The Disneyland Pigskin Classic. He served as Associate Executive Director of the Fiesta Bowl, helping produce, sell, and promote 50+ community events in Phoenix including its national-renown bowl game. And he was Assistant Commissioner of the Pac-10 Conference, responsible for television contracts and programming.

One of his legacies is leading a dramatic turnaround of the near-bankrupt Parade Company, which produces America's Thanksgiving Parade in Detroit. The community had lost hope of the future of its 65-year holiday tradition. It had decided to close its doors, yet with great regret as the parade was a civic unifier in an otherwise troubled city. Losing the parade signified yet another death blow to community spirit. But city fathers gave it one last shot. They hired Hendrix who turned massive financial losses into major financial gains; restoring the production quality of the parade and returning it to national television, ultimately on CBS. City leaders approached him once again to assume management of another Detroit institution – the International Freedom Festival, making Hendrix responsible for Detroit's two largest public events.

As President of Las Vegas Events, Hendrix performed in the highest pressure arena, that of the entertainment capitol of the world where he was responsible for luring national and international events to Las Vegas. He stimulated tourism and drove economic impact exceeding \$250 million annually. He elevated both the quantity and quality of activity, producing or promoting 45 annual events – NASCAR, NHRA drag racing, college football and basketball championships, film and music festivals, and world championships of rodeo and equestrian show jumping. He received the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce Tourism Award for his work. Hendrix recalls producing Las Vegas' New Years Eve celebration – a massive fireworks show which ran from tip to toe down the Las Vegas strip. "It was the first time the casinos had come together to celebrate collectively," he said. "There was a lot riding on it, so I reached out to people I could trust - the Zambelli's - to produce the show. Sure...we set a small fire to one casino rooftop and sent ashes into the lake and fountain of another, but it was wildly successful. I recall standing on the 46th floor balcony of the Rio Hotel next to my friend, the late George Zambelli, Sr. It was 11:59 p.m. New Years Eve. I asked George, "Is this going to work? If not, we can jump together."

Hendrix' work at the 500 Festival is to produce and promote events that celebrate the Indianapolis 500 – the world's largest single day sporting event. Their 50 annual events and programs draw 500,000 people annually and include one of the nation's premier parades and the nation's largest half marathon. Last year, the 500 Festival won 17 IFEA Pinnacle Awards including the parade earning the Gold Pinnacle for "Best Event Within an Existing Festival." The Mini Marathon has grown from 23,000 runners to nearly 40,000 during his tenure. He has developed new events and programs and grown the budget dramatically since his arrival in 2003. And when he isn't running that Indianapolis organization, he is supporting others. He served on the NCAA Final Four Special Events Committee; is on the Civic Advisory Council for the 2012 Super Bowl; and he and his team produced the Indianapolis Colts Super Bowl Champion ticker tape parade.

Hendrix has been a 20-year contributor to IFEA. Joining the organization in 1989, he has spoken at countless IFEA Conventions and regional seminars; hosted the IFEA Profits Seminar in Las Vegas and last year the 500 Festival hosted the IFEA Convention; shared his expertise in sponsorship, media, parades, and sports, and has moderated sessions and written for IFEA publications and industry books. In addition, he has chaired committees, notably the IFEA Sponsorship and Hall of Fame Committees; served on the IFEA Board of Directors for eight years, including serving as Treasurer, and served on the IFEA Foundation Board and the IFEA President's Council.

Hendrix says he has been touched by it all. "This business is part art, part science. It's heavy on people management... that's the bonus. I have met some of my closest friends doing this. The topper is that I met my wife, Amy, at an IFEA Convention. So you could say this industry has shaped me professionally, personally, and matrimonially."

Hendrix blushes at the thought of being inducted in the IFEA Hall of Fame. "Getting into this business was a blessing for me. It's all I've ever known, all I ever wanted to do. To be honored for doing work you love is an interesting twist. It's humbling to be grouped with people who are real trailblazers. It's been a pleasure and honor to work alongside many of them."