

MICHELLE WILLIAMS



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

AS LOCAL AS LOCAL GETS

By Laura Lane

On the morning of December 2, Michelle Williams experienced the 52nd annual Williamsburg Christmas Parade as she has 48 times previously during her 49 years of life. However, this year was different. For the first time, she planned the entire event.

As director of business events for the parade's

producer, the Greater Williamsburg Chamber & Tourism Alliance, Michelle has been previously involved. This year's parade reins were transferred from longtime organizer Naomi Flythe, placing the job under Michelle's event planning umbrella.

"I've been in the parade, at the parade, and

now behind the scenes of the parade," Michelle says. Born and raised in Williamsburg, she completed her first parade march at age three as a Coloniaettes mascot, followed by many years with school bands and then her own children's participation. She's certainly no stranger to this Williamsburg holiday highlight, or anything

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else in town for that matter. "I'm about as local as local gets," Michelle says.

Michelle's mother, Maxine, moved to Williamsburg from North Carolina in 1951 to work at Eastern State Hospital, and her father, Ben Moss, followed upon discharge from the Army. As a carpenter foreman in construction, he helped build Williamsburg Hospital-ity House, James Blair Middle School and the Carmike movie theater. The day of this year's Christmas parade marked seven years since Ben passed away after a struggle with diabetes. Maxine, an independent 84-year-old, still resides in Williamsburg, as do three of her four children and their families.

After Michelle's WJCC education, she earned a mass communications degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1990. Although she dreamed of directing commercials, Michelle returned home to help her still-employed parents care for her ill grandfather. She accepted an advertising sales job with *The Virginia Gazette*, where she stayed for much of her career.

In 1995, Michelle married her high school sweetheart, Ken, a Williamsburg native who she'd known since they were both freshmen at Lafayette High School. Ken serves as the building engineer for Williamsburg Commu-

nity Chapel, where the Williams family attends church.

While she and Ken welcomed the birth of their daughter, Alex, followed by son, Jared, Michelle took a hiatus from the *Gazette*. A couple of years after she accepted an offer to return to the newspaper part-time, her position was cut due to company acquisition. She soon became thankful for the ability to devote attention to her family.

Three weeks later, just before Thanksgiving, 9-year-old Alex did a handstand at a gymnastics meet when an undetected blood vessel malformation in her brain hemorrhaged. From Sentara's ER to CHKD, it was 10 days before she came home. That was the one year that the family missed the Christmas parade.

Alex's long recovery included Gamma Knife radiosurgery at UVA the following spring. Apart from slight peripheral vision loss, today she is a healthy college freshman studying neuroscience at Virginia Tech. In fact, her experience has motivated her to pursue pediatric neurology with hopes to practice at CHKD. "She is the most amazing person I know for having gone through it, and she wants to help other kids with health issues because of it," Michelle says. "She makes me so proud."

A year of medical bills nudged Michelle to take an administrative job with the DoubleTree Hotel's catering department, where she discovered the joy of professional event planning, getting her feet wet with small business conferences. Recognizing her inclination, Michelle's boss recommended her for a more event-focused position at the Chamber with better hours. Michelle was hired in 2013 and is now responsible for more than 35 events per year, varying in size and ranging from Chamber Board meetings to the Alliance's eight signature events, such as the Annual Gala, Oktoberfest celebration and now the Christmas parade.

Each event that Michelle plans essentially provides marketing for local organizations or initiatives, not to mention the communications plan she develops to promote it. So although she didn't set out to become an event planner, the job creatively utilizes her advertising background.

"It's like a big puzzle, a big mosaic, and then when you're finished, you have this beautiful event that people look back on," she says. "Ultimately, what you're planning is for somebody to have a good time. That's the part I like—helping people enjoy themselves."

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chine or not, Michelle is known for keeping her cool. “You’ve just got to roll with it, you know? We’re going to make it work.”

Acknowledging why her husband calls her “tenacious,” Michelle says, “I’m here to take care of business. People say that there is no question where you stand with me. I wear my heart on my sleeve. But I’d like to think that I’m seen as someone that would lend a hand, especially at work. The best thing about my job is the people. We really are like a family.”

Michelle’s love for “planning parties,” as her children have described her job, extends into her personal life as much as her husband will let it. “If he had his way, it would be quiet,” she says with a laugh. Although Ken prefers the background, Michelle calls him a great cook and an excellent host. “While I’m running around, he is quietly washing and putting away dishes, vacuuming up the crumbs, or making sure everyone has what they need,” she says. “I love that about him. Every good planner needs a behind-the-scenes guy. He’s mine.”

A fan of the holidays, Michelle looks forward to this season’s festivities. “Once Thanksgiving comes, I listen to Christmas music all the way to New Year’s,” she says. “Thanksgiving is also one of my son’s favorite holidays, because

he’s a 15-year-old boy with hollow legs.” Jared, a sophomore at Jamestown High School, is an avid athlete, having played WISC soccer and Hornets football for years, despite his mom’s hesitation. “He’s the toughest kid, determined to go back to practice even with his arm in a cast at age nine,” Michelle says. “He makes me laugh and he’s fun to be around.” Jared hopes to attend UNC or Virginia Tech, with interests in ocean photography and science.

Both of Michelle’s children grew up participating in the Christmas parade. “It’s a big tradition for our family,” Michelle says. “That’s always the weekend that we go to the parade, get our tree and go to the Grand Illumination.”

The Williams family joined as many as 10,000 parade attendees. “It’s part of the tourist holiday experience, which is important for business to thrive,” Michelle says. “But it’s also a tradition for locals. It’s a free family day, and there are very few of those. Plus, it’s a place for all kinds of organizations, from kid-friendly to elderly groups, to take part in the same event and share awareness.”

In the wee morning hours, over 100 participating units set up, assisted by the Chamber’s 16-person staff and a team of enthusiastic community volunteers. For an hour or so, holiday

spirit and six months of planning were brought to fruition by an array of floats depicting this year’s “Winter Wonderland” theme.

When Christmas arrives, Michelle says she and Ken spend time with both of their large families. “We’re exhausted when it’s all said and done, but no one would change it.” A favorite moment is always the Chapel’s candlelight Christmas Eve service. “I like the reverence of it,” she says, “and that in the midst of all that chaos and fun, you take time to remember what the season is about.”

In her ideal future, Michelle sees health and happiness for her children, as well as “rocking chair” retirement days with Ken. The beach-loving family toys with the idea of moving to the North Carolina coast one day. But for now, Michelle says Williamsburg still holds more opportunity—and her heart.

“This is a great place to work and a great place to raise a family,” Michelle Williams says. “As my daughter is realizing when she meets new people at college, most come from places that either have water, history, or shopping and restaurants. We have all of it. Williamsburg is home. I don’t know how else to put it. And I don’t know any true local who wouldn’t say the same thing.” NDN

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