

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE WALT DISNEY WORLD AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

A 44-year tradition (started by Walt himself) offers fun - and a lot of work.

BY DEBORAH BRAUSER
PHOTOS BY MATT ROSEBOOM

CONGRATULATIONS 2009 AMBASSADORS



The 2009 Ambassadors, Clay Shoemaker and Vanessa Rosas, pose with Mickey Mouse and the outgoing ambassadors TC Newman (left) and Kerri MacPherson.

It's announcement day inside the Premiere Theater at Disney's Hollywood Studios and the air is crackling with excitement and anticipation. Each of the six finalists competing for the two coveted Walt Disney World Ambassador positions seems to have their own cheering squad within the gathering crowd. With the award ceremony not yet started, these very loud groups of family, friends and co-workers show their support with frenetic clapping, yelling, holding signs and banners, and even waving large photo face cut-outs on sticks. In other words, it's a pep rally of support as the final step in a long selection process gets underway.

After each finalist is introduced on stage (to deafening cheers) by ambassadors from years past, the President of Walt Disney World Resort

Meg Crofton walks to the microphone, flanked by the ultimate goodwill ambassador—Mickey Mouse. As Crofton opens a fancy scroll and reads the names of the 2009 Ambassador Team, it seems like a wonderful storybook ending. But for the two new ambassadors named, the journey is just beginning.

The new team will officially start their year-long assignment on Jan. 1, when they will participate in more than 1,000 local, national and international events while representing the Walt Disney World Resort, their fellow cast members, and the Central Florida community. But on this day in October, the two young winners are whisked away to start preparing for their new roles immediately. As TC Newman, one of the 2008 ambassadors, said, "It's more fun and more work than you can ever imagine." Which is just the way Walt Disney wanted it.

A LONG HISTORY OF AMBASSADORSHIP

Around the time of Disneyland's 10th anniversary celebration, an overwhelming number of requests for appearances were pouring in. So many in fact, that Walt Disney decided that he needed a representative to help him out. In 1964, he named his first ambassador from among his employees, with a new cast member chosen to carry out the tradition each year after that.

The year before Walt Disney World opened in 1971, Debbie Dane Brown was selected as the park's first ambassador and went on to travel almost 80,000 miles during her tenure. "I was 19 and flew out to California two days after I was selected," said Brown. "There, I spent three months learning all things Disney and then hit the road throughout the Eastern United States, Canada and some Central and South American countries to

talk about Walt Disney World and what we were going to be like. I told everyone I met, 'This is happening. It's going to be a thrill. Come see us!'" Opening day is an especially dear memory for her. "I was just overwhelmed by the fact that it had grown into something so grand, just an incredible dream of Walt Disney. And being able to represent what he dreamt of and loved was an incredible responsibility and honor."

Over the years, the goals of the ambassador program haven't changed, though its makeup has. The teams have had varying numbers, including a high of nine part-timers in 1995 – the same year the program welcomed its first male team members, to its current two full-time members. It's a tradition that is now held at all Disney parks throughout the world.

This year, Newman and her fellow ambassador team member Kerri MacPherson participated in more than 1,300 events, visited 38 children's hospitals during a 22-city national Season of Compassion Tour, traveled to Disney destinations around the globe, hosted VIPs and dignitaries at Disney World, cut dozens of grand-opening ribbons, made appearances with Disney characters, oversaw many cast member service anniversaries and milestones, and even read stories to Central Florida children. It's a job with hours that are always changing, sometimes starting as early as 5 a.m., sometimes going late into the evening, and many times including weekends. "We have a 24-hour resort," said Newman. "And though the ambassadors don't work 24 hours a day, we definitely have a varied schedule."

Angela Sola, manager of community relations, is in charge of the Ambassador program, while acting as chief scheduler, trainer and even surrogate mom for the team. This will be her fifth year overseeing the program. "They have a very, very, very busy schedule and have to be really good managers of their time. Since it's a position of service to others, they have to have a real passion and



The first Walt Disney World Ambassador Debbie Dane Brown (left, in red) with 1970 Disneyland Resort Ambassador Cathe Birk in California. Brown was in attendance at the announcement for Walt Disney World's 2009 ambassadors (right).

enthusiasm for the job, especially as they represent our 62,000 cast members. I tell them it's a 365-day opportunity."

As much work as there is, however, Newman said that the hardest part was getting to the position. "For me, it was a 10-year journey just to get the courage to interview. I hired into Disneyland in 1996 and was so impressed by the professionalism and poise of the ambassador team that I knew that was something I wanted to do. But I was too afraid to even tell anyone about my dream. Years later, after I joined the Walt Disney World organization, I eventually decided it was time to go for it." She was not selected the first year she went out. "But because I had such a passion for this, I went out a second year and made it. I would say that if being a Disney ambassador is in your heart, you'll find the courage to go through the interview process."

THE PROCESS

Each year, Disney World cast members who are over 18, have a high school degree or higher, and have more than one year of service are invited to attend informational sessions about the program in August, followed by a first-round session of group interviews.

From here, about 20 move onto round two and more extensive interviews. The finalists, which usually number about 10, are then selected around the end of September. After that, they prepare for "Media Day" – an extensive day of training in several crucial areas, with an opportunity to see themselves on camera. Then, the day before the final announcement is made, each finalist goes through one final interview in front of Meg Crofton and a panel of her senior leaders.

Many cast members have gone through this process several times, with quite a few making it all the way to finalist a couple of years in a row. There aren't any shortcuts for these participants, however, as everyone has to start over from the beginning each year.

Once a finalist is chosen and their term is completed, each ambassador has the option to return to their prior job or apply for another available position within the Disney World Resort. Just some of the past ambassadors include Melissa Valiquette, who is now director of entertainment at Disney's Hollywood Studios, and Michelle Reynolds, who is now the director of Disney's human resources department.

CAMERAS & MICROPHONES EVERYWHERE

At Media Day, this year's six finalists went through an extensive group session on stage techniques from Forest Bahruth, show director at Walt Disney World Entertainment, with suggestions on everything from the proper way to hold a microphone, to keeping attention while addressing an audience, and even how to walk, sit, and present themselves in the most confident way possible.

Individual training and evaluation sessions followed in presentation skills – standing in front of a room and giving a PowerPoint presentation that they were given for the first time just moments before; a written assignment – as all ambassadors are expected to write many articles and thank you cards; and a hands-on session on talking with the media – as those selected will be called upon to give hundreds of interviews for media outlets all over the world.

After completing an on-camera interview full of tough questions designed to see how he'd handle the unexpected, second-time finalist David Horvath seemed unfazed, while never losing his ever-present smile and sense of joy at just being there. He said that for him, the entire process has been almost like receiving a free education in professional enhancement. That's why he's going through it all again. "With any good development, you're pushed. You know, you don't really grow unless you're challenged. Otherwise, you're stagnant. And this is a challenge. But it's a really great growth opportunity too."

Alan Brunn, associate creative director for show development and production at Disney – and in charge of the presentation skills training for the day, agreed. When asked why any department at Disney would be happy with this process (when it could potentially mean losing a member of its team for a year, while keeping the position open for his or her return), Brunn said that it's because of the many different techniques that they learn. "The



There's no shortage of support in the crowd watching the ambassador announcement.

process not only helps the participant, it helps their entire department to have someone come back with this level of education and skills. Whether they move on or not, it's beneficial to everyone involved."

For first time finalist Vanessa Rosas, an industrial engineer at Disney World, she sees becoming an ambassador as an opportunity to be an example to children. "I'd love to encourage them to think about math and science as a potential for a career and that it's a lot of fun. You can do great things for our industry and just have the time of your life, like I am.

"It just gives me goose bumps to go through this process because it's part of the legacy. It would be such a great honor to do this for a year and be an example for my girls. They're 4- and 2-years-old and hopefully they'll be proud of me when they get older and

really understand the reasons mommy went through the program and wanted to be part of its heritage."

ANNOUNCEMENT DAY: MEET THE TEAM

When Meg Crofton announced the names of Clay Shoemaker and Vanessa Rosas as the 38th Walt Disney World Ambassador Team in October, both said the moment didn't seem real.

"When I heard my name, I needed verification that it had happened and that I had heard right," said Shoemaker. "Then it just felt like a dream. I'm coming off being a manager of the Magic Kingdom Dream Squad, and this feels like one of those magical moments we always celebrate."

Echoed Rosas, "I'm super excited! I want to jump and I want to hug everybody and I can't wait to start my role." She didn't have long to wait.

GETTING READY TO TAKE THE REINS IN 2009

After facing a slew of media cameras right after the announcement, the two new "ambassadors elect" were taken away to start preparing for their new roles, including being measured for their new costumes.

"We are considered to be costumed cast members," explained Newman. "And our fantastic staff over at Creative Costuming outfits us for the year." These range from a casual look of pressed



2009 finalists await the announcement.



2009 Ambassador Vanessa Rosas

khakis and buttoned up shirts to the more typically seen business suits in the Ambassador colors of bright red or royal blue. In all, they have about six to eight different costumes for the year.

A strenuous two-month training process then kicks off to ensure that they're ready come Jan. 1. First, they head to Disneyland for a week of training with the other Disney ambassador teams from around the world. Then, all global ambassadors come back to Orlando for another week. The new Walt Disney Ambassadors will then receive sessions on everything from international etiquette training to how to stay poised at all times, as well as individual coaching

in areas that need extra work.

"After that happens, they get to follow us and shadow our experiences," said current ambassador Newman. "Kerri and I get to be like the mama ducks and they get to be our ducklings, following us around. And then at the first of the year, we'll kick them out of the nest and it'll be their turn."

And when they say Jan. 1, that's what they mean. "On the first day that the new team takes their position, they need to be ready to go and prepared for anything - including the possibility of an event at 12:01 a.m.," said Sola. "Those types of things happen all the time."

LOOKING AHEAD

Current Ambassador Kerri MacPherson said she's a little sad that her year is coming to an end. "You know, it took me two tries at going through the process and it's such a fun role. So it's absolutely bittersweet to go back to sort of a normal life. I'm just proud that we get to join the ranks of amazing former ambassadors, and that we are now part of the family and will forever be. That is just an honor in and of itself."

Fellow Ambassador Newman also used the term bittersweet as she looked back at her year. "This role is one of service to our cast members and to



2009 Ambassador Clay Shoemaker

the community at large. And it's an opportunity for us to say thank you to the cast members who keep Walt's vision alive and to the community who supports the Walt Disney Company. We are average cast members who love our company. And we get one year to show the world how fantastic it is to work for Walt Disney World."

Shoemaker is excited for his upcoming year and to take his place as one of the next Ambassadors. "This was my third time through the process. My wife, my family, and my fellow cast members have all been very supportive and encouraging. And now, I'm just ready to get started!"



We offer Personalized Friendly Service

To Plan Your Perfect Disney World Vacation, Cruise or other package, call for details today **1-866-896-9939**. We specialize in Walt Disney World Packages, Disneyland Resort Packages, Disney Cruise Line, Adventures by Disney, as well as other off property destinations.

Disney pictures, logos, artwork are property of (c)Disney.



www.AllAboutFamilyVacations.com

(866)896-9939