

THE WORK BEHIND THE WORK

Add it to my job description

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

I FOLD. CHAIRS, NAPKINS, AND programs, that is. I came to the SFA as a volunteer at the 2009 Fall Symposium on food and music. I alphabetized nametags. I threw away half-drunk cups of coffee. I was hooked. Ten years later, I still am.

Last fall, I learned how to fold a rented maroon poly-cotton-blend dinner napkin to look like a rose, a technique that seems to borrow heavily from tight-rolling blue jeans.

Look, I hate to brag. But I've hauled cases of bottled water in a Kentucky downpour. I've driven to the Birmingham airport at eight o'clock on a Saturday night to exchange a rental van with a bolt in the tire. I've sat on the floor of a catering van clutching leaky bags of ice on a ninety-degree Mississippi day.

The best part, aside from the stories with which I'll bore my future grandchildren, is that I've done none of these tasks alone. Team-building ropes courses have nothing on the bonding that happens among SFA staff behind the scenes of our symposia. We've donned foodservice gloves to serve plate lunches in Jackson and banh mi in New Orleans. We go on candy runs. We wrangle AV coordinators and tardy speakers and rental emergencies. We unload the podium, we set it up on stage, and we load it again. Amen. (Cue Jackson Browne.)

We have strategies, and we have supplies. Travel toothbrushes, emergency antiperspirant, and a fresh swipe of lipstick. A surfeit of caffeinated beverages and nutritionally void snacks. New outfits from LOFT—essentially our town's only purveyor of moderately priced clothing for adult women with jobs and hips—whose storewide 40 percent off sales always fall right before a major SFA event. And all of the teamwork and togetherness we can stand.

I'm under no illusions that we're the

ones doing the heaviest lifting at our symposia, literally or figuratively. We couldn't pull off the events without the rental company workers who haul tables and chairs and glassware and linens. Or the chefs and cooks who prepare our meals. Or the women and men who scrape plates, wash dishes, and haul trash.

At our recent Winter Symposium in Birmingham, an attendee said to me, "Your staff seems to like each other."

"We do," I replied. "We really do. Except maybe toward the end of a three-day event, when we've been together for seventy-two hours straight." But you know what? Even then.

Several food editors attended the Winter Symposium. As the last guests

Caffeine, candy, resourcefulness, and teamwork fuel SFA staff through our symposia.

were leaving, we picked up cocktail cups and boiled peanut shells and dragged full trash cans to the dumpster in the parking lot. At the edge of the stage, I held one end of our decorative podium so that my colleague Melissa Hall could unscrew the side and take it apart for transportation in the rental van (the one that would, minutes later, turn out to have a flat tire). She jokingly asked me if I thought the other editors ever did this kind of work. Surely they must, I said. I bet they went straight back to the office tonight, as a matter of fact.

Maybe they did, or maybe they didn't. If they did, I hope they had a team. I'm sure glad to have mine. Not only at symposia, but every day in the office—and of course, on this issue of *Gravy*. 🍷

Brandall Laughlin