

INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS SHAPING OUR FUTURE

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Mark and Brenda Lhormer

Bringing communities together and redefining Wine Country tourism.

By Christina Julian

When Brenda and Marc Lhormer, co-founders and directors of the Napa Valley Film Festival (NVFF), first publicly announced their plans to produce a full-scale film festival in Wine Country, a couple of things were clear: They had grandiose dreams and enough energy to make it happen. Not even a faltering economy would stop the couple (partners in work and life) from accomplishing what some dubbed “mission impossible.” For the Lhormers, the notion was anything but.

“Marc and Brenda assembled a talented team that’s engaged the Hollywood movie industry, major sponsors, leading winemakers and chefs, and a national movie audience who come together to bring new energy into a week in November that used to be pretty quiet in this valley,” says Yountville Mayor John Dunbar. “Everyone benefits from that.”

Raymond Vineyard proprietor Jean-Charles Boisset is equally impressed: “The film festival expanded the horizon of Napa to include the

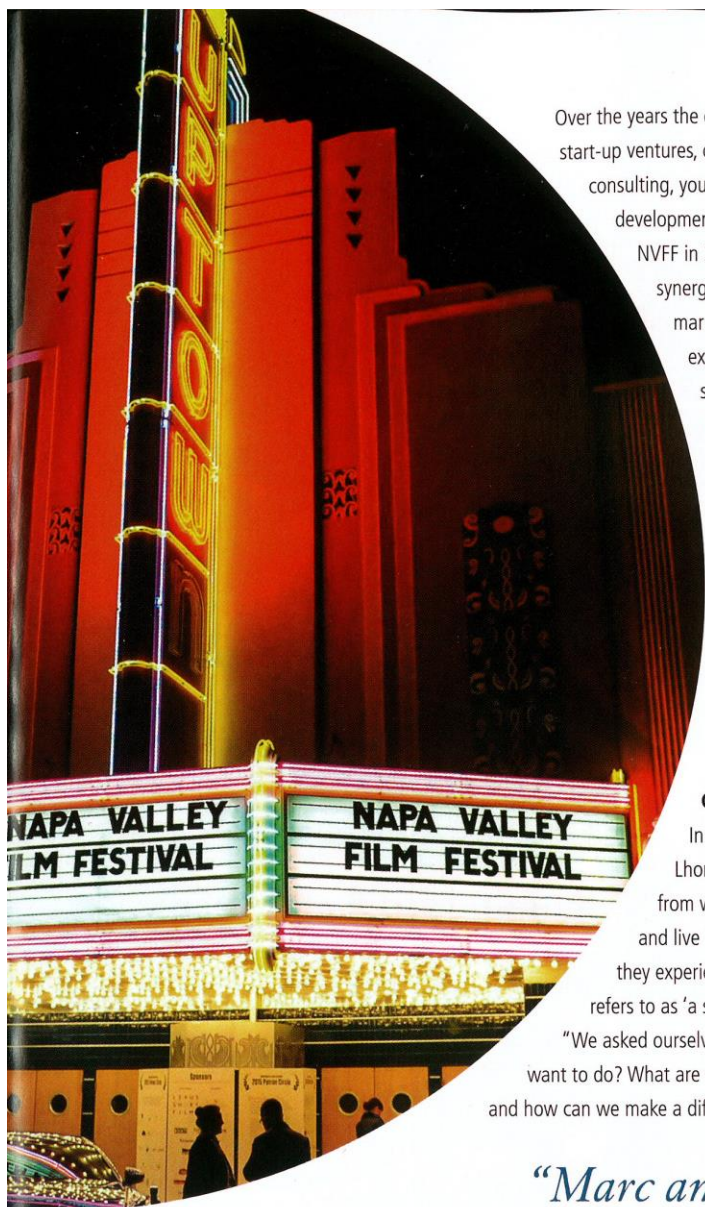
energy and talent of film. Marc and Brenda brought Hollywood and its world of creativity to Wine Country, and we’ve embraced them for it.”

Brenda, an eighth generation Californian, and Marc, a native of Pittsburg, Penn., came together through common connections following their time at Stanford. The duo’s professional pedigree spiraled upwards from there, with collective expertise in the private and nonprofit sectors, including esteemed posts at the U.S. Olympic Committee, Oracle, Microsoft and Bain & Company, among many others.

The couple’s first professional collaboration was in 1987 at the fledgling event planning company, Amazing Events, where they developed a way of doing business that would manifest years later at NVFF. “As a special events company, we wanted to gather people from all around the world, as global citizens, to celebrate the arts,” says Brenda.

“Even back then, we always wanted to do inspirational and motivational events—and here we are today. NVFF is our true amazing event.”





Over the years the duo tangoed between start-up ventures, company reboots, consulting, youth leadership and film development before launching NVFF in 2011. Add to that a synergistic friendship and marriage, and you have exactly what it takes to shoot from fleeting idea to film festival powerhouse in fewer than five years.

Hotelier Michael Woods nutshells the couple's mojo: "Their success factor is dogged determination with great heart."

Getting busy

In the mid-'90s, the Lhormers took a hiatus from work, deciding to travel and live internationally, until they experienced what Brenda refers to as 'a spaceship moment': "We asked ourselves, 'What do we really want to do? What are we passionate about and how can we make a difference?'"

The more entrenched the Lhormers became with the festival community, the more interested the couple became in the industry as a whole. "We felt like making a film could be a lot like running a festival—something we could do, with the right project." The couple put the word out to some friends to see what might turn up. In 2005, a producer friend sent the couple a script. By the summer of 2006, they'd hired a director, formed an LLC and started to raise capital to produce what would become the cult classic, *Bottle Shock*. Following a 30-day shoot, the film was completed in 2007 and premiered at Sundance in January 2008.

After supporting the film through its theatrical rollout to 400 theaters across the country, they began to circulate the idea of creating a world-class film festival for Napa Valley, scheduling it in the fall to complement the Sonoma festival in April.

Testing the waters

Starting in mid-2009, the Lhormers had "sit downs" with Napa Valley influencers, starting with Chef Michael Chiarello and his wife, Eileen. "We believed it would only work if we got the whole community to embrace it. But Michael said, 'I'm going to support you, and do a couple of events for you,'" says Brenda. "They encouraged us to go for it. I'd worked with him before and he saw what we had done in Sonoma. He also knew how hard we worked and that we were creative risk takers."

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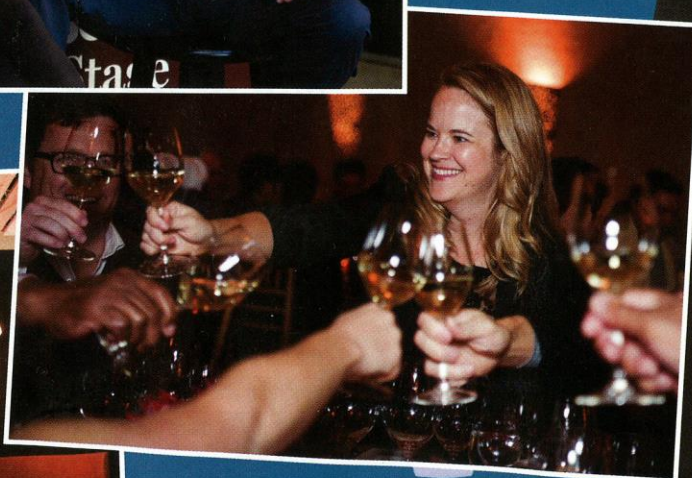
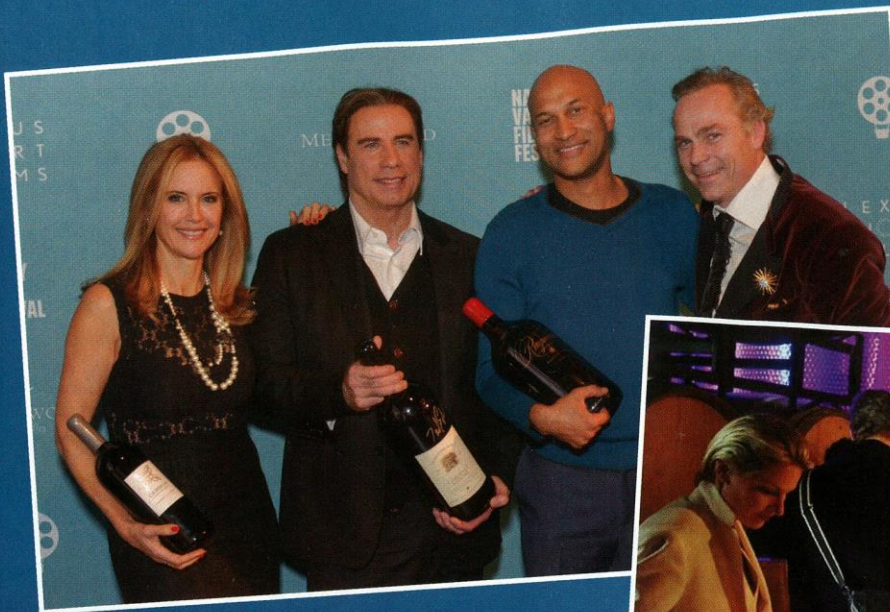
—Jean-Charles Boisset

Brenda then went to film school to produce fundraising films for nonprofits and Marc started the nonprofit City Year Seattle (an AmeriCorps program) and would ultimately land in Sonoma in 1999. It was there the Lhormers were indoctrinated into the film community, first as a host family for the Sonoma Valley Film Festival and later as board members and co-executive directors for the event—a post they shared from 2002 to 2008.

"The challenge was to give it some fresh air and real marketing muscle. Attendance tripled, then doubled again," says Marc.

Likewise, Boisset, who'd already gained valley approval with his unconventional approach to wine experiences, embraced the Lhormers' vision early on. "We believed in them and their ideas for the Napa Valley Film Festival immediately. We also believed Wine Country needed the festival as an additional dimension to its overall incredible culture, events and sensory experiences. It's great to have the arts of painting, sculpting and music, but film was missing," says Boisset.

Yountville's Dunbar also offered support. "Personally, my wife and I became founding



Left: The Napa Valley Film Festival attracts many celebrities, with past appearances by John Travolta, Keegan-Michael Key and Bobby Flay, among others. [Photos by Bob McClenehan, courtesy of Katie Morris]

Right: Marc and Brenda Lohrmer, founders of the Napa Valley Film Festival [Photo by Bob McClenehan, courtesy of Katie Morris]