

SEND IN THE CLOWNS PRESS

Los Angeles Magazine

November 2006



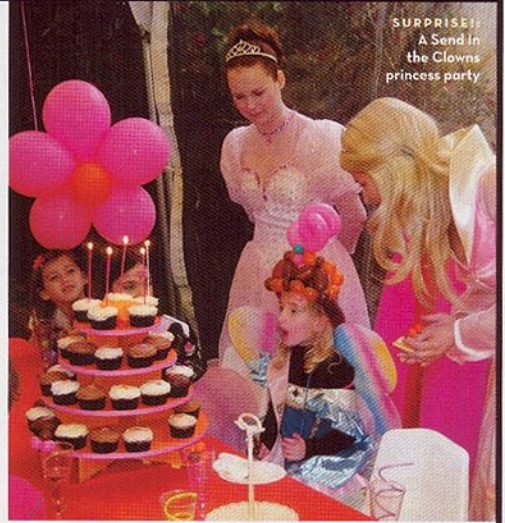
BUZZ

Bigger Wishes

The burgeoning business of extravagant kids' birthday parties by *Melinda Fulmer*

LINDSAY SACKS KNEW SHE WANTED to do something out of the ordinary for Graham's fourth birthday—something that would appeal to her son's elevated tastes. Graham had started reading at 13 months; Mozart already occupied a higher place in his musical pantheon than the Wiggles. So a bouncy house or an afternoon at Chuck E. Cheese's didn't seem right.

Although she runs a company that trains aspiring attorneys for the California bar, Sacks lacked expertise in bravura kiddie party planning. So she retained someone who did have experience: Leesa Zelken, founder of Send In the Clowns. The company created an event at the Sackses' West Hollywood home as flamboyant as Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony. The invitations asked the 60 adults and 40 children to come "Jam with Graham." The tables were graced



with photos of the four-year-old dressed up as his favorite 18th-century composer. There was a DJ spinning classical concerti and less highbrow fare like "Old MacDonald"; there was a balloon artist, a carousel ride, musical-instrument-decorating stations where kids could personalize tambourines and maracas, a popcorn cart, and pizza cut into musical notes. Although the event set Sacks back \$3,700, she will likely become one of Zelken's repeat customers. "If we decide to go the grandiose route again for birthdays," Sacks says, "Leesa is the one we'll call."

AU COURANT

Rag Tag

The studios are getting stingy with their used duds

EVEN THE SECONDHAND SHOPPING in this town involves A-list material: Will's Dolce & Gabbana necktie from *Will & Grace*, his friend Karen's stilettos and silk robe, Jay Leno's casual wear. The Silver Screen, a boutique at Universal Studios Hollywood, began hawking such leftover NBC apparel in May. Industry resale shops such as It's a Wrap have sold cast-off studio duds for years, but only recently did the studios themselves—Fox on its lot and Warner Bros. via eBay—start cashing in on their old costumes. "For the studios to have their own stores, it sounds like an advertising thing for the amusement park," says It's a Wrap co-owner Tiara Nappi, who has recycled TV and film wardrobes ranging from *Roseanne* to *Mission: Impossible*. The studios seem to see it as an extension of their brand. "It's a good way for people to get even closer to behind the scenes of their favorite TV shows," Universal spokesperson Eliot Sekular says. It's also one more reason for tourists not to sneak into dressing rooms. —*Mary Trahan*



Since 1999, Zelken has helped Southern California parents plan celebrations that go far beyond a piñata and a Baskin-Robbins ice cream cake. She's done her share of one-clown affairs, but she's also staged lavish productions for actors and studio executives that involve live-animal shows, strolling fairy-tale creatures and prestidigitators, horse-drawn carriages, and dress-up tents that allow little girls to become fairy princesses. The celebrations, she says, get bigger each year. "There is a keeping-up-with-the-Joneses mentality," Zelken says. "Parents tell me, 'I need to do more. I want to do it better.'" Profligate kids' parties are just the latest evolution in how people are entertaining, Zelken says. Rather than throwing cocktail parties, parents are using their children's parties as an excuse to get together and socialize.

Parents—mostly moms—come to her because they need someone to collaborate with, and husbands, ▶▶

send ^{IN} the Clowns



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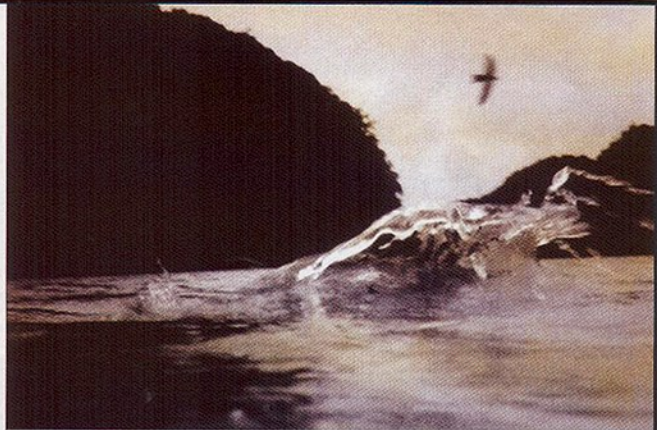
▶▶ Zelken says, are “not interested in talking about what ribbon to put on the goody bags.” As for their friends, any such discussion might lead to the leaking of crucial intelligence. “They don’t want to tip them off,” Zelken says. “They are the competition.”

A former actress and Gymboree Play & Music teacher, Zelken started her career in the kids’ entertainment business when she hired herself out as a clown between TV and commercial gigs. To other struggling actors, that might have been humiliating, but Zelken, who is partial to designer tees and hip-hugging jeans, found it satisfying. “I enjoyed the performance aspect,” she says, as well as the immediate gratification from parents and children.

When she found herself attending up to five parties on a Saturday, Zelken began hiring entertainers (mostly former mommy-and-me teachers and other actresses) to expand the company. Now Zelken, who is 43, oversees a staff of eight to ten entertainers who can portray clowns, princesses, and superheroes. About 20 percent of her clients spend more than \$5,000 to celebrate their child’s special day. Last year she had a hand in some 600 parties from Orange County to Malibu, a number that she expects to swell again this year.

To keep the festivities on a kid’s scale, Zelken often finds herself urging restraint. Some clients want to stage parties for their one-year-old that rival studio bashes, complete with merry-go-rounds and other carnival rides that the children aren’t old enough for. “It might look impressive, but it’s just having more to have more,” she says. Her biggest party to date was for a physician in Beverly Hills who plunked down \$8,000 for Zelken’s entertainers.

Out, she says, are “furry-headed mascot characters” like those strolling around Disneyland. In are amped-up versions of the simple birthdays many parents recall from their own childhood, with sack races, water balloon tosses, a tug-of-war, and cupcakes. “It’s trying to create that feel of simple nostalgia and a simpler time, but doing it takes a lot of effort and coordination,” she says. “People always ask, ‘Why can’t it just be simple?’ If you want simple, you have to order simple.” LA



TRIBUTE

Sure Shot

Photographer James Fee, 1949–2006

IN MARCH OF THIS YEAR, I assigned photographer James Fee a major feature on the state of the city’s animal shelters. As *Los Angeles* magazine’s photo editor, I had no doubts about James’s ability to handle a story of such dark intensity. His work for us over the past few years—images of the homeless huddling beneath the Sixth Street Bridge, the grit and squalor of the Hollywood vice squad’s beat, the stark, fluorescent-lit face of a recruit headed off to Iraq—will stand among the most enduring images to appear in these pages. What concerned me was that this dedicated, articulate, poetic, and brilliant photographer had just been diagnosed with cancer and

had been given not more than a few months to live.

His determination to pursue the story—to capture through his lens the horror of so many animals marked for death even as he faced the imminent certainty of his own—was a testament to his determination to pursue his art, to face with an unflinching eye the best and the worst of what the world revealed to him. I struggled to find a way to help him work, even though he could barely stand for more than a few minutes.

James died in September. Photography was his life, and without it, what was left of his days would have had no meaning. As the last reserves of strength were draining from him, he continued working, even after he submitted his haunting images for the animal shelter piece. When I went to visit him



IMAGE MAKER: Fee (above) and his photograph *Fly by* from 2003 (top)

at his apartment, he was weak but, as ever, was surrounded by his girlfriend of many years and a small gaggle of his former Art Center students, who gave themselves over to making sure he had what he needed in his final days. This was largely friendship and conversation about life and art, and a steady arm to lean on. One of his students spent the last few months helping James to print his last series. Craig Krull Gallery in Santa Monica will open *James Fee: The Last Photographs* on December 2, to continue through January 13, 2007. —Kathleen Clark

send in the clowns

