



International Festivals & Events Association

**Chuck O'Connor, CFEE
Principal Consultant
Event Marketing Group, LLC
Traverse City, MI, USA**

In his advice book, 'Don't Sweat the Small Stuff', author Richard Carlson says 'Don't struggle against the natural flow of experience'. That bit of instruction could be the storyboard for Chuck O'Connor's early work life.

Born in southern Michigan, the eldest of eleven children, Chuck's early 'flow of work experience' found him in various unrelated professions, from managing a production line at an aluminum anodizing plant, to running the front desk of a Holiday Inn, to selling specialty coatings for Allied Chemical Corporation. Finally, he became a partner and sales manager for a tennis court & running track surface coatings company in the Detroit area throughout the late '70's.



But that all changed when he married his wife, Gail, in 1980 and made the BOLD CHOICE to sell his share of the business back to his partners, and pick up, re-locate, and start all over in beautiful northern Michigan.

Key takeaway: "Learning what you DON'T want to do for a living is as important as finding your true calling!" For Chuck... it was marketing, negotiations and SALES!

Enter – the crazy world of MEDIA! Hired by a local radio station in 1981, Chuck hit the streets as a radio rep, selling 30-second spots to retail customers in Traverse City, Michigan. After three years of learning the ropes, he was offered a sales position at the local NBC television station. That led to a promotion to General Sales Manager, followed by a better offer from a bigger CBS station, where he managed sales and also directed their affiliate national spot sales effort. Times were good!

Meanwhile, Chuck and Gail had started their family, and Chuck's job-related travel lost its appeal. In 1993 - with two young sons - Chuck took another chance and joined the National Cherry Festival as its Marketing Director, charged with developing a sustainable corporate sponsorship platform. At the Cherry Festival, negotiating partnerships to the mutual benefit of the Festival and its sponsors, played right into his wheelhouse. But he would need to learn the business.... His early career path resembled anything BUT the Festivals & Events industry.

Chuck credits much of his education and success in the sponsorship business to the excellent networking opportunities through IFEA and IEG conferences. He also honed his presenting skills through Dale Carnegie training courses. He was an early CFEE program graduate, and as he became more proficient, he gave back by conducting sponsorship and onsite marketing presentations and webinars for IFEA, IEG, MFEA, Chambers of Commerce, and numerous festivals and events across the country. In 2008, Chuck taught the sponsorship section of the

then newly-developed CFEE FastTrack program to a group of festival representatives in Honolulu, which the Hawaii Tourism Authority had assembled to help re-invent and grow their businesses.

Over the last 25 years Chuck tried to maintain continuity as the Cherry Festival grew and evolved under 5 different executive directors, each with unique visions for the organization. He grew sponsorship investment to over one-million dollars annually, helping to ensure that the traditions of the nearly 100-year-old festival, driving tourism and commerce, would endure.

At the same time, he acted as a key liaison to the cherry industry - something that he was proud to do, especially because he and his family lived in the heart of Leelanau County's cherry-growing region. Both of his sons worked for nearly eight summers for a local cherry farmer, learning a farmer's excellent work ethic and contributing to the cost of their college educations. And while Gail never worked in the industry, she sure enjoyed introducing family and visitors to the area by taking them hand-picking cherries every summer! To their parents' delight, their two sons, now in their early thirties, were both blessed with daughters last year!

In 2001, Chuck founded EMG – Event Marketing Group, and began consulting and representing a number of other established and start-up special events, leveraging his network of contacts to mutual benefit. Among them: the Iceman Cometh Mountain Bike Challenge; the Great Lakes Equestrian Festival; the M-22 Challenge Triathlon; National Writers Series; Traverse City Film Festival; the Great Lakes Winter Trails Council; and the North American VASA cross-country ski race series.

But, as satisfying as the 'art of the deal' was, it was something else that became more meaningful and gratifying over the years: Building lifelong friendships with the Cherry Festival's staff and volunteers. During the annual eight-day event Chuck came to be known for his signature 'safari hat', as he rode his bicycle throughout the property's venues and parade routes, with a smile and a wave for anyone who noticed.

Through his 35 years in media & special events, Chuck has accumulated a wealth of knowledge in his specialty, which he continues to share. He has personally mentored hundreds of people from the attendees at IFEA and IEG conferences, to past and current National Cherry Festival employees, and to other festivals and sponsorship professionals, teaching them how he became successful, and where he had made mistakes.

Now retired from active duty at the Cherry Festival, Chuck remains connected as a senior consultant. In his spare time, he enjoys sailing, backcountry skiing, hiking, cycling, playing guitar, and of course spending time with his wife and new granddaughters!

"Personally, I have known Chuck for 28 wonderful years. He has held many roles in my life: mentor, friend, confidant, role model, boss and employee. That said, the most important role he plays is that of a *family member*. Chuck is the biggest cheerleader in our National Cherry Festival "family". His personal demeanor and contagious enthusiasm for work and life makes all of us strive to be better people. Because of knowing Chuck O'Connor, we *are* better." (Kat Paye ~ Cherry Festival Executive Director)

Please help us congratulate our 2019 IFEA Hall of Fame inductee, Chuck OConnor, CFEE.