

Thursday, Aug. 28, 2008

Family wins sweepstakes that nearly went unclaimed

Notifications thought to simply be junk e-mail

While on the Prince George's County's Web site last year, an icon promoting a \$25,000 family reunion sweepstakes featuring a trip to Six Flags in Largo, a night at the Greenbelt Marriott and a trip to National Harbor in Oxon Hill caught Laurel resident Kendie Reich's attention.

Like countless others who see similar advertisement for free cars, boats or other giveaways, she entered her information and immediately forgot about it until she got a visit at her home informing her she had won the second Prince George's County Family Reunion Sweepstakes Grand Prize.

Reich almost missed her winnings as she did not input her phone number on the registration form and assumed e-mails saying that she had won was simply spam.

"You get those sort of things all the time," she said.

In March, Reich, currently a non-practicing registered nurse, received a FedEx package about the award, but because she was asked for her social security number, she said she remained skeptical. The award had a 10-day notarization period before it would be offered to someone else and on the eighth day, Reich decided to act.

That same day, J. Matthew Neitzey, executive director of the Prince George's County Conference and Visitors Bureau, went to her house.

"I realized that unlike our previous year's winner, I could at least go and see if they still lived there," he said. Last year's winner was Yolawnda Rogers of Cincinnati, Ohio. Winners are selected randomly from the pool of applicants.

"It's kind of a funny story trying to track someone down and saying, 'Yes, we're a real organization, and we'd like you to accept the prize,'" said Neitzey, who added that the sweepstakes is as a way for the county to get its reunion message out.

"We decided that we have a lot of assets for the reunion market," he said, pointing to the affordable quality hotels in the county, Six Flags, award-winning parks and the strong ethnic communities.

"So we branded ourselves as Reunion Capital USA."

Although the event is initially geared toward family reunions, Neitzey told Reich that she could also bring her friends. Since her family is scattered across the country, she chose to bring members of her church Reaching Hearts International, Spencerville and members of a nonprofit her family works with Hearts International.

"We had an absolutely lovely time and we were delighted to be able to share the whole event with them," said Kathy Spinolo, one of Reich's guests. "The county put on such a wonderful event and we were grateful to be a part of it."

Since their 25th wedding anniversary was the first weekend in August, Reich said she and her husband, Kevin, decided to plan the trip then. The couple also renewed their wedding vows at the Marriott. Yet the trip almost didn't pan out again.

The day before the trip was to begin, their 13-year old son, Cody, had an accident while playing tag at a and

was treated for a concussion and three fractures around his right eye. After a day and night in the emergency room, Cody was discharged and the family immediately went home to pack, compile programs, itineraries and flowers for each of the eighteen rooms for the 40 guests.

Reich said they had planned on being at the Marriot by noon to set up the rooms for each couple. But they got to Marriott at 6 p.m.

Reich said at there was supposed to be a low-key meet and greet at 7 p.m., but to their surprise it was a banquet filled with their friends and special guests Leslie E. Johnson, wife of County Executive Jack B. Johnson, and County Councilman Ingrid Turner (Dist. 4) of Bowie.

"I just praise God that He was so kind to give us such a gift," Reich said. "For me, I just felt really honored that we were chosen and God would bless us with such wonderful gift on our 25th wedding anniversary. I just really knew that we were so incredibly blessed – it could have gone in a whole other direction."

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