

July 2014. Vol. 18, No. 3. – Growing a Lotus in Indiana/Lotus World Music & Arts Festival: Developing a Volunteer Cohort – LuAnne Holladay and Tamara Loewenthal; John Fenn, Guest Editor



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By CultureWork, on July 17th, 2014

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Lotus World Music & Arts Festival: Developing a Volunteer Cohort

[Tamara Loewenthal](#)

The individuals who founded the Lotus World Music and Arts Festival loved the diversity of world music and wanted to give it a forum in Bloomington. For the inaugural event, they booked the artists and then enlisted their friends and acquaintances to make signs, run the door at the two venues, lodge artists in their homes, and help sell artists' merchandise. These friends were the volunteers that made the event happen. When this first festival proved to be an enormous success—and there was a strong push to do it again—a planning committee formed to help expand the reach and scope of the festival. They were the second wave of volunteers, but the first to realize that they were helping to build an event for which long-term strategies were necessary.

In the first five years, Lotus grew from two to five venues, from one night to two. In the next ten years, it grew to include eight venues and two additional days that offered a Thursday kick-off concert and a Sunday closing concert. This exponential growth, with a staff that hovered around three full time positions, meant that volunteers carried more and more of the weight in producing the festival.

To understand what Lotus Festival Volunteers do is to envision every imaginable job there might be. Volunteers set up and tear down tents, fencing, and other infrastructure. They sell tickets, exchange wristbands for tickets, monitor venue entrances and exits, sell artists' merchandise, create a visual arts presence, and take care of artists' on-site needs. They procure two-way radios and shuttle vans and all kinds of items and services required to pull off this event.

In order to oversee the ever-increasing workload, volunteer planning committees carry out the visioning and implementing of Lotus Festivals. These include:

- A *Sites* committee that looks at issues connected to street closings; relations with businesses affected by those closings; infrastructure needed to put up tents and supply electricity; staging, fencing, and riser needs; and supplying restroom and recycling facilities. This committee currently operates as two distinctly separate groups, *Venues* and *Streets*.
- An *Artist Relations* committee whose job has been to secure hotel rooms, shuttle artists between venues and their hotel, offer meals and other hospitality to artists, and provide important logistical information on site.
- A *Festival Support* committee that works to solicit volunteers from the community, to train them for their jobs, to create a Festival application, and to identify promising new candidates for other committee work.
- A *Visual Arts* committee that provides opportunities to engage in visual arts activities during the Festival, while also creating displays related to particular world cultures, and managing street parades.

The committees are led by staff but function mostly autonomously to achieve their goals.

As Lotus grew, volunteer needs rose considerably each year: from 30 to 50 to 100 in the first three years. With these increasing numbers, it was clear that someone needed to

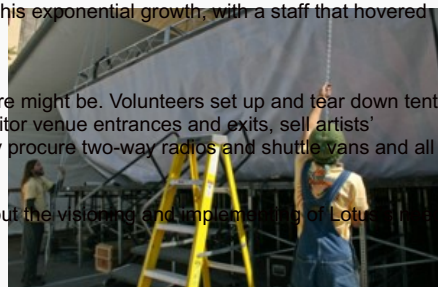


Photo by Pat Glushko



Photo by Eileen Rice

manage the volunteers. This need led to the role of the Lotus Festival Volunteer Coordinator.

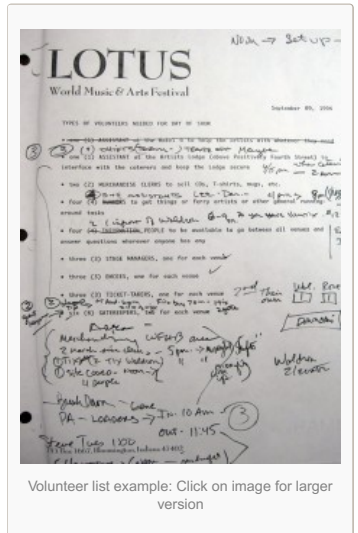
The earliest Volunteer Coordinators used 3' x 5" notecards to keep track of a volunteer's job, and used a simple Word document to track all positions. In the early days, there was often communication by phone because the widespread use of email was non-existent. Volunteers signed up but there was no application as such, no formal process for vetting them.

As email became a primary mode of communication, around the late 1990s, it enabled better outreach and faster response times. By 2005, the Festival had 250 volunteers and the Excel grid that held the information was still something of a tracking nightmare. For this reason, there was a strong internal push to develop an online application system, something that would benefit both the Volunteer Coordinator in tracking data and also volunteers in having easy access to the application. With no money to purchase software—and a staff lacking the skills—the organization tapped a volunteer who had the expertise to create a database. Thus was born the current system of engaging, assigning, and tracking volunteers.

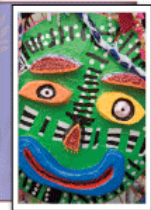
Today, potential Lotus volunteers can find the application online. They answer questions about the dates they are available, the hours they prefer, and the type of jobs they feel best suited for. They agree to attend one of our volunteer orientations and agree to work their shift. The system that has been developed offers a volunteer compensation: one night of festival attendance in exchange for each 6-7 hour shift worked. From the planning aspect, this system allows us to ensure that one person can work in the same role for the entire night to which they're assigned (no substitutions, no retraining during the event). From the volunteer satisfaction aspect, those who work also have a chance to listen, dance, and groove to the music they love. In our surveys, this is the most listed reason for why people volunteer.



Photo by Pat Glushko



Volunteer list example: Click on image for larger version



Volunteer Application Form

Festival Dates: September 18-21, 2014.

Orientation dates (must attend one): Thursday, September 11, evening or Saturday, September 13, morning

If you have any problems using this form, please send an e-mail to volunteer@lotusfest.org.

The Lotus Education and Arts Foundation assures all information gathered will be kept confidential and will not be shared with any other entity.

Application Priority Date: Tuesday, August 12th, 2014 via online submission. Applications will be accepted after this date, but will not receive first consideration for shift assignments.

Please read our [Lotus Festival Volunteer Policy](#) before submitting your application.

Basic Information

First Name: **Nickname:** **Last Name:**

Birth Day: (just the day, not the month, from 1-31)

Street Address:

City: **State:** **ZIP:**

Home Phone: **Cell Phone:**

Work Phone: **Email:**

Occupation:

Age Requirements: You must be 18 years or older to volunteer. Please check **Yes** to verify that you are 18 years or older. **Yes**

Number of Years Volunteering with Lotus: First Time

Previous Festival Assignments:

Some volunteer tasks may include lifting/moving equipment (for example, street barricades, tables, sound equipment, etc.) Are you able to perform such tasks? **Yes:** **No:**

[Lotus Online Volunteer Application Form: Click on image to see the online link](#)

Retention of volunteers is an ongoing concern of every organization that relies on volunteer power to accomplish its mission. For Lotus, it was important to recognize the volunteer base as a core strength. The volunteer culture for the Lotus Festival grew from the desire of almost all those involved to hear and see the music that Lotus brought to Bloomington. In other words, the greatest perk we could offer our volunteers is that they can attend a part of the Festival to do just that.

Additionally, tracking a volunteer's commitment to the Lotus organization over the years shows us that we have folks who love the event to such a degree that they will work year after year. We have several volunteers who have given their time every year they have been in town and many more who volunteer as often as they can. By tracking a volunteer's Lotus work history, which includes work on our educational outreach activities and fundraising events, we are able to honor specific workers for their years of volunteering or the range of their volunteer contributions to the Lotus organization.

We host an annual Volunteer Appreciation party, at which we recognize those who have given us 5, 10, 15, and 20 years of service, or who have gone above and beyond. The party allows us to celebrate, feed, and thank all our volunteers for how they enrich our organization. It also reinforces the volunteer esprit de corps, as they mingle and share stories of their experiences, realizing they are a part of a huge effort.

Today, in 2014, the Lotus organization receives the help of over 700 volunteers a year: 500 for the Lotus Festival, 150 for our educational outreach events, and 50 for our fundraising events. Our volunteers can be found teaching at Indiana University or studying there. They are busy running a business or creating art for their day jobs. They can be seen working for the city of Bloomington, for our Co-op, or farming on the outskirts of town. We see them proudly wearing their volunteer T-shirts from previous years, letting us know that Lotus is something they are happy to share via the message on their backs. Our ties to the community are deep and strong, and we could not envision sustaining our model without the commitment of all our volunteers.

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Volunteer Party, photo by Jeremy H

Author Note

Tamara Loewenthal has been part of the Lotus Education and Arts Foundation since she first volunteered in 1995. After more than a decade

-serving the Lotus organization as a board member and sites coordinator, she became the Lotus World Music and Arts Festival's volunteer coordinator in 2007. Since 2010 she has been the organization's year-round volunteer coordinator, overseeing the recruitment, training, and retention of more than 600 volunteers for Lotus events. She has led the transition from the festival's "notecard-and-Excel-sheet" volunteer management system to a digital online application and assignment process, a transformation that has included the development of orientation and training tools for 500+ festival volunteers. Tamara is also a professional dancer and musician, a founding member of the old-time ensemble Fiddle 'n' Feet.

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Photo by Merrill Hatlen