



MEMORABLE EVENTS

LOCAL EVENT PLANNERS CELEBRATE ANNIVERSARIES
AND ENGAGE EMPLOYEES WITH FUN AND INSPIRING PARTIES.

BY DAVE ZIELINSKI



Twin Cities Public Television 50th Anniversary Celebration

Venue: Twin Cities Public Television headquarters and downtown St. Paul streets
Attendees: 20,000 for public festival; 650 for employee and donor events
Audio Visual: EventPro
Rental Company: Après Party and Tent Rental
Catering: D'Amico Catering
Decor: Sasha Thayer
Event Planners: Char Mason & Associates, Coco Collaborative

◆ The 50th anniversary celebration for Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) was designed to honor the station's past as well as look confidently to the future, recognizing a unique community voice along the way.

Three events were scheduled on consecutive days to celebrate the station's main constituencies: employees and volunteers, donors, and the viewing public. Event planners were challenged to think big on a non-

profit budget. The celebration kicked off with a private Thursday night event for 400 past and present station employees: a picnic with grilled burgers and hot dogs held in a tent on top of a parking ramp next to the TPT building. The picnic featured music by the band Front Porch Swingin' Liquor Pigs and an appearance by David Newell, who played Mr. McFeely on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

Erecting a tent on the ramp required permission from the City of St. Paul, and bringing in weights to hold it down, since drilling into the ramp for staking wasn't an option. Décor for the picnic included gingham linens and flower arrangements from the St. Paul Farmers' Market.

The second event, on Friday, for 250 major TPT donors and community leaders was also held in the tent, with seating and staging converted to a more refined rooftop-garden, veranda look. Portions of *Almanac*, TPT's live, public-affairs program, originated from the space. Attendees

enjoyed appetizers, specialty drinks, custom cookies with a TPT anniversary logo, live entertainment, and special guest David Brancaccio, host of PBS's nationally broadcast *Now* program.

The culmination of the three-day celebration was a public festival on Saturday that attracted 20,000 people. Held in the TPT building and on surrounding streets in downtown St. Paul, the event showcased the station and its five-story facility. Planners created venues in and around the station with several entertainment stages, tents, and food vendors on blocked-off streets to accommodate large numbers of attendees.

The extensive event options led to a need for abundant maps, signage, way-finders, and security to assist in crowd moving. To signal to festival-goers that they'd arrived at the party, a 50-foot tall Macy's Parade-style balloon in the form of public-TV character Arthur was positioned near the TPT building. A gusting wind later blew Arthur into a nearby tree,

punching a large hole in his fabric, but the nimble balloon supplier was able to quickly patch the hole and have him aloft again in 15 minutes.

Attendees took tours of the station, where one floor showcased TPT community partners and offered membership merchandise. Outside, some 29 street performers and musicians entertained festival-goers, including a speed painter; Taste of Spain, a six-piece Latin dance group; break dancers; and the local band Auto Body Experience.

Legendary public-TV characters such as Big Bird and Cookie Monster also roamed the grounds, often followed in pied-piper fashion by children, says event co-producer Char Mason. Handlers helped the costumed characters negotiate crowds, and a decision to have the characters wander the grounds rather than stand in line signing autographs proved prescient as crowds swelled beyond estimates despite the rainy weather.

A small park on the corner of TPT

property was turned into a version of Sesame Street for the day, with theme music from the show piped in, decorations featuring show characters displayed on the grounds, and costumed characters making regular appearances.

Local designer Sasha Thayer worked with TPT's graphics department to dress up street barricades and the grounds with "fun, cartoony-looking" flowers to adorn the front entrance, Mason says. Shimmery fabric draped on entryways provided visual movement and helped attendees spot entrances. "With large public festivals, you need things that are big and 'poppy,' or otherwise it's hard for the public to see it," Mason says.

The planners engaged six food vendors offering Mexican-style roasted corn, gyros, cheese curds, onion rings, corn dogs, barbecue, cherry lemonade, and more.

The last-minute canceling of marquee performer Michael Johnson, a blues musician, sent event co-producer Cookie Coleman scrambling for a replacement. She contacted musician Billy McLaughlin, who graciously stepped in and proved an audience hit, Coleman says.

Mother Nature also provided a helping hand—but not in the usual way. The day of the outdoor festival brought a gusting rain, which Mason says helped keep the crowd size manageable. While the event goal was to attract a crowd of 10,000, double that number showed up. "[The rain] was probably a lifesaver, because had we had a sunny day, we might have had 30,000 people," Mason says.