

PROFILES IN *Success*

A series of conversations with Fashion Group members
What they do, how they do it and why it matters.

by Wendy D'Amico

Shawny Burns



A respected writer with impressive credentials and a wide experience in such matters wrote, "If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman," which, in thinking about Shawny Burns, is precisely the thought that leaps to mind. So what is it that Shawny is asked to do... Well, there's the Sorelle Group, the event and production company she founded and runs with her sister Yony, and one of the most prominent and successful in Washington, D.C. (Event management meaning the 2006 Kennedy Center Spring Gala, The Martin Luther King Concert with President Obama, Pope Francis' first visit to the

United States; the Global Coalition on HIV-AIDS galas at the Kennedy Center... you get the idea.)

Add to that, a commitment to Fashion Group that includes her role as the liaison to two regions; as the indispensable star-wrangler and backstage floor manager at the annual Night of Stars gala, and key organizer, workshop and discussion leader of the annual Regional Directors Conference.

All the while, loving and dedicated wife to Chris and mother of three...

A woman of vision, grace, intellect and accomplishment, we sat down for a conversation with Shawny Burns and started with this:



Tell us about your background... where you were born, educated and about your family...

A native Washingtonian, I was born and raised in a large Irish- Italian family, the second oldest of seven children (five girls and two boys). My dad was General Counsel for the Appalachian Regional Commission and my mom was an elementary school teacher and they still live in the home I grew up in. I graduated from Marymount University, VA, in three years with a BA in Fashion, Marketing and PR.

My husband Chris and I have three amazing kids.

What were your first thoughts about a career?

Fashion always beckoned me, and I can remember, as early as 11 years old, buying and saving fashion magazines to pour over, devour and absorb. From that moment on, I was hooked.

That early love led to your career in fashion. Tell us about that....

While at I was at Marymount, Bloomingdale's opened in Tysons Corner, and I was hired part time in the shoe department, which was perfect since I had, and still have, a bit of a shoe obsession. After graduation I was promoted to assistant manager in the Designer Salon which was incredible. Back then Bloomies produced extraordinary country promotions, and designers from all over the world made personal appearances. My goal, however, was the fashion office and, when a position opened, the next day I was flown to New York to interview with the legendary Kal Ruttenstein, SVP of Fashion, and got the job on the spot. (A lot of people may not remember but, in the 70s, Kal was the president of Bonwit Teller.) From fashion director at Tysons to fashion director of branch stores, Bloomies taught me a lot. It was exhilarating to open the Chicago store with a Chanel fashion show and personal appearance with Karl Lagerfeld. And in the first four months of the store's opening I was responsible for over 250 fashion events. It was a thrilling time, but then Saks recruited me for the position of fashion and PR director in their Chevy Chase store, and I was ready for a change.

As one of their top producing stores, Chevy Chase was host to countless designers - the Ferragamos, Oscar de la Renta, Carolina Herrera, Christian LaCroix, and Badgley Mischka to highlight just a few. After a few years at Saks, I started my own business, Solostyle, as an independent fashion show producer. However, Saks lured me back and I returned as the regional fashion/PR director for Chevy Chase, handling the opening of their new men's store and their store at Tysons Galleria. A few years later, I knew that to grow further in the fashion industry, I would have to move to New York, but I wasn't going to leave DC, so it was time to move in a new direction and I was ready to do more. That direction was Sorelle Group.

Tell us about Sorelle Group and how it is to work with family?

My sister Yony and I had been exploring different businesses for about 10 years, but the timing was never right. But we knew we were destined to work together. Her analytical approach and my creativity complement each other seamlessly. Based on our work experiences, an event management and production company fit us perfectly.

Your business roster claims some extremely high profile, news-worthy clients. Can you tell us who some of them are and what kinds of projects you implement for them?

We were very lucky from the beginning because we got most of our clients via referrals. A few of our clients over the years included: The Global Coalition on HIV-AIDS (gala dinners at the Kennedy Center), Georgetown University (Martin Luther King Concert), People for the American Way (honoring founder Norman Lear and celebration of his 90th birthday). DC College Access Program (show and fundraising gala), Pope Francis' first visit to the US (25k guests at the Mass plus other events around the city). And we were still able to still do events in the fashion industry. A few of the projects included parties for the Ralph Lauren stores, major fashion shows with Junko Koshino around the Kennedy Center's Japan Festival, Saks Fifth Avenue Fashion Targets Breast Cancer, SFA fashion show with Charles Nolan, and The Heart Show to benefit the American Heart Association. Our company has also worked in Australia and Morocco for clients. Living and producing events in DC, you can never get away from the politicians and embassies, corporate heads and the social circles. We have worked with a lot of fascinating people and a few of our favorites have included President Obama, Senator John McCain, Secretary Hillary Clinton, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Kathleen Turner, Jane Lynch, Glenn Close, Angelina Jolie, Marvin Hamlisch, Aretha Franklin, Patti LaBelle, Audra McDonald, and Tony Bennett.

But we also love our smaller clients too. We work with a lot of non-profits and help them to develop successful events to raise the funds so desperately needed for the arts, education, the LBGTQ community and health related causes - breast cancer, AIDS, and Alzheimer's research to name a few.

What are the primary responsibilities of your position and what is fascinating about your job?

My relationship with my sister is synergistic and we divide the responsibilities equally. Yony is excellent at data systems, determining what our clients' needs are and then finding or creating the best systems for them. My strengths and passion lean towards the innovative and creative ideas. We are always searching for new, unique, unexpected trends in lighting, menus, entertainment, décor and music to make the events experiential and engaging for everyone.

Do you have people reporting to you and, if so, what's your management style?

We have a core team and then an army of event specialists who support our bigger events. Every event has a detailed timeline and our specialists can easily adapt to any role. There are always issues that can come up and we're lucky to have our amazing team behind us!

How do you lead? How do you persuade people to embrace your ideas and directives - especially those who may be hard to convince?

Since our team is seasoned, my style is to let them do their jobs. If we find someone is struggling, or not comfortable in a specific role, we work to find a better spot for them. Collaboration is essential and we are inspired by new technologies, ideas and ways of engaging the guests in innovative and exciting ways to enhance the event, raise more money and awareness for our clients.

Clearly Sorelle Group has a history of major successes, but has there ever been a really unfortunate situation and, if so, how did you handle it and what did you learn from it?

Our mission statement is that we want to do our best for our clients in achieving their goals, and we want the experience to be a mutually agreeable situation for all parties involved.

In almost 16 years of business, we have had only two experiences where we did not enjoy the project. The C-level executives were unprofessional and created

more problems. Their refusal to listen to their competent teams and to us, when we advised them, was very challenging. Fortunately, the events were a great success and the guest experiences were flawless. Both clients wanted to retain us again, but we realized we weren't being true to our mission statement so we decided not to continue the relationships.

Can we talk about FGI? Did you meet Margaret Hayes during your years at Bloomingdale's?

After I started working with Margaret at FGI, we discovered we had both worked at SFA and Bloomies, just not at the same time.



You worked closely with Susan Glick; how did you meet her and how did it come about that the two of you worked together on some of the most important and time-consuming Fashion Group events?

Thanks to FGI, I met Susan Glick. Our backgrounds in retail and fashion show production were similar and our love of theater was another thread that tied us together. We were both Regional Directors and then District Directors at the same time and then we became Regional Liaisons together.

As you know, Susan passed away suddenly in January of 2019 and it has been very difficult, not only for me personally, but for FGI. Susan did so much. We shared a similar work ethic, we loved collaborating with our DDs, and enjoyed brainstorming and developing strategies with Margaret for the future of FGI.

Backstage at Night of Stars, for all intents and purposes, the two of you have been running the show; making sure that everyone is where and when they should be; announcing every presenter and honoree and keeping the event on track and on time. Do you enjoy it?

Night of Stars is the highlight of the year and I loved working with Susan! It was always fun and no matter how stressful the situation, Susan was always calm, serene and gracious.

Then there's the critical organization of the annual Regional Directors Conference. Given the structure, activities and personnel involved in that three-day event, there has to be a certain stress level.

Talk about that - and how you manage to carve out the time for these events. The Regional Conference is a lot of work, but I have been so fortunate to have worked with Susan, the Regional Conference Committee and the FGI NY Team - Suzin, Trish, Maryanne, Jazz and Wendy - who make it all happen for us and all the participants. New York has always checked with Susan and me to make sure which dates are best for us. That allows us to support FGI in the middle of our own demanding jobs.

Can we talk about Italy with which you have a great connection to and love for...and, in fact, isn't it true that you have a sister who lives and works there?

When we picked Sorelle (Italian for sisters) Group for our business, it was to honor our mother whose family is from Popoli in Abruzzo, Italy. Every fall one of our sisters lives in Florence near the Via de'Tournabuoni, where all the designers have their stores. She received her degree in art restoration in Florence and now works with a well-known restorer in her studio in Florence, so it has been easy to visit Italy often. I could get used to living there!

What would you say are the three qualities that got you where you are today?

Hard work ethic, delivering beyond expectations, being kind.

One thing you're exceptionally good at? Bad at?

Staying calm under pressure; the crazier it is, the calmer I get....

Bad at...

Telling clients that they need to pay more....

My most memorable "aha" moment was...

When we were hired for Pope Francis' visit- realizing that even though we are a small firm, we can do anything!

If I had a do-over, it would be...

I would have started my own business sooner.

Nothing gets on my nerves more than...People who are all talk and fail to deliver on what they promise...

My advice to anyone planning on their own business...

Create a plan and then work the plan... be true to your mission statement and re-evaluate your goals every year so that you can continue to grow and thrive.

Tell us something about yourself that no one knows...

I was very shy as a kid but, at Bloomies, I was thrown into commentating fashion shows and then doing live fashion segments on TV. I even did one with Oprah Winfrey when she was on a Baltimore news station. Shyness conquered!

In a follow up to our conversation with Shawny, we talked with Shawny's friend and admirer, District Director Chuck Steelman who had this to say...

"Shawny makes things happen. She is a force in the fashion community in the D.C. area and has been the perfect leader as the liaison overseeing two districts - one of which is mine - for Fashion Group International. She is delightful to work with and I am happy to know her and call her a friend."

And so say we all...

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