



## 2024 Annual Education Conference Recap

by Allyn Hodgins (with session recaps by current and future Board members)

WOW! It feels like meetings are FINALLY back! Our 2024 Annual Education Conference was amazing, and it was great to see so many old friends and new faces. We had about 80 people register and nearly 50% of attendees were non-members! It's so wonderful to see we're almost back to pre-COVID numbers.

First and foremost; I speak for the entire chapter; we want to thank our gracious hosts, The Forum Hotel; thanks to Darby and the entire team; and our supportive sponsors and partners, and the top-notch MPI Virginia Annual Conference and Education Committees, all of without whom we wouldn't have been able to pull off such a successful event!

The welcome reception was hosted in the hotel's Study, which was a relaxing setting. It reminded me of an old-timey and sophisticated sitting room, with deep colors and plush seating. It was a great vibe to establish the feel for meeting.

The first full day of the conference kicked off with some YUMMY breakfast burritos and networking, before jumping into opening remarks from our President, Martina James and our PACKED agenda, which offered up to 10 CEUs over the course of the two day event!

I asked that some members of the current and future MPI Virginia Chapter Board of Directors provide recaps of each session, so it wasn't just me telling you how great this conference was... so here they are for Day 1 of the conference:



### *Developing Yourself as a Team of One* Sara Shelton

Do you have no Woo? Sarah Shelton doesn't, but if you are in sales, chances are its higher up on your list. In her presentation "Developing Yourself as a Team of One", Sarah dove into how to leverage career development into increased job satisfaction. We got a free inside look at the CliftonStrength method of discovering what you naturally do best and learning how to develop your greatest talents into strengths. Strength-based development increases our performance, engagement, and helps with improved actionable feedback. We had a great time pairing up and talking about the balconies and basements of our strengths. That go-getter and tireless effort of an "Achiever" and

*Kathleen Hinger, CMP*

the stubborn, bossiness of too much “Command”. Beneficial for better self-awareness and also helpful to recognize the strengths of our colleagues.



*Kathleen Hinger, CMP*

### ***Seeing is Believing: Harnessing the Power of Event Imagery for Growth***

***Morgan Montgomery, CMP, CPCE, CERP***

Morgan Montgomery shared a plethora of wisdom to help those in attendance improve our usage of Event Imagery. How many times have you scoured your phone or computer of that one picture you took of that thing you want to explain? Humans process most information visually, and faster than text, which is part of why a picture is worth 1000 words. Morgan shared the importance of curating your images to ensure clear Brand Identity, meet your specific Goals, and help others Aspire to what you can achieve with them. Simple yet powerful. And she guided us through the power of understanding how to get the images you want and need, especially the pitfalls to avoid with obtaining images from outside sources. From handy best practices to tools to help you stay organized and efficient, it truly was a masterclass in maximizing the benefit adept visuals can provide to a supplier, planner, marketer and more.



*Heather Buss*

### ***Human Trafficking Awareness in the Hospitality Industry*** ***Deanna “Dede” Wallace***

Human trafficking is a critical issue in the hospitality industry, and awareness is key to combating it. Dede Wallace is a Victim Assistance Specialist with Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), a division of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). She plays a crucial role in supporting victims of human trafficking and raising awareness about this critical issue.

Here are some key take-aways about human trafficking awareness in the hospitality industry:

1. **Training Programs:** Many organizations offer specialized training for hotel staff to identify and respond to potential trafficking situations. [These programs often include interactive scenarios and survivor-informed lessons.](#) ECPAT.org
2. **Indicators of Trafficking:** [Hotel employees are trained to spot signs such as frequent requests for new linens, guests who avoid eye contact, or individuals who seem to be under someone else’s control.](#)

2. [Proactive Measures](#): Hotels can adopt best practices like [The Code](#), a program that unifies the industry against trafficking, especially of children.

3. [Resources and Toolkits](#): There are various toolkits available that provide guidelines and best practices for preventing trafficking in the [hospitality sector](#).



*Cindy Bell*

***Deep Dive into Virginia's Economy: Drivers of Growth, Shifting Demographics, and Implications for the Meeting Industry***  
*Ryan Price and Eric Terry*

In a captivating 60-minute session, attendees got an exclusive, deep dive into the evolving landscape of Virginia's economy. The discussion also provided a thorough analysis of Virginia's shifting demographics, shedding light on how these changes will reshape the meeting industry. With a focus on innovative economic development initiatives across the Commonwealth, this session delivered crucial insights and strategies to seize emerging opportunities and stay ahead of the curve.



*Tracy Fink*

***Data Driven Decisions – Before, During, & After the Event***  
*Ali DiGuardo*

One of my favorite business quotes comes from Steen Rasmussen: "Data-driven decisions are only as good as the data you use to make them." In the event industry, data is essential for executing a successful event and ensuring a memorable experience for your client. During Ali DiGuardo's presentation, "Data-Driven Decisions – Before, During, and After the Event," she emphasized the importance of collecting the right data at every stage of the event process.

Before securing a contract, it's crucial to gather information that addresses both the client's needs and any relevant logistical details. Ali also highlighted the value of registration data in shaping an effective event marketing campaign. During the event, she provided insightful tips on creating a welcoming environment for all participants. Finally, she stressed the importance of collecting feedback and testimonials after the event to inform future planning.

As event planners, we often focus on what needs to be done next. However, with the right data in hand, we can ensure that our next steps are informed by solid, data-driven decisions.



Megan Hazzard

## *Inclusive Leadership and Belonging: A Pathway to Amplified Leadership*

*Camica Credle & Bettina Mason*

Camica Credle and Bettina Mason brought the energy again to the MPI Virginia Conference with their interactive and engaging session “Inclusive Leadership & Belonging: A Pathway to Amplified Leadership.” Their objectives outlined for all of the attendees for this session were to Inspire, Innovate, Ignite and Implement. It was great to see the feedback from the crowd as they used their menti software to include all of us in the answers to display on the big screen. We were able to compare how other conferences have responded to some of their questions and see how differently we all think and respond. This presentation included the discussion of the critical role of inclusive leadership and how to inspire and elevate teams. We were also given several questions to discuss with our tablemates like how to fuel innovation and creative problem solving and how to spark a passion for inclusivity to become champions of change within our organizations. This is always a valuable exercise to get to know those around us and learn from our fellow Meeting Professionals. Discussing how to implement the culture of belonging gave us actionable strategies to create an environment where every team member feels valued, understood, and integral to their organization’s success.

These two are always a fan favorite with the MPI members and we were happy to have them back! The quotes they shared were also incredibly intentional and appreciated by the audience. I saved them because I felt so strongly about them and hope the chapter members who were unable to attend will appreciate them as well:

“Diversity is a Fact. Equity is a Choice. Inclusion is an Action. Belonging is an Outcome.” – Arthur Chan

“Listen with curiosity. Speak with honesty. Act with integrity. The greatest problem with communication is we don’t listen to understand. We listen to reply. When we listen with curiosity, we don’t listen with the intent to reply. We listen for what’s behind the words.” – Roy T Bennett

At the conclusion of Day 1's education sessions, we all took time to get "gussied-up" and ready to attend the Awards Reception and Dinner.

We started the celebratory evening with a reception on the lawn. The weather could not have been more perfect! We enjoyed delicious apps (the Tuna Tostada was to-die-for), drinks and some laughs. Thank you, Paisley and Jade, for sponsoring the fun and elegant décor and seating! Did I mention we had a fun set up in the meeting space? Paisley and Jade provided a comfy seating area for us there too!



Members of the 2023-2024 Board of Directors and the Incoming 2025 Board of Directors

Our buffet dinner was served, we all chowed down on a delicious (and what I would say was healthy) spread of steak, salmon, a baked potato bar!, veggies and afterward, we all indulged ourselves in some Banana Foster desserts.

And after we were all in a food coma, it was time for the 2024 Chapter Awards presentation!

Congratulations to all of the nominees and winners of our 2024 Chapter Awards.

#### Most Creative Host Facility of the Year

Nominees (**Winner**)

- **2023 Annual Conference: Wintergreen Resort**
- 2023 November Quarterly Meeting: The Graduate
- 2024 February Quarterly Meeting: Delta Marriott Virginia Beach Waterfront
- 2024 March Board Retreat: The Landing at Hampton Marina
- 2024 April Quarterly Meeting: The Hilton Richmond Downtown

#### Young Professional Award

Nominees (**Winner**)

- Cindy Bell
- **Shamera Stewart, CMP**
- Kate Belleman

#### Howard Feiertag Impact Member of the Year Award

Nominees (**Winner**)

- **Penny Guiles**
- Kara Allen
- Lori Leib, CMP

#### Cecil H. Bailey, CMP Mentor Award

Nominees (**Winner**)

- Christi Ruddy, CMP
- **Lori Leib, CMP**
- Artonda Cheeseman, CMP

#### Education Program of the Year

Nominees (**Winner**)

- "V.O.L.A.R. – How to Turn Roadblocks Into Runways To Success!" – Mitch Savoie-Hill
- "Enhancing Your Executive Presences" – Shawn Smith
- "Hands On: F&B Charcuterie Boards" – Delta by Marriott Virginia Beach Waterfront Culinary Team
- **"Events Unplugged: Real Talk about Mastering Logistics, Elevating Experiences, and Engaging Creative" – Faith Wilkerson & Kelli Lemon**

#### J.B. Bostic Torchlight Award

Nominees (**Winner**)

- Lauran Dangler
- Ariel Cole, CMP
- **Allyn Hodgins**

#### Meeting Industry Leadership Award

Nominees (**Winner**)

- **Christi Ruddy, CMP**
- Lisa Meriwether
- Brittany Rice

#### 2024 President's Award

**Megan Hazzard**

We wrapped up the Awards Dinner with a fun and energetic after party on the lawn. Thanks to Colonial DJs who supplied the tunes, fun lighting, and photo booth! I seem to always get several fun reels from the photo booth and ALWAYS, I wish I had gotten some pics with a ton of other folks too! Oh well, next time!

The night ended really late for some of us, so it was great that we started Day 2 of the conference off with a protein-packed breakfast of eggs, bacon and oatmeal.

After devouring breakfast, we were then ready to jump right into the last 4 sessions of the conference.



*Rachael Holt, CMP*

### ***Safety First: Identifying Security and Emergency Response Protocols***

*Abby Tammen & Ben Reeves*

In this session we learned important safety measures to take at the workplace. Abby and Ben started out by involving the audience and people shared their safety procedures. We then watched a video on mass shootings and learned the importance of Run, Hide or Fight; the three main options when put in that situation. They also shared some easy and free options to increase workplace safety, such as: inviting your local police department to conduct a walkthrough and provide suggestions, monthly safety meetings, create evacuation routes, and identify a code word for staff to use. It was an engaging session with impactful information that we were able to bring back into our own workplace.



*Shamera Stewart, CMP, MBA, DES*

### ***Igniting Inner Leadership: Self-Care for Event Planners***

*Tracy Hess*

During "Igniting Inner Leadership: Self-Care for Event Planners," Tracy Hess connected the dots between self-care and leadership, delivering insights to every meeting and event professional needs to hear. We explored the full spectrum of self-care, from physical and emotional to financial, and even practiced a calming breathing exercise to manage stress and overwhelming thoughts. Tracy also shared her foolproof time management matrix, perfect for anyone juggling multiple roles and job duties. Her real-life examples showed just how powerful these methods can be in transforming both personal and professional lives. This session was packed with practical nuggets and tools that left attendees energized and ready to lead with confidence!



*Penny Guiles*

### ***Teamwork Makes the Stream Work: How To Build The Best Virtual And Hybrid Events Without Losing Your Mind***

**Nick Bacon**

Nick Bacon’s “Teamwork Makes the Stream Work, How to Build the Best Virtual and Hybrid Events Without Losing Your Mind” was not only informative, but entertaining. Nick gave us tips on how to build successful virtual and hybrid events by focusing on communicating effectively with not only your meeting owner, but also your venues and partners. Additionally, he emphasized the value of building trust by defining your North. What is it that the meeting owner wants the attendees to experience? Simply put, what is the why? Nick was able to be vulnerable in his approach by sharing mistakes he had made during events he produced to show that you should always be prepared for issues that might arise and that you should leave room for mistakes, because inevitably you will experience one or the other. It was a great session, and we thank Nick for sharing his time and expertise in this field with us.



*Steve Tewksbury, CMP*

### ***Enhancing Experiences and Managing Relationships***

***Casey Armstrong, Reed Patterson, Abbey Withrow & Rachael Holt, Zach Eiseman***

The final session of the conference brought together a panel of leaders who were at the forefront of Richmond’s CNN’s 2024 Best Towns to Visit in America award.

Casey Armstrong and Reed Patterson of Richmond Region Tourism shared many of the services offered by most Convention and Visitors Bureaus, giving specifics of how they work with different organizations to bring business and tourism to Richmond and surrounding counties. Abbey Withrow with the Richmond Marriot Downtown and Rachel Holt with the Westin Richmond shared how many hotels sales departments partner with CVBs, local businesses, arts and adventure operations to provide unique and memorable experiences. Rounding out the panel was Zach Eisenman, CEO of Eisenman Associates, who explained how he brings together clients looking for new and exciting programs with fellow panelists, explaining how they work together to create lasting memories. The session takeaway was that we must keep face to face one-of-a-kind interactions to ensure that real and lasting connections are made and strong word of mouth that keeps the buzz alive, particularly as word grows about all that Richmond has to offer.

Again, thank you to the entire Annual Conference and Education Committees for curating a fantastic array of sessions designed to “Inspire, Innovate and Ignite” each of our leadership journeys!

Throughout the entire conference we held our silent auction to raise funds for the chapter. We had boucoup hotel stays from across the state, getaways, activities for the family, and some great gift bags up for grabs. Thank you to all of our donors! We raised more than \$2,000.00 for the chapter. If you are interested in donating to a future silent auction, please reach out to [Megan Hazzard](#) or [Kathleen Hinger](#), incoming Director of Sponsorships.

MPI Virginia continues to plan future events, and we invite you and your colleagues to attend our next Quarterly program which will be November 19-20, 2024, at Hilton Norfolk The Main. Registration is open, so register [here](#) today.

We also have a few informal Chapter Meet-Ups scheduled. We’ll be at [The Crossings Hotel & Conference Center on September 17](#) and on [October 16 we’ll be at The Lost Office Collaborative in Richmond](#), for a “Morning Brew Meet-up”. Our December Meet-Up will be a Holiday Happy Hour and will take place on [December 12 at the Williamsburg Lodge](#). As always, our happy hour meet-ups and coffee chat events are FREE for MPI Virginia members and only \$10 for non-members, so invite anyone, who may have interest in MPI or its members, for some quality networking time.

Lastly, we want to say one final “Thank You” and give a HUGE round of applause to our Annual Meeting host, The Forum Hotel Kimpton Charlottesville, our amazing speakers, our generous sponsors, and our members who support us at each and every meeting. Thank you!

We hope to see everyone soon!!