



ENGINEERING ENTERTAINMENT

WILKES GRADS PROVIDE FOUNDATION
FOR LOCAL COMPANY'S SUCCESS IN
STAGING EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS

By Helen Kaiser



BRAND NEW WILKES ALUMNUS MATT Griffith '10 used to enjoy rock concerts, fireworks shows and other high-profile events just like everyone else.

Now that he works for Mountain Productions, however, he also scopes out all the staging, roof systems, grandstands, rigging and hoists when he attends such events. Griffith and two other alumni practically form an adjunct Wilkes engineering department at the Wilkes-Barre firm, said to be the largest staging company in North America.

"They play an integral part in our success," says president and general manager James Evans about Griffith, Paul Serkosky '96 and Sean Davies '06. "There's not a project that leaves here that one of the three hasn't been involved in."

Mountain Productions' CEO Ron Simms, himself a 1960 Wilkes graduate, says the University's engineering faculty can be proud of the problem-solving capabilities of its graduates.

Mountain Productions is internationally known for providing equipment, engineering expertise and professional installations of staging—from a simple podium and dais to a complex industrial structure with vehicles suspended 50 feet in the air. The company has been involved in extraordinary events such as Pope John Paul II's 1995 visit to New York City, The Jacksons' Victory Tour, the inauguration of President Barack Obama, Live Aid Philadelphia in 1985, Live 8 in 2005 and many others.

Founded in 1979, Mountain Productions has staged more than 18,000 events. According to Evans, the company handles more events each year than any other such firm.

With the only accredited engineering program in the area at nearby Wilkes, Evans knows where to look for the expertise he needs in his 75-employee operation.

There often is a Wilkes intern on staff to help with the complex engineering computations needed for erecting each customized installation. Because safety is imperative, all results are triple checked—including a review by an independent registered engineer—before construction begins.

After the company's sales staff and designers determine a client's needs, the engineers set to work "to make it happen," says Serkosky.

They travel to the site to survey the facility and determine what is needed. With a transit, they determine elevation and other information. Starting with a basic drawing of the proposed structure, they then incorporate wind loadings to make sure it will be safe. Engineers also determine how much weight the structure can hold, including elements such as lighting and

sound equipment. Mountain Productions' shop workers build the stages on site.

"With traditional architectural engineering firms you might be working on one big project for years," Serkosky says. "Here we might have a week. We serve as project manager-engineer-draftsman and jack-of-all-trades."

"There's a gratification that comes from knowing I helped make (an event) possible," adds

Davies, whose portfolio includes Christmas tree installations at Rockefeller Center, annual Times Square New Year's Eve celebrations and the Pentagon 9/11 Memorial dedication in 2008.

Serkosky says he was particularly proud of his work on the stage in New York's Central Park for Pope John Paul II in 1995 and designing three stages for Pope Benedict's visit in 2008—including one at second base at Yankee Stadium, where no one was permitted to walk on the grass. Hired in 1996 after a two-year internship, Serkosky has served as a mentor to several other Wilkes interns who have come through the doors.

Davies is another former intern. He enjoys the camaraderie of a small engineering department, as well as the fact that "every one of our projects is different—in size, venue and location. We could be doing installations at a Super Bowl or a religious event; there are so many variables."

Griffith has worked for two years as an intern with plans to come on board officially after graduation. The internship program is a win-win for students and the company, because both can determine if an individual is a good fit for the work.

Griffith says he learned so much by doing. He traveled to job sites for a July Fourth celebration at the Philadelphia Art Museum and to Syracuse, N.Y., for a Dave Matthews Band concert.

"When you're learning theory in classrooms, sometimes you don't see how you'll ever use it. But as long as you understand the fundamentals and concepts of engineering you can make an educated decision out in the field," Serkosky says. His degree is in mechanical engineering, but a lot of what he does on the job involves structural engineering, which he taught himself "based on the foundations that Wilkes provided with the mechanical engineering degree."

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From left: Pre-performance at the 2009 Rothbury Music Festival, the stage for the Kenny Chesney Tour, and the stage for the 2008 papal visit in Yankee Stadium. PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOUNTAIN PRODUCTIONS.