

## Behind the Scenes: The Walt Disney World Moms Panel - Our Magical Tour

by Kim LaPaglia, PassPorter Guest Contributor

[To read part one of Kim's series on the Disney Moms Panel, [click here.](#)]

One of the perks of being selected as a Walt Disney World Moms Panelist was a trip to Walt Disney World! So my husband and I took a flight into Orlando International Airport in early December. As I neared the Orlando Baggage Claim, I noticed a cast member holding a sign with my name on it. While my husband, Michael, went to get our luggage, the cast member and I began a nice chat. Once we were loaded into her SUV, she continued to share interesting stories of her experiences with VIP Tours.

Upon entering the Coronado Springs front desk area, there was a sign welcoming the Walt Disney World Moms Panel. We had our own check-in desk and a manager came out to greet me. I was receiving the red carpet treatment at my favorite vacation destination, and again, I nearly broke out into strains of "When You Wish Upon A Star." My itinerary was enclosed in a blue folder with that endearing Disney Moms Panel logo. The first memo read "Dear Kimberly, Welcome to Walt Disney World."

For another warm welcome, there was a beautiful resort pen from the Coronado Springs manager in my room. I had to quickly prepare for the first Moms Panel function at the outdoor Laguna Bar. My husband called bell services, but they could not locate our luggage, which we had given them just 15 minutes earlier. Okay, Plan B: Open my carry-on bag and iron my back-up outfit. Before I had to leave, the luggage arrived and I was at least able to retrieve Plan A shoes. Now, you know how important shoes are. However, I have to admit that I've never really had a shoe issue in Walt Disney World. Maybe that's because I really like my comfortable walking sneakers and have a great disdain for blisters. This was indeed a different kind of trip.

Finally, I was walking to the Laguna Bar. I felt an immediate sense of togetherness after our introductions were made. Everyone had the same giddy smiles. I think we all had the identical surreal, "I can't believe I'm here" feeling. We were introduced to some of the cast members that had been instrumental in the creation of the Mom's Panel, including Leanne, our exuberant leader with Walt Disney World Public Relations. Meeting these dedicated people was a true highlight. I tend to look at cast members in awe anyhow. But the Walt Disney World Moms Panel

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Team are truly dream-makers. Little did I know the dreams yet to unfold.

We enjoyed drinks and nervous, excited chatter. The cast members took group photos using all of our cameras. Then we were led to what would be our personal bus for the weekend.

The next scheduled function was the "Osborne Family Spectacle of Dancing Lights." We arrived at Disney's Hollywood Studios (yes, it was still called MGM then) via a backstage entrance. We shared laughs about not wanting to see anything that would take away from the magic. We cleared security and entered near the Lights, Motors, Action Extreme Stunt Show. Now, I was in a state of disbelief and probably stayed in this enchanted fog for the next three days. It was similar to my wedding day, when I wanted to take it all in and not forget a moment.

Soon, we were treated to the spectacle of the Osborne Lights being turned on. We were then led through the lights to a photographer who was waiting to capture our first group photo. In a sea of people, the masses parted and we were somehow all lined up. (I have this framed photo -- another gift -- to view while answering questions for the Moms Panel.) People were pointing at us, wondering who we were. I was beginning to wonder myself!

We had free time until our 7:20 pm Brown Derby reservation, an Advance Dining Reservation for which I didn't have to call myself! (All of you fellow obsessive planners understand, I'm sure.) Most of the group headed to Rock 'n' Roller Coaster. Kara (a fellow panelist) and I decided to walk around the shops. It was a delight being able to wander without having to meet up with family or having our children pulling us away from the merchandise. More important, it was nice having some quality time with another Mom and being able to share the amazement of this wonderful experience.

At the Brown Derby, we were seated at a long table. The food was delicious, and the conversation and company was delightful. We met more cast members, who shared wonderful stories with us. After enjoying the grapefruit cake dessert, we were led out of the empty restaurant. The conversation had been so engaging that I hadn't noticed the restaurant close. We were led back to our bus via the empty streets of the Studios. Again, I was in a dream-like state.

Back at the resort, I found even more surprises. Waiting on the table was a basket brimming over with Walt Disney World Moms Panel logo items such as pens, a pink jacket, watch, hat, and more. I was too excited to sleep. My husband and I went outside to enjoy the warm

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evening, while I shared my journey with him. Finally, with refillable mugs in hand, I tried to read and then sleep. I didn't do well at either attempt.

At 7:30 am, I arrived at the Coronado Springs Convention Center to a welcoming breakfast buffet. It was wonderful to see the panelists as they strolled in. I enjoyed the breakfast and thanked Leanne for the amazing gifts.

The Acapulco Room was set up with computers, and at our desks we found more gifts, including pens and a mouse pad. A highlight of this session was a presentation by Imagineers, introducing the interactive Toy Story Mania attraction. During a short break, I made a call to my son and my mom. I couldn't wait to share the fact that Leanne had surprised us again; we would be touring the Cinderella Castle Dream Suite! When she told us, I felt a bit dizzy with excitement.

Our mini-bus took us to the Magic Kingdom. Again we were led backstage (should I close my eyes?), cleared security, and walked right in to the Magic Kingdom. We entered near the Plaza Restaurant and walked to Cinderella Castle. After posing in the lobby with Cinderella for a group photo, we ascended the stairs and were seated at three tables. Somewhere along the way, we had picked up a photographer and camera man, who were busy capturing our royal lunch. Then, the chef and manager came out to greet us. It was these special touches that made everything so magical. For the crowning finale the chef presented us with three Cinderella slipper desserts, which we all shared. (I had the white slipper at my vow renewal.) This was a divine milk chocolate. It was a magnificent lunch, especially knowing that my dream come true of seeing the suite above us was not far away.

We put on our previously-purchased tiaras (for the record, Bret, our lone Dad, skipped this step) and were led outside to an unassuming door. We went up to the suite in two groups, along with our "paparazzi." We stepped in to a small but special parlor. This was where the concierge waits to receive any wishes from the lucky Castle Suite winners. Here, the clock was not going to strike midnight. It was perpetually stuck at one minute before that un-magical hour.

After the elevator ride, I found myself standing in the suite's foyer led by Alexis, a cast member, who regaled us with stories about the suite. The most often heard request from the Dream Suite winners is to have a picture taken of them in their pajamas in the Magic Kingdom after park closing, and one group of college girls wanted manicures and pedicures.

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Biting my lip to hold back tears, I stepped inside the suite. Again, I reminded myself to just soak in the moment. I wanted to breathe in the magic of the experience and keep it with me forever. I am such a Cinderella fanatic/wannabe. The suite has many royal touches. The picture over the fireplace becomes a flat-screen television. In the bathroom, there is indeed a throne. Soak in the tub and you will find yourself beneath simulated stars. I had my picture taken seated on the sofa, but we were asked not to sit on the beds as the next Year of a Million Dreams winners would be arriving soon. I was in awe and it was bittersweet to depart. I will especially cherish the mementos we were given: a Cinderella Castle Suite Privacy Please sign and a Your Key to the World key to the suite. Our next group event was a modified Traditions Tour (Traditions is Walt Disney World's cast member orientation program). It was the Guestology Tour, "plussed" up by Lisa, a cast member with the Disney Institute. The first question posed was, "How many employees work at Walt Disney World?" I raised my hand and said, "None." Correct! (They are cast members, not employees!) By this time, I wanted to head over to the Casting Office to secure myself a role. The tour was informative and challenged even our knowledgeable group. We rode the Haunted Mansion (with the new special effects) and then went over to Pirates of the Caribbean. Again, we were led to a private entrance and onto a boat. I was ecstatic that the Walt Disney World Moms Panel was sharing a ride through my favorite attraction, but I refrained from singing along, "Yo Ho, Yo Ho."

We returned to our hotel before our 5:35 pm Artist Point dinner. At the Wilderness Lodge, we were met again by cameras. We were fortunate that these people were on hand to help commemorate our trip. Dinner was again delicious; we were introduced to the chef and manager and given personalized menus. There was no time for dessert, though, as we had a party to attend; Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party.

(During the day, while I was with the panel, my husband was playing in the parks. However, any family members who had traveled with us were kindly invited to join us for the Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party that evening.)

Waiting at the Magic Kingdom with our family members was a roped-off area atop the train station. We were treated to hot chocolate, coffee, and cookies. Although I had been to Mickey's Very Merry Christmas Party a few times with my family, viewing it with the Moms Panel was special. There were some bittersweet moments -- I recalled seeing my son at a previous party, waving at Santa and trying to catch snow on Main Street. It was a pleasure to meet some of the Moms Panel's family members and watch the children enjoying this magical evening. After the parade, Michael and I watched the fireworks. Michael took the

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"real" bus back to the hotel, but I wanted to enjoy my private transport and time with the panel members (although I was too exhausted to talk much). The lack of sleep, a full day of events, and emotional moments were catching up with me. I perked up a bit when I saw another surprise waiting in our room. It was a plate of cookies and a carafe of milk. Sweet dreams, indeed!

*About The Author: Kimberly LaPaglia thrives on answering questions about Walt Disney World vacations. Stay tuned for her last day of training which includes the Walt Disney World Moms Panel photo shoot and what it's been like since the site went live.*

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