

Performing Arts Volunteer Program Administrators Create an Online Forum

Brooks Boeke, Manager
Friends of the Kennedy Center, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
Washington, D.C. 20566-0003
Tel. 202-416-8303 * FAX: 202-416-8076 * E-mail: mbboeke@kennedy-center.org

Ginny Bowers Coleman, Director
Office of Volunteer Services, New Jersey Performing Arts Center
One Center Street, Newark, NJ 07102
Tel. 973-297-5808 * FAX: 973-642-7372 * E-mail: gbcoleman@njpac.org

Meghan Kaskoun, C.V.A., M.A., Volunteer Manager
Aronoff Center for the Arts
650 Walnut Street, Cincinnati, OH 45202
Tel. 513-977-4113 * FAX: 513-977-4150 * E-mail: mkaskoun@CincinnatiArts.org

Sally Kutyla, Manager of Volunteer Services
Kimmel Center, Inc.
260 S. Broad Street, Suite 901, Philadelphia, PA 19102
Tel. 215-790-5819 * FAX: 215-735-3119 * E-mail: skutyla@kimmelcenter.org

Connie Pirtle, Founder and Director
Strategic Nonprofit Resources
10103 Edward Avenue, Bethesda, MD 20814
Tel. 301-530-8233 * FAX: 301-530-8299 * E-mail: AskConnieP@cs.com

Abstract

Administrators of Volunteer Programs in Performing Arts (AVPPA) is a free online forum created in 2007 by a group of professionals who shared the same vision of bringing together colleagues in performing arts volunteer resource management to share best practices. AVPPA is open to professional leaders and other specialists who actively manage volunteer programs at performing arts venues and who have a desire to promote effective performing arts volunteer resource management practices globally. AVPPA provides an online network for discussing the unique challenges of performing arts volunteerism and also serves as a resource for anyone interested in establishing a volunteer program in a performing arts organization. The authors discuss challenges to volunteerism in arts venues, including keeping volunteers motivated and engaged while monitoring that they are delivering accurate messages about the organization, ways in which volunteers are rewarded and recognized for their volunteering, and scheduling and supervision of volunteers who may be asked to work late evenings, weekends, or numerous hours per week.

Key Words:

performing arts centers, performing arts, arts volunteerism, global arts volunteerism

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, volunteers have faithfully supported the performing arts in the United States and also provided their own management. Professional performing arts volunteer resource management came into its own as an established career in the 21st century. These volunteer resource managers need a forum for discussing the unique challenges in their field.

Administrators of performing arts volunteer programs wrestle with issues of scheduling and coverage of activities carried out by volunteers in organizations that are often open to the public more than 85 hours a week, while at the same time working in close proximity to artists, artistic management, and backstage functions. Many performing arts volunteers are in highly visible and important “front line” or “front-of-house” roles. The training and supervision of these volunteers is critical to the customer service provided to performing arts patrons, and the overall image of the organization. Just as the program for any performance says “programs and artists subject to change,” the volunteer work environment is prone to frequent change. This requires the volunteer resource manager to create and nurture a volunteer culture that embraces change and remains flexible.

Administrators of Volunteer Programs in Performing Arts (AVPPA), an online network of volunteer program administrators at performing arts venues (see <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AVPPA/>) was created in fall 2007 to bring together individuals who manage volunteers in the performing arts to share best practices, challenges, and successes. AVPPA was co-founded by the volunteer resource manager at the John

F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Founder/Director of Strategic Nonprofit Resources, both in Washington, D.C., with the support of the volunteer resource managers at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia, and the Aronoff Center for the Arts in Cincinnati. These five individuals comprise the AVPPA Steering Committee that facilitates communication and explores common issues, concerns, and experiences among AVPPA members to ensure that AVPPA focuses on issues relevant to the modern performing arts volunteer resource manager.

Creating the AVPPA Network

In 1990, the director of Strategic Nonprofit Resources founded Volunteer Managers in the Arts (MVP Arts) to bring together Washington, D.C., based arts volunteer resource managers to discuss best practices. The volunteer resource manager at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts is a long-time member of MVP Arts. Over the years, casual conversations took place between the two, and it became clear to them there was a need for a national group similar to MVP Arts. They subsequently established a Steering Committee, inviting three professional peers to join them in the creation of the first-ever online network of performing arts volunteer resource managers. The volunteer resource managers at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia, and the Aronoff Center for the Arts in Cincinnati accepted the invitation and the AVPPA Steering Committee became official in fall 2007.

Steering Committee meetings were held monthly via conference calls. The Committee's tasks were to: develop its statement of purpose; create the name and mission statement for the network; set goals for the network; establish membership guidelines; define the role of moderators; create guidelines for maintenance of the network; draft an invitation letter for potential members; create a marketing plan to promote the network; and expand membership internationally. The Steering Committee created a list of about 15 different potential names for the network which were then narrowed down to five. After a few more discussions and some online checking for acronyms already in use, Administrators of Volunteer Programs in Performing Arts (AVPPA) was selected as the official name for the network.

During these same conversations, the Steering Committee worked on AVPPA's mission statement. Although the initial invitation to join AVPPA went to performing arts volunteer resource managers in the United States and Canada, the Committee felt the word "global" should be in the mission statement since one of AVPPA's long-term goals is to become an international network. It was agreed that the AVPPA mission statement would be:

AVPPA connects administrators of volunteer programs in performing arts and provides a forum for discussion of the unique challenges of performing arts volunteerism and the promotion of effective volunteer management practices globally.

AVPPA's goals are to: (1) connect administrators of volunteer programs in the performing arts; (2) provide a forum for discussing unique challenges of performing arts volunteerism; and, (3) promote effective arts volunteer management practices globally. The

Steering Committee chose YahooGroups as the network provider and created guidelines for members using the network. The Committee chose to moderate the AVPPA network to ensure it would meet members' expectations and that it focused on issues relevant to the modern performing arts volunteer administrator.

Throughout the planning process, the topic of generating discussion among AVPPA members was frequently addressed by the Steering Committee.

One of the roles of the AVPPA moderator is to engage members throughout the month by posting relevant questions to the network. Topics such as recruiting and training volunteers, volunteers handling cash in concession areas, and issues related to providing volunteers with authority to resolve customer service concerns are just a few of the challenges performing arts volunteer administrators encounter that the Steering Committee wanted to address. It created a list of potential questions that could be posted to the AVPPA network periodically for discussion. Some resulting questions addressing the unique role volunteers play at performing arts venues include:

1. Do you have volunteers working with artists or working backstage with wardrobe and stage crews? If so, how do you supervise them?
2. How do you deal with the issue of volunteers photographing performers or asking for their autographs?
3. Does your organization use volunteer ushers? How often must they work to be considered an active member of your program? If no volunteer ushers are used, in what ways do your volunteers interact with paid ushers? Do they work side by side or are their roles separate? Is there friction between these

two groups or do they work well as a team? Do paid ushers and volunteers wear the same uniforms?

4. What are your policies regarding complimentary or discounted performance tickets for volunteers?

Each month, the AVPPA moderator archives topical discussions so they are available for access at any time by AVPPA members. Discussions around each topic are summarized into a Word document and saved in the "files" section of the network. This facility is valuable to its members because it is easier to have discussion summaries available instead of having to search through every posting.

Launching the AVPPA Network

The Steering Committee decided to expand the AVPPA membership slowly during the first year, inviting performing arts volunteer resource managers from different performing arts venues to join over time. The first invitations were sent during National Volunteer Week 2008 to nearly 100 performing arts center volunteer resource managers. The invitation e-mail included AVPPA's mission statement and goals, as well as some background information about the steering committee members.

A few months later, an e-mail invitation was sent to volunteer resource managers at concert halls in the United States including those of the Detroit Symphony, the New Jersey Symphony, and the St. Louis Symphony. Currently, invitations have been sent to volunteer resource managers at theaters and other performing arts venues. During the remainder of 2009, invitations will be sent to volunteer resource managers at theaters and dance venues in the United States and Canada.

AVPPA is still young. The Steering Committee is purposely building the membership base slowly, continuing to nurture current members and gain knowledge and perspective from them as they take the next

steps in promoting and marketing AVPPA. Like any new organization, keeping the network fresh and valuable to members will always be a top priority as well as one of the main challenges. Keeping AVPPA member "chatter" relevant and engaging, and continuing to post provocative questions and statements to the network, will always be goals.

The Future of the AVPPA Network

AVPPA celebrated its one-year anniversary in April 2009. The initial group of five has now grown into a professional network of 44 volunteer resource managers at performing arts centers, concert halls, and other performing arts venues across the United States and Canada. The membership base includes volunteer resource managers from the Cleveland Orchestra in Ohio, the Phoenix Stages in Arizona, the Montalvo Arts Center in California, the Portland Center for the Performing Arts in Oregon, the Raymond F. Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in Florida, and the Luminato Festival in Canada, thus representing various regions of North America.

AVPPA is the first-ever online network that brings together volunteer resource managers in the performing arts to share best practices, making AVPPA a valuable resource to its members. With performing arts centers facing challenging economic times, the AVPPA online network provides an opportunity for volunteer resource managers to collaborate at no cost to their organizations.

AVPPA shines a spotlight on a unique sector of volunteerism and volunteer program administration. Its existence alone could be considered a giant leap forward by bringing even more credibility and recognition to arts volunteer resource managers. The

AVPPA databases of volunteer resource managers at performing arts venues will need to be updated periodically as new contacts are developed and people change jobs. The Steering Committee will need to continue to develop contacts with performing arts venues outside the United States to fulfill one of AVPPA's goals of being an international network.

The Steering Committee must be alert to continuing technological advancements in professional online communication. Striking a balance between the virtual world we live in and good old-fashioned customer service will always be a priority because of the customer-centric nature of the performing arts. Even though most of AVPPA's communications take place online, an important function of AVPPA Steering Committee members is to add the personal touch, such as periodic phone calls to current or potential members.

AVPPA strives to be a resource to colleagues at performing arts venues, nationally and internationally, who want to strengthen existing or start new volunteer programs. The Steering Committee plans to expand the AVPPA files to include articles, photos, and training materials related to the field of arts volunteer resource management, as

well as sharing best practices that will benefit its colleagues in the field. Over the years, Steering Committee members have assisted colleagues from other countries and feel that sharing information and exchanging ideas will strengthen current practices and increase support for all arts volunteer resource managers. Expanding the AVPPA membership internationally will bring varied and historical perspectives of performing arts volunteer management to the network and will position AVPPA to capture new ways of thinking about traditional structures, approaches, and relationships not well known to arts volunteer resource managers in the United States.

It has been an exciting journey so far among fellow colleagues who are involved with volunteer resource management in the performing arts. Feedback from current AVPPA members and the online discussions indicate that AVPPA is growing into a valuable resource for volunteer resource managers in the performing arts. Because AVPPA is still in its embryonic stage, the Steering Committee looks forward to the participation and feedback of future AVPPA members and the growth of this valuable professional resource.

About the Authors

Brooks Boeke is Manager of the Friends of the Kennedy Center volunteer program in Washington, D.C. She has more than 15 years of experience in the field of volunteer management. In conjunction with her position, she has published two books: *Cooking with Friends*, a cookbook which remains a top-10 bestseller in the Kennedy Center's Gift Shops; and *Curtain Up on the Friends, A History of the Friends of the Kennedy Center Volunteers*, which is not only a history of the Friends of the Kennedy Center organization, but also a valuable resource on the "three Rs" of volunteer management: recruitment, retention, and recognition. She also consults regularly with arts administrators worldwide to assist them in starting their own volunteer programs.

Ginny Bowers Coleman has been Director of Volunteer Services at New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark for the past three years. She also serves as President of Directors of

Volunteers in Agencies (DOVIA) of Essex County where she has been active for 3 years. Previously, Ginny worked backstage in theatrical productions as stage manager, production manager and other roles with NJPAC and other companies. She is currently Stage Manager with Masterwork Chorus under the direction of Andrew Megill.

Meghan Kaskoun has been the Volunteer Manager at the Aronoff Center for the Arts in Cincinnati, Ohio, for the last 10 years, and has been involved in managing volunteer resources for a total of 15 years. She is a credentialed Certified in Volunteer Administration (CVA) and a Management of Volunteer Programs graduate through the Greater Cincinnati United Way & Community Chest and The Union Institute, and was also an instructor in this certificate series for 3 years. Actively involved with the Cincinnati Association of Volunteer Administrators (CAVA), her leadership was utilized for 5 years on the CAVA Board.

Sally Kutyla has been the Manager of Volunteer Services at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia for the past eight years. She also serves on the steering committee for the Kimmel Center's customer service program. She is on the board of the Delaware Valley Association for Volunteer Administrators, as membership chair, and is a member of the Cultural Volunteer Managers of Greater Philadelphia. Most recently, she was Members' Activity Manager for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. Previously she was in retail management for more than fifteen years.

Connie Pirtle is the Founder and Director of Strategic Nonprofit Resources, a Washington, D.C., volunteer resource management consulting firm that supports volunteer program managers, executive directors, development and marketing directors, board members, and volunteers to increase the effective utilization of volunteers in nonprofit governance and direct service. Connie also writes a volunteer management advice column, "Ask Connie" at www.VolunteerToday.com. She was executive editor of *Transforming Museum Volunteering: A Practical Guide for Engaging 21st Century Volunteers*, published in 2007 by the American Association for Museum Volunteers. Prior to forming her company in 1997, she was Vice President for Volunteerism at the League of American Orchestras for 10 years.