

Ladies In Red

These red-coated chaperones ensure a smooth party.

Barbara Lewis | Contributing Writer

Word is out among the tweens and teens on the b'nai mitzvah party circuit: Watch how you behave or the Red Coat Ladies will get you!

For mothers of brides-to-be, the warning is a little different: If you can't get the Red Coat Ladies, don't have a wedding!

The Red Coat Ladies, a party management company formally known as Party Assurance, was started 15 years ago by Pat Blackwell of Commerce Township. The ladies are on-site problem solvers who make sure weddings and b'nai mitzvah parties run smoothly.

Blackwell, 52, grew up on a farm in Minnesota, one of 11 children in a strongly Catholic family.

Soon after she and her husband, Doug, married in 1987, Blackwell took a job as building manager for Temple Israel in West Bloomfield. She supervised the custodial staff, managed the events schedule, made sure the rooms were set up, ordered supplies and more.

She was stunned by the lavishness of Detroit b'nai mitzvah and wedding parties.

"I had never seen parties like that," she said. "Back in Minnesota, when my brother got married, I picked the flowers and we butchered a steer."

But Blackwell was also struck that so often the mother of the celebrant was unable to enjoy the festivities.

"I'd watch moms not be able to eat because an unexpected guest showed up, and she had to figure out how to squeeze in an extra place at Table 12," she said. "Or someone had to leave early, and the mom couldn't join the dancing because she had to run around to find the right party favor."

What these parties needed, she realized, was "an extra wife for the day" to take care of the details.

Blackwell offered her help to those having parties at Temple Israel. Soon, their friends hosting parties elsewhere were asking for her services. She quit her day job and started managing parties



Pat Blackwell



Pat Blackwell with a chef from Great Lakes Culinary Catering

full time.

Chaperoning is a major part of the package for b'nai mitzvah parties. The Red Coat Ladies make sure the young guests don't sneak alcoholic drinks or get up to mischief in the restrooms, and they stay at the party until every child has been picked up.

The Red Coat Ladies have become known for their ingenuity.

"She absolutely saved the day at my daughter's wedding," raved Margo Stocker of Farmington Hills.

At the Friday night rehearsal dinner for her daughter Laurie's wedding to Kevin Skurow in October 2012, Stocker's older daughter noticed a problem with the ketubah: The bride's name was in the spot for the groom's name, and his name was in the bride's spot.

"Pat said, 'I'll take care of it,' and whisked it away," Stocker said. "At 10:30 that night she called and said it was all taken care of. Hiring her was money more than well spent!"

The Red Coat Ladies also rescued Cara Lash at her bat mitzvah party last April at the Royal Oak Farmer's Market. "On the day of the party, her dress didn't fit," said Cara's mother, Stacy Lash of Huntington

Featured in Detroit Jewish News
March 20, 2014
"Celebrate" section

More information:
www.PartyAssurance.com

continued from page C22



Pat Blackwell makes sure the ice cream cart is ready to go.

even in families where fathers play an active role with the children, party planning is almost always the mother's domain, she says.

They go through the event step by step, with Blackwell asking questions from her long checklist. Even very organized moms don't think of everything, she says.

Before the party, Blackwell loads up her car with supplies and makes sure everything gets set up at the site.

"My record is 32 trips," she said. "The mom had created elaborate basketball-themed centerpieces in her basement for a bar mitzvah at Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills. I could only take one at a time in my car."

"Instead of running back and forth, the mom had that time to visit with her out-of-town company."

Each Red Coat Ladies lead worker carries a suitcase of supplies to handle emergencies: needles and thread, glue, static guard spray, scissors — even a steamer to take care of wrinkled clothing.

They also carry an extra uniform for themselves. At one wedding, a groomsman split his pants as

he was lifting the bridal chair for the hora. Duct tape didn't work. Blackwell is tall, so she got her extra pants — and they fit the guest well enough.

After the party, the Red Coat Ladies pack up everything that needs to go home with the family. At weddings, they make sure the bride and groom have whatever they want in their limo and hotel room.

The company now handles about 180 b'nai mitzvah parties a year and almost as many weddings.

The Red Coat Ladies have worked at more than 200 venues, from the Adoba Hotel in Dearborn to the Zap Zone in Farmington Hills. Prices vary, depending on how many Red Coat Ladies are needed and for how long; packages start at \$750.

Most parties have two Red Coat Ladies on hand. The most Blackwell has had at one event is six. It was a "magical mystery tour" party; she needed one chaperone on each of the three buses and one at each site the buses visited.

Detailed information about the company's services is available at the company's website, www.partyassurance.com. □