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Behind the scenes

A visit with the people
who organize events —
like Tim Gunn's
recent book signing **G4**

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Glitzy

Blizzards, rain, Secret Service — they deal with it

BY CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN
Special to *Newsday*

Ostensibly, celebrity event and wedding planner Michael Russo has one of the glitziest jobs imaginable.

Based in Glen Cove, Russo has designed holiday parties for comedian Kathy Griffin, actress Emmanuelle Chriqui (“Entourage”) and NBA star Shaquille O’Neal. He’s also planned the weddings of former Major League Baseball player Paul Lo Duca, actress Beverley Mitchell (“Seventh Heaven”) and most famously, pop star Kevin Jonas, who tied the knot at Oheka Castle in Huntington in December.

As such, Russo not only gets to create dazzling parties, but he also gets to hobnob with the rich and famous at the very events he conjures up.

It’s hard to conceive of a more glamorous profession — until you peek behind the scenes — which, for Russo, have wound up filled with mud.

The setup for the Sept. 9, 2004 event at Oheka Castle — the wedding after-party for former ‘N Sync boy band member Joey Fatone and his longtime girlfriend Kelly Baldwin — had been going swimmingly.

“We had set up a Ferris wheel, bumper cars, a huge swing, a zeppole truck,” Russo recalls.

“All of a sudden, we noticed that the giant slide was sinking!”

Record-setting rainfall the day before the wedding had created a great lawn of mud — one that could not support the carnival rides. So, piece by piece, “we had to move the whole thing to the parking lot,” Russo says.

He managed not to lose his cool. “I don’t know where it comes from,” he says, “but in moments of major stress, I



NEWSDAY PHOTO / ALEXANDRA VILLA

Event planner Michael Russo, based in Glen Cove, creates dazzling parties, but it's hard — and muddy — work sometimes.

not always glamorous



Nancy Grigor, who runs Amagansett-based Hamptons Locations, photographs a home in Bellport. She does location scouting for film and television shoots as well as for ads and commercials, catalogs and magazines.

PHOTO BY GORDON M. GRANT

become very calm."

Still, that experience was a mere blip in the radar compared to the blizzard of Dec. 19, 2009 — the day of Kevin Jonas' fantasy winter-wonderland-themed wedding-come-to-life. The ceremony was set for 6 p.m. at Oheka Castle and, for the reception, a 10,000-square-foot tent had been set up on the grounds for some 500 guests.

"It didn't start snowing until about 1 p.m.," Russo recalls. Soon enough, the gusts of wind were so violent he feared

the tent might be blown away. A tent crew of 14 had to work fast to secure it — installing larger tent stakes complete with sensors that would signal if a stake moved. As the crew pounded the stakes into the ground, snow was accumulating atop the tent.

And that meant it was time for the crew to start shoveling, to ensure the tent wouldn't collapse under the weight of the snow. Russo also had to scramble to rent extra heaters — a total of 16 — to keep guests warm as the temperature dropped.

"After the first dance, I started planning for an emergency," he says of efforts that included lining up hotel rooms in case guests couldn't make it home.

The blizzard ended with a record snowfall of 26-plus inches. Even so, Russo says the guests were able to get home the same way they arrived — on the buses that had delivered them to the wedding, whose location had been kept secret.

"Everyone says what a glamorous job I have," Russo says, "but they only see the final product. They don't see the craziness that goes into it!"

Former model Nancy Grigor's encounter with unpredictable weather didn't involve snow — just hours and hours of unexpected rainfall.

Grigor, who runs Amagansett-based Hamptons Locations, does location scouting for film and television shoots as well as for ads and commercials, catalogs and magazines.

She has set up East End locations for the upcoming film "Something Borrowed," starring Kate Hudson and John Krasinski, and arranged Long Island settings for "Something's Gotta Give," "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," and "The Nanny Diaries."

Grigor says she was contacted by Essence magazine to scout a location for an outdoor photo shoot for the August issue that would feature superstar Janet Jackson on the cover. The magazine wanted a modern white house on the ocean and "we had to find a white horse for Janet to ride down the beach," Grigor said in an e-mail.

She arranged for the house and a horse from a stable in

East Hampton, and "the day before the shoot we tested out the horse on the beach to make sure it would all work well." On the morning of the shoot, everything was ready.

Then, when Jackson arrived, her manager asked that the windows of her dressing room be blacked out so paparazzi couldn't snap her picture.

"This took quite some time, but we managed to get the windows covered" with cardboard and black fabric, she says.

And rain had begun falling. "The sky was black and the winds picked up," she says, "and it was apparent we had a problem."

And the wait began. "You

ON THE COVER

At Huntington's Book Revue, events planner Julianne Wernersbach passes books to TV's Tim Gunn for signing.

See **PLANNER** on G7

All in a day's work

PLANNER from G4

can't just say, 'Let's take a rain date and maybe try it in a day or two,'” Grigor says. “Celebrities have a specific time schedule. You have to work with them when they are available.”

Which means that “once they are booked, you have to make the best of it.”

In this case, it meant the horse couldn't be used after all. Jackson would be photographed instead with a Porsche from a local car dealer, and when there was a short break in the weather, the shooting began.

The photos turned out great, Grigor says, “and no one knew what a mess we had to deal with.”

'So much for glamour'

A drenching of another sort caught Michelle Isabelle-Stark, who runs the Suffolk County Film Commission. She typically secures the rights for shoots at public facilities — parks, buildings, streets, historic structures.

So when a film was on location at the Mill Pond Restaurant on Route 25A in Centerport this summer, she stopped by the set. “I always try to go on location to meet the director, producer and crew to say ‘Hi’ and find out how their experience is, shooting in Suffolk County,” Isabelle-Stark says.

She spent some time on the set and, before shooting began, was heading to her car when a truck launched a high-intensity water spray on the road for the next scene — inadvertently soaking her right along with the pavement.

“So much for glamour,” she says with a chuckle.

Typically, she says, her work is less about celebrities and more about paper — the contracts, budgets and other forms necessary before any physical shoots. Such prep work is also what takes up much of Julianne Wernersbach's time.

For three years, Wernersbach has been the publicist and events coordinator at Book Revue in Huntington, one of the last independent book stores on Long Island and one with a heavy schedule of events. Since its founding in 1977, the store has hosted a venerable who's who of authors and celebrities, among them Newt Gingrich, Rosie O'Donnell, Sean Hannity, Buzz Aldrin, Paula Deen, Neil Simon, Caroline Kennedy and, twice, Bill Clinton.

Wernersbach was on the store's staff for Clinton's second visit — Dec. 2, 2007, a date she says was “the most



Suffolk County Film Commission's Michelle Isabelle-Stark on the set of a movie in Southampton.

PHOTO BY GORDON M. GRANT

details it takes to put the evening together are virtually invisible to the audience,” she says. But for that visit, Clinton's security detail submitted a lengthy packet of guidelines — down to the exact specifications for the table where Clinton would sign copies of his book “Giving: How Each of Us Can Change the World.”

Security checkpoints had to be established, every inch of space probed by bomb-sniffing dogs and some sections of the store closed off to the public.

Wernersbach remembers the evening as one of nonstop running — back and forth, dealing with first one issue, then another.

It qualified as an unforgettable experience, one she says ended with her standing near the former president in a group photo.

Making stars do a little work

The requirements for fashion guru and “Project Runway” star Tim Gunn's September appearance weren't nearly as demanding, but the pressure was still on. With a packed house of some 250 excited fans waiting, Wernersbach says, she had to make sure that Gunn signed 200 of his books before he strode into the shop to speak. To accomplish that, she guided him from a back alley entrance-way into an office, then spent nearly an hour handing him one open copy after another of “Gunn's Golden Rules: Life's Little Lessons for Making It Work” (Simon & Schuster, 2010). The books would be set aside to be sold after his appearance.

For Gunn, those signings were only the beginning: After he spoke to the audience, he greeted about 200 fans who had already purchased books, posing for a picture with each one. Wernersbach handed him each customer's book, and he inscribed them with personal comments. It took about three hours.

It was one of four book signing events he had scheduled in the New York area

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