

unique venues magazine

UNIQUEVENUES.COM // WINTER 2018

23
Winners
20
Best of
AWARDS
page 58

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CONTENTS

BEST OF UNIQUE VENUES // Winter 2018



36

THUNDERBIRD EXECUTIVE INN AND CONFERENCE CENTER IS NOW CATERING TO LEISURE TRAVELERS.



HEINZ STADIUM IS ONE OF PITTSBURGH'S FINEST

48

In Every Issue

12 *Publisher's Letter*

36 *What's Trending*

As hotel rates continue to climb, campuses are stepping in with an abundance of availability for leisure travelers.

42 *The Main Event*

Furman University welcomed droves of stargazers in August, with everyone intent on catching a glimpse of the Great American Eclipse.

48 *On The Road*

From sports stadiums to a piano bar and thriving campus, these four venues provide ironclad reasons to visit Pittsburgh.

80 *Venue Index*

Find comprehensive listings of Unique Venues members across the U.S. and Canada, listed alphabetically by region.

106 *Person of Interest*

Professional of the Year: With a successful career in collegiate conference and event services, Shane Cutler has shifted the tide at Boston University.

Features

58 *Winners' Circle*

These 23 winners of the Fourth Annual Unique Venues Best of Awards really make our industry go 'round.

70 *Market Gains*

Unique Venues Best of Awards aren't just for the show-stopping venues that are turning heads, but also for the creative work behind the scenes that helps to spread the word.



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CONTENTS

BEST OF UNIQUE VENUES // Winter 2018



WARM UP WITH THIS COMFORTING MULLED CIDER.

28

On The Cover

Shane Cutler, our honoree for Professional of the Year, gives us an inside look at how he managed to advance the conference programs at Boston University. Page 106

The Agenda

17 *Planner's Dictionary*

Dictionary.com added more than 300 new words this year, including these fun planner terms you ought to know.

22 *Décor*

Sitting pretty: Unique Venues members show off unique seating configurations that have been bringing more clients to the table.

28 *Happy Hour*

Drinkhouse Fire & Ice Mulled Cider is full of cloves, cinnamon, and anise, plus tons of holiday cheer.

32 *Food for Thought*

Minnesota's Oak Ridge Hotel & Conference Center keeps guests warm with this festive butternut squash soup that's great for winter and well into 2018.

Industry Updates

76 *News & Awards*

Here's the latest, great achievements from our member venues.



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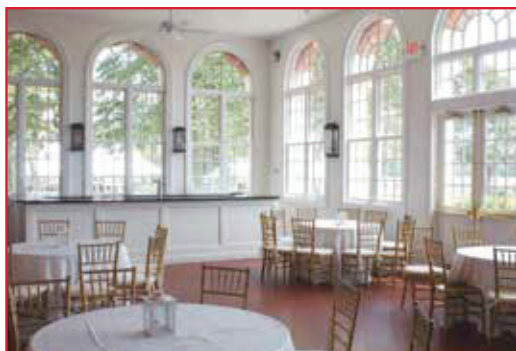
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



THERE'S A COMMON PHRASE that salespeople often hear during training seminars: "The sale begins when the customer says no." It's a scenario that plays out every day for non-traditional venues. The only difference is that the customer isn't the one saying no—it's actually their colleagues, coworkers, management, or other venue stakeholders.

Our members have heard "no" plenty. For the vast majority, meetings and events are an auxiliary form of revenue. Because it's not the venue's core business, hosting outside groups can be a challenge. Just imagine converting an entire campus, museum, mansion, or movie theater from its standard business to a meeting or special event venue at night, in the summer, or on the weekends. But this is exactly what our members do every day, which is why we take the time to celebrate them every year.

Our annual Best of awards honor those venues (and the people behind them) that turn "no" into "yes" on a daily basis and still have the time and patience to deliver exceptional customer service.

This year's winners and nominees are good negotiators, willing to take risks and go against the grain, and capable of taking on supervisors and establishments to get things done and make clients happy. As their marketing partners, they're an inspiration to us, and their colleagues look up to them as well.

In fact, at our Annual Member Conference, other members wanted to know how these venues do it so they can follow suit and host an equally successful conference and event program. For example, how University of Maryland, College Park turns their campus into a safe space for youth sports groups and camps or how Silver Bay YMCA Conference & Family Retreat Center continues to be a successful venue for reunions year after year (receiving our award in this category for three consecutive years!).

So, here's to this year's winners and nominees that show us daily that "no" just means it's time to get to work, roll up the sleeves, and get the job done.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michele Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michele Nichols, Founder Unique Venues
Michele@UniqueVenues.com

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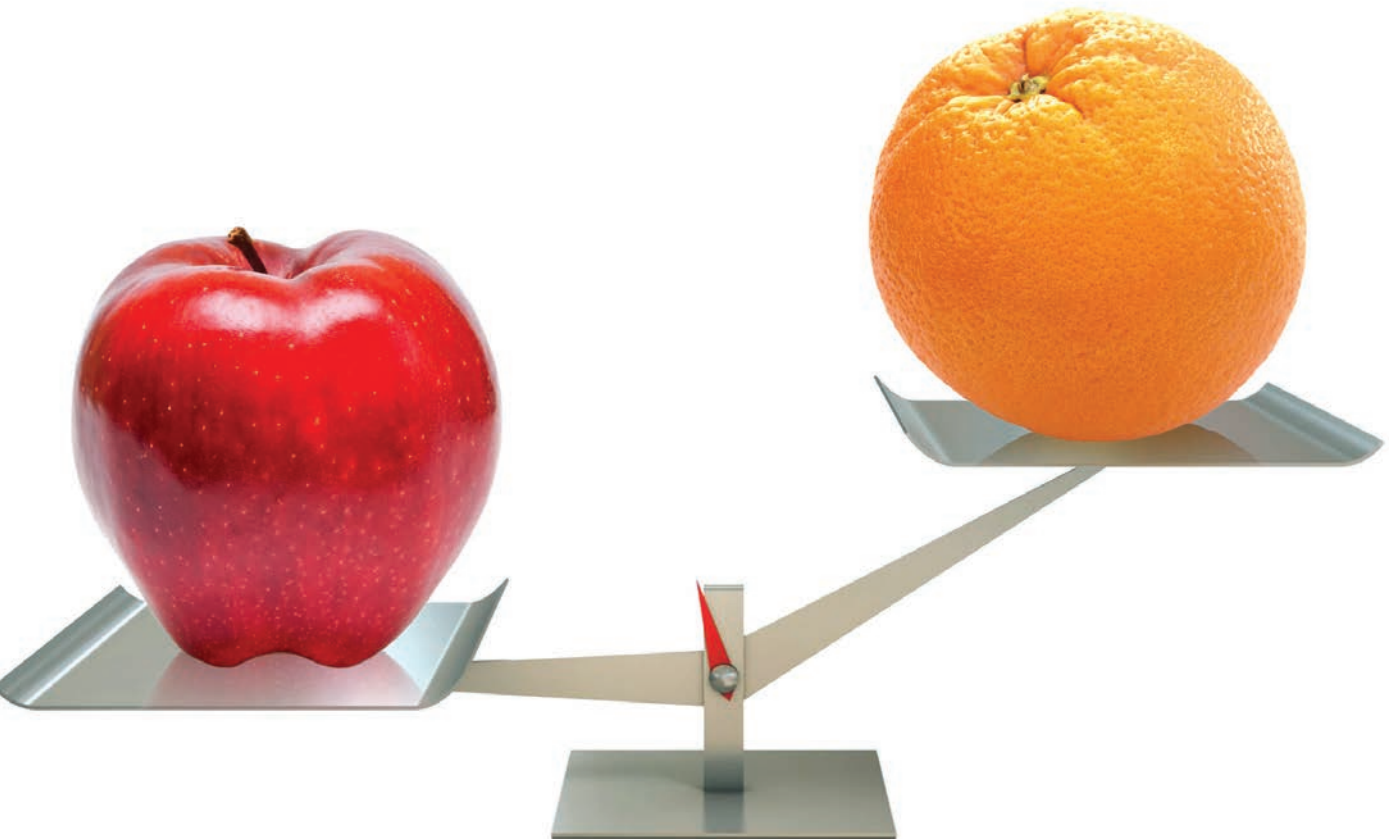
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The AGENDA

▶ PLANNER'S DICTIONARY

▶ DÉCOR pg22

▶ HAPPY HOUR pg28

▶ FOOD FOR THOUGHT pg32

WORD *to the* WISE

Dictionary.com added more than 300 new words this year, including these fun planner terms.

BY SELENA FRAGASSI

In 2017, Dictionary.com added an impressive 300 new words to the official English vocabulary. Though many of them reflect our current political climate—'woke' and 'lamestream' among them—many could also soon become part of a planner's vernacular. Here are a few of our favorites, their definitions, and how to use them the next time you're talking to a colleague.

AL DESKO

DEFINITION: Eating at one's office desk.

USE: "My lunch break has basically been al desko since January 1."

ATHLEISURE

DEFINITION: A style of clothing inspired by athletic apparel but also worn as casual, everyday wear.

USE: "This event's dress code is business casual so I will ignore any guest showing up in athleisure."

DESO

DEFINITION: Shortened term for designated driver.

USE: "With that open bar, I hope this room has a lot of desos."

GHOSTING

DEFINITION: The practice of suddenly ending all contact with a person without explanation.

USE: "How is my client ghosting me two weeks before their holiday party?"

MIC DROP

DEFINITION: Something, especially a statement or action, that displays such a bold confidence.

USE: "The keynote speaker totally had a mic drop moment at our conference when he started quoting Shakespeare."

NBD

DEFINITION: Acronym for no big deal.

USE: "That weather forecast is NBD. We have an 'indoor plan.'"

*Find the full list at
dictionary.com*

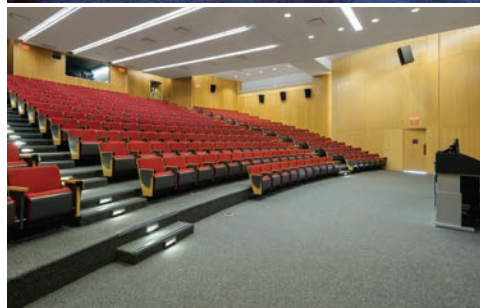


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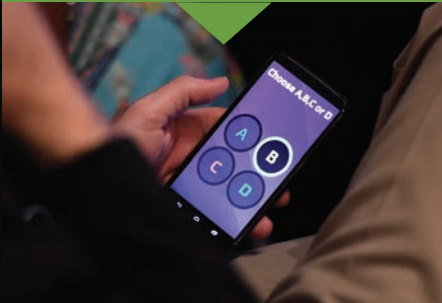
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SITTING PRETTY

Unique Venues members show off unique seating configurations



At left: Graceland's setup was fit for a King. Top to bottom: Chase Center puts all their seating facing forward for keynotes, University of Nevada Las Vegas has opted to use square tables for more capacity, and Willowdale Estate sets up centers of attention.

Table rounds and classroom setups are so ... been there, done that. These four venues decided to get creative with their arrangements by designing true gathering spots where everyone wants to pull up a chair.

CHASE CENTER

This riverfront venue in Wilmington, Delaware configures couches and lounge chairs into mini living room areas—all forward facing—where everyone can get comfortable for keynote speakers. UniqueVenues.com/ChaseCenter

ELVIS PRESLEY'S GRACELAND

For a recent conference reception, the Memphis mecca set up mini living rooms with “blue suede” accent lights on furniture, which was surrounded by 20 of the singer’s famous automobiles. UniqueVenues.com/Graceland

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

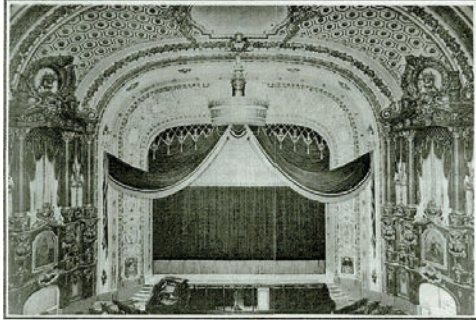
The university’s conference and events department has started utilizing square tables instead of rounds to create a polished look and also maximize seating capacity to fit in more people for larger events. UniqueVenues.com/UNLV

WILLOWDALE ESTATE

For a recent wedding, this boutique venue in Topsfield, Massachusetts organized white sofas around a central platform where the bride and groom stood for the ceremony to give everyone a perfect view, and an extra comfortable seat so they could enjoy the moment. UniqueVenues.com/WillowdaleEstate



FLASHBACK PHOTO



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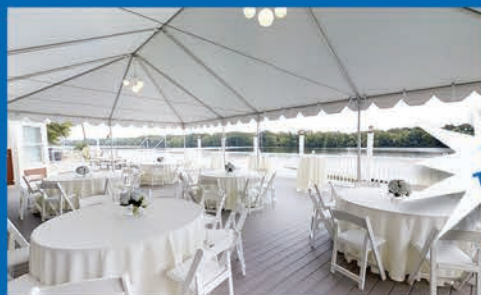
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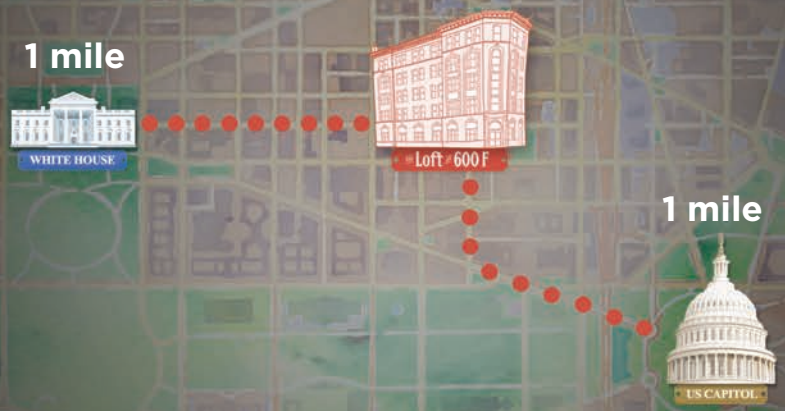
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INGREDIENTS:

- 1 (750 ml) bottle red wine
- 1 orange, sliced
- ¼ cup honey or sugar
- 8 whole cloves
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 2 star anise
- ¼ cup brandy (optional)

TO PREPARE:

1. Combine all ingredients in a non-aluminum saucepan, and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat.
 2. Reduce heat to medium-low heat, and let simmer for at least 15 minutes.
 3. Strain and serve warm.
- Makes about 6 servings.* **uv**

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THE AGENDA

food for thought



Butternut Squash Soup

Courtesy of Oak Ridge Hotel & Conference Center
(Chaska, MN)

As winter approaches, few things are more comforting than a piping hot bowl of soup. Oak Ridge Hotel & Conference Center knows that all too well, since the venue is based in Minnesota where the temps can dip into single digits (or colder) during the season. To warm guests up, they serve this hearty butternut squash soup, made with kitchen staples and a dash of fresh herbs.

INGREDIENTS:

10 lbs. butternut squash
½ cup honey
1.5 gal. chicken stock
3 shallots, thinly sliced
1 cup butter
1 cup flour
3 rosemary sprigs
salt & pepper, to taste

TO PREPARE:

1. Cut squash in half, clean out, and smear with honey.
2. Roast squash in oven at 350 degrees for one hour, until soft.
3. In pot, melt butter, add sliced shallots, and sauté until tender.
4. Add flour to pot and stir continuously.
5. Add ⅓ of the stock and keep stirring.
6. Add cooked squash, the remaining ⅔ of the stock, and rosemary sprigs. Simmer for 45 minutes.
7. Add salt and pepper to taste.
8. Remove rosemary, pour mixture in blender, and puree.
9. Return mixture to a pot over heat, and add rosemary back in.
10. Simmer for 15 minutes.
11. Season to taste. *Makes 2 gallons.* **uv**

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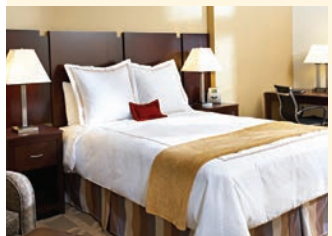


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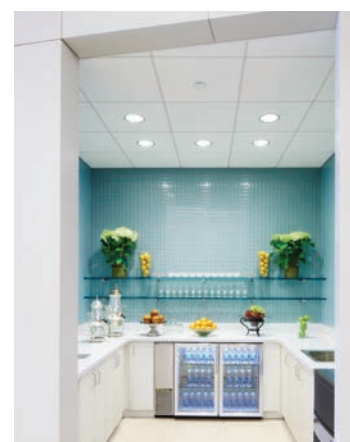


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WHAT'S TRENDING

BY SELENA FRAGASSI



Clockwise from left: A look at the modern accommodations available for rent at Western University; many guests choose to stay at The Thunderbird Executive Inn and Conference Center for its unique feel; and the overnight rooms at University of Hartford are popular with interns.

Room for Rent

As hotel rates continue to climb, campuses are stepping in with an abundance of availability for leisure travelers.

It's the phenomenon sweeping every major city: Hotel rates are going up. In Chicago, the average per diem has increased by 16.8 percent from 2015 to 2016; in D.C., it's 12.5 percent; and even in Jackson, Mississippi, rates have gone up by 11.9 percent (all the findings according to a study by *Business Travel News* published last March).

As hotel rates continue to climb, people are checking out—and looking into other options for overnight accommodations. And that has set college and university campuses up nicely with a supply of sometimes thousands of beds in residence halls to meet growing demand for more affordable options.

"Price is probably our best advantage,

especially when someone is looking for a deal," says Cliff Fielder, conference services manager at Western University in London, Ontario, which currently has 500 single rooms, 3,000 double rooms, and 900 suites available across campus for \$65 a day, seven days a week when school is not in session (early May to mid-August). With such a large unused allot-

ment, the university has started to aggressively go after leisure solo travelers and families looking for competitive rates in a central location. "We recognized about three years ago that we have an incredible inventory of space available, so why not go out and promote and try to sell it?" he says. "It's a lucrative segment for us with continual double-digit growth."

At Western, Fielder says residence halls operate much like a hotel with beds (and basic linens) and breakfast that can be arranged for groups. He and his team have particularly been successful in catering to visitors of a nearby hospital that may need to find last-minute options.

"We are pretty close to our university hospital, and have been able to offer family stays for people that are visiting for the short-term but need beds for a number of unexpected nights," he notes.

At Thunderbird Executive Inn and

Conference Center in Glendale, Arizona (a unit of the Arizona State University Knowledge Enterprise), the property tends to attract both business travelers and leisure travelers including NFL football fans coming in for Arizona Cardinals games as well as guests attending MLB's Spring Training season every year.

"Our guests like the quiet atmosphere and close proximity to sporting events and shopping, and they're not afraid to try a non-traditional hotel—not just for cost savings but also the experience that is memorable," says Patti Davidson, regional general manager of the property that has 120 single rooms and 14 doubles that range from \$69-200 a night and are available year-round.

The inn and conference center is located on the campus of ASU's Thunderbird School of Global Management, which dates back to World War II when it was used as a fighter training base. Today, many black-and-white photos illustrating that history decorate the rooms and common areas, adding to the property's charm. Davidson also believes that the individualized service at a campus is part of its success. "What's unique about being at a university is that we know how to treat the customer with exceptional service and amenities, and they grow to love and appreciate that."

Though the Thunderbird Executive Inn and Conference Center has been open since 1996, it was in 2005 that a turning point came when the property retained FLIK Hospitality Group as a management company, "allowing us to strongly market to leisure travelers," says Davidson. "We really started to see an uptick in the transient market in 2012 and realized we could compete in the standard business market. Our business travelers have liked the resort-style atmosphere we have to offer and also the fact that we haven't had to compromise on amenities they expect

from a corporate hotel."

At the University of Hartford in West Hartford, Connecticut, the influx of residence housing over the summer has provided a unique opportunity to go after interns.

"We are right in the insurance capital of the country. A number of companies like Cigna, Prudential, and The Hartford are literally all in our backyard," says Director of Conference Services Heather Canny. "It's a really good market to tap into since they are all right here."

At this campus, there are 20, four-person suites with kitchen, living room, and separate bathrooms available for varying rates from late May until mid-August.


"We always had a speckling of interns, but three summers ago, we decided to be proactive and invested efforts to get larger contracts as opposed to just one-off visitors," says Canny, noting that The Hartford Insurance Company is their largest client with a contract for 20-plus interns that was recently renewed for a third year.

"It's a very pretty campus, and a nice place for them to live, but we do have competition from apartment buildings in downtown Hartford that have intern housing. They are more like luxury apartments, but also a tier or two price-wise above us," Canny adds, saying that her team's strategy for new business is to market what they do have. "We are price-conscious, safe, and have a lot of outdoor space. Plus a membership to our sports center comes with every rental. We also have complimentary parking on campus and free laundry."

Of course there are challenges—in the case of the University of Hartford it's their late time window (beds don't open up until closer to Memorial Day and are unavailable as of the second week in August). At Thunderbird Executive Inn & Conference Center it's visibility. "Finding our location can be a challenge because we don't have a branded name out on the street; we are located within

a campus without our own drive," says Davidson. There's also no standalone restaurant so guests have to share dining venues with the student body. It's a similar situation at Western, says Fielder. "We have to let people know that there's a potential of conference groups being there and some students that stay and do summer classes. They also have to realize that we don't have active food and beverage like a hotel." But he and Davidson say as long as they are upfront with guests about the environment they don't seem to mind in the long run.

And so far the future looks good. Almost all of the properties interviewed have moved on from just simply registering guests through their own website platforms and have started making rooms available on third party travel websites like Hotwire, Booking.com, Travelocity, and Expedia.

In fact, Davidson says Thunderbird's third party online reservations have grown 26 percent from the 2015-16 fiscal year to date. "That's up more than \$340,000 for us," she says, "strictly by getting our name out there." A big part is also the reviews, she says. "We pride ourselves on having all reviews responded to, good or bad, so people know what they will experience when coming to our property, which is usually pretty satisfying." 

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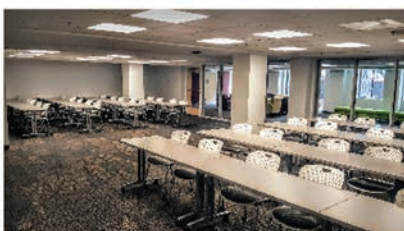
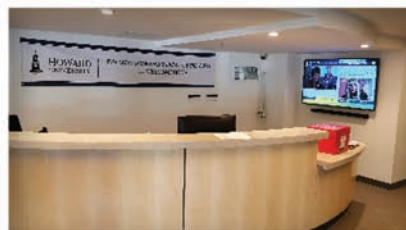
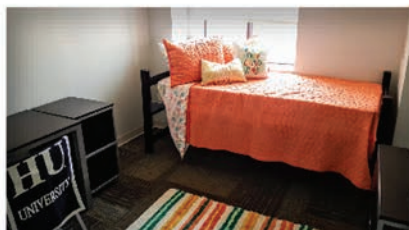
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THE MAIN EVENT

BY SELENA FRAGASSI



MOON *Struck*

Furman University welcomed droves of stargazers to its South Carolina campus in August, with everyone intent on catching a glimpse of the Great American Eclipse.

There's nothing like a once-in-a-lifetime feat of nature to bring out the crowds. In August, Furman University welcomed more than 10,000 visitors and an additional 4,000 students, faculty, and staff that had recently returned for the school year to the Paladin Stadium to get a front-row seat to the first total solar eclipse since 1918. "It was an incredible thing to see, with all the people everywhere with glasses on viewing this great event," says Tony McGuirt, director of Younts Conference Center & Summer Programs at the university.

Located in Greenville, South Carolina, Furman was in the direct path of the eclipse as it traversed the United States and left viewers in the stadium in total blackout for a full two minutes. "We had the perfect weather for it, with completely clear skies," adds McGuirt, noting that in almost every aspect the event went off without a hitch.

A committee of 12 staff had been planning for the gathering since April. "We relied on our marketing com-

munications department to get the word out through news releases, social media, and our website," says McGuirt. The strategy worked so well that he says a large majority of the crowd was from out-of-state and he even ran into a family from London that had planned their U.S. holiday around the solar stunner. "I asked them how they found us and they said on the web, so we knew it was effective."

One of the biggest challenges in pre-

paring for the free viewing was trying to anticipate how many people would actually show up, particularly since Furman didn't have tickets or take any RSVPs. "We were anticipating up to 10,000 guests, but as the momentum built up, we began to realize it would probably be larger than that," says McGuirt. "So we had to be prepared for a 'sell out,' and anticipate what we would do if we ran out of parking, for example." In that case the plan would have been to close the gates and say the venue was at capacity. "But thankfully we actually never had to do that. We came close, but we could have put a few more in the [16,000-seat] stadium," he adds. "A lot of people chose to stay outside the stands and fill up the grassy areas, too."

Outside the stadium guests had plenty of events to occupy their time starting at noon, two hours before

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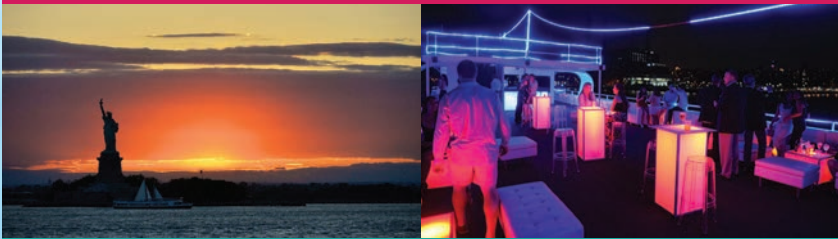
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THE MAIN EVENT

BY SELENA FRAGASSI



the main event. “There were various booths, probably about 20, where people could buy food, kids could take part in STEM activities, and there were sponsors focused on health, climate science, and other topics,” notes McGuirt who says the school provided water for all 14,000 guests due to the excessive heat on the day. The university also purchased 10,000 specially designed protective glasses, which could be picked up at various points on campus, allowing people to turn their eyes to the skies without risking any vision damage.

The main benefit of being inside the stadium though was the addition of Physics Professor David Moffett who emceed the event and provided in-depth commentary. “He was telling folks what was happening as time passed, what was happening in other states at various times, and really just walking everyone through the whole process,” says McGuirt. “He was extremely informative.” The jumbotron screens on the field also carried a live stream from NASA that gave the full grasp of the momentous event. “We wanted to make it entertaining and educational at the same time,” admits McGuirt. Several students from Furman as well as nearby campuses



People from all over the U.S. and as far away as London came to Furman University to see the eclipse in August. The campus was in the direct path of the event and has a 16,000-seat stadium.

were also conducting experiments on-site, in an area separate from the crowd where they could gather data. Media, too, also came out in full force with Furman receiving coverage from local news stations like WUSA-9, WYFF-4, and national outlet Thrillist.

“It was a tremendous PR event for us as well,” says McGuirt, further noting that the main goal for the staff was to make it a memorable experience for everyone involved. “One of our missions is to be part of the community and give back, and so we hope

they enjoyed the day and walked away with a positive view of Furman and felt welcome to come back and share the word about us.”

There is a good chance that could happen in seven years, if not before, as the next major eclipse crosses the same path in 2024. [uv](#)

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ON THE ROAD

BY SELENA FRAGASSI

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As if being in a football stadium wasn't enough of a thrill, one of the coolest new venues at Heinz Field (home of the Pittsburgh Steelers) is the PNC Champions Club. This trendy spot features a full glass enclosure where attendees have a unique vantage point from the field's south end zone. "You can sit inside and be 5-10 feet off the grass and see the entire stadium," says Corporate Communications Manager Nick Sero. "It's turned into a great spot for events with a full view of the stadium

plus top shelf food and drink options."

PNC Champions Club is just one of many options for rental at the stadium, which is located in a prime spot along the Ohio River, just a bridge away from the downtown district. Large-scale events of up to 100,000 (utilizing the 68,000 seats inside and parking lots outside) are welcome as are small weddings and meetings that take place in suites, such as a recent 40-person meetup for a regional chapter of Coaches vs. Cancer. "We really do have a few different areas in the stadium

that are good for any size," says Sero.

He also touts the in-house catering as some of the best in all of sports. "We work with Aramark to do catering for all our events, and they prepare barbecue that is brined in-house and is really exceptional." Some of the other features groups can take advantage of are exclusive facility tours, alumni and player meet and greets, and large scoreboards and TVs inside all clubs and suites that can display logos, meeting schedules, or any other visuals a client may need.

"We are not just the home of the Steelers, but the home of Pittsburgh," says Sero. "Whatever the event is, the client will find the right spot for them."



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

The campus' Cathedral of Learning is the second tallest educational building in the world.

University of Pittsburgh

The University of Pittsburgh has many of the amenities of a large campus, but there is one standout space that visitors always flock to: the Cathedral of Learning. It's the second tallest educational building in the world and plays host to a number of 'nationality rooms.' "Almost any country you can think of is represented," says Conference Services Manager Adrienne R. Holmes, noting that her department can also set up tours.

For visiting groups, Holmes and her team can help reserve space at the campus' University Club or the Petersen Events Center, both offering a unique layout of spaces. In the University Club, there are two ballrooms, four smaller breakout rooms, and a rooftop terrace with a view of the cathedral. There are also two on-site restaurants for convenient dining experiences. The Petersen Events Center is the university's sports facility with a 12,000-seat multi-purpose arena for use as well as a handful of other smaller spaces.

Though space is limited on-site for overnight accommodations, Holmes

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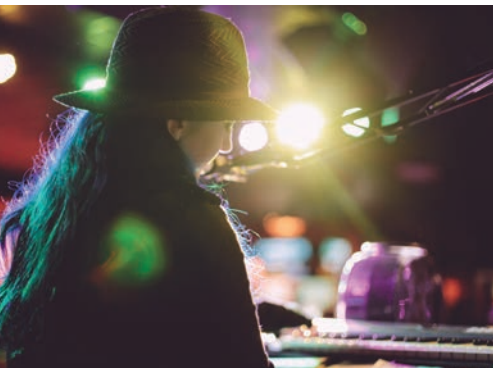
ON THE ROAD

BY SELENA FRAGASSI



HOWL AT THE MOON PIANO BAR

Above and below: Events have the floor at this live entertainment venue.



regularly works with nearby hotels, including the Wyndham, Hilton Garden Inn, and Residence Inn Pittsburgh Oakland/University Place to secure room blocks and special rates for multi-day conference guests. Other perks of hosting a meeting at the university, she says, is, “We offer free Wi-Fi at the University Club, and there are food and beverage



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Staff at the university operates like a one-stop shop for easier planning of events.

minimums so that if a group spends a certain amount, the room rental is waived.” Her department can also work with the parking office to reserve spots for conference guests. “We are a one-stop shop that’s able to plan an entire conference so it’s easier for a planner to navigate.

Howl at the Moon

Music can not only add ambiance to your next event, it can also be the main focus when you gather at Howl at the Moon. This high-energy live entertainment venue is one of 16 national locations (and on some cruise ships), located in Pittsburgh’s cultural district. “We are within walking distance to the convention center and stadiums, so people can easily find us,” says Sales & Event Manager Natalie Holoweckyj, noting that Howl at the Moon has quite the range for what it can host. “We can do just about everything, from luncheons to offering our stage for speakers, team-building activities, or the traditional nightlife experience. It really is customizable for each group.”

Holoweckyj and her team can coordinate full buyouts for about 430 people or semi-private event space for a group as small as 10. Though the main floor is one

open room, the Moon Deck is another popular option that has an elevated area and private bar. The venue has full catering services (whether just apps or a complete dinner) and bar options including hourly drink packages and drink tickets. There are also A/V capabilities, including microphones and TV monitors for slideshows and logos.

Of course entertainment is the big draw here, and there are several packages groups can take advantage of, from setting up a dinner and dueling piano show to a more customized concert with a curated playlist of tracks. “Our musicians really can play everything,” says Holoweckyj. For private events, planners can also fill out a questionnaire that allows the musician to play a song written just for the group. “We can also do something a bit more structured like a ‘name that tune’ game,” she adds. “Our goal is to ensure everyone has a good time.”

PNC Park

Enjoying a day at the park is a totally different ballgame when you’re an attendee of an event rather than a spectator. “People always see a ballpark when it’s full, but it’s such a unique feeling and view when you

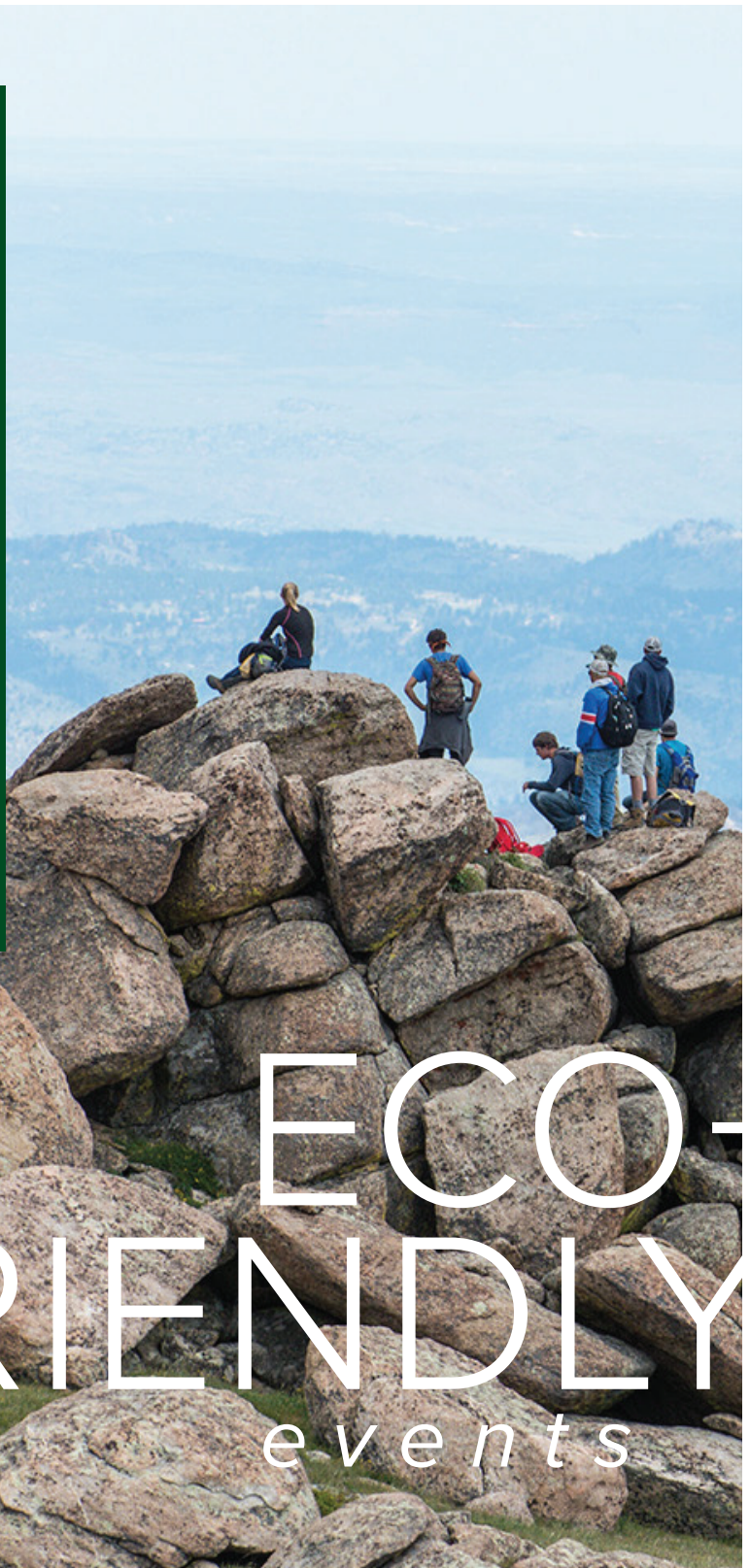
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ON THE ROAD

BY SELENA FRAGASSI



see it empty and can fully understand the magnitude of how big these places are,” says Ann Elder Regan, Director of PNC Park Events.

As the home of the Pittsburgh Pirates, PNC Park has seen its share of exciting moments during the regular playing season and the off-season when some truly magical events take place. One of Elder’s favorites was a few years ago when a client opted to utilize 90 percent of the park for one event. “We had a check presentation on the field, a private concert with a major music act, themed spaces and decorated hallways, and a formal dinner,” she recalls. “We love when clients challenge us. Anything they want to try to do, we will do our best to make it happen.”

One of the newest spaces is the Business Center, a versatile option with state-of-the-art A/V, its own private conference room, and reception space. The Hall of Fame Club and Lexus Club are two other popular choices that can be set up in a myriad of ways, each with a patio that overlooks the playing field and the city skyline. The park is actually located just outside the city proper with the benefit of accessible parking and close proximity to hotels and restaurants.

Most events take place when the team is on the road or not active, “but during the season we do have space available



PNC PARK

Pictured here and above: More than a ball-park, PNC Park also has meeting space and

and all-day meetings can roll right into a game,” says Elder, noting there is space for 5 to 1,000 people, whether it’s an intimate networking event or a tented dinner on the field with catering provided by one of two providers. Here, too, sports fans can get incredibly unique experiences from private tours to practice in the batting cages and walking the bases. Says Elder, “We can even customize merchandise through our Fanatics Store to ensure they have something to go home with, too.” **uv**

GET CONNECTED

Heinz Field

heinzfield.com/private-events

Howl at the Moon

UniqueVenues.com/HowlPittsburgh

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PNC Park

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Unique Venues Best of Awards

WINNERS

Circle

These 23 winners of the Fourth Annual Unique Venues Best of Awards really make our industry go 'round. Get to know the best venue for locally sourced catering, best venue to film a movie or TV show, and so many more special places.

By Selena Fragassi



Sometimes winning really is everything, especially when niche venues are recognized with industry awards. For the fourth year, we are proud to bring back the annual Unique Venues Best of Awards, paying homage to your picks for the special event venues, business centers, and campuses that are going above and beyond to provide unparalleled service and professionalism—and making our community grow even stronger. Congratulations to all the winners and runners up and thanks for continuing to make us proud.

BEST SMALL MARKET VENUE



Winner:

THE CONNORS CENTER – BOSTON COLLEGE
Dover, MA

The Connors Center at Boston College presents groups with the best of both worlds. “Located 20 miles from downtown Boston, on 80 acres in Dover, Massachusetts, the Connors Center provides a picturesque backdrop for executive retreats, multi-day conferences, weddings, and social events, and is easily accessible from the city while a world away from its hustle and bustle,” says General Manager Susan Burton who notes the venue often attracts corporate groups that are seeking standout venues in the Boston area for their clients. Part of the charm of The Connors Center is that it’s an historic turn-of-the-20th Century mansion with many of the original details intact, such as intricate wood-carved mantles, large French doors, bay windows, built-in bookshelves, and fireplaces. In total, the venue offers 50,000 square feet of space across 12 rooms with various configurations as well as lush outdoor gathering areas. Overnight accommodations are also available for up to 90 guests. “As an

historic estate, many of the rooms were not originally created for meeting spaces,” says Burton, “but through renovation programs, we have created technologically modern meeting areas while maintaining the charm and ambiance.”

UniqueVenues.com/BCConnorsCenter // (617) 552.9210

Runners Up: University of Illinois Conferences and Special Events (Champaign, IL, UniqueVenues.com/uillinoisconferences); Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum (Springfield, IL, UniqueVenues.com/LincolnLibrary)

photographic opportunities, including both lake and mountain views, and is open all seasons,” says Outdoor Programs Manager John Boardman. The property accepts bookings February through June and September through December of each year and can facilitate seasonal outdoor activities such as canoeing, horseback riding, high ropes courses, archery, and hiking. The exclusive rustic experience is coupled with two site locations that offer large banquet halls for weddings, corporate retreats, and private events, accommodating 40 to 350 guests. Heated overnight accommodations are also available for up to 200 guests as well as full catering service, all of which can be booked together. “During May, June, and September we also offer tipis for rental,” says Boardman. Each has 10 sleeping bunks with mattresses and a central fire pit for an extra special touch.

UniqueVenues.ca/CampChiefHector // (403) 673.3858

BEST OUTDOOR/ROOFTOP EVENT SPACE



Winner:

CAMP CHIEF HECTOR YMCA
Exshaw, AB

There are few places to get back to nature like Camp Chief Hector YMCA, nestled in the beautiful Bow Valley Provincial Park within the Canadian Rocky Mountains. The 1,000-acre site (just one hour from Calgary Airport) is a stunning and private location for meetings and events with “lots of great

Runners Up: The College of William and Mary (Williamsburg, VA, UniqueVenues.com/WilliamandMary); The Connors Center – Boston College (Dover, MA, UniqueVenues.com/BCConnorsCenter)



THE CONNORS CENTER - BOSTON COLLEGE



CAMP CHIEF HECTOR YMCA

BEST EARTH-FRIENDLY VENUE



Winner:

CARLETON UNIVERSITY, RICHCRAFT HALL

Ottawa, ON

Carleton University's Richcraft Hall demonstrates the sustainability commitment of all new buildings on campus, and the programs Carleton is delivering to advance sustainability and energy reduction. This commitment is embedded within the Sustainability Strategic Plan, which focuses on energy reduction and other "green" policies such as water consumption, electricity usage, and waste management. "The plan commits Carleton to ensuring that all new construction and major renovations achieve Green Globes Rating for overall environmental performance," says Philip Mansfield, manager, sustainability programs. Richcraft Hall has achieved 4 out of 5 Green Globes, recognized for its LED lighting

systems, low-flow water saving fixtures, a high-efficiency HVAC system with energy recovery wheel, automated sensors to control lighting, heating, and cooling, and windows to facilitate natural ventilation and daylight. Hundreds of meetings and events are hosted in this beautiful green space where guests can also enjoy a living green wall with drought resistant plants. Campus-wide, Carleton has also achieved a Silver Star rating from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education and was named a "Cool School" by the Sierra Club, which lists North America's greenest colleges and universities.

UniqueVenues.ca/CarletonUniv // (613) 520.5611

Runners Up: Seattle Aquarium (Seattle, WA,

UniqueVenues.com/SeattleAquarium);

Miami University Conference and Event Services

(Oxford, OH, UniqueVenues.com/MUOhio)



CARLETON UNIVERSITY, RICHCRAFT HALL



COLLEGE OF SAINT ELIZABETH



GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
CONFERENCE SERVICES

BEST VENUE FOR SPIRITUAL/WELLNESS GATHERING



Winner:

SILVER BAY YMCA – CONFERENCE AND FAMILY RETREAT CENTER ON LAKE GEORGE

Silver Bay, NY

When Silver Bay YMCA was founded in 1902, it was built on the principles of building a healthy spirit, mind, and body. "Silver Bay carries on a similar tradition today by hosting dozens of spiritual and wellness groups, large and small," says Marketing and Communications Director Liz Hinck, noting that guests can find peaceful opportunities in every corner of the 700-acre campus in upstate New York. That includes quiet wooded areas for prayer and personal reflection and hikes with vista views of Lake George, where many also like to take a dip in the cleansing waters. Silver Bay also features a Labyrinth for those interested in walking meditation. During seasonal months, on-site non-denominational worship services are offered in addition to a number of Spiritual Life discussion groups. Worship takes place in the beautiful Helen Hughes Memorial Chapel made of stone or in the spacious 700-seat Auditorium. When it comes to wellness, the campus boasts a 100-year-old gymnasium with basketball court, utility gym, fitness center, dance studio, and coffee lounge. Wellness groups can also take advantage of yoga, reiki, and cancer-patient respite groups. "The appeal is the wide array of wholesome and invigorating experiences in which guests can partake," furthers Hinck.

UniqueVenues.com/SilverBayYMCA // (518) 543.8833

Runners Up: American University (Washington, D.C.,

UniqueVenues.com/AmericanUniv); Mountain Winery

(Saratoga, CA, UniqueVenues.com/MountainWinery)

BEST VENUE TO FILM A MOVIE OR TV SHOW



Winner:

COLLEGE OF SAINT ELIZABETH

Morristown, NJ

The show goes on at College of Saint Elizabeth. The campus has become an undeniable asset to area film crews that enjoy the accessibility to New York City ("New Jersey Transit is literally at our front gate," says Patricia L. Devlin, director of conference and event



KEEP MEMORY ALIVE
EVENT CENTER



services) and the availability of comfortable lodging for actors and crew. Productions have scouted the beautiful 200-acre campus for its adaptability, marrying modern facilities with historic, cherished spaces. “With plenty of private, quiet spaces, a film crew can easily set up their equipment and film with little interruption,” adds Devlin, “and ample parking allows space for the trailers used by actors and production crew.” Devlin also notes that although the entire campus is conducive to filming, it also hosts a special outdoor facility (the Greek Theatre) that brings a new, creative twist to commercial production. “It’s one of only a handful in the U.S. and seats up to 1,200 people.”

UniqueVenues.com/CollegeStElizabeth // (973) 290.4384

Runners Up: Miami University Conference and Event Services (Oxford, OH, UniqueVenues.com/MUOhio); Shrine Auditorium & Expo Hall (Los Angeles, CA, UniqueVenues.com/ShrineAuditorium)

BEST CITY CENTER VENUE



Winner:

GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE SERVICES

Atlanta, GA

Atlanta is considered one of the “most charming” and “most cultured” cities in America according to *Travel + Leisure* magazine, and in 2016, the city’s vibe helped to attract 700-plus conventions, meetings, and events. Located in the heart of trendy Midtown Atlanta,

five minutes from the downtown district, Georgia Institute of Technology takes advantage of all the cultural, recreational, entertainment, and tourist attractions nearby for its guests. “There are an endless number of activities to take advantage of in the city, such as the Georgia Aquarium, World of Coke, College Football Hall of Fame, Piedmont Park, and a number of restaurants,” says John Nussear, director of conference services. The urban amenities also extend to nearby off-site meeting spaces, a full-service, on-campus police department, and an array of hotels for VIPs, according to Nussear. In total, Georgia Tech offers more than 50 meeting rooms, the largest for 9,000 guests, as well as sleeping accommodations for 6,000 people. In such a crowded urban market, the Conference Services department stands out with competitive pricing, a staff available 24/7 and a “home-like” feel on campus.

UniqueVenues.com/georgiatech // (404) 894.2469

Runners Up: Keep Memory Alive Event Center (Las Vegas, NV, UniqueVenues.com/KeepMemoryAliveEventCenter); American University (Washington, D.C., UniqueVenues.com/AmericanUniv)

BEST VENUE FOR EXPOS AND TRADESHOWS



Winner:

KEEP MEMORY ALIVE EVENT CENTER

Las Vegas, NV

It’s not every day you can attend an expo or tradeshow in a venue designed by famed

architect Frank Gehry, but that’s precisely the environment attendees have when walking through the exhibitor floor at the Keep Memory Alive Event Center in Las Vegas. The 9,200-square-foot floor is a blank canvas that can be transformed into an infinite variety of unique events beyond tradeshow too, including weddings, social celebrations, banquets and corporate meetings for up to 700 people. Events can also be extended into the Gehry-designed Reflection Garden that accommodates a reception for 1,500-plus guests. The center also offers an all-inclusive package “that avoids additional fees and hassles, allowing the client to take full advantage of all that the venue has to offer,” says Vice President Carrie Giverson. Ample parking is also available within steps of the event center for easy access. Even better, event proceeds benefit the nonprofit organization Keep Memory Alive that provides funds for research, treatment, and clinical studies of neurological diseases. Some past tradeshow clients have included Samsung, Nike, and Volvo, that have used the space for up to 40, 10’ x 10’ booths and the staff that assists with set up and breakdown.

UniqueVenues.com/KeepMemoryAliveEventCenter // (702) 263.9797

Runners Up: Georgian Conference and Event Services (Barrie, ON, UniqueVenues.ca/GeorgianConferenceServices); MetLife Stadium (East Rutherford, NJ, UniqueVenues.com/MetLifeStadium)



MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY



ROCKRIDGE CANYON
CONFERENCE AND
RETREAT CENTRE



NATIONALS PARK

BEST VENUE WHEN THE MEETING'S OVER



Winner: TIE

NATIONALS PARK
Washington, D.C.

and

**ROCKRIDGE CANYON CONFERENCE
AND RETREAT CENTRE**

Princeton, BC

When you want to go into extra innings with your meeting group, Nationals Park has all the bases covered. The official ballpark of the Washington Nationals Baseball Club is also available as a unique private rental option with 22 different event spaces in a variety of sizes and styles—with 14 located indoors and 8 outdoors. “Your guests can have a breakfast meeting in the Nationals Bullpen, a holiday party in the Nationals Clubhouse, or a private concert on the field,” says Emily Dunham, Executive Director of Ballpark Enterprises. Meeting spaces are equipped with A/V, and the video scoreboard can be used for logos, videos, or a live feed. As well, the in-house caterer, Levy, can provide customized menus to make your day a success. When the business agenda is finished there is a plethora of activities to partake in, including ballpark tours, batting practice on the field, firework shows, mascot appearances, and more. Says Dunham, “It’s a chance to experience a Major League Baseball stadium in an unconventional way.”

UniqueVenues.com/nationalspark // (202) 640.7823

“At RockRidge Canyon, the fun runs from sunrise to well past sunset,” says Shelley Austin, retreat coordinator for the conference center set in a breathtaking mountain valley that offers 19 meeting rooms for up to 450 people and overnight accommodations for 350—plus a number of activities to enjoy at the property when business wraps. “A popular option is a hike to the top of a steep ascent, while other guests prefer to go jump in the lake,” she adds. Waterskiing and wake boarding activities are possible, as are kayaking and canoeing, and there’s also an outdoor pool that draws in both sunbathers and lap swimmers. The afternoons are often “free time,” says Austin when groups can choose to partake in a Challenge Course or zip-lining. In the winter months, after-hours activities included snowshoeing, tubing, and skating on the

BEST HIGH-TECH VENUE



Winner:

MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY

Chicago, IL

The Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago is a renowned institution that looks at notable advancements in science and discovery across history—while steering its own achievements in technology. “The first thing you’ll notice upon arrival are the giant LCD monitors in Entry Hall used for ticketing,” says Stan Hansen, senior marketing specialist for Sodexo, which runs event operations at the venue. Many other cutting-edge technological capabilities are also built right in to various structures. “The breathtaking 120-foot copper-domed ceiling in the Rotunda has built-in lighting trusses for both event lighting and video projections, and the four hanging 20’ x 30’ banners in the rotunda can be turned into projection screens,” adds Hansen,

noting A/V techs are available on-site. These breakthroughs are also seen in transformative exhibits, which event guests have access to, including a 40-foot tall indoor tornado and robotic marvels in “Robot Revolution.” There are also flight simulators in the transportation gallery and dive trainers in the U-505 submarine exhibit. The museum recently completed a lighting upgrade in Entry Hall with an electronic control panel that can specify colors, which presents branding opportunities. “We always work within budgets to provide the best event experience possible,” says Hansen.

UniqueVenues.com/MSIChicago // (773) 753.2583

Runners Up: Virginia Tech Executive Briefing Center (Arlington, VA, UniqueVenues.com/VTEBC); OFFSITE New York (New York, NY, UniqueVenues.com/offsite)



frozen lake. The newest addition to the property is the 320-seat Rock Theater auditorium with state-of-the-art lighting and sound and a calendar full of music events, comedy, and dramatic theater. Outdoor firepits are also a gathering place for s'mores and storytelling.

UniqueVenues.ca/RockRidgeCanyon // (250) 870.9030

Runner Up: National Inventors Hall of Fame Museum

BEST VENUE FOR FORMAL AFFAIRS



Winner:

THE OHIO UNION AT OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Columbus, OH

Dressing up events is a seamless experience with The Ohio Union at Ohio State University. The campus' premier facility hosts a whopping 22,000 events per year including gala fundraisers and other formal black tie affairs. Previous clients have included the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation Gala Promise Ball and Childhood League Center-Merry Go Round Fundraiser with live and silent auctions. All are held in the Archie M. Griffin Grand Ballroom, with cocktail receptions and auctions in attached pre-function space. "Our ballroom can seat up to 1,000 guests, and has 33' ceilings with three large Swarovski crystal chandeliers, matching sconces on the walls, as well as hardwood floors and large floor-to-ceiling windows,"

says Karen Narwicz, director of sales. The room is complete with a podium, dance floor, cabaret tables and chairs, LCD projectors and screens, a built-in A/V booth, and plated dinner service presented on bone china for up to 1,000 guests from an in-house culinary team. Staging, backdrops, specialty lighting and the ability to hang truss are other important features that wow guests. "Our event coordinators can help plan your special event, and we offer complete set up and tear down," says Narwicz.

UniqueVenues.com/OhioUnionOSU // (614) 292.9835

Runners Up: The National Archives Museum (Washington, D.C., UniqueVenues.com/NationalArchives); Robert H Lee Alumni Centre UBC, Vancouver, BC, UniqueVenues.ca/LeeAlumniCenter)

BEST VENUE FOR REUNIONS



Winner:

SILVER BAY YMCA – CONFERENCE AND FAMILY RETREAT CENTER ON LAKE GEORGE

Silver Bay, NY

This year's award marks an incredible fourth consecutive win for Silver Bay YMCA Conference and Family Retreat Center in this category—and it's easy to see why. First is the idyllic location, set on 700 acres on Lake George in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York, which encompasses more

than 60 buildings (all on the National Registry for Historic Places). Though Silver Bay hosts more and more new families every year, there are so many that have regarded the campus as their second hometown. "We see families establishing bonds within their family group, but also bonding with other families they meet here at Silver Bay," says Sales Director Lindsey Rice. Here, groups can choose standard programs and activities or customize programs for their needs. That means creating day camp programs with craft shops and swim lessons for children and providing activities for all ages to come together such as scavenger hunts, beach parties, square dancing, and trivia nights. Family dinners are also a special time with varied options available including formal dinners and barbecues or even requesting the chef to replicate a favorite family recipe.

UniqueVenues.com/SilverBayYMCA // (518) 543.8833

Runners Up: Bobby McKey's Dueling Piano Bar (National Harbor, MD, UniqueVenues.com/BobbyMcKeysMD); Eagle Rock Retreat Center (Eagle Rock, MO, UniqueVenues.com/EagleRockRetreatCtr)



THE OHIO UNION AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY



SILVER BAY YMCA - CONFERENCE AND FAMILY RETREAT CENTER ON LAKE GEORGE

**BEST VENUE FOR UNIQUE
OR LOCALLY SOURCED
CATERING**



Winner:
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
College Park, MD

At the University of Maryland, College Park, traditional cafeteria fare just won't do. Instead the in-house culinary team creates fresh, unique dishes with restaurant caliber. "New guests are frequently surprised at the cuisine and service offered on our campus because they don't expect university food service to operate at this level," says Joseph E. Criscuoli, marketing and sales coordinator of Conferences & Visitor Services. Most of the ingredients come from Terp Farm, an organic farm 15 miles off campus that works in conjunction with the College of Agriculture and Dining Services. Students log field trips, workdays, and internships, and Terp Farm provides produce to University of Maryland Catering, restaurants, and occasionally to dining halls. "In addition, catering chefs maintain two herb gardens at the front of the Adele H. Stamp Student Union and harvest many of the herbs they use right at the moment they are needed," adds Criscuoli who says that the updated catering options were in response to more clients specifying sustainability as an important aspect of their event. "They are looking for locally sourced foods, recyclable or compostable supplies, and menus that feature a local theme, and we are proud to serve the university community in this way."

UniqueVenues.com/umcollegepark // (301) 314.7884

Runners Up: UTEC Events & Catering (Lowell, MA, UniqueVenues.com/UTEC); Wild Wolf Brewing Company (Nellysford, VA, UniqueVenues.com/WildWolfBrewing)

**BEST VENUE FOR
TEAM-BUILDING**



Winner:
THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY
Williamsburg, VA

No single Challenge Course is the same at The College of William & Mary. "We're proud to be able to customize team-building events on a group-by-group basis. Our team of facilitators tailors tasks and challenge activities to promote the learning goals of the client,"



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
- COLLEGE PARK



THE COLLEGE OF
WILLIAM AND MARY

says Mariellynn D. Maurer, CCEP, director of conference services. Prior to coming to the Challenge Course, each group is asked about their goals, challenges, mission, values, and purpose, and all groups start with ground and low-ropes elements before moving on to high ropes. The course is nestled in a scenic wooded area on the Virginia campus, near Lake Matoaka, and the location offers a moderate climate much of the year to enjoy it. "We feature a zip-line that goes across Lake Matoaka and, for many groups, that particular element is the highlight," adds Maurer. Immediately adjacent to the obstacle course is the Briggs Amphitheatre, which complements the outdoor activities with additional options, such as catered meals or a celebration station after finishing the challenge.

UniqueVenues.com/WilliamandMary // (757) 221.4084

Runners Up: The Conference Center at Montclair State University (Montclair, NJ, UniqueVenues.com/MontclairStateConfCtr); YMCA Camp Elphinstone (Gibsons, BC, UniqueVenues.ca/CampElphinstone)

**BEST VENUE FOR
TRANSPORTATION ACCESS**



Winner:
**GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
CONFERENCE SERVICES**
Atlanta, GA

Whether by plane, train, or automobile, it's incredibly easy to get to and from Georgia In-



GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
CONFERENCE SERVICES

stitute of Technology, which is located in the heart of Atlanta's Midtown district, just five minutes from downtown. "Everything is truly minutes away," says John Nussear, director of conference services, noting that many attractions and points of interest are within a 10- to 15-minute walk. As well, there are a number of transit systems that guests can take advantage of, including a Greyhound bus station in downtown Atlanta, Amtrak train service in Midtown, as well as the city-wide MARTA trains "that are great for traveling to campus from the airport and getting around different parts of the city," says Nussear. Passes can be purchased from the Student Center. Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport is also just 15 minutes away and is considered one of the largest and most active airports in the world, as well as a prominent Delta hub, so flying in and out of the city is incredibly convenient. Uber, Lyft, and taxi services are also available all over the city and campus for transport in a moment's notice.

UniqueVenues.com/georgiatech // (404) 894.2469

Runners Up: National Inventors Hall of Fame Museum; Boston University (Boston, MA, UniqueVenues.com/BostonUniv)

2017
Best of
awards
UNIQUE VENUES

BEST MEETING PACKAGE



Winner:

THE CONFERENCE CENTER AT MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Montclair, NJ

When you're based in the highly competitive market of New York City, it can be tough to stand out from the crowd. In an effort to attract more business, The Conference Center at Montclair State University decided to roll out more expansive meeting package options. "We've broadened the array of events we host to satisfy a more diverse client base, we had to expand our meeting packages to accommodate specific needs," rationalizes Director Ryan Klutsarits. "The common goal was to create an easy process where we, as a venue, could shoulder the load." That includes taking steps to add in more ancillary services beyond just food and beverage, such as integrated LED uplighting, and options to include floral arrangements and centerpieces through partnerships with local florists. "Also, since we are on a college campus, another asset we have is reserved parking and a valet shuttle service that literally places guests at our front door," adds Klutsarits. All packages also include technical support. "We realize that event planners have enough decisions to make, therefore we try to simplify their experience with one bundle [of options] while not losing the ability to be completely customizable."

UniqueVenues.com/MontclairStateConfCtr/ (973) 655.3431

Runners Up: The National

Conference Center (Leesburg, VA,

UniqueVenues.com/nationalconferencecenter);

The Falls Event Center in Roseville (Roseville, CA,

UniqueVenues.com/FallsEventCenterRoseville)

BEST VENUE FOR LGBTQ-FRIENDLY EVENTS



Winner:

THE MARCUM HOTEL & CONFERENCE CENTER

Oxford, OH

The resounding message at Miami University is, "everyone is welcome here," says Kathy Crowley, senior marketing and sales manager for the Conference & Event Services department. "Especially since our mission is diversity and inclusion in every



aspect of the campus." Her team ensures that everyone feels comfortable when choosing meeting or event space within the array of available venues. "Our planners work with members of the LGBTQ community to ensure that all rooming situations are preferable, as there are many options for single person rooms and all-gender bathrooms in the [Marcum Hotel], as well as in event and dining venues," says Crowley. The campus is frequently chosen for inclusive commitment and marriage ceremonies, since both chapels on-site are non-denominational as well. Groups including SPECTRUM have also hosted

LGBTQ-friendly regional events with Miami University. Says Crowley, "We make it easy for groups who are seeking inclusion and seamless planning for all their attendees."

UniqueVenues.com/TheMarcum/ (513) 529.6918

Runners Up: Hampshire College Event Services &

Summer Programs (Hampshire, MA,

UniqueVenues.com/HampshireCollege); The Warner Theatre

(Washington, D.C., UniqueVenues.com/WarnerTheatre)

BEST EVENT PACKAGE



Winner:
THE OASIS CENTRE
Edmonton, AB

If clients have flexible dates they can find incredible rates at the Oasis Centre in Alberta, Canada. Because the venue often sells out Fridays and Saturdays during their peak season, they created an attractive Thursday wedding package. “It’s for those clients that would love to have the full Oasis experience at a little more than half the cost,” says Anne McLennan, wedding director. Couples can also buy into spring wedding promo packages that provide incentives before primetime booking windows, including off-season discounts from partner vendors and a chance to further reduce costs by having a “mini room flip” rather than the full room changeover. But weddings aren’t the only events that get to take advantage of special promotions. “We offer our corporate clients comprehensive and well-designed packages too, with the intention to help streamline and offer pricing incentives depending on the season, or type of event, whether it be a corporate seminar, concert, memorial, or fundraiser,” says McLennan. “Because we are not a hotel, or associated with a chain, we are able to maintain a competitive edge by having flexibility in all aspects of event planning, including our in-house services, as well as pricing. We love working with our clients for a win-win solution whenever possible.”

UniqueVenues.ca/OasisEdmontonConfCtr // (780) 451.9227

Runners Up: The Falls Event Center in Elk Grove (Elk Grove, CA, UniqueVenues.com/TheFallsEventCenterElkGrove); The Falls Event Center in Roseville (Roseville, CA, UniqueVenues.com/FallsEventCenterRoseville)

BEST CONFERENCE CENTER



Winner:
UCLA LAKE ARROWHEAD CONFERENCE CENTER
Lake Arrowhead, CA

In recent years, UCLA Lake Arrowhead has hosted a number of high-profile conferences for Cornell University, Columbia University, California state government agencies, and notable nonprofit groups. “As long as the organization meets UCLA’s mission of education, research, or service we welcome the conference here in Lake Arrowhead,” says Director Steve Caloca, noting that his team makes planning simple. “We are there every step of the way



THE OASIS CENTER



UCLA LAKE ARROWHEAD CONFERENCE CENTER

from planning to on-site to post-conference,” he says. The center also offers a Complete Meeting Package (CMP) that, for one price per person, per night, provides deluxe sleeping accommodations and IACC-certified meeting space with all audio-visual needs, plus breakfast, lunch, dinner, and coffee breaks in the meeting rooms. “On top of our CMP value, there is also no charge for parking, no charge for Wi-Fi throughout the property, and no charge for the on-site recreation facilities,” adds Caloca. That includes a seasonal outdoor swimming pool, indoor poolside spa with fireplace, and tennis, basketball, and volleyball courts. For an additional cost, the conference center also offers full team-building activities such as rock walls and rope courses through the Arrowhead Adventures program. “The other big attraction is the learning environment on our 50-acre campus,” adds Caloca. “Groups can choose outdoor breakout rooms, such as our zen deck, boat docks, or the fire-pit in front of our main lodge.”

UniqueVenues.com/UCLALakeArrowhead // (909) 337.2478

Runners Up: McNamara Alumni Center, University of Minnesota (Minneapolis, MN, UniqueVenues.com/mcnamara); Corporate College (Cleveland, OH, UniqueVenues.com/CorporateCollege)



CONFERENCES & ACCOMMODATIONS AT UBC

BEST PLACE TO GATHER FOR THE DAY



Winner:
CONFERENCES & ACCOMMODATIONS AT UBC
Vancouver, BC

Meeting days are made better at the University of British Columbia. From the elegant Chan Centre for the Performing Arts to the fascinating Museum of Anthropology, there are plenty of unique spaces on this scenic campus that enhance any meeting, conference, or event. “We have meeting and conference spaces of all types and sizes to accommodate any group,” says Tony Hsu, business development manager. In total, UBC has 85,000 square feet of combined meeting and exhibit space, welcoming groups of up to 4,000 people. “Some of Vancouver’s top tourist attractions and beautiful gardens are also located right on campus,” adds Hsu. The Conferences & Accommodation staff can also help with venue selection, budget management, web design, registration and payment processing, and catering and overnight accommodations. The department also offers customized conference packages catered to budget and conference size.

UniqueVenues.ca/UBC // (604) 822.1060

Runners Up: AceBounce (Chicago, IL, UniqueVenues.com/AceBounce); OFFSITE New York (New York, NY, UniqueVenues.com/offsite)



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND - COLLEGE PARK



VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY - RHOADS HALL



VIRGINIA TECH EXECUTIVE BRIEFING CENTER

BEST VENUE FOR YOUTH/ SPORTS GROUPS



Winner:

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

College Park, MD

For the second consecutive year, the University of Maryland, College Park takes home the award in this category. The campus offers unparalleled options for youth groups, including a suburban location near the nation's capital with two-layer security and 8,000 beds plus two dining halls where younger attendees can convene together. "Each summer, sports camps run by Big Ten Conference coaches

combine with college immersion, special studies, and STEAM programs to create a thriving campus," says Joseph E. Criscuoli, marketing and sales coordinator of Conferences & Visitor Services. One of the most notable is the Maryland Field Hockey Camp held at UMCP's state-of-the-art field hockey turf facility since 1995 with instruction from current and former National & Olympic team members. "Our ropes challenge course, rock climbing wall, ice cream socials from the Maryland Dairy, and TerpZone facility are 'must-do' add-ons for any youth program," adds Criscuoli. UMCP can also provide in-house motor coach charters that make ground transportation to nearby Annapolis, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. a breeze for additional educational components.

UniqueVenues.com/umcollegepark // (301) 314.7884

Runners Up: Carleton University, Conference

Services (Ottawa, ON, UniqueVenues.ca/CarletonUniv);

RockRidge Canyon Conference and Retreat Centre

(Princeton, BC, UniqueVenues.ca/RockRidgeCanyon)

BEST RENOVATION



Winner:

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY - RHOADS HALL

Richmond, VA

Virginia Commonwealth's Rhoads Hall was originally built in 1968 to house 697 students in 340 traditional-style rooms—but nearly 50 years later it was in need of some modernized upgrades. Over the course of two summers, in 2016 and 2017, floors 2 through 18 were overhauled. The renovations included completely gutting the existing bathrooms and corridors. Bathrooms received new showers and toilet areas, updated vanity sinks, enhanced tiled floors and walls, and the addition of ADA/Gender Neutral facilities. New carpet, ceilings, and a fresh coat of paint were unveiled in all the corridors as well after the project was completed in August. "The major challenges in completing this project on schedule were coordinating and completing the required demolition (including asbestos abatement), while at the same time moving an enormous amount of materials for the renovation via three standard elevators," says Nichole M. Smithson with the Central Housing department. But in the end, she says, "We provided more privacy for students and guests



and enhanced the living experience for those who live and visit with us."

UniqueVenues.com/VCU // (804) 828.7465

Runners Up: University of South Florida-St.

Petersburg (St. Petersburg, FL,

UniqueVenues.com/USFStPetersburg); Salve Regina

University (Newport, RI, UniqueVenues.com/SalveRegina)

BEST VENUE FOR SMALL GATHERINGS



Winner:

VIRGINIA TECH EXECUTIVE BRIEFING CENTER

Arlington, VA

Small meetings have a home at Virginia Tech Executive Briefing Center, where the ideal group size is 50 people or less. "We offer two rooms that can accommodate a smaller guest count for all-day meetings while allowing everyone to be seated comfortably with ample table space," says Coordinator Anna Smith. In addition to state-of-the-art meeting spaces (including a 20-foot ultra-high-resolution projection screen with 3D capability), other ancillary options include the Falls Church Foyer for receptions up to 100 people and the Hospitality Zone for more intimate gatherings of under 40. "With four built-in monitors, you can personalize the space with your company's logo or scrolling PowerPoint, which gives the Hospitality Zone an even more cozy and customized feel," adds Smith. She says the Executive Briefing Center is also frequently used for small, one-day office retreats to get away from everyday distractions or even one-on-one client meetings for those times when making a great impression can play a key role in a meeting's success. **UV**

UniqueVenues.com/VTEBC // (571) 858.3030

Runners Up: (TIE) Abraham Lincoln Presidential

Library & Museum (Springfield, IL,

UniqueVenues.com/LincolnLibrary),

The Marcum Hotel & Conference Center (Oxford,

OH, UniqueVenues.com/TheMarcum)

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MARKET

Gains

Unique Venues Best of Awards aren't just for the show-stopping venues that are turning heads, but also for the creative work behind the scenes that helps to spread the word.

By Selena Fragassi

When it comes to a great reputation,

a venue's work is not done with the accommodations or the catering or even when the meeting or event wraps. There's a great deal of attention paid to the work done outside of just the execution; we salute these four venues that have put in the extra work to also create user-friendly websites, engaging social media, and unique print ads and marketing collateral. Here's the best we've seen this year.

BEST MARKETING COLLATERAL



Winner:

SIMMONS COLLEGE (BOSTON, MA)

Simmons College is not a traditional venue—and the conferences and special events department knew that their promotional collateral couldn't be ordinary either. "I wanted to develop a marketing piece that was different, not a bi-fold brochure, or a packet that had loose pages that would fall out," says Nikki Vanderpol, director, conferences and special events. "I wanted to produce a piece that delivered the pertinent information in an easy-to-read, clear, concise format." To do so, Vanderpol and a colleague came

up with the idea to create a set of bright flash cards on heavy card stock that were held together by a ball-and-chain key ring, along with her business card as the perfect finishing touch.

"I believe that when a potential client is shopping around for a venue they are seeking out one that they can trust to execute all components of the event," adds Vanderpol. "With this in mind, I wanted the content of the piece to focus on four main messages." Each card features information on those individual points, including information about the college's over-the-top customer service and convenient one-stop shop operation as well as their commitment to work ethic. "I want recipients to know that we have knowledge of conference planning, and

also relay the message that our staff will take care of them and their guests, from the first point of contact to the final invoicing." The other two cards explain the college's ability to customize services and provide flexibility, and finally, tout the ideal location in Boston with a campus surrounded by Fenway Park, museums, and restaurants, and access to the downtown district.

The other added benefit is that this particular marketing collateral has a longer shelf life. "Our conference business changes over time," says Vanderpol, "and this design allows us to replace one card if needed, without having to reproduce the entire piece." UniqueVenues.com/SimmonsCollege // (617) 521.2158



BEST PRINT AD

Winner:

MCNAMARA ALUMNI CENTER (MINNEAPOLIS, MN)

Talk about a slam-dunk! McNamara Alumni Center's winning print ad grew out of the staff's love of basketball—and humor. "Because the Alumni Center is part of a Division 1 college campus at the University of Minnesota, March Madness is well-known and talked about in this community," says Director of Marketing & Sales Amy T. Leyden of the ad that ran for 30 days in March, right around the time of the popular competition. "And because I'm a huge college basketball fan and our small events team has a good sense of humor, I envisioned a 'McNamara Madness' booking promotion that featured our team in basketball uniforms superimposed upon a background of our gorgeous Memorial Hall."

To make the photo shoot work, Leyden borrowed basketballs and uniforms from the University of Minnesota Gophers men's team. "They agreed to let us remove the jerseys' names and numbers and replace them [respectively] with MCNAMARA and 20%," with the number identifying the ad's promotion for 20 percent off the rental rate when you book a room.

Leyden was not only the creative director for the piece but also the photographer. "Our team members lined up in front of black pipe and drape and gave his or her best 'attitude,'" she recalls. "That was the most fun—with many laughs—primar-



ily because our team is made up of such kind, customer-service-friendly people, so getting them to look tough and intimidating was hard for many of them!"

A graphic designer put the piece together in Photoshop and Leyden wrote coordinating copy that reflected basketball lingo alongside the hashtag MACMAD to inspire social media posts. The ad was posted on the Alumni Center's website and social media pages, and sent electronically to a long client list. "Our clients found this campaign hilarious," admits Leyden. "We received many, many likes on the Facebook post and some clients requested posters for their offices. Best of all, it generated bookings."

UniqueVenues.com/mcnamara
// (612) 624.9831

BEST WEBSITE



Winner:

BISHOP'S UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE SERVICES (SHERBROOKE, QB)

In May, Bishop's University Conference Services department met their goal of completing a website upgrade before the kickoff of the new summer conference season. "Our main priority is to stay ahead of the current conference trends, and we like to keep our website maintained accordingly," says Martine Couture, conference coordinator, sales and marketing. Some of the updates included adding catering menus from the venue's three exclusive partners, as well as adding information on a wedding package, holiday menus, and a comprehensive list of A/V equipment and services available on campus through the university's IT department. A revision also included new descriptive text for each of the event types offered. "We wanted these descriptions to highlight the benefits of using our one-stop-shop conference services," adds Couture.

Planners find the website easy to use since it's bilingual (Quebec has a large proportion of both English and French speakers) and because all the necessary components are contained within a section separate from the individual traveler portal, "therefore the information planners find here is very specific to



their group market,” says Couture. One of the other main benefits is that the website outlines easy steps for organizers that aren’t necessarily professional planners. “We provided step-by-step guides for planning an event that are easy to understand and follow a natural flow,” says Couture. The path starts at accommodations, then moves to venue choices listed by type of event, then food, amenities, and other activities.

Visuals were also important to the Conference Services department and one of the major upgrades was updating about 95 percent of the photos featured “to give a fresh and modern look to the website,” notes Couture. “We wanted the photos to speak for themselves in order to avoid long text.” The website also features a virtual venue tour video, created by Unique Venues, “so we could show our clients what their experience will be like,” adds Couture.

UniqueVenues.ca/BishopsUniversity // (819) 822.9651

BEST SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE



Winner:

WILLOWDALE ESTATE (TOPSFIELD, MA)

Gaining followers on social media and keeping them engaged is no easy task nowadays as more and more accounts come online and more people turn to hashtags and retweets as a primary way of communicating. The way that Willowdale continues to make headway is by “focusing on the shared values with our customers,” says Sarah Boucher, senior sales and marketing manager. “We like showcasing exceptional party experiences and event planning inspiration, as well as our excellent catering and historic location. We promote these shared values through video, photos, and text that will be compelling to our target audience of current and potential customers, past clients, neighbors, other event professionals, friends, and family members of our team.”

Boucher says that her staff regularly posts on Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram,

LinkedIn, and Twitter. “The social channels that drive the most traffic to our website have been Pinterest and Facebook,” she says, “and Instagram traffic is growing rapidly and we anticipate that with the added business features this platform will quickly become one of our favorite ways to connect with prospective clients.”

In the past year, part of the team’s emphasis has also been on high-quality engagement (such as getting more likes, comments, and shares) as well as conversions through social promotions. “We seek out new opportunities for engagement and encourage conversation and participation in the ways that are most natural for the user since each platform is different,” adds Boucher.

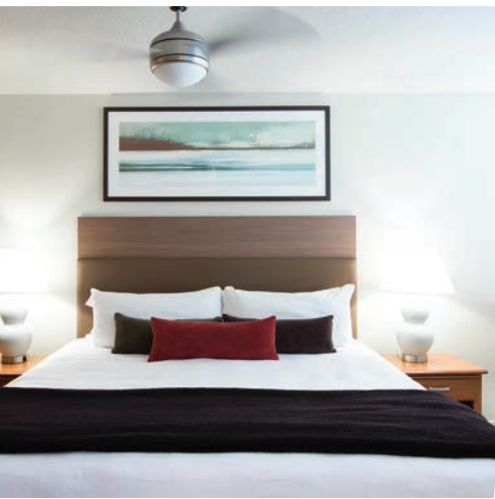
For example, on Pinterest, she says, “Our goal is to reach our target customer before they even start the search for a venue. We add images that have a mix of helpful keywords related to the image and location in the description to make sure that people using the search feature can find our page based on the kind of party they are planning, or the location of the event.” On Facebook the idea is to create posts that are likely to encourage comments or shares. “Organic interest on Facebook can have a dramatic impact on brand awareness, referrals, and reaching a target audience without paying for ads. It also helps to encourage other businesses and individuals to connect through tagging our location, writing reviews, and posting photos,” says Boucher, noting the team does use targeted ads from time to time based on posts that have already proven to do well. And Instagram, she says, “is the perfect platform for reaching new people and showcasing our best work in a visually compelling way. We’ve had a lot of suc-



cess connecting with industry partners, recently engaged couples, and locals through the use of our venue’s location tag, relevant hashtags, and through following and building relationships with key influencers in our target audience.”

As Willowdale heads into 2018, Boucher says the focus will be on increasing the frequency of posts for Pinterest and Instagram, and also creating video to share on Facebook and more promotional stories for Instagram. “We have also started to use the [social media organizing tool] Buffer this year and we are just loving the schedule feature,” she says. “We expect this tool to be a time-saver, but also helpful in analyzing what is working well for us and to cross-post our best content in the coming year.”

UniqueVenues.com/WillowdaleEstate // (978) 887.8211



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INDUSTRY UPDATES

news & awards

BY SELENA FRAGASSI



city. The upgrade added 13,000 square feet of space bringing the total availability to 90,000 square feet. In addition to more meeting rooms (with new built-in beverage stations), there is also a private executive meeting suite with exclusive restrooms and a food and beverage area. On the sixth floor, the new Business Reception Lounge has arched windows with tons of natural light and views of Times Square as well as a customer service desk for easy registration.

UniqueVenues.com/amanenewyork

Albright College Shifts Gears As New Home of World Cycling League HQ

A seven-acre site on the Reading, Pennsylvania campus was picked by the World Cycling League to be the site of a new \$20 million world headquarters as well as a 2,500-seat, high-tech indoor velodrome that will offer a competitive bike racing track. This arena will be only the second of its kind to open in the U.S. and the first on the East Coast. Not only will it host international meets, it will also welcome year-round cycling programs, pre-Olympic training camps, collegiate events, and more special programs. Incoming college president Jacquelyn S. Fetrow, Ph.D., says she also envisions a variety of initiatives “that will contribute to student life at the College, including adding cycling as a varsity club sport, providing student internships at the velodrome, and enhancing Albright’s business curriculum by adding velodrome-related courses in sports marketing, event management, video production, communications, and more,” according to the school, which estimates the buildings will be completed for the 2018-19 academic year. *UniqueVenues.com/AlbrightCollege*

Vancouver’s Polygon Gallery Is Now Open for Event Business

Located on Vancouver’s North Shore, the Polygon Gallery is a breathtaking waterfront property that showcases photography and media art in a clean, contemporary building designed for a reflective experience. “It is the most geographically evocative site—where sea meets mountain. And it’s the place where, in some ways, the community is most connected to the larger region—which it views just across the harbour,” says architect Patricia Patkau. The gallery space is ideal for special events with space for 20-200 guests seated and 375 guests for receptions; there are day and night rentals available, along with optional private guided art tours.

UniqueVenues.ca/PolygonGallery

Mangia DC Food Tours Fills Up with More Awards in 2017

There is a lot to experience in the nation’s capital—from the historic monuments to the incredible museums, and even the cuisine. Mangia DC Food Tours is a locally owned and operated business that takes guests on guided walking tours to get a real “taste” of Washington. In addition to learning about architecture and history, participants also get to have a bite of the best area restaurants with a combined four-course meal. Groups can choose between the two-mile Italian Food Tour or the one-mile Georgetown Food Tour as well as various cooking classes and wine excursions. The tours have continued to

grow in popularity with support from several industry awards. In 2017, Mangia DC Food Tours received the 2017 Certificate of Excellence from TripAdvisor for the second year in a row, recognized for quality service and cuisine attractions. This year the company also garnered TripAdvisor’s title for D.C.’s #1 Cooking Class in addition to a coveted Yelp award. *UniqueVenues.com/MangiaDCFoodTours*

AMA New York Executive Conference Center Now the Largest in the City

After a recent overhaul, AMA New York can now proudly boast that it’s the largest conference center in the entire



Buffalo Trace Distillery Pops the Cork on New Event Spaces

Groups can now literally meet on Kentucky's Bourbon Trail with the opening of new event spaces at the marquee Buffalo Trace Distillery, in Frankfort, Kentucky. The Elmer T. Lee Clubhouse is a 1,950-square-foot, second level space built from centuries-old log cabins with hardwood floors, a cathedral ceiling, wood-burning fireplace, and copper countertops. It seats 200 with standing room for 350. The smaller Master Distiller's Room is for more intimate gatherings of 16 people or less, also with a cathedral ceiling, fireplace, and ambient lighting. There's also the Single Oak Room in the George T. Stagg Gallery within the Visitor's Center. This 780-square-foot room accommodates 70 people seated or 150 for receptions. It features built-in display cases, exposed brick walls, a beamed ceiling, and portable bar. **uv** UniqueVenues.com/BuffaloTrace



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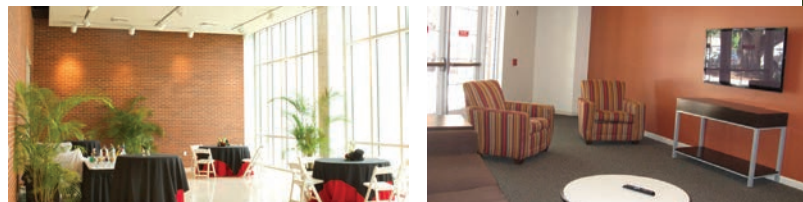
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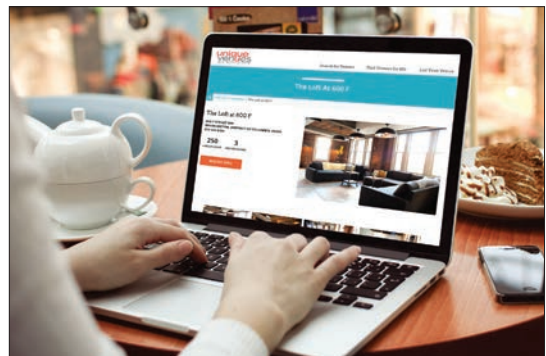
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INDEX

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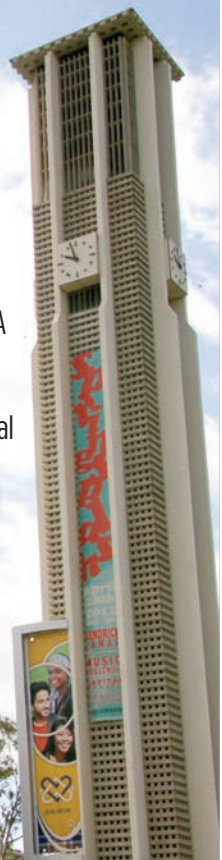
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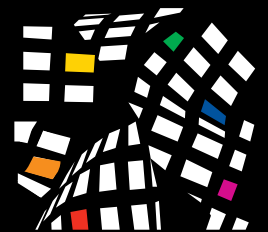
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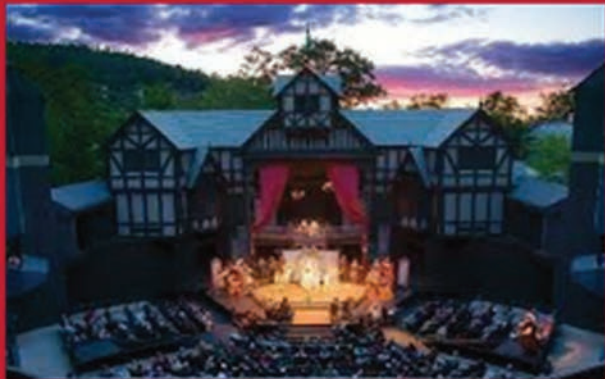
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INDEX

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INDEX

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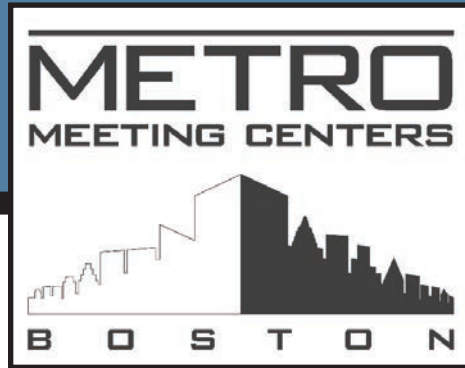


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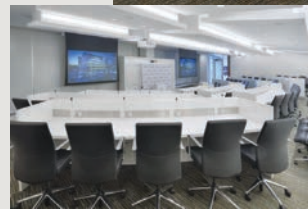


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PERSON OF INTEREST

BY SELENA FRAGASSI

PROFESSIONAL *of the* YEAR

With a successful career in collegiate conference and event services, Shane Cutler has shifted the tide at Boston University, discussing his team's biggest accomplishments in 2017 and what comes next.

Shane Cutler can't remember a time he wasn't immersed in the world of higher education. From starting his career as assistant director of student activities and Greek life at Plymouth State University to becoming the first director of the University of Vermont's Conference and Event Services department to his current role as general manager for Events & Conferences at Boston University, Cutler has made the campus home—not only for himself but also for the many groups that visit each year.

"Shane and his team have created an operation that is considered a benchmark in the collegiate conferencing industry," says Unique Venues President Chuck Salem of naming Cutler Professional of the Year. If the 2017 accomplishments are any indication, there are more good things ahead.

Unique Venues: What were some of the key moments for you and your staff this year?

Shane Cutler: "One of the most exciting things is that we developed a departmental, five-year capital plan for renovations in all of our event venues. Another accomplishment is our marketing efforts. We now look at marketing as systematic, multi-faceted, multi-layered, and, whenever possible, personalized. We've made gains through SEO, social media, ad campaigns, full-out website designs, collateral, e-blasts, and outreach to our local chamber. We also have a better client feedback system, including meetings with our annual summer clients and a new online evaluation system, where we also provide gift cards upon completion. Lastly, we have launched an overnight housing reservation system to allow individuals that are part of a conference or event to reserve and pay on their own."

UV: What is the health of collegiate conference programs as we head into 2018?

SC: "Very strong. As a whole, we offer truly unique spaces that clients are actively seeking, and we can do so in most cases for a great value, particularly for price-sensitive

clients. Given that our campuses are designed to support and deliver a product for degree-seeking students, we have access to a truly unique product, including state-of-the-art classrooms and meeting facilities."

UV: What are some of the industry trends you and your team are identifying?

SC: "One thing we have noticed is that clients are busy and want to make quicker decisions, so we have found it important to have information readily available online, and have business systems in place to get back to clients very quickly with full pricing and availability. At times, clients also request to move to a contract without physically seeing a venue, which for us was a driving force in creating facility videos and an expanded online presence. On a more serious note, we also wonder how travel and immigration restrictions by the U.S. Government will impact international conference attendees and academic students as a whole."

UV: How can planners start to integrate with campuses more?

SC: "One of the values a campus offers is we don't just provide a venue for a meeting, but we can also offer additional services. Instead of sending staff to come onsite for check-in and actual management, they can outsource those needs with us and let us co-manage the program with them. It's not something a planner can find in all cases at a hotel or conference center." **uv**



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