

## AEP 2025 CONFERENCE PRESENTER BIOS



### **Alexander Casas**

#### **Florida International University**

Alexander D. Casas is the Chief of Police at Florida International University (FIU). He was appointed to the position in September 2011.

Prior to coming to FIU, he was the Acting Division Chief of Police at Miami-Dade Police Department, South Operations Division. He served for twenty-two years with the Miami-Dade Police Department and held a variety of positions and assignments throughout the County. He leads daily operations to include police response, investigative response, crime prevention, community outreach, homicide investigation, sexual battery investigation, and community-oriented policing. Additionally, he has served as an Adjunct Professor at FIU from May 2011 to present. Currently Chief Casas is an Adjunct Professor at FIU, where he has been teaching since May of 2011.

He attended FIU, attaining a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice in 2006 and received a Master of Science in Leadership from Nova Southeastern University in 2010. He has one son and three daughters.



### **Richard Davies**

#### **DRPG**

Rich started his career as an audio engineer but soon discovered a passion for experience strategy and design: challenging the brief, formulating the 'why' and delivering meaningful, measurable experiences.

His industry experience has allowed him to work globally with some of the biggest brands and sectors including automotive, retail, telco and tech companies. delivering integrated campaigns, stand-out events, and bold brand experiences in both B2B, B2C and internal comms at all scales.



**Kyla Dunn**  
**University of Missouri**

Kyla Dunn serves as the Director of Events, Engagement, and Outreach where she leads strategic initiatives to foster connections between the College and its broader community. Specializing in event planning and outreach efforts, she works to elevate the College's visibility and impact. Kyla's expertise in engagement helps strengthen relationships with students, faculty, alumni, and donors, ensuring memorable and meaningful interactions.



**Carrie Fox-Buttram**  
**University of the Pacific**

There's one thing that is undeniable... Carrie Fox was created to create! Starting at a young age, crafting the finest tea parties for her neighbors, or setting the table with fine china for taco Tuesday... life has always been a party and she's here for it!

As a change agent of creativity and innovation, Carrie specializes in crafting meaningful experiences that resonate with an audience, leaving guests wanting more...creating a following and guaranteed return on investment. With over 25 years of experience (or a lifetime if you start with the tea parties), she has honed her expertise in delivering dynamic moments, seamless event production, and immersive brand experiences, each with a personal touch. Her years in the event world have been woven through private, corporate and non-profit sectors, positioning her to have a vast array of industry knowledge that proves gold for her clients. Carrie is fearless, focused and understands that every event is unique, tailoring her services to meet any client's specific goals and objectives. And she does it ALL – from conception to execution!



**Andrea Elavor**  
**Appalachian State University**

Andrea has worked in the event industry from many different angles, but once she merged her love of higher education and event planning, she found her place. She started at App State in 2014 as Director of the Chancellor's Residence, then shifted into the Office of University Events. Here she manages a team that plans events hosted by the Chancellor, Provost and Vice Chancellor of Advancement to promote strategic initiatives and campus community. Being part of AEP has been a huge benefit in helping her connect to the greater community of people who do this very specific type of work.



**Sara Freeman**

**Rowan University**

Sara Freeman is the Associate Director of University Events at Rowan University, bringing 20 years of expertise in event strategy, meetings, and conference management. A results-driven leader, she specializes in strategic planning, event design, and fostering meaningful connections. Her experience includes directing healthcare development events and serving as Event and Communication Director at a Chamber of Commerce. Passionate about creating seamless, high-value experiences, Sara excels in problem-solving and team leadership. Outside of work, she enjoys long beach walks with her two furry companions, Tucker and Teddy.



**Melissa Goitia**

**Arizona State University**

Melissa Goitia, CSEP, is Executive Director of the Office of University Events & Protocol and the Office of University Ceremonies. She is a Protocol Officer at Arizona State University and the co-founder of the North American Association of Commencement Officers (NAACO). Melissa has more than 30 years' experience in event production and has produced commencement and other ceremonies for ASU for more than 20 years.

Melissa is a Certified Special Events Professional (CSEP) and holds a Bachelor's degree in Journalism and Public Relations from the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University and a Masters degree in Educational Leadership from Northern Arizona University. She completed training as a Protocol Officer and is a certified Intercultural and Etiquette and Protocol Trainer through the Protocol School of Washington® and has completed a certificate in Hospitality & Tourism Management Certificate through Florida Atlantic University.



## **Bill Hansen**

### **Florida International University & Bill Hansen Catering**

Catering legend Bill Hansen, CEO of The Hansen Group, is a 40-plus-year industry veteran who provides personalized, curated experiences to anyone planning a wedding, a quinceñera, a bar/bat mitzvah, a corporate event or even a simple dinner party. Over the last four decades, this visionary has hosted four U.S. presidents, several championship Super Bowl teams, Pope John Paul II and countless celebrities and athletes.

Since 1990, Bill has taught Catering Management at Florida International University. He also wrote the textbook *Off-Premise Catering Management*, which remains a standard text in many classrooms. Bill is set to release his latest highly anticipated book, *Plating Up Profits*, in January 2025.

Bill and his wife, Terry Hansen, recently gifted FIU's Chaplain School of Hospitality and Tourism Management \$250,000 to build an Events Lab/Incubator for students to learn hands-on the latest and greatest in weddings and events. The lab, located at the Kovens Conference, is scheduled to open in January 2025.



## **Robert Hickey**

### **The Protocol School of Washington**

Robert Hickey, Deputy Director of The Protocol School of Washington® (PSOW), has been conducting protocol trainings and workshops since 1988.

He is the author of the updated and expanded edition of "Honor & Respect: the Official Guide to Names, Titles, and Forms of Address" (2013). He has updated and revised the fourth edition of "The Blue Book of Stationery" published by Crane & Co., (2009) with Pamela Eyring a guide to the use of printed stationery in social and corporate correspondence and entertaining.

He speaks to groups on a wide variety of topics. His topics revolve around on 'how you do things' really does matter to those at the top of the pecking order. In today's casual world most people have little day-to-day practice with the formal communication and application of precedence that are standard operating procedure in high government and international business. He believes the basics of protocol are useful to everyone interested in advancing his or her career.



## **Jim Hooker**

### **TSEC Academic Solutions & AEP Chair**

Jim Hooker is an award-winning event strategist with over 27 years producing world-class academic, corporate and entertainment events. He currently serves as the Executive Director for Academic Programs for TSEC Academic Solutions and is Chair of the Academic Event Professional (AEP).

His expertise focuses on accentuating the value of high-touch, emotional relationship building between an organization and its constituencies through events. He has produced landmark celebrations for University of California (both Irvine and Davis), Partners In Health, University of the Pacific, Caltech, Boston University, Williams College, Arizona State University, Bloomsburg University and many others. Prior to joining TSEC, he was Executive Director of University Events at The University of Texas at Austin as well as having served as the Associate Sr. VP for Cultural Relations and University Events at the University of Southern California for 10 years. He holds a master's degree from the USC Annenberg School for Communication where his research focused on The Influence of High Touch Event Communication on Donor Support.



## **Nancy Huemer**

### **Barnard College**

Nancy joined Barnard College in November 2018 as the administrative assistant in Alumnae Relations, before moving to the Special Events team in August 2019. Prior to her work at Barnard, she spent almost a decade working for J. Crew in a variety of roles, including oversight of all in-store events in the New York City region. She also served as Digital Organizing Director on Bob Kerrey's 2012 Senate campaign. Nancy earned her B.A. in Political Science, with a minor in Physics, from Barnard College in 2010, and she is an 8-time marathon finisher.



## **Rachel Janicki**

### **Illinois State University**

Rachel Janicki earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and History from Illinois State University in 2020. She has worked in Career Services at ISU since 2020, serving as the events coordinator for employer engagement since 2022. As events coordinator, Rachel manages 14 career fairs each year, student-facing Cultural Career Network programs themed around equity, diversity, and inclusion, and employer-facing programs that help employers to better connect with today's college students and future job seekers. Rachel is passionate about connecting students, alumni, employers, and other campus and community partners, helping them grow their professional networks and leverage transferable skills.



**Angela Lamon**  
**Barnard College**

Angela joined Alumnae Relations in March 2019 as a temporary Associate Director, focusing on young alum and student engagement, and is now the Director of Alumnae Relations. With a strong background in higher education, her experience spans academic advising, campus and community events, and university relations. Angela holds a B.B.A. in Accounting and Business Administration and an M.A. in Higher Education/Student Personnel, equipping her with a well-rounded perspective and a deep understanding of both academic and student affairs, as well as alumni relations.



**Jihan Lang**  
**Spelman College**

Jihan Lang is a seasoned event strategist specializing in donor and campaign events with over a decade of experience in event planning and institutional advancement. As Director of Institutional Advancement and Campaign Events at Spelman College, she oversees the logistics and execution of 90+ high-profile events annually, ranging from intimate gatherings to large-scale functions of 50,000 attendees. Jihan excels in crafting innovative strategies for donor cultivation, stewardship, and fundraising, including campaign initiatives reaching \$150M. Known for her meticulous attention to detail, collaborative leadership, and creative vision, she transforms events into memorable experiences that drive meaningful connections and institutional success.



## **Dewey LoSasso**

### **Bill Hansen Catering**

Corporate Executive Chef Dewey LoSasso has become one of the country's top innovative celebrity chefs, having transformed numerous restaurants in New York City and along the trendy Biscayne Corridor. He has served as Donatella Versace's personal chef and has delighted patrons of several of Miami's leading restaurants, including The Forge Restaurant/Wine Bar, Schnebly Winery and Miami Brewing Company, LaTour, Pavillon Grille, The Private Foundlings Club, North One 10 and Tuscan Steak, to name a few.

LoSasso was also the executive chef for the Lipton Tennis Tournament, now the Miami Open. While in New York, he brought the Hudson Hotel back to dining prominence. During his four-year tenure at The Forge, LoSasso led the rebirth of the iconic restaurant, creating modernized interpretations of classic dishes from the 1960s, '70s and '80s, emphasizing farm-to-table and ocean-to-table ingredients. His "Coffee, Steak and Eggs Dish" was selected by Esquire Magazine as one of the Top Dishes in the country.

He is currently Corporate Executive Chef for the Bill Hansen Catering & Event Production team guiding the culinary department to new heights.



## **Kelsey Menefee**

### **Missouri State University**

Kelsey Menefee, a proud double alumna of Missouri State University, is a highly skilled professional known for her expertise in planning and executing award-winning events that celebrate the university's mission and impact. As Director of University Advancement Relations, Kelsey oversees the MSU Foundation's scholarship process, ensuring seamless administration of scholarships across the Springfield and West Plains campuses. She collaborates with financial aid offices and scholarship committees to uphold donor guidelines, facilitates student recognition efforts, and demonstrates the transformative power of private support. Kelsey's dedication to excellence reflects her passion for fostering meaningful connections within the Missouri State community.



## **Merary Nieves**

### **Florida International University**

Merary Nieves is the Assistant Director of the Central Reservations Office at Florida International University. She holds a Masters in Global Strategic Communications and a bachelor's in business administration with a focus in Marketing. Prior to joining FIU, she worked as a Marketing Coordinator for Women of Tomorrow, a non-profit organization.



### **Jennifer O'Sheal**

#### **Seton Hall University**

With over twenty years of event marketing experience, Jen has worked across a wide range of event types, from corporate conferences and trade shows to fundraisers and galas. In her current role as Director of University Events at Seton Hall University, Jen takes a collaborative approach to create meaningful experiences at university-wide events such as Commencement, University Day, presidential investitures, Charter Day, convocations, dinners and galas. She also serves as a consultant to campus partners on best practices for events and leads a committee to develop new revenue opportunities at the University. Her efforts created revenue opportunities for filming on campus with the most recent project being a Super Bowl commercial with a fortune 500 company.

When Jen isn't busy orchestrating events at Seton Hall, she enjoys coaching her daughter's basketball team, volunteering at her kids' schools, traveling to new destinations, attending Broadway shows and concerts, spending time at the beach and playing golf.



### **Jehnny Rivera**

#### **Florida International University**

Jehnny Rivera is the Executive Director for the Office of University Protocol, Ceremonies, and Events within the Office of the President at Florida International University. She began her career at FIU in 2013 as a Special Events Coordinator and continued her growth within the department and was appointed as the Executive Director in 2022. She oversees a team of 7 professionals that annually produce over 30 ceremonies and over 50 special events.

Jehnny is a Protocol Officer at FIU and received her certification from The Protocol School of Washington. A lifelong FIU Panther, she obtained her Master's degree in Business Administration and Bachelor's degree in Hospitality Management.



### **Liz Ronecker**

#### **University of Missouri**

Liz Ronecker is an Event Coordinator for the College of Arts & Science that manages logistics for a wide range of academic and community-focused events. With a keen eye for detail and a passion for creating impactful experiences, Liz works closely with faculty and staff to ensure seamless execution of events that enhance the college's mission and engagement.





### **Matt Sampson**

#### **Purdue University**

Matt Sampson is a Director of Special Events at the Purdue for Life Foundation. A Purdue University alumnus, he loves the opportunity to bring his love for his alma mater into his work every day. Matt's career in the hospitality industry has taken him across the country from Monterey, CA with Hyatt Hotels, to Chicago, IL with Levy at Wrigley Field.



### **Stephanie Smith**

#### **Missouri State University**

Stephanie Smith, a double alumna of Missouri State University with over 20 years of dedicated service, is a strategic leader committed to advancing the university's mission. As Executive Director of University Advancement Relations, she manages scholarship and endowment programs, donor recognition, and privately funded faculty positions, ensuring alignment with institutional goals and regulations. Stephanie has planned and executed award-winning special events for Missouri State and its Foundation, fostering meaningful connections with donors, alumni and the community. Her expertise in stewardship, communication, and event management has significantly enhanced the university's impact, inspiring support and creating transformative opportunities for students and faculty.



### **Tamanna Tasmin**

#### **Illinois State University**

Tamanna Tasmin was born in Bangladesh. Ms. Tasmin has earned two master's degrees - communication (2021) and project management (2022). She now serves as the program coordinator for the student relations team at Career Services, Illinois State University. As the program coordinator, she manages an average of 20 programs each semester. Her job role includes leveraging limited resources, motivating a strong team culture, innovation, maintaining cross campus collaboration, stakeholder relations management, and ensuring logistical support. Before moving to the US, she worked for 7 years in various industries including brand manager, PR executive, and head of marketing.



**Matt Thomson**  
**Ohio State University**

Matt Thomson is an experienced event strategist with over a decade in event planning, donor relations, and organizational management. As the Director of Presidential Events at Ohio University, he leads event initiatives for the Office of the President and advises the Ohio University Presidential Ambassadors. Known for his innovative approach to event design and seamless logistical coordination, Matt has a proven track record of managing multi-million-dollar budgets and enhancing attendee experiences. He holds a Master of Education in College Student Personnel from Ohio University and a Bachelor of Arts in Child Development from Bluffton University. A Certified Meeting Professional, Matt is also skilled in event management systems and digital marketing tools. He currently serves as Board President of Passion Works Studio, a nonprofit organization that fosters inclusive communities through collaborative art, creating employment opportunities for individuals with and without developmental differences.



**Jill Townsend**  
**University of California, San Diego**

Jill Townsend has over 25 years of experience in the Events and Hospitality industry. As Executive Director of Special Events and Protocol at University of California San Diego, Jill is pleased to plan and produce events that make her alma mater shine. She and her team specialize in campus ceremonies, including groundbreakings, dedications, and commencements, in addition to specialty all-campus events that raise enrolment, awareness, visibility, and support. Jill's past honors include a Westie Award from the Western International Live Events Association and a CASE Gold Circle of Excellence Award. Career highlights include growing and managing a highly respected special events team and producing a three-day commencement weekend featuring His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.



**Vanessa Vazquez**  
**Florida International University**

Vanessa Y. Vazquez serves as Director of Sales & Operations under the Division of Finance at Florida International University and has over 19 years of experience in Higher Education. She is a proud two-time alum from the FIU College of Business, currently ranked second in the nation for international business. She leads the Central Reservations Office; overseeing annual rental revenues of \$5.5M+ and is responsible for both the sales strategy and central operational processes on managing spaces across multiple campuses.