

## City of Sheldon Recreation Department: Special Events

By: Derrick Tripp, Director

(Kids Fear Factor)

Sheldon Recreation has hosted several special events since I began service as Recreation Director for the city of Sheldon (population 5,000). Although Sheldon is a smaller community, I believe many larger departments probably have a process they use which is similar when preparing to run a special event. Two of the most important things learned about planning a special event are: 1) there is never such thing as over-preparing.....and...2) the true formula for a successful special event lies within the recruitment of good volunteer help. With my financial resources being limited, I always look for volunteers to help run my events.

The 10 step checklist that I use for every special event looks fairly simple, but there is a lot involved in the process (for purposes of this article I will focus mostly on a **Kids Fear Factor** event I ran this past autumn):

1. Idea brainstorming
2. Develop a budget
3. Establish a date, time and location
4. **Recruit volunteer staff**
5. Develop marketing plan and implement
6. Set up event venue
7. Conduct a walkthrough of the event, review checklist
8. Conduct the event
9. Deliver thank you cards
10. Complete event survey and evaluation

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### 1. Idea Brainstorming

The first obvious step you have to take when planning a special event is... “What do we want to do?” We like to involve others when brainstorming, the more minds involved the better the ideas. In this particular instance, I was to hold a special event for “Celebration Days”, which is an annual festival held over Labor Day weekend here in Sheldon. Celebration Days is run by the Sheldon Community Development Corp. The idea of a Fear Factor like competition came from me and our Chamber Director, Shanelle. Most of our programs are aimed at children ages 5-12 years of age, so that is whom we decided the competition would be for. The competition would be broken up into three groups (boys/girls combined on teams of two for ages 5-7, 8-9, and 10-12). We decided to have 3 challenges each team would participate in (2 individual and 1 involving both teammates), and then the top three teams in each age division would participate in a final challenge. The internet is always a great tool when needing fun ideas for an event, which is where I found several of mine...*Just Google It!* And if you don't know what Google is, well, Happy Retirement!

### 2. Develop a Budget...blah!

A terrific thing about my Fear Factor competition is that the Sheldon Community Development Corporation (SCDC) covered all expenses through their Celebration Days fund. This meant we were able to charge a minimal cost for the kids to participate, \$5.00 per team. Next year, we will probably raise the cost, but it was nice to have the cost so low for the first year for participation numbers. Much of the Celebration Days fund comes from local business donations so I really felt the whole community was involved in the success of this

event. With most start-up programs or events, our City Manager likes me to put together revenue and expense reports to give him an idea of what the program/event's impact may be. This is obviously one of the least fun tasks to do, but is absolutely vital when planning for an event.

### **3. Establish Date, Time, and Location**

For many of my events, we use our local school facilities. Similar to Ankeny, I have to request usage from an individual who coordinates the facility schedule for all public schools. We do not have a lottery, but my department does get to pick immediately after the schools have scheduled their needed usage. We only have two public school gyms with many different groups wanting usage, so it is always a struggle. In the case of my Kids Fear Factor event, I planned to hold the challenges at our City Park. Most of Celebration Days is held there, and who wants to be indoors during Labor Day? There was more room at the park anyway, which would be needed to set up the individual challenges. The event was run on Saturday, September 1 and began at 10:00 a.m. We planned on the event taking approximately 2 hours. The event actually ran about an hour and a half.

### **4. Recruit Volunteer Staff**

Volunteers are important to us whenever we run a special event. One very nice thing about working in a smaller community is that I am usually able to find good volunteer help. I had several sources I used in this case. I am a member of a local Kiwanis Club, and usually can talk a couple fellow Kiwanians into helping when needed. There was a Celebration Days Committee formed of members who already desired to help with the festival. Most of my volunteers were parents of children participating. I left a spot on the registration for parents to volunteer, and also made some calls to individuals who have helped me in the past. I had about 15 volunteers in place, which would be more than enough...but always assume high.

### **5. Develop Marketing Plan and Implement**

The SCDC publishes 10,000 brochures of all the weekend's events, and they are sent all around town and also to communities within a 60 mile radius. That was obviously our best form of advertising. There were ads in the local newspapers, on the community calendar, websites, radio, and television. I also took part in an interview the Friday before with our local news station, KTIV Sioux City, promoting our Fear Factor event. We even had the reporter complete one of our event challenges this year, which was fun and hopefully boosted interest. We always send all of my program and event registrations to our local schools. This practice will ensure all children receive a registration form.

### **6. Set up Event Venue**

Our preparation involved doing a park walkthrough to analyze how and where we would set up each competition station. We ordered some of the products which would be used through a magazine and I bought the rest of what I needed locally. Most of what we used was found at the grocery store. We purchased a Fear Factor banner which would be put up at the check-in area. We also purchased buttons for each of the participating kids which read, "Fear was not a Factor for me!" For the 3 winning teams, we had a gift bag of candy and prizes.

### **7. Conduct a Walk Through of the Event, Review Checklist**

We didn't do much of a walkthrough with this event. We did spend many hours preparing for all of the competitions the night before. We made posters and signs to indicate where each event was located.

## **8. Conducting the Event**

With every special event we've done, I am always a bit nervous and running a fast pace during the event. No matter the amount of preparation, event day is always hectic. All of my volunteers showed up an hour and a half early to help set up the stations. I did a brief walkthrough of each station so all volunteers knew what was happening. I also wrote each "age division leader" a script which they were to follow which gave the kids instructions about each station. Many kids got there very early (which you always have to figure), but there were many others running up to the check-in booth late (which you also have to always figure on). We started the Fear Factor event by giving all the kids and parents an introduction on what was going to take place, Joe Rogan style...he's the host of the TV show. And then they were off. The actual event goes unbelievably fast and seems very chaotic, but if it ends with smiling faces then you know it was a success. The kids, and parents, all seemed to have a great time and we only had a couple kids throw up...don't worry they were just eating baby food...one was my boss's daughter...oops!

## **9. Deliver Thank You Cards**

No matter how small of a program or event I run, if it involves the help of unpaid volunteers, I always send thank you letters out. It is the least I feel I can do, because without them, the event is impossible to run. I am also on the Celebration Days Committee, so I spend all Labor Day weekend volunteering my time back for the Chamber Director and the community. It feels like a nice circle.

## **10. Complete Event Survey and Evaluation**

With most of our programs and events we like to get feedback from the community. We have sent out several surveys in our monthly city water bill newsletter regarding my programs or events. Receiving the input of others only can improve on the quality of the programs or events we run. We usually try to get input by listing different aspects of the event and have the community rate them (promotion, date, time, location, age range, quality of event, challenges?) We then leave a blank area on the survey which can be used for any comments or concerns. After we receive a good sample of the surveys back, we start to review them. We look for areas where the most need for improvement is. We have gotten great feedback in the past which has led to improved programs and events.

\*I added some photos from our Fear Factor Event along with this article

\*\*If you have any questions for me regarding this article or just to chat...feel free to call!

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