

## Business First of Buffalo

# Unconventional approach to hospitality career

James Fink

*Friday, November 21, 2008*

If Kerry Painter had followed what she thought was her life's blueprint, she probably would have been a lawyer arguing some minute detail in a wood-paneled court room.

But, as John Lennon once sang, "Life is just what happens to you, while you are busy making other plans."

The other plans in this case were taking a part-time job working for the firm that managed and ran special events at Detroit's Joe Louis Arena, the former Olympia Stadium, Cobo Hall and the Fox Theater. Among her first jobs, working as part of the bodyguard detail for singer Prince before, after and during a concert at Joe Louis Arena.

"I wanted to be a lawyer, I really did," Painter said.

Painter was enrolled in the University of Michigan where she was majoring in business and minoring in economics and communications – all part of a pre-law regimen – and then she landed that part-time, between-semester job.

That job has led Painter down a career path that has put the Windsor, Ont., native as the point person for the still-to-be built Niagara Falls Convention and Civic Centre.

Officially, Painter is the center's president and general manager. Unofficially, she has become a major cheerleader for the Niagara Region.

Not bad for someone, who before taking the job, had last been in Niagara Falls when she was on a family vacation as a second-grader.

Within the tourism and hospitality industry, Painter, 45, is widely regarded as start-up specialist. She did that with Detroit's Fox Theater that reopened 15 years ago after the historic venue underwent a multi-million renovation.

Painter's diverse resume includes working at Hazel Park Harness Track in suburban Detroit and also, briefly, serving as tour coordinator for David Copperfield's tour of Europe.

Painter oversaw the rebirth of the Detroit Opera House, another major Motown venue and with the \$293 million restoration of the San Francisco City Hall.

Before coming to Niagara Falls, Painter worked in the New Orleans suburb of Slidell, where she was the point person for the development of the Northshore Harbor Center that opened in late spring 2005, just four months before Hurricane Katrina hit the region. The center

suffered more than \$5 million worth of damage and for a while served as relief center for the hurricane's victims.

Painter was one of 124 applicants for the Niagara Falls job.

What made her stand out was her experience, enthusiasm and a strong desire to return "home" to Canada. Even before she applied for the Niagara Falls job, Painter had made her five-year-old adopted son, Garrett, a dual U.S. and Canadian citizen.

"Everyone was impressed with Kerry and more so now that she's here," said Niagara Falls Mayor Ted Salci Jr. "Kerry has done a marvelous job and she's only been here a few months."

Construction on the \$100 million, 250,000-square-foot convention and event center won't start until next spring. The center is targeted to open by April 2011. Painter is so confident, she is already booking events there for May 2011.

When it opens, it will be the newest convention center in Canada and one of the largest outside of Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal.

The center will be located just off Stanley Avenue in the city's Fallsview Business District, not far from the Niagara Fallsview Casino Resort and Marineland. It is projected to be a major economic engine in a city where tourism and hospitality is its prime industry.

Early projections show the center creating \$93 million in visitor expenditures in Niagara Falls while bringing in an estimated 514,000 additional visitors annually to the city. The center may spearhead at least \$100 million in new, private investment.

"It will change the character of the city forever," Salci said. "That's why it was so important to us that we hire the right person. We're hoping the center will get rid of the 'shoulder season' (cold weather months when hotel occupancy and visitor impact drops off) in Niagara Falls."

A pre-construction economic impact study, conducted by the Toronto-based firm of PKF Consulting, said the convention center could add the demand for 173,000 new room nights annually in Niagara Falls with 70 percent of that coming during the shoulder months between late fall and early spring. Niagara Falls' two casinos could see \$65 million in new revenues because of the convention center.

"What's really cool is that I am creating something from others' vision," Painter said. "People in Niagara Falls have dreamed for a convention center for 20 years and now, I'm about to deliver it."

While Painter works in an office building that's connected to the Fallsview Casino, she does not limit her view of Niagara Falls to the Fallsview Business District.

Painter spent a large amount of time during her first months exploring Niagara Falls from the perspective of not only a new resident but also as a tourist. What she found was pleasant surprise and pleasant surprise from the region's wineries to the Shaw Festival plays in

Niagara-on-the-Lake to taking Garret for a ride on the Maid of the Mist. To sell the area, you had to know the area, Painter contends.

She has bookings or prospective dates for more than 60 groups including 2014 gathering of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities that will bring in more than 5,000 people to Niagara Falls for the 2014 meeting.

In Niagara Falls, Painter is not only selling a new convention center but also a more cost-effective location than Toronto. Room rates, alone, are anywhere from 20 percent to 30 percent cheaper than downtown Toronto. Travel costs are more affordable.