

PLANNER'S WORKSHOP

my path to success

➔ Joan Eisenstodt, passionate student and educator

The Industry's 'Leading Learner'

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As she does daily, Joan Eisenstodt shared with the MiForum listserv a word of the day on August 7. On this particular day it was "Darby and Joan," which means a devoted old couple leading a quiet, uneventful life.

This definition couldn't be further from the truth for this 62-year-old Joan. With over 35 years of experience in professional meeting planning and consulting, Eisenstodt is a powerful force in the industry.

She was named a "Meeting Partner of the Year" by the National Speakers Association; was honored in 2008 by the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) for her lifetime achievement as an educator; and is regularly named one of the "25 Most Influential People in the Meetings Industry," according to *MeetingNews* magazine. She has been inducted into the Convention Industry Council Hall of Leaders and was selected by Meeting Professionals International (MPI) as an "International Planner of the Year."

"I was honored by PCMA last year with a lifetime achievement award as an educator, which was especially nice



because I did not graduate from college and am not an educator on a university campus," explains Eisenstodt.

Similar to many in her generation, Eisenstodt fell into this industry, although she truly believes she is now fulfilling her destiny.

"As a young girl in the early fifties, I put on street fairs complete with games and refreshments to raise money for

polio research," she recalls. "I was a volunteer leader and organizer in grade school and high school; worked in an art museum doing events; and volunteered for public TV in my native Ohio organizing events and on-air auctions. I moved to DC in '78 and got a job at an association, where I was hired first in the membership department and then, by a bit of luck, was made the association's first meeting planner in its 10-year history. I learned quickly and excelled at what I did."

It's been many years since Eisenstodt became "official" in her meeting planner role and in her role as a business owner (founding Eisenstodt Assoc., LLC in 1981), and through that time, she says meetings are still designed

and delivered in very much the same way as when she started. Although contracts have improved, they, too, are basically the same.

Eisenstodt remembers her mother finding the hotel contract her maternal grandparents signed for her parents' wedding in 1944. "It was the same front and back catering agreement that is used today," she explains. "If you take

out the very specific war conditions, the fruit cocktail they had as an appetizer, and the prices, you'd never know the difference from today's contracts."

Committed to Education

Education and learning are her passions. "There are many of us who plan meetings and events who do not always take advantage of the professional development opportunities available to us," she says. "It's time to change that. In an increasingly competitive world, we need to keep up with the trends and skills that will advance our knowledge. Whether in or outside of our industry, educational opportunities for planners abound."

Learning is her lifelong commitment and joy. She refers to herself as a "learning learner."

"My love of learning comes from my mom, who was a voracious reader. Actually, from both parents, neither of whom graduated from college, and yet they watched and read the news and discussed it with their very curious daughter," she explains.

There aren't many industry associations that Eisenstodt is not a part of. She presently serves on ASAE & The Center's Ethics Committee; she works with PCMA on the student programming for its annual meeting; and she has chaired MPI's Task Force and the Committee on Student/Faculty issues. She is a trainer for MPI, PCMA, ASAE, and SGMP, providing educational content on various topics.

An active member of many industry



Wikki Stix and other toys make Eisenstodt's training sessions fun and stimulating

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listservs and discussion boards, she has notably moderated the MiForum (formerly MIM) listserv since 1999. She also keeps busy posting on Facebook, Twitter, and MeetingsCollaborative.com.

"My posts usually include information about the industry and the world at large so that those in the industry are well-informed if they so choose to be," she says.

Those who have participated in her classes will be intrigued to learn that she gets nervous every

time she presents or conducts training. "Many will also be surprised that I am a strong Introvert on Myers Briggs," she says. Another surprise: Eisenstodt doesn't drive a car, nor has she ever. As she told a stunned industry colleague some years ago, you can be successful without a license or a college degree, and with an "I" as part of your profile.

Learn from Others

Mentors and mentees have been critical to her success. "We learn and grow in those relationships. We are allowed to ask questions that we may not be comfortable asking and answering in a work setting," she says.

One of the things she tells those just starting out is to "see this industry and your role in it differently than it may have been defined by professors and the industry itself. Discover your strengths and build on them. You'll be surprised at how you grow and what you can do. Take chances by saying a resounding 'yes' to a request to, say, speak to a group or chair a meeting. Most important, stay curious and involved in life. Learn from outside our industry."

Not surprising to those who know her, one of Eisenstodt's strengths according to "StrengthsFinder" is connectivity. Her outside interests include reading, theater, art, and a good game of Scrabble.

If more people took advantage of classes and other learning opportunities, there would be a vast improvement in all we do, she says. "There is a greater degree of professionalism among planners and hoteliers in some cases—and there is the CMP [certified meeting professional] and other designations. That said, the number of people planning meetings is so vast that the changes are not that great, since many of the people who plan meetings are not in professional organizations," she adds.

Eisenstodt gets a kick out of the fact that many she meets and interacts with online think she has a huge company with many employees. Not true. Although over the years she has worked with some great subcontractors, she is currently a happy Introvert, consulting as a one-woman show.

"For me, success is helping others and living a life that has meaning both within and outside one's work," she says. "What I've developed over many years is a strong desire to learn and to connect others to learning to help them do better in their work and lives." And that she has done. **SM**