

THE POWER OF CONNECTION



IFEA prides itself on many different things: the quality of our educational programs, an incredible array of member benefits, a high value international convention and others. However, one of the strongest reasons for membership is the power of connections and the networking opportunities that this organization provides. If you look at the home page for the IFEA website, this phrase is noted: "Our success lies in the success of those we serve through professional education, programming, products and resources, networking and representation." I have taken the liberty of highlighting the word "networking," as this is consistently one of the key reasons why new members join the organization and why existing members renew. IFEA presents unique opportunities to network and to build strong industry connections. There is a reason why the coffee area at the annual international convention is called "Connections Café!"

Isn't this the goal of any "professional association?" According to ChatGPT, part of the definition of a professional association includes the following sentence, which also mentions "networking": "A professional association is an organization formed by individuals in a particular profession or occupation to promote their collective interests, provide resources and support, establish standards of practice, and facilitate networking and professional development opportunities." So, what makes IFEA different than any other association when it comes to networking? I believe that the difference is how we promote the power of connection. Typical networking involves a conversation, perhaps an exchange of business cards (for those who still use them!) and perhaps a follow up email, call, or text. Connection, on the other hand, leads to long-term business and often personal relationships. To demonstrate this point allow me to offer a few real-world examples.

When I attended my first IFEA Convention, many years ago, I literally knew one person, the late Don Whiteley, a world-class international parade producer from Atlanta. He and I had worked on a project together and he suggested that IFEA was an organization that could help grow my professional career. At that first convention, Don introduced me to everyone he knew, which, quite frankly, was most of the attendees! Many of those people, including Don, became lifelong friends and colleagues. This experience takes place at every convention and many of my best friends are people that I have met at IFEA events.

The second example of connections was one that was made at the IFEA Convention in Williamsburg, Virginia in 2019. Two of the people who received Foundation scholarships that year and were in the CFEE classes were Sarah Umlauf, Executive Director of the Saint Louis Art Fair and Megan Zaranek (then Megan

Tramonte) who was then Operations Coordinator for an art festival in Florida. Fast forward to 2024 when Sarah was looking for a replacement for their Operations Director. Who applied for and was hired for the position? Yes, kids, Megan Zaranek. A connection that would not have existed without the IFEA Power of Connection.

The next example came as the result of the IFEA Convention in 2023 in McAllen, Texas. Rachel Cieri is Manager of Volunteers for PHS/The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society which produces the annual Philadelphia Flower Show. In this role, she manages in excess of 2,000 volunteers and she was attending the convention on a Foundation scholarship. Through volunteering for the Foundation Night event, she met Alex McNulty, who is the Manager of Member Services at Pasadena Tournament of Roses. In his role, he manages more than 1,500 volunteers. They developed a friendship, and Alex invited Rachel to come to Pasadena to volunteer for the annual Pasadena Tournament of Roses Parade. She took him up on the offer and had a once-in-a-lifetime learning experience which has enhanced her professional development. I am especially proud of Rachel, as she is a graduate of Temple University's School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality, where I taught for 15 years.

My fourth and final example is Dave Bullard. Dave is an independent festival and event public relations/marketing consultant who has spent decades in the PR/Journalism industries, most recently as the Marketing and Public Relations Manager for the Great New York State Fair. Dave's first IFEA Convention was in 2019 in Williamsburg, and yes, he was in the same CFEE class as Megan and Sarah! I had the pleasure of interviewing Dave recently and one of his comments was that when he came to his first IFEA Convention, he found his "tribe." "I didn't have any expectations when I came to my first IFEA Convention. The first night of CFEE I ate dinner by myself. The second night, a whole group of my CFEE classmates came over to me and invited me to join them to go out that night. That never happened with any other convention or professional association." Dave is now a member of the IFEA Foundation Board, moderator of the IFEA Marketing & PR Affinity Group, and has built his consulting business through IFEA connections.

These four examples are but a brief collection of IFEA connection stories, and I am certain that many of you reading this have your own story to share. With some articles I have written, I struggle to match the minimum word count. For this article, my challenge was not exceeding my limit! If any of this resonates with you, I encourage you to support the IFEA Foundation in any way that you can. We do a lot of initia-

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tives throughout the year and my next column will focus on the Annual Convention and Foundation night in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but for now if you want to give, here is the link: www.ifea.com/p/foundation/waystogive.

Looking forward to connecting with all of you soon!

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