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Performers hit high notes during boom

[Matthew Swibel](#)

Staff Reporter

Jan Kearney knows how to party. And these days, she has reason to. Kearney's homegrown business has outgrown her Dupont Circle basement, and its full-time staff of four has moved into offices in McLean. The progress of her Cast of 1000s performance troupe is matched only by its rising reputation for flipping conventional corporate entertainment on its backside.

Corporate life is a cabaret

In the midst of a seemingly endless labor drought, executives are pushing the creative envelope on events that promote camaraderie, boost morale and relax employees during this age of work before play. So naturally, these are good times for a gal who organizes corporate murder mysteries, recreates Las Vegas casinos and arranges impromptu visits from "Bill and Hil."

Better yet, Cast of 1000s comprising dozens of skits and look-a-likes has achieved what a lot of its local clients haven't: profitability.

Although Kearney won't disclose margins, she did say her company collects nearly \$1 million in annual revenue. Cast of 1000s used to charge about \$125 per hour during its clowning and face painting days. Nowadays, companies spend as much as \$80,000 to see Kearney's performers entertain at elaborate holiday parties or annual meetings. Some members of her contract talent pool have quit their day jobs to accommodate a loaded schedule of performances.

This accidental entrepreneur is basking in success while it lasts. She knows too well that corporate entertainment budgets are among the first to disappear during market downturns and economic tremors.

Few in Kearney's field are naive about the fabulous economic climate or how it's inflated the party budgets as well as the market caps of Washington's big spenders.

"People don't necessarily need entertainment or themed decor," said Annie Senatore, president of College Park-based A Vista Events. "They can get away with good linens." Senatore, an event planner to local businesses, uses Cast of 1000s as a trick up her own sleeve a dozen times a year.

"There aren't a lot of people that do what they do," she said.

Birth of a notion

Cast of 1000s didn't suddenly burst onto the event planning scene. The entertainment company went through some dramatic transitions before it taking its present shape.

Kearney traces Cast of 1000s' roots back to when she began mime classes. Widowed at 33, the former Peace Corps volunteer and teacher needed to interrupt a self-described crusade with something selfishly expressive.

"I decided the next thing I did was gonna be fun," Kearney said. "I didn't want to save the world. I went and took

up mime just did it to see what it was like to perform. Eventually people started hiring me."

Kearney later hooked up with a clown company, eventually buying it out in the mid-1980's. With that she unbridled her entrepreneurial spirit and broadened the company's event offerings to form what is now Cast of 1000s

Funds at that time did not provide for a computer to log event bookings. Another early challenge was building an arsenal of performing talent "The performers need to be handled very delicately," Kearney said.

With Kearney's soft touch, Cast of 1000s now commands an ensemble of about 125 contract artists from celebrity impersonators to crooners to theme actors.

"She's one of the most creative people I've met locally," said Emily Anderson, a performer who is multi-tasking to create a marketing campaign for Cast of 1000s.

Aside from cast members, the entertainment agency's most encouraging clients keep prestigious company. Phil Cavanagh, director of corporate events at America Online, has the formidable task of creating an engaging environment for AOL's young, hyperkinetic employees several times a year. For Cavanagh, Cast of 1000s adds a human element to corporate events.

"What's unique is they can take my messaging and incorporate it into themed guests and characters," he said.

Best years of their lives

Cavanagh noted a heightened demand for corporate entertainment. "When you look at a workforce with mostly dual incomes, you need extra enticements to come to these events," he said.

Despite the good times, Kearney knows how quickly the bubble can burst. It happened before, and it wasn't pretty. After expanding in the '80s, Cast of 1000s suddenly had little cause for celebration.

"It just fell apart," Kearney said. "By Desert Storm I was alone. The economy was bad, people weren't bringing events to Washington. I remember how we were going to do a big thing at the Greenbrier and the stock market plunged 300 points. That was it it canceled."

A Vista's Senatore said fostering client relationships could prevent Cast of 1000s from taking another beating should the economy weaken: "Even in a downturn, they're more likely to stick with you."

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