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Fantastic Family Functions!

Marc Skulnick finds out exactly what it takes to plan a successful family reunion

THERE'S NO DENYING that planning a family reunion is a lot of work and sorting out all the details can seem overwhelming at times, even to the most seasoned party planner. From setting a date and selecting a location to compiling menu ideas and coordinating the activities, planning a fabulous family function is a daunting task, but one that can be fulfilling and quite enjoyable if done right.

With the ever-increasing popularity of family reunions, we thought it might be a good idea to compile a few of the tips and tricks that can help you plan a successful family reunion.

However, instead of publishing the usual list of do's and don'ts, we thought we'd assemble a panel of experts — who between them have organized over a dozen reunions — and get them to give their own unique views on what it takes to organize a successful, enjoyable and well attended family reunion, along with a few amusing anecdotes of family reunions from the past.

Q: If you could give one tip to somebody about to start planning their family reunion, what would it be?

"Don't try to do it all yourself! That doesn't mean that you have to form committees to ponder additional committees, but do at least get a core team of folks to help lead the charge". — Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak

"Be realistic. You may have high expectations about having a reunion and great ideas for the event. But not everyone in the family may share your enthusiasm. Stay positive but always expect the unexpected". — Lisa A. Alzo

"Don't be reluctant to ask for help. Planning a reunion is a lot of work and making it a team effort will enable everyone to have a good time". — Maureen A. Taylor

"Think of all the possible elements that would make your reunion a success. One thought will lead to another and that one to another and soon you have the makings of a successful reunion. Write them down as they come to mind, it would be a shame to forget them". — Beverly Smith Vorpahl

"I would have to say leave plenty of time for planning and spend an inordinate amount of time trying to contact everyone who you want to attend. People take it personally if you miss them off mailings. Don't rely on family members spreading the news to others in their group". — Halvor Moorshead

Q: How far in advance would you recommend someone start planning a family reunion?

"Anyone considering holding a family reunion should start gathering materials immediately. You'll need to book a meeting place, arrange for food and contact family, so why wait until the last minute. Our family plans a reunion every other year and makes reservations for the next one while we're all still together". — MAT

"I have organized three reunions — the largest, in 2000, was attended by 87 people from seven countries. We started 15 months in advance and did at least four mailings over the next year to everyone we could reach. Few people committed until four or five months before the event". — HM

"Allow yourself a full year to plan and see to the details, especially if this is your first reunion. A year's advance notice will also allow your potential guests to mark their calendars, putting your event at the top of their priorities". — BSV

"If it's their first time, or they've never done a reunion before: at least one year. Longer is better". — Edith Wagner

The Panel

Lisa A. Alzo: Lisa is the author of *Three Slovak Women* (Gateway Press) and an instructor of Eastern European, Slovak and Great Lakes Region genealogy classes for MyFamily.com and Slovak Genealogy classes for the National Institute of Genealogical Studies.

Halvor Moorshead: Halvor is the publisher and editor of *Family Chronicle* and *History Magazine*. He enjoys writing articles for *Family Chronicle* and has organized three family reunions.

Donna Potter Phillips: Donna has lectured and taught genealogy classes throughout much of Washington. She is also a regular contributor to *Family Chronicle*.

Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak: In between reunions, Megan lectures and writes articles and books, including her latest, *Trace Your Roots with DNA: Using Genetic Tests to Explore Your Family Tree*.

Maureen A. Taylor: Maureen is the author of *Uncovering Your Ancestry Through Family Photographs* rev. ed. (Family Tree Books, 2005), *Scrapbooking Your Family History* (Betterway, 2003) and *Preserving Your Family Photographs* (Betterway, 2001).

Beverly Smith Vorpahl: Before retiring, Beverly was a reporter and editor for the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington, and wrote a genealogy column for several years. She has written numerous genealogy articles for a variety of national publications, including *Family Chronicle*.

Edith Wagner: Edith is editor of *Reunions* magazine and author of *The Family Reunion Sourcebook*, *Reunions Workbook* and responsible for much of the reunion copy at www.reunionsmag.com.