

Lois Konnos

Carnival Booking, Inc. pres & CEO
known as stickler for high standards
by Richard Varr

The sights and sounds of the carnival – illuminated Ferris wheels, vendors selling sweet cotton candy and giggling children on rides – have made Lois Konnos the successful, self-made businesswoman she is today. With a spirited personality and a thirst for closing the deal, the West Houstonian has created the largest independent carnival-booking agency in the country.

“I like carnivals when it’s dark outside – you drive up to them, and then all of a sudden you think you’re in Disneyland,” says Konnos, the president and CEO of Carnival Booking, Inc. “The secret [to having a successful business] is finding something you can fall in love with and make it grow.”

And fall in love with carnivals, she has. Not only has her business flourished since its founding in the early 1990s, but she has helped take the once shady industry to a whole new level of respectability.

“If the carnival isn’t first rate – safety inspected, drug tested, background searched – and if they don’t present the carnival to my criteria, I won’t deal with it,” she asserts. “In the last 10 to 15 years, I would say the men have been separated from the boys.”

A stickler for honorable and solid business practices, Konnos works only with reputable organizations.

“I have established a criteria that you must meet in order for me to represent you,” she maintains. “When you work with the gentlemen of the industry who take care of their rides, who maintain their rides, who don’t hire from off the street and who have a family oriented business, chances of something happening are greatly reduced.”

“No money is better than bad money, no money better than nervous money,” she adds. “I know who’s naughty and nice in this business.”

So how did Lois Konnos end up as one of the best carnival-booking agents in the country?

It all started about 15 years ago when she – a single mom with a grown son – was exploring new work opportunities.

“I fell into it by accident, and I saw what it was all about,” she explains. “We did a fundraiser for the Red Cross, and someone said ‘get a carnival.’ So I got a carnival.”

Konnos started with smaller carnival bookings and eventually learned from colleagues working the bigger shows, as well. Since it was the same trouble, same aggravation, same permits, why not?

She first booked carnivals within the parking lots of Super K-marts. When malls saw what she could do, they started working with her.

“When people hear it’s me on the phone, they’re happy and take my call,” she says. “I used to have to beg for them to talk to me. Now, they call me.”

“I saw a niche and I worked it until I could fill it,” she says. “Carnival at first was not a nice subject. But now it’s come a long way.”

Carnival regulations have tightened in recent years.

“It’s no longer Smokey Joe’s Café. It’s big business, and it needs to be treated that way,” asserts Konnos. “What I did was take a quasi subject with a gray reputation, clean it up, package it and sold it.” “That is why I am on top of my game – I earned it.” Shows are run in an orderly manner with no sleeper trailers brought onto carnival sites, 18 wheelers “lined up militarily” in back of the mall, and with only the carnival and rides front and center. “It needs to look like a mini Disneyland,” she says with a smile.

Today’s carnivals must be set up on firm ground or blacktops so they don’t sink when it rains, and they usually take up a space of at least 200 by 400 feet, which is 80,000 square feet, in any direction. They must have ample parking facilities and be in a place of high visibility. Once the location is approved, then a contract is signed and the carnival arranges and pays for porta-potties, dumpsters, permit fees and security.

“The carnivals are always mindful of their patrons security, that’s why it is our custom to us off-duty police officers,” notes Konnos. “All employees are drug-tested with background checks performed through agencies.”

In addition, many of the new carnival owners are college graduates.

The rides have also grown into what’s known in carnival jargon as “spectaculars” – million dollar rides.

In the beginning the rides were so elementary. For instance, the airplane ride was so close to the ground that the child had to push with his own feet.

“Carnival rides have evolved into fine-tuned machines, but they are expensive,” she adds.

Carnival owners are making payments on million dollar rides; therefore, they pay for dependable, qualified superintendents who have been trained by the ride manufacture to know every part of that ride. In addition, they are paying a half a million dollars or more a year for insurance. If you think you pay a lot for gasoline, look at the carnivals. Their diesel fuel costs can run \$15,000 to \$20,000 a week because it takes a lot of 18 wheelers to move the carnivals from one location to the next and the rides run on generators.

Carnival Booking, Inc. books shows nationwide. While Konnos doesn't always deal with a large number of shows, she books them at the best locations.

"I don't go for quantity, I go for quality. And when quality meets quality, everybody is happy with the revenues and performance."

Promotions are often held to boost carnival ticket sales and to lure carnival goers into a mall. We often work with the malls to determine what promotions will increase the malls sales. One such promotion might be for mall shoppers to show a proof of purchase from the mall to get a discount on an all day armband for the carnival rides.

"It enhances the bottom line of a mall, because all of the stores benefit from it," says Konnos.

The success of the carnivals can be subject to the weather, the mall's location and where the carnival is actually erected within the mall's grounds.

Konnos is a member of the worldwide Outdoor Amusement Business Association (OABA), Texas Association of Fairs and Events, International Festivals and Events Association and locally, the Greater Southwest Houston Chamber of Commerce.

"Lois does provide a wonderful service to not only our industry but to the communities where she lives and operates," says Bob Johnson, president of OABA, a 5,000-member Orlando-based trade organization. "She is very talented and on the mark in terms of her business – on the cutting edge from the standpoint of creating new and exciting events that are prosperous for the carnival industry."

"She goes out there and represents us as what we are – a business, a company," adds Jeffrey Bloomness, president of the Chicago area carnival company All Star Amusement. "Through her negotiations she has proven that we're a legitimate industry making legitimate money. She has helped us with what we do – fundraising for so many communities."

Konnos, who created her business out of her West Houston home, still works there today with colleague Linda Wade, the agency's vice president. She says "Linda is a very intricate part of the growth of my business and I thank God for her every day."

"I make the deals, I'm a closer. Linda does all the detail work," explains Konnos. "We're a perfect team."

"Working with Lois and the fast pace of the carnival industry is very exciting and fulfilling. This is different from anything I have ever done and I love the excitement. Sometimes contracts are coming and going so fast that it's hard keeping up with them," says Wade, a legal assistant for 25 years before joining Carnival Booking, Inc. "Everything changes from day to day – we're always arranging moves for carnivals all over the United States."

Konnos takes great pride in working with carnivals to help raise money for charity and scholarships.

“I like giving away tickets to people who can’t afford to take their children,” she says. I’ve built my business in a charitable and honorable way. I like doing for kids and their families who can’t do for themselves.”

“You’ll see a kid crying because a mom doesn’t have the money for the rides,” she adds. “I’ll put a band around his arm so he can ride all the rides all day long. And to watch the kid light up – I like giving. In my opinion, we’ve turned carnival around into a service – charity and good will.”

Born in Washington D.C., Konnos has lived in Houston for more than 20 years.

“Houston is what California was,” she says. “California used to be called the Gold Coast. I feel like Texas has awakened, and it’s blooming in every direction.”

“It’s a privilege to be established here and to be able to make a living here,” she adds. “I laugh every time I see a bumper sticker that says I wasn’t born here but I got here as soon as possible. I used to wonder what I was doing here, but now I can tell you.”

What’s in the future for Lois Konnos? “With the carnival business and mall business, I’m going to step up to the festival business as well,” she says. “But I will always benefit a charity. I believe in being charitable and doing something for people.”