

ARTICLE

Hosting A Fabulous Event Is As Easy As Connecting the Dots

by Donna Whicher

Sara England Cunningham, owner and founder of the event production company *connect•the•dots*, has a knack for throwing a great party. "I love seeing people enjoying themselves, having a great time," she says. "I get so much satisfaction when an event comes together exactly the way we planned it. Recently, after an event, someone said to me, 'You were so calm.' And I said, 'That's because it was so fun!'"

Sara specializes in events that benefit charities, such as the Party with a Purpose that she and her husband throw



Sara England Cunningham


each year to raise food items for their local Community Food Pantry. And all of the events she produces reflect the spirit of the Eastern Shore, which makes an idyllic backdrop to celebrate a personal or professional milestone. "My style reflects this region. It's conscious of the environment, and it reflects the environment," she explains. A shared affection for the area is one way she bonds with clients. "We

love being on the water. We love Bay life, so I also encourage my clients to go as green as they can: to use cloth instead of paper, to work with

vendors who support local merchants, to recycle as much as possible after an event, those kinds of things.”

While some clients approach Cunningham during the early planning stages, others seek her help after completing some preparation and things have begun to grow unwieldy. As co-owner of Rock Hall’s Inn at Huntingfield Creek Bed and Breakfast, Joanne

Rich has helped plan a number of weddings, and she was looking forward to personally tending to the details of her daughter’s pending nuptials. But after meeting Cunningham, Rich says, “It was clear she would be a tremendous asset,” so she recruited her. Rich recalls, “Sara helped narrow down the theme to a kind of ‘Scheherazade’s 1,001 Arabian Nights meets J. Crew’—very ro-



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mantic, but fun and summery." The theme incorporates 2009's most fashionable color palette: tangerine, leaf green, and hot pink. "Sara's linen resource pulled the theme together wonderfully. I would never have had access to that resource without her. She also personally referred the caterer and photographer we'll use. I value her services tremendously. She had the intuitive sense to anticipate problems before they happened. She is very comprehensive and careful with the confidentiality of her clients. In general, every aspect of her work is highly profes-

sional. Everything has been more than satisfactory," she says, pausing before adding, "and when Joanne says that, it means that it was *really, really good.*"

One day, Sue Leeman had her daughter's wedding on her mind and was thinking that she "needed someone to literally connect the dots. Then I opened the *Kent County News* and there was the picture of Sara's ribbon cutting." Leeman had already done some planning and approached Cunningham midway through the process. "My daughter and her fiancé had picked the crab

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theme. It's a destination wedding: everyone who is coming is from somewhere else. Sara helped with the flowers, the linens coordination, and provided lots of ideas. She'll be there the day of the wedding, making sure everything gets pulled together. She's had great suggestions."

Cunningham takes care of everything from design, to vendor coordination, to day of event

management, using a gentle hand. "Some event planners take over and the event doesn't reflect the client. I don't do that. I listen and I don't force anyone to do anything that they don't want to." She's creative and attuned to weaving her clients' personalities into her designs. Cunningham, a self-described "stickler for getting it right the first time," pays close atten-

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tion to details. She recently designed a birthday party for an avid hunter and suggested that the room be decorated like an enormous duck blind, that guests be provided with duck call party favors, and that tables be festooned with decoy centerpieces and camouflage print linens.

By firmly establishing close vendor relationships with experienced industry professionals, Cunningham is positioned to tailor each party

to the individual. A garden club party will abound with local foods and local floral arrangements, and for the fan of traditional Eastern Shore fare, she might suggest a menu including oyster fritters and crab cakes (though she has connections to chefs who offer international cuisine as well).

Those who have little or no experience consulting with an event planner may be surprised at how



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much more they can relax and enjoy their own event if they seek professional help, she explains. "Some people are under the impression that using an event planner would be cost-prohibitive, but professional event planners have key industry contacts and are in a position to receive professional discounts that can save their clients both money and valuable time."

To learn more about connect.the.dots:



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Donna Whicher is a Chestertown resident who enjoys freelance writing and attending parties. She has written for national and regional publications.



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