

Boulder native, charity-event guru Dave Clark returns home

Clark has worked with everyone from Nelson Mandela to Prince in support of causes

By John Aguilar Camera Staff Writer

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Dave Clark holds a photo of Yusuf Islam (a.k.a. Cat Stevens) in his Boulder office on Aug. 26. In 2003 Clark organized an AIDS fundraiser And persuaded Islam to come out of retirement to play.

Dave Clark has arguably the most extensive and illustrious Rolodex in all of Boulder County, if not the state of Colorado.

The Boulder native got Yusuf Islam, better known as Cat Stevens, to play live in public for the first time in a quarter-century at an AIDS charity concert he organized in 2003.

He lobbied Prince to help push Muhammad Ali's 1996 biography "Healing: A Journal of Tolerance and Understanding" by promising the music legend a face-to-face meeting with the boxing great. "Prince was in tears because this was his boyhood hero," Clark said.

He lined up Whoopi Goldberg, Richard Gere and Lou Reed to perform at a birthday tribute to Anne Frank. The 2005 event even included the participation of Miep Gies, the woman who hid Frank and her family in her Amsterdam home during World War II.

Now the 49-year-old producer of around-the-world "cause-related" events -- often anchored by a collection of the globe's biggest celebrities espousing the fight for human rights, the battle against AIDS or the struggle on behalf of wounded soldiers -- is back where he started.

'Died and gone to heaven'

"I feel like I've died and gone to heaven since I've been back," said Clark, who returned to Boulder late last year after living in New York City for more than two decades.

Clark, who went to the University of Colorado on a running scholarship and earned a sponsorship from Adidas, credits Boulder for his entrepreneurial start. He founded an apparel company in the city before taking it to the East Coast.

"I've been an entrepreneur since I was a freshman, and ever since then I've never really worked for anyone," he said.

Clark launched a marketing and events firm in 1995 after trying a stint as a sculptor for nine months. He began the company with a campaign to promote The Three Tenors world tour and hired artist LeRoy Neiman to create fine art posters for the concert series.

Three years ago, he founded the eponymous David Clark Cause, which has worked with presidents and other global luminaries on various cause-related events.

Today, Clark works out of an office at Crispin Porter + Bogusky in Gunbarrel and has teamed up with the ad firm to work on a future project involving the International Olympic Committee.

"This guy is a really smart thinker," Crispin CEO Andrew Keller said. "When he has a person, a day and a place -- he's good at combining these things."

Like the time he got human rights hero and former South African president Nelson Mandela to agree to be part of a massive star-studded concert to raise money to combat the AIDS epidemic. The 2003 concert in Cape Town featured Bono and The Edge from U2, Robert Plant, Eurythmics and Peter Gabriel.

But the show's biggest star in Clark's estimation was Islam, who came out of decades of seclusion for one reason only: Mandela asked him to. Clark said he convinced the anti-apartheid activist to write the British rock star a personal invitation.

Clark said the concert almost didn't happen because Mandela was concerned that AIDS, which was ravaging the African continent at the time, was a more salient problem than human rights, the banner under which the concert had initially been cast.

That's when Clark decided that a rebranding of the disease was necessary.

"People with AIDS -- they're not dying because they're sick, they're dying because they're poor," he said.

Clark suggested Mandela use his old prison number from his cell on Robben Island -- 46664 -- to lend a powerful identity to the concert. He also suggested that an image of barbed wire be twisted into the shape of the AIDS ribbon -- "a ribbon of hope" -- to create a powerful visual intersection of the disease and human rights.

That concert helped open the door to collaborations with other international stars and heroes.

"After working with Mandela, everyone trusted me and I was able to move through the circles I've needed to move through," Clark said.

'Halo effect on Boulder'

Three years ago, Clark's company put on an event called the "Above & Beyond Citizen Honors," in which former Secretary of State Colin Powell stood in Arlington National Cemetery and asked Americans to nominate ordinary citizens in their local communities who have gone "above and beyond."

That was followed up just last month at the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally in South Dakota with the blowout American Thunder Music Festival, hosted by actor Jeff Bridges. The money raised went to the Bob Woodruff Foundation, which helps wounded vets and is named after the television reporter who was seriously injured covering the Iraq war.

David Rose, a longtime rock music photographer who was Bruce Springsteen's official cameraman for a decade, helped produce American Thunder and said his experience working with Clark "redirected my life."

"I thought this cause was a better path than just selling an album or a movie," said Rose, who has shot for Vogue, Vanity Fair and Time.

The photographer said Clark has a knack for taking complex subjects and problems and recasting them with celebrities at meaningful locations so that mass audiences can get behind them.

"It's much easier to get people to rally around something when they can understand it," he said. "Before he conceives something, he asks, 'Does this ring true or not?'"

Clark said he hopes to one day bring a major cause-related event to Colorado, now that he calls the state his home again. He concedes that may mean pulling out that Rolodex with all those names and crafting an idea that can capture imaginations.

"I don't know of any other company that does what I do," he said. "Hopefully, it will have a nice halo effect on Boulder."

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