

## Clinton wedding maestro

Season gets busier for Hub-based event planner

By Mark Shanahan, Globe Staff | July 28, 2010

There's busy, and then there's Bryan Rafanelli.

The Boston-based event planner chosen by Bill and Hillary Clinton to oversee the super-secret nuptials of their only child, Chelsea, isn't returning calls. Even if the former president and his wife, the secretary of state, hadn't imposed a news blackout, Rafanelli has been unavailable for weeks, engrossed in the details of a wedding that's drawing interest around the world.

The former first daughter is expected to marry her investment banker beau, Marc Mezvinsky, in upstate New York on Saturday. The wedding, rumored to cost as much as \$2 million, has cast a bright light on the 48-year-old Rafanelli, whose reputation for orchestrating sumptuous parties has won him high-profile admirers from Boston to Washington to Palm Beach.

Besides the Clinton event, which a source says will be in Rhinebeck, N.Y., Rafanelli and his team have discreetly arranged several other posh affairs this summer. Just this month, he put together the opulent Marblehead wedding of Elizabeth Lynch, daughter of longtime Fidelity executive Peter Lynch, to French royal Gonzague de Montrichard, complete with a 20-minute fireworks display.

Because the Clintons are keeping even the most mundane details of their daughter's wedding private, neither Rafanelli nor his company's creative director, Billy Evers, would agree to be interviewed for this story. But business associates, former employees, and clients agree that the peripatetic planner with the movie star smile rarely disappoints.

"Bryan is the Chanel of party-planning," says Boston socialite Lisa Pierpont, a friend and occasional client of Rafanelli's. "He can talk to the prince and the pauper, and he has an impeccable eye. When people hear it's a Rafanelli event, it's like, 'OK, we're going.'"

### Taking events to new levels

Even in a down economy, when private firms and nonprofits have cut back on spending, Rafanelli's company, Rafanelli Events, is popping, with 125 events booked since January. The company employs 22 people, primarily event producers and coordinators, and his typical fee is 15 to 20 percent of the cost of the project, which can easily run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"We certainly discuss budget, but sometimes it's hard to pin down, things slide," says Boston philanthropist Barbara Jordan, a friend of Rafanelli's who has hired him for several private and nonprofit events, including an extravagant haunted-house party in 1997 held in an abandoned building in the South End. "It was like something out of 'The Addams Family' — totally wild. Bryan wants to make it happen your way."

A native of Warwick, R.I., Rafanelli comes from a family of lawyers. His father, who died in March, practiced law, and two of his five siblings are also lawyers. His mother was an enthusiastic hostess who put on frequent parties for family and friends and, as a child, Bryan was her eager assistant.

Rafanelli went to Syracuse University, where he majored in political science. He was the co-social chairman of his fraternity, Delta Tau Delta, and president of the interfraternity council, which oversaw the Greek system on campus. There, he not only planned parties and events, he paid uncommon attention to details such as color, lighting, and flow. For the school's first-ever ice-carving competition, he contracted a local ice company to deliver truckloads of frozen blocks to each fraternity house, and he assembled a student panel to judge the 6-foot-tall sculptures.

"Bryan always seemed to take it to another level," says Rafanelli's college roommate, Alec Stern, vice president of the Waltham-based marketing firm Constant Contact. "He built a sense of community with his events."

Rafanelli contemplated a career as a lawyer, but he took a job at Filene's instead, working in the china, crystal, and infant-wear departments. On a volunteer basis, he organized events for the AIDS Action Committee and, after leaving Filene's, studied design at the Boston Architectural Center. In the 1990s, he began staging events for other nonprofit groups. His good looks, engaging manner, and whimsical designs — elaborate displays of exotic flowers, acrobats, beer bottle chandeliers, even lawn gnomes — quickly brought Rafanelli to the attention of Boston's wealthy fund-raisers.

"After one of Bryan's parties, a friend of mine said, 'Oh my, you should see what he did with the room,' so I called him up cold," says Charlotte Vena, a founder of the Storybook Ball, a fund-raiser for the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital. "We didn't want the standard pale-pink tablecloth, cobalt blue glass thing anymore."

Rafanelli turned a traditionally staid event organized by the Ladies Visiting Committee into a fanciful, well-attended affair that raises millions of dollars annually.

"Boston's always been a hub of philanthropy, but charities didn't hype the style and look of their events," **says Jill Goldweitz, an official with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston**, whose annual fund-raiser was conceived by Rafanelli. "Bryan turned up the volume by 25 percent. People leave knowing who we are and, by the way, the party was great."

#### **VIPs fill client list**

Over the years, Rafanelli has amassed an immense inventory of props — plates, planters, vases, linens, lights — that he stores in a warehouse in South Bay. Sometimes, however, it's the personal touches. When Roberta Weiner arrived at Temple Israel for her daughter's wedding in 1995, she discovered a surprise gift: a meticulously decorated pink dollhouse with a Barbie that looked just like her daughter.

"There was a note attached that said, 'May all your dreams come true,' " recalls Weiner, wife of Boston developer Stephen Weiner.

It was a gift from Rafanelli. “I know this sounds melodramatic,” says Weiner, her voice trembling with emotion, “but Bryan does make your dreams come true.”

His lengthy list of clients includes nonprofits such as the American Red Cross, Boston Public Library, and the Children’s Hospital Trust; deep-pocketed corporations like Macy’s, Ralph Lauren, Louis Vuitton, and Millennium Pharmaceuticals; and wealthy individuals like Red Sox owner John Henry, whose wedding reception for 400 guests was held inside a glass tent in the outfield at Fenway Park last summer.

“John feels very comfortable with Bryan,” says Henry’s wife, Linda Pizzuti Henry. “He did John’s 60th birthday dinner at Mizu [salon] and, using black and white and red, he transformed the space into something very sexy.”

Rafanelli should be well acquainted with the Clintons by now. During the Democratic National Convention in 2004, he put on a party for them, hosted by philanthropists Elaine and Gerald Schuster, at the State Room.

He also did a 2008 fund-raiser for Hillary Clinton at the Schusters’ home in Palm Beach, and handled the wedding this month of Representative Anthony Weiner of New York and Hillary Clinton’s longtime aide, Huma Abedin.

Though he planned a breakfast, concert, and three dinners as part of President Obama’s inauguration, Rafanelli was a Hillary Clinton supporter, contributing \$4,600 to her campaign. In addition, Rafanelli’s partner, Mark Walsh, was on Clinton’s staff, serving as her director of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender outreach during the campaign. (Walsh also declined to be interviewed for this story.) Rafanelli and Walsh live in the South End with their dog, Henry, listed on the company website as “love czar.”

“It doesn’t matter to me what side of the aisle Bryan’s on,” says Darlene Jordan, a prominent Republican fund-raiser who has hired Rafanelli to throw parties at her homes in the Back Bay, Palm Beach, and South Dartmouth. “When my daughter was born, Bryan gave her the most beautiful soft, grey elephant. He said to me, ‘You didn’t think I’d buy her a donkey, did you?’ ”

Because of the strict confidentiality surrounding the Clinton wedding, details are sketchy. The Clintons have not confirmed that the wedding is even taking place this weekend. It’s believed the ceremony and reception are being held at Astor Court, a Beaux-Arts mansion with stunning views of the Hudson River designed by architect Stanford White.

Darlene Jordan, who isn’t attending the Clinton wedding, says it will no doubt be a hectic day. But she’s seen the party planner do it many times before, and without a hint of panic.

“He’s a great puppet master,” Jordan says, “and you never see the strings.”

*Mark Shanahan can be reached at [shanahan@globe.com](mailto:shanahan@globe.com). ■*