

MANAGING THE NEW JERSEY FOLK FESTIVAL

Hi. I'm Bill Selden and currently one of the newest members on the **Board of Trustees** of the **New Jersey Folk Festival**. My interest in the **NJFF** has been a long one. Early on, I think it was 1978; I performed Balkan music in the festival with a group with the improbable name of "*I Solisti di Zirnachron*." It was a collection of mostly modern western instruments, but we had all been bitten by the Balkan music and dance bug and at that time were the only such group in New Jersey. Since then I have performed in several NJFF programs. When I retired this last fall, and **Angus Gillespie** the festival **Director** asked me to join the board and it was a perfect fit.

The **NJFF** board is a diverse group made up of some sixteen out-of-school adults. On the board are festival alumni, local businesspeople, retirees looking to serve the community, and folk music fans. That is the kind of pool of talent and experience that any organization can use. My own contributions are my interest in Balkan music and dance, which I have done for nearly forty years, and my experience in producing public events. I ran the **Rutgers Geology Museum** for thirty three years and organized its educational enrichment programs.

I went to a couple of NJFF board meetings and thought that sitting in on the **Folk Festival Management** course Angus teaches would be useful. I saw that the course places students in a fabulous learning environment. I enjoyed the classes. After all, I didn't have to take the tests. I did, however, have to report to the board about what was going on in the program. It was not as bad as a test, the board seemed to like what I said, and suggested I write it down. So here it is.

The class met on Monday evenings during two time periods; a total of almost three hours and usually class ran over. The backbone of the course is the festival manual, sort of a "Joy of Cooking" for the festival. During 36 years of productions, Angus and his staff have met and solved most problems. In the early years the manual was a simple report. Eventually the reports were compiled into the more than 200

page document it is today. If you have a question, the manual has the answer.

There were fourteen students in the class, and each was assigned a specific sector of the festival like promotion, alumni relations, or managing one of the various performance stages. They also learned about the entire production so in case of an emergency they would know what they were doing if they had to cover for someone else. That safety net gave the students confidence that this big project was doable and instilled a sense of shared responsibility that united them.

The first time period consisted of informative presentations about folk traditions followed by festival organization. In 2010 the **NJFF** had an Andean theme and there were presentations about Bolivia and Peru. I knew little about the region so it was useful to have some of the basics filled in. The talks covered the melding of Inca religion with Christianity, economics, languages, and the ethnic complexities of these two countries.

James Deutsch, a folklorist from the **Smithsonian Folk Festival** spoke about that festival's objectives, problems, and solutions. He emphasized how important it is for a presenter to be a skilled communicator in addition to knowing their stuff. Having produced many public events in my museum career, I know first hand how critical that is.

My favorite was professional musician Dan O'Dea who verbalized and then demonstrated the particulars of American folk music traditions. I love music performances and lectures about any kind of art. He is a teacher, very polished in his playing, and had just the contact quotient the **Smithsonian** identified as essential.

After the presentations and before the end of the first period, all fourteen students reported the progress and problems of the previous week to the **Festival Manager, Catherine Rossi**. This status review was another safety net the festival has to ensure the program runs smoothly.

The second period was for problem fixing. Students met with the faculty during "break-out" sessions for direct exchanges about everything. The experience of the managers and students who worked in previous years identified dangers, like the database that is not up to date, the necessary vendors who do not return phone calls, and the unnecessary vendors who keep calling. New problems were raised and it was quite useful to have a half dozen people pondering them. The group could draw its collective experience and creativity. That was yet another safety net.

The **Festival Management Course** is unique for a number of reasons. Perhaps most the most prominent is that the **New Jersey Folk Festival** is one of only a few festivals that are managed by undergraduates. Organizing the event is a big undertaking. This year there were 22 food vendors, 55 craft vendors, more than a dozen presenters to be evaluated, and well over a hundred artists to be considered for performing.

Undergraduates do everything. In this course, students have a hands-on service-learning experience. In that aspect, it resembles a student research project. Students certainly are guided in organizing their part of the program, but they carry the freight.

Just as research is shared with a larger audience, the festival is a work shared with a larger community. More than that, student energies are directed outwardly to create something beyond the academic arena and its degree requirements. Their work provides educational enrichment for the public and contributes to an atmosphere of higher learning within the entire **Rutgers** community.

Another unique aspect of the festival is its sense of teamwork. The camaraderie in the **Festival Management** class began in the fall, months before the course started, with a weekend retreat held at **Camp Bernie** in northern New Jersey. Students, faculty, and board members gathered at the camp and became acquainted. There they began to develop the familiarity of shared experiences like meals, conversation, night hikes, pranks, and obstacle courses. By the time classes started in the spring semester, **Festival Director Dr. Angus Gillespie, Associate**

Director Erin Clarke, and **Festival Manager Catherine Rossi** were more colleagues than instructors.

The course is largely learning by doing, sort of the humanities equivalent of a lab science. Laboratory exercises teach a depth of understanding that is beyond lectures and reading. **NJFF** students experience the complexity of actions required to produce this a large event. The breadth of experience the course provides is reflected in the course syllabus, which included topics, like, The Folk Festival as a Business, Festival Publicity, The Smithsonian's Festival as a Model, Public Cultural Representation, East Brunswick Television Studio, and Mock Radio and Television Interviews. If ever they must organize a large project, this experience gives students a good grounding.

The motivation was different too. All of the students were truly committed to the folk festival, but there was a sense of determination not to let the group down. One students who worked on the festival in a previous year commented that, "looking out on the festival grounds about two in the afternoon and knowing that your work made this happen was a great satisfaction." I think students had fun even if the had to take the tests.

The students themselves were a unique group. Enrollment in the management course is limited and strongly influenced by the previous year's class. Each class is asked to identify other students they think might do a good job producing the festival, and then encourage those students to sign up for the course. Student judgment of their own colleagues is often the best informed.

The result was a group of very able people. These guys were good. That was pretty evident when students gave oral reports or rehearsed media interviews for the festival. They were poised and articulate, and if your presentation followed one of them, you'd better be prepared or you'd embarrass yourself. Here, their motivation was FEAR!

I think most of all, students take the festival personally. This is their party and they are the hosts. It is important to them that their guests have a good time. If you made it to the **NJFF** in 2010 to

celebrate the Andes with the rest of us, you know how well they succeeded.