

They are your partners, your logistics experts, your go-to people—they are convention service managers (CSMs), and here are the three best of 2011



CONVENTION CENTER > Mary Ann Torres



HOTEL > Lori Denning



CVB > Samaria Williams

They Make You Look Great

By Andrea Doyle

Convention service managers (CSMs) are vital partners in the meetings process who rarely get their due. Happily, *Successful Meetings* joins with ESPA, the Event Service Professionals Association, every year to choose the Convention Service Manager of the Year in several categories. Our 2011 winners were honored last month at a gala luncheon at the ESPA Annual Conference in San Diego.

- CONVENTION CENTER -
Mary Ann Torres

Event Manager
Pennsylvania Convention Center Authority

Mary Ann Torres, CMP, event manager at the Pennsylvania Convention Center Authority (PCCA) in Philadelphia, is a world-class juggler—when it comes to meeting the demands of

both a busy career and a lively family. She plans, organizes, and coordinates a wide range of events within the PCCA while at the same time being a single mom to two sons and a daughter.

That it can be a challenge to successfully balance work and home life is something Torres downplays with her characteristically positive outlook. “Having to overcome obstacles has given me the strength and courage to strive to be the best example I can be for both myself and for my children,” she says.

Her introduction to the industry came in March 1998 when she was hired through a temp agency to help with an antiques and collectibles show at the Atlantic City Convention Center. She went on to become show manager, and her career took off from there.

“I believe my experience helps me relate to the clients I serve now because I have been in their shoes and can empathize with what they have to face,” notes Torres, who joined

the PCCA in 2008.

Perhaps her favorite aspect of the job is that no two days are the same. "The variety and scope of events booked at the convention center never cease to surprise me," she says. "We go from cat shows to tattoo shows, and then there are the various citywide trade shows. Each presents its own unique challenges."

Trina Armstrong, director of meetings for The American Society for Cell Biology, can vouch for Torres' ability to get things done. "Since this was our first time in the building, Mary Ann took full control, helping us each step of the way to work most effectively with the unions. She read every page of our spec book, and when some floor plans were off, she called immediately with suggestions of how to best reset the room. Mary Ann is one of the most amazing, efficient, personable, and trustworthy event managers I have ever had the pleasure of working with."

- HOTEL -
Lori Denning

Senior Conference Planning Manager
The Conference Center at NorthPointe

With her sights set on becoming a sports agent, Lori Denning, CMP, got her master's degree in sports management from West Virginia University. But as part of her master's internship, she became involved with events such as the Newsweek Professional Tennis Classic in Baltimore, which piqued her interest in the meetings and events industry.

She landed a job with IntelliRisk Management Corporation planning annual meetings, executive meetings, and trade shows, then moved on in 2003 to become senior conference planning manager at the 120-room Conference Center at NorthPointe, just outside Columbus, OH, where, she says, "My goal is to make each and every client shine."

As each client is different so are their needs. Denning was working with one leadership group that had broken into teams to perform skits as part of their program, when she got a frantic call from a participant who needed a hockey stick as a prop, and fast. Denning got busy and whipped one up out of cardboard tubing and a yardstick.

Denning's skills have impressed Frank Hartley, vice president of Senn Delaney, a company that helps businesses improve their performance by reshaping the culture of the organization. "Lori, on multiple occasions, has created an exceptional experience for those of us who are conference presenters as well as conference attendees," he says. "Her

leadership always results in the highest quality of service while feeling seamless."

Denning sums it up just as seamlessly: "I really do love what I do," she says.

- CVB -
Samaria Williams

Convention Services Manager
Greater Houston Convention & Visitors Bureau

As convention services manager for the Greater Houston Convention & Visitors Bureau, Samaria Williams is used to wearing many hats. "I'm an extension of the sales team, a special event planner, a liaison to our members, and an overall advocate for Houston," she explains. "I am here to ensure that our clients have the best experience possible before, during, and after their meeting in Houston."

Williams, who joined the Greater Houston CVB in April 2008, is the first to admit she got involved in this industry totally by accident. Hospitality had always been second nature to her as she grew up in the hotel and event mecca of Las Vegas. "I started out working in the airline industry and then found myself opening up a hotel off the Las Vegas Strip, when finally a friend offered me the opportunity to work with her as a third-party meeting planner, and I was hooked from that point on."

She moved to Houston when her husband Richard joined Continental Airlines. "I was not able to find a job as a planner in Houston, but the next best thing is working with them as a convention services manager at a CVB," she says.

"Samaria goes out of her way to assist planners in using the resources available through the Houston CVB," says Michele Sawka, housing account manager for ConferenceDirect. "Her friendly, down-to-earth personality shines through on the phone and in person. She assisted me with a large conference I had in Houston a few years ago, and without her assistance, I couldn't have made it through it."

Indeed, Williams is a supreme facilitator. "From what restaurants offer vegan menus to where they can ride a mechanical bull, if our clients are interested, we make it happen," she says. "Although every meeting is different, they all want to offer their attendees a unique experience. It's my goal to deliver just that." SM



For a more in-depth look at each of the award winners and the properties and organizations they represent, scan the code or visit bit.ly/smCSMoftheYear2011