

Raising the Game

May 21, 2007

Posted by: Marilyn Clint

When I first heard his name, I thought he was putting us on. There was no way a guy named 'Flowers' -- Ira Flowers, to be exact -- could be serious about wanting to do a film about the Rose Festival. From his voice mail message, he was obviously young and maybe a little brash. I figured at best he was looking for a way to promote his filmmaking through a connection with the festival; at worst, he wanted to satirize one of Portland's most venerable traditions.

Years of working for an organization that sometimes is criticized for the earnest way it tries to stick to its own civic mission can make you a little overly cautious.

Which brings me to one of my lifelong maxims: When you're wrong, admit it.

And I couldn't have been more wrong about Ira Flowers.

It took just an hour into a meeting with Ira and his partner, respected local grip Brian 'Coach' Fleskes, for Rachel and I to be sold on what turned out to be their passion and their vision about marrying the festival with an ambitious movie project. We had already been planning a documentary film for our Centennial celebration in order to find a new way -- something other than a traditional exhibit or book -- to revisit the rich history of the Rose Festival.

Meeting Ira and Brian was an example of another of my most important daily exercises: Live your life preparing for every serendipitous event. Serendipity is not just luck. By its very definition, it's about developing a faculty for entertaining what some would call 'happy accidents' -- about letting down your guard and going with your gut and often being amazed by the results.

Isn't it often said that success comes from 'making your own luck'?

No, this blog is not my version of 'The Secret.' But the years of planning for our Centennial Celebration have been peppered with examples just like this one of weird coincidences and unexpected discoveries, and meeting this man with the unlikely name 'Flowers' might have been one of the most important of these.

For nearly twenty months now, Ira and Brian -- the F&F in F&F Film Services -- have been working with us on realizing a vision about bringing the Rose Festival story to life in a new and unique way. Utilizing today's tremendous technology was part of that vision, as was developing a program to encourage and promote filmmaking as a curriculum. What better way to look at a hundred-year-old iconic celebration than through the eyes of kids?

It was exciting to get caught up in Ira and Brian's vision and refreshing that two talented young filmmakers could be so passionate about Rose Festival. They had what we sometimes see in newly recruited volunteers or zealous college interns, something I like to call 'stars in the eyes.' I had it when I started working for the festival decades ago, and I developed it again when we got into planning for our Centennial. These 'stars' can diffuse the difficulties in the road ahead and bring about a welcome blindness to obstacles that might seem insurmountable if looked at head on. And as long as the visionary can still believe when the stars have started to fade, the initial energy will create a momentum that will be all-too-needed later on.

Since that initial meeting, it has sometimes been frustrating both for them and for us to come to terms with the realities of resource management and fund raising in the Rose Festival world of multiple projects and extremely high expectations. We all knew this film would be the signature product of the Centennial. But it had to be managed with existing festival staff -- Rachel and me -- who already had very full plates, and by two men who had to juggle lives and full time jobs with a project that would require more than full time commitment.

Now we're all deeply ensconced in our respective roles, and while I once talked to Ira several times a day and saw him several times a week, we rarely have time to even exchange emails. We have to go on faith now that we're all doing what is absolutely necessary to achieve the goals we set for ourselves months ago.

How have Ira and Brian managed to not only produce an ambitious motion picture documentary, but to provide an education in filmmaking fundamentals and advanced computer technology to nine diverse young people? These kids have been so inspired by their association with Ira and Brian and what they've learned about both the technical and creative sides of filmmaking, they have each dedicated in excess of a thousand hours to the intricate photographic rendering process -- long after the actual curriculum had ended.

To say this experience has far exceeded my initial expectations sounds woefully inadequate, even though I do say it several times a week. The project has been a roller coaster of ups and downs both emotional and professional. The sweat equity infused into this project has been exponentially higher than the six-figure investment we've made. Creative people are challenging to work with -- daring and driving and sometimes demanding. But if you want to achieve excellence, surround yourself with people who are excellent.

I love the game of tennis. And I make my best shots when I'm hitting against good shot-makers. It's called raising your game.

Ira Flowers and Brian Fleskes raised the game of the Rose Festival's Centennial. And in my next entry, I'll attempt to use mere words to describe the resulting reward: 'From One Rose,' our Centennial motion picture.

