



Gets New Digs Befitting Its Name

By Melissa James, York County Contributor

"We don't sell Barney plates anymore," quipped David Kiedinger, describing the scale of his business. What started 25 years ago as a small party supply store has grown into a major event rental and production company, which often hosts parties atop aircraft carriers.

Big Top Entertainment has been bursting at the seams of its Newport News warehouse, built 14 years ago by David and his wife, co-owner Julianne Smith Kiedinger. They decided to seek a new home for their business in York County—near their own home. While they were hoping to avoid another construction project, the Kiedingers couldn't find a structure that quite matched their needs. They ended up purchasing a lot at 500 Old York-Hampton Highway and started planning their dream warehouse.

"We'll be proud to show off this new building," said David. "It's not going to be anything like a typical, traditional rental equipment company. It's going to be creative, unique, a little eccentric. It's going to be us." What excites him most, though, will be having everything in one place. Currently, Big Top is straddling two locations: its original building and a satellite location it acquired "as a Band-Aid." With just one loading bay and nine trucks trying to get in at once, efficiency is a challenge.



"But now we'll be able to focus on the event, and not how we're going to load and pack it. We won't have boxes sitting out in the parking lot when it starts to rain. It will make life so much easier for our crew." The other employees will also have more dedicated space, with 10 new offices instead of two.

"My office was a storage room with printers and a dinosaur head next to me, because there was nowhere else to put it," David said. The Kiedingers plan to debut the new building in March, and they report everything has been smooth so far.

"Working with Jim Noel and the County, it feels like everyone has been on our team. Dealing with permitting and plans hasn't been as painful an experience as one would expect. They have to do their job, and there are restrictions—we had to do a brick front, which costs more than metal, but we understand it's needed for beautifying the area. The experience feels like they want us to succeed, which makes the County succeed," he said.

That feeling was validated Feb. 19, when the York County Economic Development Authority and Office of Economic Development honored Big Top Entertainment with their 2020 William Rogers "Poor Potter" Award, for the company's significant investment and job creation in York County. It's certainly been an exciting start to the year for David and Julianne, and a milestone they could scarcely have imagined when they first started the business in 1995.

They had just moved back to York County—Julianne's hometown—from Green Bay, WI, where she could no longer take the cold. Julianne was a natural at entertaining, as a former Miss Williamsburg and Miss Virginia (she also competed in Miss America, where she finished first runner-up to winner Kelly Cash, Johnny Cash's niece, who remains a friend).

"We knew we threw really good parties, so we decided, why not open a party business? And now we haven't partied since," laughed David. "We get to party on Tuesdays and Wednesdays." He said they didn't put much research into the idea but dove into it as more of a passion project. "So far, it's worked," he said.

Their original retail store sold basics like streamers and balloons (and yes, Barney plates), but they soon realized Wal-Mart was outdoing them, along with up-and-comer Party City. The Kiedingers had been doing some rentals on the side and opted to refocus on that part of the business. They eventually discontinued their retail operation and are now a top-tier event production and rental company. Big Top owns over 100 tents, an impressive array of props and décor, and countless chairs, tableware, catering supplies, even a Ferris wheel.

“What’s really our niche is that we’re not a cookie-cutter rental company where it’s ‘this is all we have.’ We listen to the customer and what their vision is—whether that involves building it or buying it, we make that vision happen,” said David. “We don’t like to say no.”

Going above and beyond is sometimes literal—one corporate event requested an airplane hung overhead inside the Hampton Roads Convention Center. The Kiedingers found a suitable one, driving to Tennessee to retrieve it, disassembling and reassembling the wings and adding a tail banner. They even employ full-time art directors, to ensure their events are one-of-a-kind.

“We love doing custom events because it shows our creativity,” said David. “We love a challenge. The best part is standing back once the event is set up, looking at it, and hearing the customer say, ‘Wow, you nailed it!’

“We like to underpromise and overdeliver. Many times, we finish setting up and say, hmmm, needs something more. Additional uplights, another prop... they don’t pay extra for that; we just take pride in what we do and want to make it look complete. We are our hardest critics.”

But the real secret to their success, said David, is their staff. He describes their 20+ employees as loyal, dedicated, hardworking and talented.

“Without them, we would not be here today. We get amazing emails with customers raving about our employees. It’s a trickle-down effect: we care for the staff, and they care for the customers.” Many employees have been there more than a decade, and the Kiedingers are eager to reward their many sacrifices when they start in the new building. Each employee gets to pick whatever desk they want, to match the desired theme for their office. There will even be doggie gates with their pet’s name in front of each office door (yes, they can bring their pets to work).

Big Top does six to 10 weddings a week in peak season and about 1,000 events per year. They’re still recovering from December 2019, when they did a record 38 events in one week. But the Kiedingers always make time for family. Their son, Preston, graduated from ODU and works on Big Top’s events staff. Daughter Lauren, also an ODU alum, works for a fitness company in New York. She’s set to be married April 25 on the beach in Hampton, with a beautiful, Tuscan-themed wedding. No need to ask who’s planning the event!

In his free time, David is active in the Lafayette Gun Club and working on his Divemaster certification (the whole family are certified scuba divers). Julianne splits her time for voiceover work, after a long career in TV and radio commercials. She records several auditions per day in their home studio, and drives to Virginia Beach to complete the spots. She has also sung in bands since age 16, currently performing classic rock and country with the group Cornerstone. They appear at many festivals and restaurants in the area, including Water Street Grill.

Their favorite pastime, though, is sitting by their backyard pool with their beloved Yorkie, Lexi. Bringing their business home to York County has paid off in more ways than one—their new commute is just 4 minutes. Now they can live and work in the same community, bringing everything full circle. It just goes to show, York County can be both the life of the party and a quiet place to escape.



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