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Describe your job.

I am chief cook and bottle washer! Seriously, I am responsible for leading a team that promotes and attracts visitors to Fort Myers—Islands, Beaches and

Neighborhoods in Florida. Our role is crucial in enhancing the economic impact of tourism in our community by effectively marketing and positioning it as a desirable place to visit, work, and live.

What made you choose the meetings and events industry?

I chose to be part of destination marketing because of my passion to positively impact my community's economy by encouraging visitation of all kinds to the area. Connecting meeting planners, event attendees, and vacationers with the unforgettable experiences you can have in our area and seeing the community thrive is truly rewarding.

How did you get started, and what got you from there to today?

My first adult job was working in a hotel, and I always loved the opportunity to have a positive impact on a person's experience, be it a family on vacation or a person attending a meeting. Like most people, my career took some twists and turns, but I was lucky to land a position in destination marketing. I've been with my organization for the last 23 years and feel fortunate to have a job that is genuinely enjoyable.

How do you keep up with industry trends, changes, and cutting-edge developments?

As the leader of our organization, keeping up with industry trends, changes, and cutting-edge developments is crucial for the success of our destination, as well as the satisfaction of our visitors. Some practices I engage in involve regularly reading tourism industry publications to stay abreast of trends. I have a strong network of peers, experts, and professionals in the industry with whom I regularly interact. Technological advancements increasingly influence tourism, so our team uses tools and platforms to monitor trends, and we regularly collect and analyze feedback from our visitors.

I also regularly engage with the local business community. Their feedback can be invaluable, as they experience the impact of tourism firsthand and can offer insights into sustainable practices and potential issues. We also seek feedback from residents, as our efforts also must benefit them. By consistently integrating these practices into my role as a tourism director, our destination remains competitive and attractive to visitors while also helping the local community.

What essential skills should every industry professional possess?

The essential skills every industry professional should possess include the ability to develop and implement long-term visions and plans, effective communication, digital literacy, a solid commitment to customer service,

analytical skills to make informed decisions, and, of course, flexibility. In addition, the ability to collaborate with all kinds of stakeholders and your community is critical.

What is the philosophy or approach to work that gets you through stressful times?

For me, it's remembering that challenges are temporary, and they often can lead to growth and learning. Also, zooming out to view the bigger picture helps reduce the intensity of immediate stressors. In general, I try to focus on the most crucial tasks and break them down into manageable steps. This reduces being overwhelmed and provides a more straightforward path forward. Leaning on past experiences has also served me well.

What is the best professional advice you ever received, and what advice do you have for others in the industry?

Be a good listener. We are in a business where your success is based on the relationships you build with people. Truly listening to people and understanding their needs will enhance your professional relationships.

Describe your biggest professional success.

I am currently in the middle of what I hope will be my most significant professional success. Last year, my community was devastated by Hurricane Ian, a strong Category 5 hurricane that experts say was the third-costliest weather disaster on record, the deadliest hurricane to hit Florida since 1935, and the strongest storm to make landfall in Florida since 2018. It came ashore on September 28, 2022, and during the past 14 months—and for the next several years—our community will be restoring and rebuilding our tourism industry. It is by far the greatest professional challenge I have faced, yet I am confident that what we are doing now will position our destination for success in the decades ahead.

Share an anecdote about a meeting or event that did not go as planned (something funny or odd) and how you handled it.

Honestly, I cannot think of one. But I am always stunned by how chaotic things can feel until just before the curtain comes up. And our team shines once it does. This is because everyone does their portion of the tasks needed to execute the event. While it may feel a bit frantic at times, we can depend on each other. I love that moment when it all comes together.

What is the best part of your job?

The best part of my job is working with so many dedicated, passionate people. The travel industry is chock-full of kind, caring, and positive individuals who enjoy what they do.

What do you like to do in your free time?

I have two passions that take up much of my free time. The first one is hiking. Now, in Florida, our hikes are primarily on flat land, so someone from a mountainous area might not think of that as hiking, but I love to take a ramble in nature. The second one is the exact opposite: I am a huge college football fan, and I love being in a stadium full of fans cheering on my 'Noles (Florida State Seminoles). Most fall Mondays, people think I have a cold because I usually cheer so much while watching a game that I lose my voice.