

MAKING THE INDUSTRY BETTER

I A V M INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF VENUE MANAGERS

A CELEBRATED AND DIVERSE CAREER GARNERS IAVM'S McELRAVY HONOR FOR MIKE MCGEE

BY LISA WHITE

WHILE WORKING IN broadcasting during high school and college, industry veteran Mike McGee had no aspirations of making his mark in this industry.

Yet there may be no one more deserving of the International Association of Venue Managers' Charles A. McElravy Award than McGee, founder of the Houston-based consulting firm Barmac Inc., which has served the industry since 1984.

"Before I got into this business, I had aspirations of being in broadcasting," he said. "I'm blown away by this recognition, since I never envisioned I'd be a recipient of this special award."

McGee will receive the McElravy Award, which recognizes professional, honorary or retired IAVM members who have made the greatest lifetime achievement to the welfare of the association or profession, during IAVM's 94th annual conference July 21-24 in Chicago.

"When you're a part of an organization as long as I have been and get recognized, it's validating," McGee said. "I've tried to help others to make the industry better as a whole."

To those aware of McGee's diverse accomplishments and many years of involvement in IAVM, the McElravy honor comes as no surprise. He has been an active member since 1972, receiving the association's Certified Facility Executive designation in 1979. He also served four terms on the board of directors and four years on the Board of Regents of the IAVM Public Assembly Facility Management School at Oglebay, where he also was an in-

structor for five years. In addition, McGee has served as a member of the Board of Trustees for the IAVM Foundation and has chaired its Development Committee and its Major Gifts Campaign. In 2007, McGee became the first recipient of the IAVM Foundation Legacy Award, which recognizes significant contributions of individuals and corporations that benefit the mission and objective of the IAVM Foundation leaving a legacy for the advancement of the public assembly facility industry. In 2006, McGee received an IAVM Presidential Citation as Legacy Leader for the public assembly facility industry.

McGee gives credit to his family, whose support and understanding have been integral to his ability to commit many hours, holidays and weekends to the career he so enjoys.

"My wife and I went 19 years before we had the chance to celebrate New Year's Eve together," he said. "It's nothing to brag about, but speaks to the support system I've had."

As for his career path, McGee said he has worn many different hats in the industry, including in food and beverage, merchandising, marketing, and even producing two comedy shows in Houston. "What can I say, I'm an action junkie!" he said.

To put it succinctly, McGee's career in the public assembly facility industry spans more than 40 years in senior management. His involvement in these types of facilities has been worldwide and includes design, development, construction and operation in excess of \$2 billion. McGee also developed and implemented marketing and promotional programs for thousands of sporting and entertainment events. His experience includes negotiating contracts with major league teams such as the NBA's Houston Rockets and Miami Heat, the NFL's Houston Texans, and the NHL's Florida Panthers and Nashville Predators, plus college basketball programs and minor league hockey franchises.

What makes McGee unique, and has most likely played a big part in his success in this business, is his take on the industry and his career.

"One of the many things I've learned is don't let what you do define who you are," he said. "I see constituents lose their identity

when they no longer do what they do, and that's unfortunate."

Yet, it would be difficult for McGee to define who he is by what he has done, given that there is almost nothing he hasn't taken on in the last four decades.

In 1970, he began his career in public assembly facility management at Louisiana's Monroe Civic Center, where he worked his way up in just a year from marketing manager to assistant manager and then, at the tender age of 23, to manager.

Starting in 1973, McGee served six years with the city of Lakeland, Fla., first as assistant director and then as director of its Civic Center, a three-building complex consisting of an arena, theater and exhibition hall.

"I oversaw 18 months of construction on the Civic Center and stayed there for about six years," McGee said.

In 1979, he moved on to serve for 17 years as the day-to-day president of the Arena Operating Co. and as general manager of Houston's 17,000-seat Compaq Center, formerly the Summit and now Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church.

A testament to McGee's work ethic are the dual roles he has played throughout his career. For example, during his tenure at the Summit in 1980, McGee founded John Crowe Productions, a television production company that served a 25-state area and provided point-to-point telecasts of more than 500 live sporting events annually.

Two years later, he also founded Century Sports, a promotional company that produced 25 to 30 entertainment and sporting events annually throughout the United States. Its clients included the Harlem Globetrotters,





Ice Capades, American Gladiators, World Wrestling Entertainment, Roger Whitaker, Sesame Street Live, numerous closed-circuit boxing events, live sporting events, concerts and Broadway shows.

“As a result of booking buildings around the country for the Globetrotters, I saw an opportunity to go into the facilities that we were renting to promote and produce this popular basketball event,” McGee said. “So I started a public assembly facility management company in 1983 and grew that to 28 venues worldwide.”

This company was Leisure Management International, where McGee served as chairman of the board and CEO. At the time of its merger with SMG in March 2000, LMI managed such facilities as the Astrodome and Miami Arena, among many others. Under McGee’s leadership, LMI was involved in the design, construction and operation of two venues in Australia, Sydney’s Super Dome (now Qudos Bank Arena) and Melbourne’s Colonial Stadium (now Marvel Stadium). LMI was also involved in the design and provided operator input into NRG Park facilities NRG Hall and

NRG Stadium, home to the NFL Houston Texans and Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

While under McGee’s ownership, LMI venues hosted the NBA Finals, the Super Bowl, the NHL Stanley Cup Final, MLB’s World Series and concerts by Paul McCartney, the Rolling Stones, Barbra Streisand, Celine Dion, Luciano Pavarotti, Frank Sinatra, Garth Brooks and other notable performers.

In his next role, as senior vice president of Philadelphia-based Aramark’s Sports and Entertainment Group from 2000 to 2004, McGee oversaw strategic initiatives and other business development areas. He then joined Clear Channel Entertainment (now Live Nation) for two years as chief administrative officer, handling all real estate, human relations and corporate communications and was the corporate interface with the company’s eight operating divisions.

With his next gig as the executive vice president of North American business operations for Ticketmaster Entertainment Inc. between 2006 and 2010, McGee’s responsibilities included overseeing a division that annually sold more than 80 million tickets and pro-

duced \$1.1 billion in revenue.

McGee has now dedicated his time to overseeing Barmac Inc. (named after his wife, Barbara McGee), which provides assistance in operations; contract negotiations and management; logistics; event planning/booking; patron services support; food/beverage/merchandising; marketing and promotions; personnel development; feasibility studies and budget efficiencies; facility design consultation/layout; and facilitation of industry contacts and relationships. In other words, McGee has found a vehicle to leverage his many areas of expertise to the benefit of the industry.

“I’ve been blessed to be a part of many great things,” McGee said. “Now, all I do is consult on various projects.”

He said what he likes best about organizations like IAVM are the relationships he’s been able to build along the way.

“In this industry, you need to be committed to what you do and take every opportunity that comes your way so you can start building relationships,” McGee said. “Those will be strategic career moves and a steppingstone for success.”

THE NEWSWOMAN BEHIND THE HEADLINES

**LINDA
DECKARD**
CHRONICLES THE EVENTS
AND PERSONALITIES
OF THIS 'RELATIONSHIP
BUSINESS'

BY BRAD WEISSBERG

LINDA DECKARD IS the Triple Crown winner of venue awards. In January, she won the inaugural IN-TIX Impact Award in Dallas; on June 13 she received the Gigi Award of Excellence at the Event & Arena Marketing Conference in Toronto; and at the International Association of Venue Managers' annual Venues-Connect Conference in Chicago in July, she'll be handed the Joseph J. Anzivino Distinguished Allied Award, which recognizes members who have made extraordinary contributions to the industry.

"I'm thrilled," Deckard said. "It's quite an honor and I'm amazed that they are giving it to me. One of the best things about it is that I knew Joe Anzivino and his wife, Nita. I visited them at their house in Vegas after Joe retired from the Harlem Globetrotters; even my dad and stepmom met him. He was a great host who embraced people. He really brought something special to the



COURTESY LINDA DECKARD

industry. The fact that I am getting an award in his name? I love it.”

Deckard founded Venues Today, the predecessor of this magazine, in 2002. She’s had a unique bird’s-eye view into what it takes to run a venue and she’s told the stories of people going from managing the floor to the executive suite. She’s seen facilities built, replaced and demolished.

Through it all, Deckard has held fast to reporting on the industry fairly and accurately, getting “the news behind the headlines” and not taking shortcuts.

“Every venue has people who run them,” she’d tell her reporters. “Most importantly and above all else, this is a relationship business.”

Deckard also had a personal connection to the EAMC award she received. The day she would get the award was her birthday and also the birthday of CN Centre’s Glen Mikkelsen, an inductee into the EAMC Hall of Fame.

“In the run-up to the awards I was most excited to be getting the award on my shared birthday with Glen,” she said.

The fact that Deckard knew the birthday of the general manager from a Canadian venue long before she got to the event would come as no surprise to anyone who knows her. And it’s a perfect example of Deckard’s philosophy that having strong and healthy relationships are the key to reporting on the venue industry.

Deckard’s knowledge of the buildings — and the hundreds of people who have worked in the venues and businesses that touch the venue world — runs deep. She’s had her eyes and ears focused on every aspect of the venue industry since, well, since there was a venue industry.

“When I started Venues Today everyone started calling them venues. Before that they were called auditoriums,” Deckard said. “IAVM was IAAM until I came along.”

Deckard grew up in Annandale, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C. She went to Indiana University and studied journalism. “I loved history and liked writing and chose journalism because I was very shy, and I knew it would force me to go out and talk to people. It worked out well.”

Growing up in D.C. and around politics, influenced Deckard. “Politics were a part of my life. When I was a girl, you couldn’t aspire to be president. You had to aspire to be the first lady. So, I wanted to be the first lady. I didn’t care who the husband was.”

Her journalism career started in Southern California with the Sun Independent newspaper chain as managing editor.

“Actually, I was the editor; I was the whole show,” Deckard said.

She followed that with a stint in Ohio where she worked for the Mansfield News Journal. “Back then you could walk into a town and get a job as a reporter at a local newspaper if you had any sort of a resume,” she said.

Deckard’s life took somewhat of a detour when she quit her job and moved to San Francisco to be part of a commune.

“It was a bunch of professionals who lived in downtown San Francisco on 10th and Howard, in a warehouse, and we were going to rule

by consensus and save the world. We called it Project One and it was going to be just the start of a city we were going to run by consensus. Everyone there had a profession and was good at it. We had some of the first computer programmers there. We had veterans against the war. It was great until we all figured out that consensus doesn’t work.”

Deckard was writing freelance and would “take any job I could get. Sometimes, I covered conventions.”

After a quick hop back to D. C., where Deckard worked for Joe Albright Communications, Deckard moved to Nashville, and started working at Billboard publications. They hired her for their amusement business division, which published Amusement Business, the Aud/Arena Guide and the Fairs and Festivals Directory.

“My first job was making calls to update the listings until they had an opening for a reporter, but there was some concern about a woman covering the carnival industry,” recalled Deck-

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— LINDA DECKARD

ard with a chuckle. “They didn’t think a woman should be out there alone at midnight at a carnival. Regardless, Billboard took a chance.”

Tom Powell, a former Anzivino Award winner, was the editor. “Tom really introduced me to the industry,” she said.

A couple of Deckard’s Amusement Business colleagues did OK, too: Ray Waddell is the president of Oak View Group’s media and conferences division and Don Muret is the senior editor for this magazine.

When Billboard decided to start covering sports, they tapped Deckard to lead the charge, regardless of the fact that she knew little about the subject.

“I was in Dallas when they told me, so I called up (Cowboys owner) Jerry Jones, who was renovating Texas Stadium at the time, and made an appointment to see him. He was thrilled that I didn’t want to talk about firing coach (Tom) Landry; I wanted to talk about the stadium. And he wanted to talk about it.” That turned into Deckard’s first big interview.

Learning about sports came next. “I had to do a listings of what was playing at the stadiums and ballparks, but they would send me lists of events with just the teams on it, and I’d have to yell out across the newsroom, ‘Blue Jays?’ and someone would shout back, ‘Baseball!’”

Eventually Deckard went to the West Coast to be Billboard’s first Los Angeles-based reporter. She stayed there until 2001, when Billboard decided to move music and box score coverage out of Amusement Business and to Billboard and it became apparent to Deckard

pretty quickly that Billboard wasn’t going to cover venues that weren’t music-driven.

“No convention centers, no fairs, a little bit about performing arts centers, and I kept getting calls from people who I knew for over 35 years who wanted to tell me these stories and they had no place for it in Billboard,” Deckard recalled. “There was a void in the market, no one was covering just venues, and I decided to go for it and start Venues Today.”

A prototype was introduced at that year’s EAMC. Deckard signed up 20 customers, the first three from Feld Entertainment. “I was embraced by the industry pretty quickly,” she said.

The first edition of Venues Today appeared in July 2002 at IAAM.

Once her magazine was launched, Deckard went after arenas, stadiums, PACs, fairs and convention centers with a vengeance. She sewed together hundreds and hundreds of venue owners and operators, content producers, ticket professionals and hospitality providers

who before Venues Today did not have a platform to share their experiences and tell their stories. The list of subscribers grew quickly.

While the news stories were the big lure, Deckard devised other ways to keep her readers attention by introducing regional Spotlights, Hall of Headlines — and the signature caricatures that went on every Hall of Headlines cover — the Generation Next Awards, the Box Office Stars Awards, (now known as the Ticketing Stars,) and Deckard’s favorite award, the Women of Influence Awards.

In late 2016, roughly six months before the 15th anniversary of Venues Today, Deckard got a call from Tim Leiweke, co-founder and CEO of Oak View Group. “He was looking to buy a publication,” she said, “and everyone said, ‘Buy Venues Today,’ so he did.”

Deckard stayed with the magazine through its relaunch as VenuesNow and then left in September 2018. “It was time to go,” she said. “I didn’t need to keep chasing news stories.”

While she may be out of the grind of publishing a monthly magazine, retirement is out of the question.

Deckard is writing a biography about Barbara “Mother” Hubbard, the great Las Cruces, N.M., venue manager and now the executive director of American Collegiate Talent Showcase. Deckard also started a website, BasedonTruth.com., where she writes “entertaining, educational and human interest” profiles of people she’s known throughout her long venue career.

“I love what I do now,” she said. “It’s telling stories. There are so many stories out there.”