

Fort Lauderdale's 'Minister of Culture'

Tourism Official Recalls Milestones, Announces Plans to Expand Gay Outreach

By Phil LaPadula

Ten years ago, few people would have believed that Beethoven could be a hit here in the land of Connie Francis and the beach-blanket ballad. But in the summer of 1997, the first Beethoven by the Beach Festival drew sell-out crowds. Members of the arts community now refer to that event as a milestone in Fort Lauderdale's emergence as a more cultural destination.

The person who orchestrated the Beethoven bash was Michael Kenny, vice president of cultural tourism for the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau. As Fort Lauderdale's "minister of culture" for the past five years, Kenny has been the driving force behind several prestigious events, including Treasures from the Topkapi Palace and the Camille Pissarro art exhibit, two popular exhibits at the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art. He also led the marketing campaign for the River Walk Arts and Entertainment District.

But longtime residents know Kenny as a man of many hats. As a civic and political activist, he has worked for a wide range of causes, including gay rights, AIDS prevention, breast cancer, and the Area Agency on Aging of Broward County. Recently, he was involved in fundraising efforts for the new gay senior center, which is scheduled to open this summer at the Sunshine Cathedral. And as an elected member of the Democratic Executive Committee of Broward County, Kenny

until then, the thinking was that only winter tourists supported the arts."

Under Kenny's leadership, the city hit another cultural crescendo in the winter of 2000 when it became one of only three cities in the country to acquire the Topkapi Palace exhibit, which featured the treasures of the Ottoman sultans. "The Topkapi exhibit was a real coup," he says. "We drew visitors from 49 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. It broke all attendance records at the museum."

While such cultural milestones enhance the city's image and bring in tourist dollars, Kenny is just as passionate about his involvement in some of the city's civic milestones. In fact, he believes his community activism has made him a better tourism official.

"It has given me relationships with a whole range of Broward County business people, who I can then call on to assist when groups are having their conventions and special events," he says. "And it has also introduced me to local people who are part of regional and national organizations."

He is especially proud of his work as a member of the board of Sunserve, which raised money for the gay senior center: "The center is a model that will be followed throughout the country. We owe our elders—whether they're gay or straight—not only respect but a debt of responsibility to ensure their quality of life is satisfactory, and that includes access to prescription drugs. There

cultural events.

In fact, Kenny sees the recent ArtsUnited show—which featured the work of gay and lesbian artists, writers, and performers—as yet another milestone for Fort Lauderdale's cultural scene. "The big turnout at the ArtsUnited event shows that there's a pent-up interest there," he says. "Like any other segment of the population, gay and lesbian individuals have a wide range of interests. But we can't ignore the fact that gays have been big supporters of the visual and performing arts, and they are also often integral parts of the professional staffs of arts groups."

Expanded Gay Marketing

Recognizing that support, the Broward Center for the Performing Arts has recently started advertising in gay publications, Kenny notes. "I've seen a noticeable increase in the percentage of audiences who are gay," he says. "At some of the shows at the Broward Center, the majority of the audience is gay men."

The visitors bureau began marketing to gay leisure visitors about five years ago, but the initial focus was primarily individual gay tourists. Kenny has recently expanded the focus to include gay and lesbian groups. "We want to welcome gay cultural, athletic, business, and civic groups," Kenny says. "Many of the groups' members are familiar with South Florida as a vacation destination but don't necessarily think of it as a place to bring their group." He noted that the bureau helps out-of-town groups arrange banquets at the Broward Convention Center.

It's apparent that the marketing efforts have succeeded in establishing Fort Lauderdale's reputation as a premier gay destination. As evidence, Kenny points to two RSVP-chartered cruise ships that will sail from Fort Lauderdale in February and March 2003 with 1,800 gay passengers aboard each. "They don't cavalierly select their embarkation ports," he says. "They will bring 3,600 visitors over a two-week period, and a lot of them will stay on after their cruise."

The one hat that Kenny admits to wearing with some wariness is his role as partisan political activist. But he doesn't see any conflict between his role as Democratic Party activist—recently pitching for Bill McBride's gubernatorial campaign—and his job with the city's tourism bureau.

"I think people understand that these are two separate things," says Kenny, who describes himself as a patriotic Democrat. "One is my professional responsibility; the other is what I view as my responsibility as a citizen."

In fact, Kenny would argue that his political skills help him when it's time to persuade people to vote for Fort Lauderdale as their vacation choice. "My political activities have honed my public speaking skills and my marketing skills," he says.

Kenny developed many of the skills needed for his current job by working at



Fort Lauderdale's "minister of culture" for the past five years, Michael Kenny has been the driving force behind several prestigious events

some of the finest five-star resorts in the country. After graduating from Rochester Institute of Technology with a degree in hotel and restaurant management, he went to work at the prestigious Greenbriar Resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. In January 1981, he witnessed history firsthand when the 52 American hostages held by Iran were reunited with their families at the Greenbriar. Later, he moved on to the crème de la crème of historic and cultural tourism—Williamsburg, Virginia. While working at the Williamsburg Inn, he met many luminaries from the political and business worlds, including Bing Crosby. "The inn was the pinnacle of that community," he recalls.

After becoming only the fourth cultural tourism official in the country in 1997, Kenny has won the respect and praise of his colleagues in the tourism industry. "He's a breath of fresh air for cultural tourism," says Ina Lee, publisher of *Travel Host* magazine, an in-room travel publication for hotel guests. "Before he came aboard, there was no unity between cultural events and tourism. His commitment to having culture and tourism work together is extraordinary. The Topkapi exhibit was a huge boost that put us on a par with Washington's Corcoran Gallery."

"It was his vision and drive that took cultural tourism to a new level, so that it now touches the entire community," says Ana Palmer, American Express's director of market development for South Florida.

Even a competitor to the South had kind words. "At the conferences that we attend, people listen to what he has to say," says George Neary, director of cultural tourism for the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau. "He's creative and gives good advice about what his experiences have been and how they can benefit from them. I've been up to see shows, and he's been down to see shows, so we've learned a lot from each other."

Thanks to people like Kenny, Fort Lauderdale's culture now runs deeper than a wade into the surf. "If you go to other beach resorts, other than going to the beach, what are you going to do all day?" says Kenny. "When you come to Fort Lauderdale, you can go to the beach in the morning, the museum in the afternoon, and see a first-class show at the Broward Center in the evening."

For more information about the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau, log on to www.sunny.org or call 800.22.SUNNY or 954.765.4466.



Former Florida Governor, the late Lawton Chiles (left) and Michael Kenny in a 1982 meeting

served on the steering committee for the Gore-Lieberman campaign.

Many people would find it difficult to juggle such disparate interests. But, like a skilled orchestra conductor, Kenny manages to blend his various community roles together into a harmonious presence that has charmed many locals.

"I'm a big believer in team spirit and civic responsibility," says Kenny. "We all need to be involved in our community in a whole range of activities. It's hard to be cynical when you participate."

Kenny first got involved with the city's visitors bureau as organizer of the Beethoven by the Beach Festival, now an annual series of concerts featuring the Florida Philharmonic. "It was the first time we did culture in the summer," Kenny says. "Up

are gay elderly individuals who live alone and could use the companionship."

A native of New Jersey, Kenny moved to Fort Lauderdale 15 years ago with his partner of 20 years, Beau. At the time, the Broward Center for the Performing Arts did not even exist. Kenny has seen the city evolve from a transient beach resort town into a metropolitan area with a large permanent population, including a burgeoning gay community. "We've seen an absolute explosion in the gay and lesbian residents in Broward County," Kenny says. "Many visitors to gay guesthouses who have a good experience end up buying here. I think that has had a big impact on the influx of gay residents." According to Kenny, gay and lesbian tourists tend to be year-round visitors, and they are big supporters of