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Blue Bell public relations firm spearheads travel initiatives

By: Frank D. Quattrone , Ticket Editor

How many of you know that 2007 is America's 400th birthday? If you consider that Jamestown, the first permanent settlement in the New World, was founded on May 13, 1607, then the huge Quadricentennial celebration of the nation's birth makes a lot more sense.

Factor in the reality that modern-day Jamestown - one point on the Golden Triangle that also encompasses historically-rich Williamsburg and Yorktown - is a bit too small to host a wide-scale celebration and you'll understand why Richmond has been chosen as the center of the year's festivities.

Richmond, after all, the capital of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the capital of the Confederacy, was founded just 11 days after the Jamestown landing by scouts from the Virginia Company ship Godspeed, which many of you might remember from its visit to Penn's Landing during Memorial Day weekend 2006.

That marvelous replica of the ship once commanded by Captain Christopher Newport and Captain John Smith was also an important piece in the long bridge spanning the 225-mile connection between Richmond and Philadelphia.

Oh, I know what you're thinking: "Richmond? I mean, it's not New York or Washington, or even Baltimore! Plus, it's so far away. Why would I want to go all the way to Richmond?"

To those who have not yet been charmed by this cosmopolitan Southern city, graced by fine architecture and gentle people and more museums, gardens and historical attractions than any other American city of comparable size (200,000 as of the last census; close to a million in the metropolitan area), you are in for a pleasant awakening!

The answer to the question posed - and why Richmond now, in 2007 - has luckily fallen into the professional care of Deborah L. Israel, founder and president of PROFIT Communications, a public relations and marketing firm located in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania.

In a telephone interview with the enterprising Israel last week, I learned exactly how this all came about. "First of all," she explained, "I think it's safe to say that Philadelphians believe that Richmond is much farther away than it really is. It's only four-and-a-half hours by car, just ninety minutes south of D.C. and an easy ride on Amtrak, and it's less than an hour from Jamestown, and all roads to Jamestown lead through Richmond.

"And yes, until last year, when the Godspeed sailed from Alexandria, Virginia to Baltimore, Washington and into Penn's Landing, awareness of Richmond was pretty low in our area. The Godspeed is a powerful visual icon," she continued, "and it also wowed spectators in New York, Boston and Newport, Rhode Island."

Basically, then, aside from her growing knowledge and affection for this underappreciated Southern city, Israel was hired to promote Richmond's "Signature Events" for 2007 because she's really good at what she does. I met her in 1999, when she was director of communications for Six Flags Great Adventure & Wild Safari in Jackson, N.J., promoting the popular theme park's \$42 million capital expansion.

A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Israel began working in the theme-park industry several years before that, at King's Island, near Cincinnati. At the time its general manager was Wilson Flohr, who was so pleased with Israel's efforts for the park that he kept in touch with her over the years.

It didn't hurt that Flohr eventually was named president and CEO of Richmond Region 2007, the entity working side by side with the Richmond Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau to promote "America's 400th Anniversary Celebration"! So he turned to Israel's firm for help.

"The two groups hired PROFIT Communications to provide outer-market public-relations services - a pilot program for the area - to attract people to the Richmond region to commemorate the year's activities," she said. "For me, the Godspeed's visit to Philadelphia was the first real taste. My first trip to Richmond was last October. I've been there several times since and I just love it.

"As far as my task is concerned? I like to call it building a bridge between two cities. There's so much vibrant history between them, from the African-American connection through the Underground Railroad to the position of each city as the center of great historical movements - the Revolutionary War and the birth of our nation in Philadelphia to the Civil War in Richmond.

"The great poet Maya Angelou," she continued, "is the honorary co-chair of Richmond's week-long series of activities [March 25 - 31] called 'African-American Trailblazers,' just as she's co-chairing the new exhibit at Philadelphia's African-American Museum called 'The Art of African Women.'"

Utilizing the talents of several professional writers, like Gwynedd Valley's Jennifer Graham and others who live and work in Abington, Blue Bell and elsewhere in Montgomery County, PROFIT Communications hopes to get the word out beyond the center of the festivities. So far, Israel shares, all their hard work is paying off.

"We've been challenged by the effort," she says, "and it's been a lot of fun. We hope that our efforts will make a difference. I've met a lot of fabulous people, learned a lot of great history, and can't wait for others to discover this great Southern city at such an exciting time."

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