

Good Luck With Your Hobby

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Party hats, cocktail glasses and sequined gowns are just a few things that you can find plenty of in my home these days. Life is always a party. Literally for this event designer. But it has not always been that way. There have been plenty of triumphs over the years, but also many trials that have tested my ability to be the entrepreneur that I am today throughout my work as Founder and Chief Executive Officer at The Event Company. Let me take you on a bit of my journey from party poppers to tissue boxes.

You see, my love for parties and all things events started back when I was a young girl. I grew up in a small town in Nebraska with an entrepreneur mother and an agronomist for a father. I am the oldest of four children and have one sister, who lives just a few miles away from me here in South Dakota, and two brothers that live in Nebraska with their ever-growing families. As young children, my mother used to plan fun birthday parties for us. Whether these were themed celebrations at our home, at a nearby park, or even at a local restaurant, she always made the most of it. The neighbor kids would be there, friends from school and of course, all of my siblings. We would help create the invitations, pick out all of the supplies, make the signs and get ourselves ready for a party! As I started to get older and enter high school, I would be on planning committees for school parties, prom and other volunteer activities.

Are you catching on? This girl has always loved a good time and if there was a party to be had, I was there. But why wouldn't I want to be? I've been one that has liked to bring people together to gather for good conversation, great music, tasty bites, fun games and activities. Let's not forget about all the beautiful decor, floral centerpieces, color-coordinated napkins and candles. Oh, so many candles. Even back in the 80s when we were young children, it was the rolls upon rolls of crepe paper streamers and matching balloons that we would blow up ourselves until our faces were red and we were out of breath. All of those elements have had so much meaning over the years. It still does. It's those things that we spend countless hours curating to transform ourselves to another place, to create an experience and to make memories. I have absolutely loved almost every moment of it, but now I have the pleasure of doing this day-in and day-out as my career. I am a part of creating those experiences and transforming people to another place and another time, just for the evening at a fundraising gala or even throughout a two-day conference. I must say that I have a pretty cool career that is ever-changing and has afforded me the opportunity to be bold and do things that some said that I couldn't. Some individuals that perhaps didn't think I was talented enough to make it happen or even the drive and determination to do so.

What? No drive? No determination? Me? Were they talking about the young woman who traveled 124 miles roundtrip, three days a week, to the University of South Dakota to earn her degree while working 3:00PM to midnight at a financial institution call center? No, they couldn't be talking about me. After helping to coordinate various employee and fundraising events throughout my college years for the company that I was working for, I knew that this was a passion of mine. I would volunteer to be a part of different event planning committees for the bank that I was working for while in college and then shortly after I graduated, I would take a role with the state's largest media company. Here, I put in my time and worked hard. I worked long hours and worked some odd hours in the media business, waking up at 3AM to get the newspaper out on the doorsteps and into the hands of our readers by the time the sun came up. That hard work paid off because I quickly made my way up the chain and joined the marketing department. I soon became the director of the marketing department and helped to manage our internal events as well as our external events. Some of these events were very large and spanned the state. I learned a lot in those years. Here is where I began to understand the importance of events on a larger scale and in the corporate world and nonprofit sector. I formed new relationships with event partners from local and state government, to admired CEOs, community leaders and everyone in between.

It takes an army of people to plan a successful event and I had the opportunity to help lead those efforts alongside some incredibly amazing people. A few of those individuals have become my mentors over the years. A man, by the name of Randell Beck, being one of them. Randell is the former editor and publisher of Argus Leader Media. While working together and as the youngest member of his executive team at Argus Leader Media, he taught me what it meant to do the hard things. I learned to push through adversity and to be bold in my decisions. I would do things that seemed light years ahead of my time (and even my skill), but he believed in me.

Another person that believed in me from the moment that met him on January 2, 2006 was a 6'8" Sioux Falls native with long hair. That's the day that I met the love of my life. Randell was also a big fan of this man. This gregarious person who was the life of the party, also loved a good gathering and liked to have people around him. Have I met my match? Well, I thought so on that wintery new year night. I even told my mother the next day that I was going to marry him. Andrew (Drew) Kramer has been by my side ever since. He supported my efforts as I worked alongside Randell while honing my marketing, public relations and event planning skills. Drew was there at the dinner table talking with me about how best to prepare to tell Randell that I was planning to leave the company to take a new leadership role with a nonprofit organization. A company that meant a lot to me because of my family - the nation's oldest and largest voluntary organization dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke.

other fundraising event in the four-state region with me as I led a team of fundraising and communication professionals in South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota and Nebraska. Soon, our little boys, William and Calvin, would join-in on those events and watch mommy in event-action. Drew, William and Calvin traveled countless miles to support me as I continued to build my dream of being in the event industry, all while raising millions of dollars for heart disease and stroke. He has been the heavy lifter when no one else was there. Drew and the boys have been my cheerleader, day after day. They believe in me. Just as Randell did many years ago when I first entered the professional industry and just as he does today.

The passion for events was there and always had been. Could I do this for my community here in South Dakota and plan events for others? What if I could take the skills that I have learned and excelled in in the corporate and nonprofit sector and help them plan their own events? With Drew by my side, my family and friends, along with others in the hospitality industry from hoteliers, to audio/visual companies to catering teams and to venues - I had a trusted troop that believed in me. This was a much-needed service in our community since there was not a corporate and nonprofit event planner focused on those segments only. After putting together some rough ideas of what it could be and talking through it with other tenured professionals in our industry that were much smarter than me (here's looking at you Sarah Maag), I launched The Event Company in October 2013. They all believed in me and I wasn't going to let them down.

Now, on the contrary, remember how I was sharing more about the naysayers along the way that didn't believe in me? Before launching The Event Company and after sharing the news that I was going to branch out and do my thing, the CEOs of a company that I was working for at the time said, "Good luck with your hobby!" Good luck with my hobby? Where is the support for local entrepreneurship and following your dreams? That was not what I was expecting to hear and started formulating my own doubts. Hearing that fueled my passion even more to show that person what I was capable of building and how our company would help so many people. I was meant to do more in this world. Then, when times were difficult and we came up against one obstacle or another, that voice of "Good luck with your hobby!" would creep into my brain. Even throughout those first three years of launching the company when our team of four was working out of a 133 square foot office creating events for national brands, multi-day conferences and doing all we could to build a good name for our company, I would hear those words occasionally. Looking back now, that is what also drove me to push even harder, to do better and to never give up.

Fast forward eight years and if you're wondering if that CEO's voice still pops into my head. I'd be lying if I said it didn't. Did I do the right thing nearly a decade ago when I took that leap to launch The Event Company? Did I make the right decision for my family?

The answer is vivid. Yes. We've made quite the name for ourselves at The Event Company having the opportunity to plan over 425 events in 19 different states across the country with some of those being nonprofit events that have raised over \$9.7M for organizations and individuals that need it the most. Funds raised for those that are fighting cancer, to the families that may not have enough food to put on the dinner table, to children with Type 1 diabetes, to sharing the word of Christ with students, to veterans, to our local aquarium, to youth and women in Nicaragua, to universities and student athletes and many others. The list of organizations and initiatives that we have had the opportunity to be a part of in eight years goes beyond what I could have ever imagined for our company. We are passionate about making a difference and creating change not only in our community, but also across the country. We do all of this by building dreams through events.

While some may have the image of an event planner in their head similar to that of Jennifer Lopez in the film, "The Wedding Planner," this is not exactly what we do. Our team has experience in managing all of the behind the scenes elements that make corporate and nonprofit events successful. Those elements include event design, audio and video production, budget development and reconciliation, fundraising consultation, committee leadership, public relations and media buying, graphic design, event communications and social media management, food and beverage menu development, trade show management, celebrity speaker relations and other facets of what it takes to make the event successful. We do have similar headsets that we rock at events like Jennifer Lopez had in the movie, but running around in suit skirts and high heels focused on all things pretty is not exactly what we do. We do so much more and each person on our team has an incredible servant heart for making our community and our world a better place.

The impact of our work is seen when we walk down the streets of downtown Sioux Falls, each time we step foot inside of a new venue for the first time and when we see the faces of those that our events benefit. It is a humbling experience. It was more so throughout the pandemic and continues to be.

When the live event and hospitality industry came to a screeching halt in March 2020 and 12 million of our colleagues were out of work, we also didn't know what was next for us and those companies and nonprofits that we serve. There were many days and nights filled with emotional tears (oh so many tears), frustration and anxiety, talks with God, countless scribbles and spreadsheets determining what we needed to do to make it through. Yet, event after event were canceling and some began talking about what it would look like if they went to a virtual format for their event. While our team had experience in various elements of virtual events that involved Zoom conference sessions, virtual auction bidding and virtual event platforms and event mobile apps to connect audiences together, we were not the experts.

Each person on our team pushed through and found ways to be innovative in the virtual event sphere. We collectively attended over 30 virtual conferences, testing out which virtual platforms we liked best and took note of those elements. We worked countless hours, day and night. We met with vendors across the country trying to determine the best ways to continue building dreams with our clients. After all, they needed us too. Those that they served through their organizations needed us. Just because their event couldn't take place as originally planned didn't mean that there wasn't a need for those hundreds of thousands of fundraising dollars or that the information that was to be presented was obsolete and no longer relevant. They needed us just as much as we needed them.

We found innovative ways and were determined to not fail, no matter what it took. We worked with our event partners to develop platforms that would allow our events to still continue, just in adapted means. To find ways for the audio and visual to be appealing and vivid on-screen since the events were going virtual. Guest engagement virtually is much more difficult to achieve than in-person. (It's hard to interact with that green camera button on your laptop!) Those weeks and months were a blur. I would find myself working 16-20 hours a day trying to keep up with the demand for our services, all while working to retain our existing clients and making it happen for them. My family suffered and I missed my boys and husband so much. My personal life was placed on the back burner and I was sinking into a depression. It was work, work, work - day-in and day-out. I would spend my early mornings reading my devotions and talking to God, asking for his strength. My days would be filled with Zoom meeting after Zoom meeting, listening to the trials that our clients were experiencing and in many cases, seeing their anxiety and emotions heightened. My nights were spent in tears of uncertainty and depression, even as I write this now, my eyes swell up and tears fall down my cheek. Drew would comfort me, pick me up when I could barely stand on my own and was there for every moment that I was experiencing. He saw something in me that I could not see in myself. He still believed in me even when I did not have all of the answers.

To the outside world, no one knew anything different. Our team banded together, to do all that they could to not only survive as a company and to continue making the world a better place, but to thrive and grow. We took on clients from across the country from California to North Carolina and many other states in between. We gathered all that we learned, worked

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side-by-side with our event partners to find ways to make it happen and we did that in a big way. Our company doubled revenues and our staff grew. I soon found myself speaking on the mainstage to thousands and thousands of industry professionals and potential clients sharing about all that we had created in the virtual world for events. Our team was also now certified on on-site pandemic protocols for events and was looking forward to getting back together

in-person for conferences, celebration and concerts. We were being recognized not only locally, but throughout the world with awards for our work, but it was all so overwhelming. To all of us at The Event Company, we knew we were one of the best across the country for all that we do and wanted to put all of our efforts into using our talents to help our clients. But how long would this workload be sustainable? Were our virtual clients going to stay with us after we came out of the pandemic and worked to get back to a “new normal?” We had so many questions but again, no answers.

So many thoughts would creep into my head throughout the day and I wasn’t sure how to process them, let alone have time to do so. Were we going to make it as a family when I would go days without speaking but a few sentences to the love of my life? Were my children going to resent me for choosing to focus on my company instead of spending time with them? Or would they see strength, resilience and wanting to help as many that we could? Was our company going to falter and fail? As a wife, mother, company and community leader, I was responsible for the livelihood of so many, but I was barely keeping it together. While the world was suffering from the effects of a pandemic, we were also experiencing the effects of a mental health crisis. Myself being one of those statistics.

Then, a light came on. A friend posted on one of her social platforms what she was feeling: anxiety, sadness, stress, frustration and uncertainty. I connected with that post and read it over and over. I was feeling all of those same things. But one thing that was different between her and me was that she reached out for professional help through a mental health therapist. Do I need help? I had spent the better part of nearly 18 months being there for so many and helping any way that I could, but did not focus on myself. I was the one that needed picking up. So I made the call. I reached out that same day to schedule an appointment with a therapist to talk through what I was experiencing and what I was feeling.

Talking to a therapist was a new undertaking for someone who was determined to not ask for help, especially when it was for me. But after sleepless nights, tear-soaked pillow cases and moments when I didn’t think I could do it any more, plus leading a company through a pandemic with record-setting growth, this was one of the best decisions that I have made for myself. Speaking to someone each week about all that I am experiencing as a mother, a wife, a friend and a leader provides a better look into myself and has allowed me to find more

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efficiencies in our business as well. While our company continues to grow and be seen on the national level, I have put that focus back on myself to work towards finding a better balance between our company and then what happens outside of the four walls of our office building. Building and re-building takes time and it will take many more months of hard work, but we’re doing it with the guidance of another leader on our team and I am incredibly proud of all she is

doing. I have been more transparent with my family about what I am feeling and my team sees what progress we are making to become even better together. I am surrounded by individuals that love me and have been there through the last eight years as we have created one pretty kickass company, led by a strong female entrepreneur and supported by nearly a dozen other amazing females. We are doing it and our outlook has never been brighter.

Well, here we are friends. It's almost time to take off those party hats and clean-up the confetti. That little passion for parties and "hobby" that I have, has been the recipient of international recognition time and time again, seen unprecedented growth during a pandemic, brought our team to some of the most humble organizations and creative companies in the world and allowed me to find myself and trust in others around me. It has been hard, yet rewarding and I am proud of those that have been a part of our journey. I am forever grateful that you chose to stand beside me and believe in me.

I will end with one of my favorite quotes that I have read over and over the last few years from author, Glennon Doyle:

"We can do hard things.

We humans have an uncanny ability to learn. We grow. We overcome. We adapt. We rest. We change our minds. Make amends. Laugh. Blow milk out our noses when laughing. We plan. We cease. We strive.

There is no end to what we can do.

But sometimes it feels too hard to do anything. Breathing seems like hard work and the days seem long and nights bound to infinity.

We can do hard things."

Do the hard things, friends. Because I believe in you.