THE WOMAN BEHIND THE MOUSE

BE ERIN WALLACE’S GUEST AS SHE ENGINEERS A MAGICAL DISNEY EXPERIENCE

BY MONICA ELLIOTT
Erin Wallace accepts roses from Prince Charming.
The mouse is great and deservedly receives a lot of credit for the success of his creator and his conglomerate. But behind every good mouse, there’s a good woman. No, that’s not exactly how the expression goes, but in this case, it’s appropriate. That’s because behind every great guest experience at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla. — the home of that famous mouse — stands Erin Wallace, senior vice president of Walt Disney World Resort Operations.

Even people who have not visited Disney World lately have a notion of its current magnitude if only by word of mouth or advertising. It’s not just your average enormous theme park, after all. Its iconic status in American — make that global — culture and its size make it the monster of all family resorts. Walt Disney World comprises seven resorts in addition to the two major theme parks — Magic Kingdom and Disney's Animal Kingdom. It includes four theme parks in all, three water adventure parks, Disney's Wide World of Sports complex, Downtown Disney, 30 resort hotels, six golf courses, and two full-service spas. And Wallace is responsible for overseeing it all.

From the hiring decisions for all the “cast members” — the hundreds of people in costumes or otherwise who staff the parks and resorts — to the financial and strategic decisions, Wallace is the woman who holds the keys to the kingdom. If it seems a bit overwhelming, that’s because it is.

“Erin is responsible for improving productivity and expenses by finding effective ways to be more efficient, and she has to do this without making a negative impact on the guest experience,” explains Lee Cockerell, executive vice president of Walt Disney World Operations.

The bottom line for any business, and especially for one of the world’s largest tourist destinations, is the customer. For the Walt Disney World Resort, guests are most important, and Wallace ensures that everything is in place operationally for them to have a blast.

“Our guests have very high expectations in how we deliver our product and operate,” observes Wallace. “That’s a challenge, but it’s also one of the most rewarding aspects of the job because we do successfully deliver a fabulous guest experience, exceed the expectations of these guests who already have very high expectations…. You’ve got to remember that most everyone has a Disney experience and has thoughts and beliefs about their Disney experience. We work in an industry where everyone has an opinion and that’s hard. It’s interesting tension.”

Wallace’s intelligence and talent counter that interesting tension. She has the requisite bachelor’s degree in industrial engineering and an M.B.A., and she has the experience of 17 years with Walt Disney World. These attributes made the decision to appoint Wallace to her current post a no-brainer, according to Walt Disney World President Al Weiss.

“First and foremost, she’s a great leader. Second of all, she balances great leadership with great technical skills,” Weiss says. “And then lastly, she’s had a variety of experiences, because she is so talented, to not only be in the industrial engineering group, but also to run some of our major operations.” Those operations have included serving as general manager for Disney’s All-Star Resort, general manager of theme park operations, director of industrial engineering, and most recently, vice president of the Magic Kingdom park.

Wallace's promotion to the ranks of executive management is especially significant because she is among only three women who sit on the Walt Disney World Steering Committee. The 13-member committee, headed by Weiss, includes the heads of all the major business lines of the company.

“Nothing less than perfection
Mistakes are a costly occurrence for magic makers. The decisions Wallace makes on a daily basis concerning finances, strategies, and guest services are critical to the impression guests have when they visit Walt Disney World. Wallace proudly relies on her indus-
SPREADING INDUSTRIAL ENGINEERING MAGIC

Whenever she has a chance to spread the word about industrial engineering, Erin Wallace is front and center. So when the Institute of Industrial Engineers asked her to be a keynote speaker at its Annual Conference in May, she jumped at the opportunity. “If I had to speak anywhere, I would love it to be in a room full of industrial engineers because it’s still a strong passion of mine and I can point to innumerable ways in which industrial engineering has helped put Walt Disney World on the map. And as industrial engineering continues to create value for Walt Disney World, I’d love to talk about it; I’d love to share that. If that can help get other companies and other people interested in what industrial engineering can do, I think that’s great,” asserts Wallace.

Wallace will give her keynote presentation at the Hilton Walt Disney World May 20 at 7:30 a.m.

Although currently a senior executive at Walt Disney World, Wallace was once director of industrial engineering for the resort and played a major role in developing the IE department, according to Al Weiss, president of Walt Disney World. “She really put [the] industrial engineering team on the map across our whole company,” says Weiss. “They’re one of our true competitive advantages we … have in this company, and she’s actually set that group up.”

Industrial engineering at Walt Disney World began at the Florida park’s inception in 1971. “By 1980, industrial engineering’s role had greatly expanded to support all divisions of the company as well as special development projects in support of Epcot, which opened in 1982,” says Mark Larson, the current director of industrial engineering. The industrial engineering group is now one of Disney’s Centers of Excellence.

The IE group is made up of 100 members worldwide, including full-time, part-time, and student cooperative and intern personnel. Teams located in Orlando, Fla., Anaheim, Calif., Glendale, Calif., and Paris support the entire parks and resorts segment of The Walt Disney Co., including Walt Disney World, Disneyland, Disneyland Paris, Tokyo Disneyland, and Hong Kong Disneyland.

Larson divides the work of the IE teams into the categories of capacity/demand management is used to improve efficiency at the park and make efficiencies at the park and make

When it comes to guest services, Wallace makes decisions surrounding the operating calendar, the host of events, daily management of capacity, continuous improvement, and opportunities to improve the guest experience. One example of that is scheduling the operating hours of the theme parks. Wallace’s staff plans operating hours on a weekly basis due to the many issues that affect the park’s draw power. “We’ve got a lot of factors that we look at, which are basically the number of visitors that we have coming, loss of daylight hours as the time of year changes, and as our occupancy and seasonality changes on the property,” she notes.

While Wallace enjoys her daily responsibilities, some projects are more exciting and rewarding than others. She uses Disney’s...
ERIN WALLACE

Position: Senior Vice President, Walt Disney World Resort Operations, Orlando, Fla.

Education: B.S. industrial engineering, University of Florida; M.B.A., Crummer School of Business at Rollins College

Family: Married to Steve. They have an 11-year-old son, Shea, and an 8-year-old daughter, Molly.

Favorite book genre: Mystery and suspense

Favorite music: “I actually love Celtic music, Irish music. The older I get, the more I listen to it. Other than that, I’m afraid I’m stuck with all of my daughter’s favorites — Pink, Backstreet Boys.”

Favorite movie: “I know this sounds hokey and you’d expect this out of a Disney person, but I do think Beauty and the Beast was my favorite movie.”

What turns her smile upside down: Indecision

Favorite thing about the job: “Truly my favorite thing is just being able to walk out in an operation and just observe and see the cast members doing what they’re supposed to do, walking with managers, talking to the guests and finding out how happy they are and what they’re doing. Truly, that is great. I love being able to walk out and talk and see everything work.”

Mentor: “Ten years ago, people would have been writing an article about Bruce Laval, who was basically my predecessor in industrial engineering here at Walt Disney World. Bruce Laval is now retired from our company, but he has been here my whole 17 years, and he has been huge as a mentor to me from when I managed the industrial engineering department, but most particularly when I came out into operations. Bruce had no shortage of great advice based on many years of experience here, both in industrial engineering and in operations at Walt Disney World.”

The IE challenge: “Making sure students can know about what industrial engineering is. There is a bit of an identity issue. It’s one of those things that once you learn about it, you begin to see its applicability and how it can be utilized everywhere, but that’s a challenge.”

Married to: “I think that having another industrial engineer as a partner is very fun because it’s very stimulating to talk to somebody who understands how you look at problems or how you look at business or how you think about things. So for me, my husband Steve is a very good person to bounce things off of. He’s very smart, and so just having someone your caliber and who is kind of with you in mindset is very good. He gives me very good advice.”

Animal Kingdom, opened in 1998, as an example: “We had the vision when we wanted to open up Disney’s Animal Kingdom that it would open up as if it had always been there. It wouldn’t stumble or have operational difficulty from the get go — that we would open it up flawlessly. And it was a lot of work to do that. It had been several years since we had opened up another theme park.”

According to Wallace, the Orlando Sentinel used the words “flawless opening” to describe opening day, and she was gratified. “From an industrial engineering standpoint, that just meant that all of our processes came into practice very easily — not easily. I should never use that word — our operating practices came on line and didn’t have major overhauls.”

Wallace is also pleased about the environmental message the Animal Kingdom espouses: “I think the product, while still evolving, took us down a whole new avenue for Disney. I think we’re so proud of the fact that we have a product here that makes a major statement that we live in a world with an awful lot of people, but an awful lot of wildlife and animals as well. We are teaching the world about these animals and about how to live with them. So the strong conservation message that came out with Disney’s Animal Kingdom, I’m very proud about.”

There are more new challenges in store for Wallace as Disney begins to rely more heavily on the advancements of technology to improve operations. “My job is to always be looking ahead … for ways in which we can use technology. We get ideas from all sorts of different places, but ways in which we can operate safer, all different aspects of continuous improvement … . It’s my job to make sure that these efforts are well thought through, have their capital funding, and that we’re resourcing against them properly,” explains Wallace.

One example of technology advancement, according to Weiss, is the FastPass system Disney’s industrial engineers developed to reduce guests’ waiting times at the most popular theme park attractions. “That’s a piece of technology that was integrated seamlessly to our guests, and I think that’s the challenge that we’re going to have going forward,” Weiss explains. “How do we take all of these great new technologies, figure out how they effectively make our business better, and integrate them into our business without making them so much in the guest’s face. They almost have to be a seamless part of the guest experience so it’s not technology for the sake of technology. It’s technology that enhances the guest experience.”

He concedes that Wallace has some ambitious tasks ahead of her. “She’s up for it,” he asserts.
IIE member Ben Algee, P.E., couldn’t pass up an opportunity to support Mickey Mouse’s latest home away from home. Last year, he and his wife, former IIE President Jane Algee, moved their family from Florida to Tokyo and he became director of maintenance for the Tokyo Disney Resort. Algee took time from his schedule to answer questions about his work abroad.

IIE: What are your job responsibilities at Tokyo Disney?
Algee: I have the responsibility of working with the Oriental Land Co. engineering department to ensure the Disney brand is protected throughout the attractions and facilities. The Disney brand includes safety and quality.

IIE: How did you receive this assignment?
Algee: The position was selected for the position.
IIE: Do you work with a lot of industrial engineers?
Algee: No. There are no industrial engineers currently assigned here on a permanent basis, but I have frequent contact with the Disney industrial engineers in the States.

IIE: Are there a lot of opportunities for industrial engineers with Disney?
Algee: Yes. At Walt Disney World in Orlando, the industrial engineering department is consistently filling management positions throughout the organization in Orlando with industrial engineers that have worked in the Disney industrial engineering department and usually have industrial engineering degrees. My international assignment is indicative of the job opportunities offered by Disney.

IIE: Motivating Your Staff Toward a Common Goal

Deaver, Philip, Making Magic Work: Inspiring Confidence and Motivating Your Staff Toward a Common Goal, Hyperion, 2002.
Jones, C.E., Walt Disney Imagineering: A Behind the Dreams Look at Making the Magic Real, Hyperion, 1996.

Security Advising is a Mickey Mouse Job,” IIE Solutions, March 2002.

observes. That is until recruiters from the University of Florida came to her high school and dropped a course catalog in front of her.

After sifting through the agricultural classes and the communications courses, Wallace eventually worked her way to the letter “I” and industrial engineering. “I couldn’t believe how interesting every single course was, and the descriptions were all there. And I was just so excited to think that there was something like that out there. It’s as if I can still recall the words popping out on the page, and I thought, oh my gosh, I have got to go check this out.”

By the time she had finished her third year in high school, Wallace knew her professional destiny. She has been fulfilling it ever since. “I still think that industrial engineering is the best business degree that money can buy, and I think the more folks we can get through there, the better our whole world will be. I’m just a little biased,” she remarks with a smile.

That IE degree has definitely boosted Wallace’s career opportunities, according to Weiss. “Her industrial engineering background is a background that has really set her up for success in a company like Walt Disney World. And what I mean by that is it allows her to have the analytic skills, to have the thinking skills, to have the problem-solving skills that are necessary for success in our company,” says Weiss.

Wallace’s devotion to industrial engineering stretches beyond her work at Disney. She is the chair of the external advisory board for the industrial engineering program at the University of Florida. “To me, the biggest challenge for industrial engineering is to focus and not to dilute itself into lots of different areas. Industrial engineers are so well educated and purposed to do so many different things in business…. So industrial engineering curriculums and departments have to focus, and then when you focus you can even better prepare your students for what they want to do in the future.”

As for her own future, Wallace is counting on working happily ever after with Disney: “It’s very exciting thinking about where Walt Disney World is going to head in the future. We’re about making these great relationships, magical relationships, with our guests, and when you begin to think about how we’re going to do that in the future, I just see lots and lots of possibilities. So there’s no shortage of interesting ways in which Disney can continue to provide very unique vacation experiences for our guests, and I would love to be a part of that.”

FOR FURTHER READING

Deaver, Philip, Making Magic Work: Inspiring Confidence and Motivating Your Staff Toward a Common Goal, Hyperion, 2002.
Jones, C.E., Walt Disney Imagineering: A Behind the Dreams Look at Making the Magic Real, Hyperion, 1996.

“Security Advising is a Mickey Mouse Job,” IIE Solutions, March 2002.