

Dark days of September 2001 set a path to Central Oregon

By Vicki Curlett
Guest Columnist

Long before my coming to *The Nugget*, I had my own business in strategic meeting, incentive, and special events planning, working mostly with corporations and mid-size businesses.

For nine months prior to September 11, 2001, I was at work on a custom-designed incentive trip for a client in Michigan that was taking 200 people on a trip rewarding them for their sales efforts with his distributorship. The destination for that group was Santa Fe, New Mexico. I'd made several trips out to New Mexico as I planned the trip, and then a few days prior to the scheduled arrival of the group, I flew out and settled in on-site with preparations for their arrivals, flights in from Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Fortunately, there were no flight delays and everyone was put on charter bus transportation from Albuquerque as they arrived.

We opened the trip that night with a Native American feast high up in the mountains. I had worked with the hotel chef on a special menu. And after dinner, I'd arranged for live eagle handlers to fly them around the perimeter of where the group was and then perch them so guests could get a closer look. After dinner, we did a roaring fire with Native American storytellers and dancers. It was a great opening for the trip, as I was always known for my original ideas and activities.

Two days into the trip, I was up early before checking on breakfast arrangements and turned on the TV to see planes flying into the Twin Towers. Meeting and incentive planners are trained in crisis management but there was no way anyone could anticipate an event of this magnitude or what was to follow. I rushed downstairs

to get some TVs set up in my host suite for guests to monitor.

The panic and uncertainty, with each guest walking into the suite, was evident. As the day wore on, and I tried to keep the group on track with the tours activities we had planned, and their anxiety levels down, it was obvious I was going to have to make some major modifications to the trip originally planned for seven days. All flights were grounded nationwide, people around the country who were traveling by car had to find a hotel and stay put, and emergency management efforts were in full swing as officials tried to determine whether this was just the first of other attacks.

For starters, some guests were National Guard and indicated they would have to get back home as quickly as possible in case they were called up for duty. Others just thought the world was going to end and wanted to rent cars to drive cross-country for fear of never seeing their children and families again. I advised against it, noting they might not find hotels or food or other necessary services,

depending on the outcome. Interesting how people react in times of crisis.

I called a meeting of the entire group and indicated we would need to prioritize getting those like National Guard back as quickly as possible, asking other guests to remain for the duration of the trip if they could and be patient as I tried to get airline seats as they became available. For some it would mean extending their stay depending on where their hometown airport was. With all flights grounded, I was up all night most nights with airline agents trying to change tickets and get a seat or two on any given flight when it became available. When you have to do that with 200 seats it is a monumental task!

Others needed rental cars or vans to drive out, but at a steep price the rental companies were charging. Meanwhile, I kept the schedule as best I could, and even had to start arranging for additional activities, meals, and more hotel nights since some guests would need to stay beyond the planned departure date. What was to be a seven-day trip, turned

into an 11-day trip until I could get all the guests, and even my client, who stayed until the end to offer assistance wherever needed, back to their home airports. On day 11, when the last shuttle bus of guests was on its way to the Albuquerque airport, I realized that I was not going to be able to get a flight home to Nebraska. I was able to get a rental car, so after all the million details of an incentive trip were tied up with the hotel, I departed Santa Fe at 4 p.m. The drive was 16 hours long through the night, with intense fog as it turned out. I rolled in to my house and fell into bed.

Interestingly, when I started looking at destinations for the incentive trip, one of the choices was Sunriver Resort because they had wanted me to come out for a site inspection to see if it was a good fit for the group. I didn't have time to make the trip then and decided on Santa Fe.

But after such a grueling trip, I was ready for a vacation, and my husband and I decided it was a good excuse to finally make that trip to Central Oregon a couple of

weeks later. We flew into Portland and headed down the rainy coast, then turned east and crested Santiam Pass to a spectacular fall leaf display. As we drove into Bend, my husband and I looked at each other and said "uh-oh," because we'd spent years of corporate travel wondering where we wanted to call home permanently.

The morning after arriving at Sunriver Resort, I met with a sales rep who was going to show us around and arrange some activities. When she asked what we wanted to do, I said, "Find me a realtor." That was a Tuesday, and her mother, who was a realtor, met with us and took us touring on Wednesday. On Friday we found a house in Sunriver we wanted to make an offer on, contingent on the owner accepting the offer by Friday night because we were flying out on Saturday morning. They accepted, and we got on the plane home asking ourselves what had just happened.

So a very stressful time 20 years ago in Santa Fe turned into a very happy ending — finding our forever home in Central Oregon.

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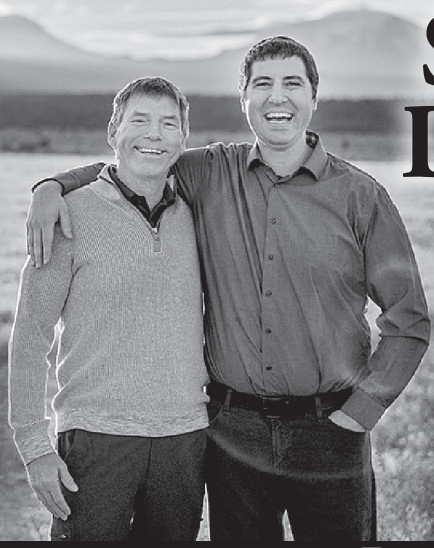
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