

Leave the planning to Viva Bella

by Roz Friedman

In this day of busy lives and little time, brides, as well as Fortune 500 corporations, put their events in Dora Manuel's capable hands and she brings their special occasions to life through her business Viva Bella.

"She juggles everything with grace and poise and truly delivers a classy experience," praised Nick and Alissa Arnold of Hyde Park, whose wedding she planned in May, 2006. "She will connect with you to understand what you ultimately want and will invest herself personally in making it come to life beautifully," noted Alex Keith, General Manager, Procter & Gamble, for whom Manuel planned corporate training meetings. What could have been stressful and overwhelming became exciting, fun, and carefree for these clients.

Manuel drew on her personal philosophy to select an appropriate name for Viva Bella, her Oakley-based wedding and event planning business. A combination of Spanish and Italian words, "viva bella" means beautiful life. "It defines the essence of what I'm trying to do," she explained. "Plan events to inspire a beautiful life."

The ministerial staff of the Oakley-based Crossroads Community Church praise Manuel for being uniquely suited to her chosen profession. "She helped develop a system for operating our wedding chapel," explained Steve Mercer, director of Pastoral Care. "She has been a huge asset to our wedding ministry. I see the blessing she is to the couple and their families." Added Senior Pastor Brian Tome, "She has a passionate heart for people, combined with a passion for excellence in details."

When planning weddings, her client's interest comes first, Manuel said. She listens to them to create a special occasion that reflects their life. She begins the process by interviewing couples so she can build the event around them, taking into consideration their personal style, hobbies, taste, and budget. "Then I try to make what they want come alive."

Her goal is to take care of the logistics, make vendor referrals, attend up to eight vendor appointments with the couple, and coordinate all the vendors on the day of the wedding. "They pay me for my knowledge of vendors so they don't have to interview 20 different people," pointed out Manuel. Acting as the couple's guide, collaborator, and trouble-shooter, she orchestrates all the behind-the-scenes details, bringing together all the elements and resources to ensure that couples can relax and enjoy their wedding day.

"She made it so special for us," recalled Katie Linich, a pharmaceutical sales representative, who tried to do everything herself for six months. When planning her wedding became overwhelming she called Manuel two weeks before the event "to relieve the stress and be able to enjoy my wedding day. I realized it was



Dora Manuel of Viva Bella (photo by Michael Bambino)

a lot more affordable than I thought." Although Linich admitted it's hard to let go of control over something you've worked on for six months and dreamt about for so long, she felt comfortable because she could trust Dora. "You know she's not going to drop the ball."

Manuel coordinated such details for the Linichs as an event schedule for the family, bridal party and vendors, wedding program, ceremony readings and songs, aisle march and photos. "Everything and everyone was in the right place at the right time," Linich said, referring to the unity candle, guest books, bridal party bouquets and boutonnieres, cooler packs on the bus ride to the reception, snacks for the dressing rooms and even emergency kits for clothing spots, repairs and minor accidents. On the day of the wedding Manuel also welcomed and directed guests, and worked with the band and videographer to ensure that the couple's wishes were fulfilled. The final touch was a surprise honeymoon gift from Manuel: an Aruba tourist book, CD with love songs, bubble bath, candle and journal. It was the perfect ending to what had been a perfect day in Linich's opinion.

Another last minute assignment, this time for a corporation, yielded similar praise. "She blew us away with her expertise and her superior ideas," commended Krissy Little, brand manager for Procter & Gamble Beauty. "We were trying to plan a training and celebration event ourself this past fall but realized we didn't have the time," explained Little. "It was the week before and we were in a pinch and stressed." Manuel stepped in on a week's notice and pulled all the details together: food, decorations, music, meeting presentation including sound and video tapes, and coordination of menus and drinks. "She handled everything," recalled Little.

Impressed with Manuel's ideas and her calming 'no problem' attitude, Little also sought her skills for a June, 2007, end-of-year celebration and awards show for 400 marketing professionals involved in the global beauty business. "We want to celebrate beauty and diversity," Little said. "Dora came up with the mosaic theme to bring our vision to life and found the perfect venue for our awards presentation." In addition, Manuel is coordinating the video production, light and sound for the awards show, arranging gift bags for attendees, securing musical performers, facilitating travel and transportation for out-of-town guests and suggesting decor. Manuel's ideas to project the theme include hiring sculptors to design artwork at the event using P & G products, providing foods from around the world and having an artist with a disability demonstrate how he paints with a brush in his mouth. "She is incredibly creative and has lots of cool ideas," Little said. "And she stayed exactly within our budget which challenged others."

Manuel herself is a living example of P & G's diversity theme as she can easily switch her planning skills from weddings to corporate events. The former corporate sales and marketing professional with Campbell Soup Company reinvented herself last summer when she turned a former hobby - planning weddings for friends - into a full-time career. "What I realized," observed Manuel, "was that I was naturally interested in this." While staying on top of her Campbell corporate job at the time and rearranging her hectic business travel schedule, Manuel discovered that "planning weddings never drained me."

The 31 year-old Texas native with degrees in international studies and marketing from Texas A and M left her position with Campbell Soup because "I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing something I was really passionate about. I asked myself if I could do anything, if money and career didn't matter, what would I do and the answer was wedding and event planning." However, it did take her two years to make that leap of faith and "leave a Fortune 500 company, take a risk, push through the fear and leave a profession with perks galore, stability, benefits, security, career advancement potential and travel opportunities. But after pushing back my fear and stepping out it felt like a beautiful life to me."

When Manuel's not planning events, she cooks gourmet meals featuring variations of her favorite food, butternut squash; has completed marathons in Texas, New York, and Cincinnati; and travels to foreign countries twice yearly with her husband Steve, a musician. In fact, on a recent trip to Mexico, Manuel got "tons of decorating ideas for my business." While visiting a resort there she admired the lanterns hanging from trees. "I'm planning to implement them for a corporate event," she said.

To experience Manuel's fresh, cutting edge ideas call Viva Bella at 470-3858.