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BUSINESS PROFILE

Published: Sunday, November 1, 2009

The Howard Group Inc. wins Better Business Bureau's Business of the Year for a second time

By M.L. Dehm
SCBJ Freelance Writer

A Snohomish County event production company, The Howard Group Inc., has been awarded the Better Business Bureau's highest small business honor — the Business of the Year Torch Award — for the second time in Western Washington's.

Over 300 Western Washington businesses are nominated for this honor annually after being evaluated for integrity, customer service, ethics and innovative business practices. This year, the judges, all unbiased, third-party representatives of a variety of organizations, selected The Howard Group for the top place in each of those categories for a second time.

"We were over the moon and we were humbled," said Howard Group president Kevin Howard St. John. Robert Andrew, president and CEO of the Better Business Bureau serving Alaska, Oregon, and Western Washington described the companies that win this award as the elite of the elite who stand out above fierce competition. In praise of The Howard Group, Andrew said that he believed the company should serve as a model for other businesses.

Jean Hales, president/CEO of the South Snohomish County Chamber of Commerce, also had praise for the organization, saying, "The Howard Group exemplifies the high quality of our business members and reflects well on the local business community."

The Howard Group is a multi-faceted event company noted for offering a wide array of unique special event services. These range from personal affairs such as arranging weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and the like to big corporate functions, trade shows and product launches. One of the company's divisions is particularly well known for planning and executing spectacular graduation night parties.

The company is especially noted for providing much of the equipment and décor for their events from their own large warehouse. It is filled with giant props, lighting, backdrops, games, DJ equipment and everything else that could be needed to create a memorable event. Almost everything can be handled by the company in-house.

Howard St. John credited the company's success to their commitment to truly listen to their clients' ideas and to try and make those wishes come true. This isn't always an easy task as clients aren't always sure of what they would like, he said, and even when they are, they often have a difficult time articulating their wishes.

He said another important element of an event service is to offer complete support to the customer from start to finish. The customer has to feel they have someone there with them to support them every step of the way.

"The journey to the destination is often as important as the destination itself. You can do a fabulous job on an event but if getting there was a nightmare, the overall experience of the client is unsatisfactory," Howard St. John said.

The events firm was founded by Howard St. John just over 25 years ago. While in high school, he lost a friend in an alcohol-related accident. It brought home to him the need for every school to have an alcohol and drug-free party to attend on graduation night.

In 1983, he established the Grad Nights division to provide alcohol and drug-free grad night parties. These parties have a reputation for being so much fun that kids really wanted to go to them rather than attend the unofficial "kegger" parties that so often have tragic results.

"I truly believe we are saving lives," Howard St. John said. "Based on national statistics, 6 to 10 additional kids would be killed each year if we weren't doing what we're doing. The death toll spirals on graduation night."



Snohomish County Business Journal/M.L.Dehm (click to enlarge) Kevin Howard St. John and his team are known for creating event magic. The company's warehouse of props and special effects lighting mimic undersea adventures, casinos and more.

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Howard St. John is not only a strong advocate for children but also sits on the board of several charities such as Seattle's Table and others. The Howard Group is also known for its corporate events. One favorite that stands out in Howard St. John's mind was an event for Boeing's United Way campaign many years ago. The company had expressed a desire to really focus the audience's attention for the moment when the company vice president would appear to make his speech.

The stage was set with an elaborate balloon wall display in the shape of the American flag. Artificial fog rolled across the stage and music played in the background. Next, a pipe and drum group marched on the stage and began to play the national anthem.

"At the end of it, the entire balloon flag exploded revealing the vice president," Howard St. John said. "That was fun." It definitely got the attention of the employees, many of whom still talk about the event, he said. Another event was set up in a client's warehouse with a marquee tent to make the cavernous space more intimate and attractive. The Howard Group even had pedicab drivers transport guests across the warehouse.

"An event has to be successful," he said, "so it becomes a good legacy. If it is a horrible event .. that will get out."

For more information, call The Howard Group Inc. at 206-363-4100 or visit www.howgrp.com. Each division has its own Internet website.

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