

family reunions

No Family Member Left Behind

How to have an event that everyone can afford | **By WILMA ANN ANDERSON**

I can easily picture the glorious sun and sand of my ideal family reunion venue: Grenada, West Indies. But I have a million and two relatives spread throughout the United States, Caribbean and Canada that I want to bring together for a fabulous family reunion. How does a reunion planner like me get all of these folks with varying wallet sizes and hometowns to the same special place at the same time without financially factoring some family members out of the event? I contacted a few experts for tried-and-true ways to pull off the reunion bash of the year.

Time is money, so seasoned reunion planner D. René Johnson of D. René Design first suggests getting the timing right. "Most families have reunions at intervals, so the best time to start planning the next reunion is immediately following the current one," she says. "This gives you time to research locations and allows family members to discuss costs and save funds." Off-peak is less expensive and early planning gives folks time to accrue vacation days. First-time reunion planners should start at least a year in advance and form a planning committee.

Kelly Davie-Seligman's management and marketing experience was instrumental when she stepped in as the planner for her family's reunion. She formed a committee right away to delegate responsibilities and found that a committee can uncover cost-saving, in-family talents—such as a designer, DJ or caterer.

Okay, we've got the time, now "show me the money," right? Spend the big bucks on the main event venue.

Consider hiring a professional planner if she has connections and may be able to negotiate better venue prices or wait-staff rates.

Edith Wagner of reunionsmag.com attests that hotels often throw in an extra room for a group. "You can use the room as a hospitality suite or donate it to a family member with financial hardship," she says. "Choose a location with free parking and shuttle service to area attractions." Free breakfast and a variety of free activities will lower the pricetag of your event. Recommend alternate lodging so members can opt to stay at a less-expensive hotel down the road.

Experts suggest setting up a reunion fund and encouraging family members to donate. Ask corporations and local businesses for monetary and product donations for goody bag items and door prizes—even food items for the family BBQ.

Create a free website and post information instead of using snail mail. Carpool, join free programs like mypoints.com to earn points toward airfare, fundraise via weekend car washes or a service like black-gifts.com. Do focus groups and mystery shopping for extra cash.

Early planning, in-house talent, donations, food, folks and fun in the appropriate venue is the formula for a low-cost and successful family bash. Now go create a monster of a reunion!

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