

Born on the Fourth of July

Harith Productions Creates a Patriotic Place for America's Birthday

Over the past few years, Philadelphia's signature Independence Day events were relatively low key. But in the year 2001, Harith Wickrema and Harith Productions transformed Philadelphia's celebration into a world-class, powerful and stirring spectacular that embodied American ideals. Deputy City Representative Bonnie Grant's goal was to create patriotic pageantry to make each guest proud to be an American, all the while celebrating the principles of the country's founding fathers—freedom and liberty.

This event was no mere party, but a historic happening with international impact, drawing world leaders, elected officials, celebrities and American citizens to celebrate the nation's birthday with pomp and circumstance, pageantry and patriotism. Rather than a duplication of previous years' long-winded speeches, Harith Productions set out to design a concept that would hold the attention of a live television audience and thrill the crowds of tourists and residents.

"It was an opportunity for us to give back to the city," said Wickrema, president of Harith Productions, Ltd., who volunteered to produce the Official Independence Day Ceremony for the City of Philadelphia. Harith Productions also was recruited by Welcome America to produce two additional events during the weeklong festivities.

As the first rays of light gleamed above Philadelphia's cobblestone streets on the 4th of July, a team of 18 volunteers from Harith Productions was hard at work adorning Independence Hall in its birthday finery. At the team's request, the city's Street Department powerwashed the road and sidewalks until they gleamed. Three thousand chairs were dressed in star-spangled covers by Sculpt Chair USA and precisely lined up into rows facing the Hall. Red, white and blue balloon columns flanked the chairs, and the pillars in front of the building were draped in red, white and blue swags.

Red, white and blue bunting festooned the stage, topped with red and white flowers and a small sea of American flags. A wood podium with the city seal took center stage, and was backed by a gleaming golden



replica of the Liberty Medal behind it.

From 7 to 9 a.m., the nation joined Charles Gibson and Diane Sawyer as they broadcast "Good Morning America" with the backdrop of Independence Hall. Wickrema's connections brought the patriotic music by the Air Force band of Mid-America, and costumed historic character performances that were a highlight of the show.

Precise minute-by-minute execution was necessary for successful television coverage, so at 9:58 a.m., an array of dignitaries and celebrities took their places on stage. At 10 a.m., the bells in the clock tower at Independence Hall pealed 13 times, for the original 13 colonies. As the last chime sounded, the official ceremony began.

Harith Productions believes that children represent the country's future, and were therefore vital to the ceremony. Named "A Tapestry of Children," a multicultural group of 10 children between the ages of 6 and 11 was selected to perform a reading of the Declaration of Independence, for which they received a standing ovation.

Under the eye of the international media, the Liberty Medal was awarded to United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan of Ghana. To make the presentation more culturally significant, a Ghanaian boy dressed in native attire carried the Liberty Medal to Philadelphia's mayor, who in turn presented it to Annan.

Speeches by politicians and dignitaries were separated by entertaining elements that included a multicultural choir, dressed in red, white and blue robes, that sang inspiration songs, among them, "The Star Spangled Banner." With a patriotic flourish, the ceremony continued with music by the Air Force Band of Mid-America, which performed alongside a children's drill team.

At the event's high point, spectators craned their necks to view military jets flying overhead in formation as the band played "Stars and Stripes Forever." At the final note, the jets roared over Independence Hall toward the horizon.



Blair Broad helps read the Declaration of Independence.

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