

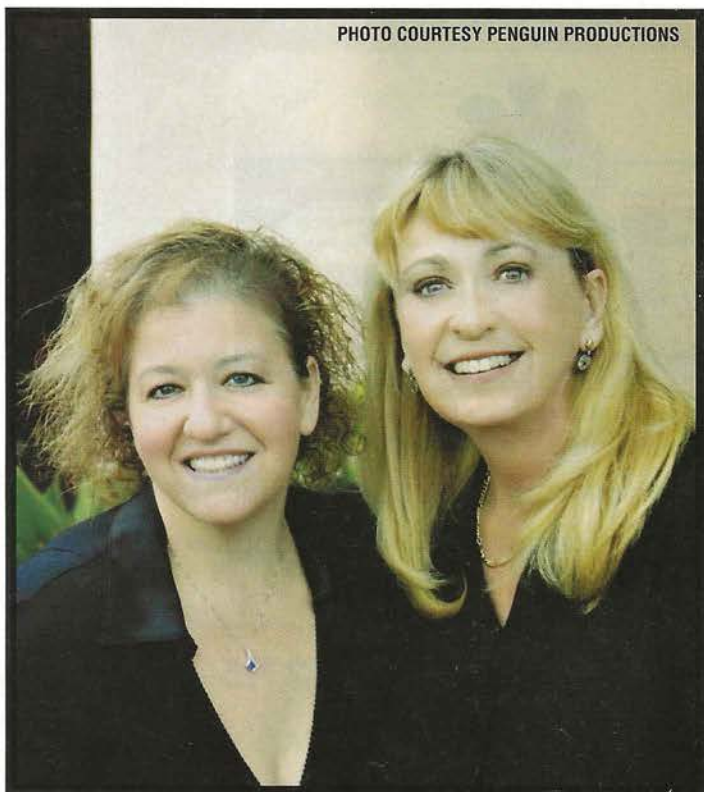
The Crème de la Crème

BESA puts its top-tier bar and bat mitzvah vendors on display for its annual expo

BY ALANNA BERMAN

BESA co-presidents Lydia Krasner and Patricia Del Rio have been with the organization since its inception.

PHOTO COURTESY PENGUIN PRODUCTIONS



FOR TEENAGED BOYS AND GIRLS, a bar or bat mitzvah can be one of the most exciting — and nerve-wracking — times in their lives. The intense studying, tireless planning and agonizing over their Torah portion all come together at the end, thankfully, with a big, stress-relieving party. But preparing for the service is only half of the work. Equally challenging is planning a party that's the perfect end to a life-changing day.

Enter Lydia Krasner, event planner and co-president of BESA, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Event Services Association — a group of knowledgeable, committed and unique vendors who specialize in b'nai mitzvah. Together with co-president Patricia Del Rio, she coordinates the 50 or so members of BESA, holds meetings and puts on the annual BESA Expo.

The expo, which this year will be March 13 at the Hyatt Regency in La Jolla, is a free event, showcasing nearly all of BESA's members for soon-to-be bar mitzvah boys and bat mitzvah girls and their families.

"The expo is really a resource for the Jewish community," Del Rio says.

And although the expo is an exciting annual event for BESA, its leaders work year-round to ensure its list of vendors includes only the best of the best.

"In the core category, which includes event planners, deejays, videographers and caterers, those people have had to perform 75 b'nai mitzvah to be [members]," Krasner says.

Del Rio agrees that when it comes to the level of members' expertise in the b'nai mitzvah industry, BESA invites only the best of the best to join.

"It's not even good enough to be 'good' — we want members who are very particular with what they need to know for these types of events," Del Rio says.

Krasner has been in the event-planning business for 15 years (and is an original member of BESA herself — she also owns Mitzvah Event Productions, a party-planning business), and she knows a thing or two about putting on an unforgettable party. She also knows what not to do.

"You would be surprised how many hotel caterers offer a crab cake for a

“It’s not even good enough to be ‘good’ — we want members who are very particular with what they need to know for these types of events.”

kosher-style menu!” she laughs.

This exact topic is what she recently discussed as a speaker at Special Event Magazine’s annual conference in Phoenix a few months ago, and it’s also the reason she began to work with BESA 10 years ago. It’s also something Del Rio, who is not Jewish, could have used when starting her photography business [many years ago].

“It’s an area of event photography that is hard to get into,” Del Rio says, “but I just kind of fell into it when a bar mitzvah mom called me about pricing for an event. Because I wasn’t Jewish, I wanted to find out everything about it.”

Krasner has been sharing her knowledge of Jewish event planning with hotel managers, caterers and entertainers at Special Event Magazine’s conference for the past seven years.

“People in this industry need to [know how] to work with the ritual objects and have respect for the religion,” Krasner says.

While a religious rite of passage is the reason for the whole affair, the party afterward is often the highlight of the weekend’s events, especially for attendees under the age of 14.

To make planning the party as streamlined as possible, members of BESA are grouped into categories like catering, event planning and décor, photography, entertainment, invitations and venues. New this year is the addition of a transportation category, which will be showcased at the expo, along with a booth or two dedicated to developing and executing mitzvah projects.

“This area was so successful last year, because this is something a lot of synagogues are requiring kids to do, and they are really taking it and making it their own,” Krasner says.

The San Diego Zoo, Humane Society, and San Diego Food Bank all participated in this section of the expo last year and are expected to attend this year as well.

Entertainment suitable for multiple generations is also a popular draw at the expo.

“With a bar mitzvah, there are three generations

there that need to be fed and enjoy the party,” Krasner says of the importance of hiring the right vendors. “It’s a real challenge for the deejay to entertain all those people, for one thing.”

Though many elements of b’nai mitzvah parties are mainstays, trends do change every year, and this year, Krasner says, is no different.

“As far as themes go, we’ve seen a lot based on technology, like Facebook or iPods,” she says, “and even people using no theme, or throwing the whole idea of a theme out the window. Just because your kid likes soccer no longer means there has to be a soccer theme to their party, because this entire event is about where they are going and should reflect their personality, not just their current interests.”

To that end, BESA members cover a wide range of interests that any bar mitzvah boy or bat mitzvah girl would be happy to have at their party. From venues and caterers to entertainment and deejays, almost anything imaginable is possible on that special day.

“We have some new members of BESA this year who are really exciting for us,” Krasner says, “in addition to the members who have been with us for a long time.”

One such addition is Jared Taylor’s Dance Masters, which combines professional dancers and routines to add entertainment at the party. These dancers are not amateurs, either. Many of them have been backup dancers for performers such as Christina Aguilera and Janet Jackson. Dancers interact with partygoers and perform dance numbers throughout the night as a surprise for guests.

“It adds a real wow factor to the party,” Krasner says.

She says she’s also noticed a new buzzword in bar and bat mitzvah circles — “authentic.”

“It’s not just the food anymore that has to be authentic, but all the textures at the party — the tablecloths. All the senses have to be engaged, and all of it has to be authentic,” she says.



How to Make Your Bar or Bat Mitzvah a Party for Every Guest

Tips from Lydia Krasner and Patricia Del Rio

1. Pick the right deejay. A deejay can make or break the party, since all age groups need to be entertained. Make sure yours understands the importance of playing a few “key” pieces — the hora, for example — and will keep kids and adults equally entertained on the dance floor.

2. Be sure to bring your bar mitzvah boy or bat mitzvah girl along with you for all the planning details. After all, this is about their achievements and should, more than anything, reflect their tastes. Del Rio recommends all children attend the BESA Expo at least once before their 13th (or 12th) birthday, just so they can see what is available and start planning.

3. Hire an event planner. The last thing you want is added stress to a day when you should be celebrating with your family. Planners can assist throughout the entire process or just during the day of the party. They’ll make sure the flow goes well, you’ve chosen the right entertainment and all problems during the party are solved discretely. Krasner also likes to provide “kid control,” or one pair of eyes per 20 kids, to keep the party fun, but safe.



Last year's BESA Expo drew hundreds of revelers, including children of all ages and their families, who sampled offerings from nearly all BESA members.

PHOTOS ON PAGE 51 AND 52 COURTESY LYDIA KRASNER

For instance, a party featuring Chinese food would also need Chinese lanterns, signage with Asian characters and traditional fabrics and other décor.

Venues have changed, too. While almost all receptions used to be in synagogue social halls, more and more teens are holding their events at trendy nightclubs they normally wouldn't be able to get into, and they're serving mock-tail versions of more "adult" beverages. Krasner says she has even planned a few parties at PETCO Park, and even less traditionally, a large tent outdoors.

"These new venues are more casual, funky and sporty than ever before," she says.

Finally, desert stations are replacing the traditional cake or fruit tables at many parties lately.

"A strawberry shortcake station or a chipwich station — where kids can make their own ice cream sandwiches, choose the cookies and then roll the ice cream in nuts — is becoming very popular," she says. "When kids can hold the dessert, they will eat it, and not get it all over everything."

Another new member of BESA, Sensational Treats, offers flavored cotton candy, far beyond the traditional pink and blue stuff. Flavors like lime and blueberry are available and made on-site, and the company is expanding its treat business to include make-it-yourself truffles and ice cream.

While a religious rite of passage is the reason for the whole affair, the party afterward is often the highlight of the weekend's events, especially for attendees under the age of 14.

"The ice cream setup is really futuristic and robotic looking," Krasner says.

Using liquid nitrogen, any flavor can be made

in three minutes flat, and if the ice cream melts, a zap of liquid nitrogen will do the trick to keep drips at bay.

With all these innovations, it's no wonder the BESA Expo draws a large crowd every year. This year's expo theme is BESA Rocks. Guests can expect a variety of food to taste, favors to sample and, of course, entertainment, including the latest trends — some only available at the Expo.

"We are working with one of our members to set up a sort of digital graffiti screen, where kids can actually "paint" on a video screen with an electronic controller, and then take a print-out of their graffiti home with them," Krasner says.

Of course, it's not just new innovations that keep Krasner and the rest of the BESA folks coming back every year.

"It's really cool to be able to provide this service to the community," Krasner says, "so families can make an intelligent decision when booking vendors for their parties."

• For more information about BESA or the BESA Expo March 13, visit www.besasandiego.com.