



"I'M FRESH OUT of college. Let me make mistakes now rather than when I'm 30 and want to make money and start a family."

That was **Dee Moore's** approach after completing a major in family studies and a minor in women's studies at the **University of Maryland**. Like many graduates, she was less sure about what to do than about her interests: organizing, facilitating, working for children (but not teaching).

That meant a brief stint — during and after college — as a nonprofit assistant, finding grants for children's leadership and team-building projects. Then she moved to the foundation of a **D.C.** charter school, working to get it accredited — "a powerful experience" but not fulfilling.

"Being so close to D.C., it's easy to do public policy," Moore says. She noticed a pattern, though: She liked being the coordinator, "the person to go to," more than the subject matter — and hated being stuck in an office.

A Web search turned up **Stratford University's** event-management certificate program. Moore called director **Alice Conway** about her problem — she couldn't quit work to take a risk on school, but this program might be the right path to a new career. Conway invited her to try a class; if Moore didn't like it, she didn't have to pay.

Why not? Most Stratford classes are held on or near the weekend, so Moore signed up for **Event Coordination and Operations**. She liked it and kept taking classes.

"It's very common to go to school here while working," says Conway. She cites Stratford's flexibility not just in class times but in outcomes: People come for a degree, a

certificate or noncredit continuing education. "Many event planners take the certificate just to validate what they're already doing," she says, "to have something official."

Anyone who knows **Washington** knows that networking is key to advancement. Moore stayed in close contact with Conway, soon noting that she was looking for a new job — and not in policy. Conway referred her to a woman whose company did something in between: planning political events.

"It's what I wanted to be doing," Moore says, but the political angle didn't hold her interest. She moved again, with Conway's help, to an event-production company, working with sets and lights. "Very cool," Moore calls it, "but I wasn't creative enough." Meanwhile, she was making her way through Stratford's other core courses: event administration (organizing and managing people), marketing (promoting a product or business) and risk management (safety, finances and insurance).

Most [event-certificate courses](#) are offered in **Falls Church** (703-734-5329) and cost less than \$500. Eighty percent of students are female, Conway says; the certificate can be finished in five semesters, but many students, especially those who work, take longer.

Stratford allows two years to finish the required 200 hours of practical experience, which can be volunteer work or paid internships but not part of one's regular job.

Both school staff and the outside experience help students launch a new career. Membership in the **International Special Events Society** (ISES) — encouraged for students — is another networking tool. Stratford alumni have ended up in government protocol, catering, convention services and corporate event management; many run their own businesses. Salaries range from \$35,000 to "the sky's the limit," Conway says.

Moore joined ISES, completed her 200 hours at weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, and charity galas, and took electives such as entertainment and contracts. In her final year, she was ready for a new challenge — and Conway heard from **Talk of the Town**, a **Rockville** events/rental company that needed a salesperson. Conway again made the connection; Moore, now 25, started there last spring.

Talk of the Town handles company picnics and school fairs, city days and prom parties, anniversaries and religious celebrations. Employees work at least one Saturday per month. April through October is the busiest time of year, with lots of moon bounces, obstacle courses and flavored-ice machines; winter brings casino parties and indoor galas. Moore works with clients on details from themes to sound systems to safety inspections.

"The company is growing, and I am, too," Moore says. "I have a plan now rather than hopping around." She wants to add full event planning — including doing guest lists, invitations and catering — to Talk of the Town's services, and its owners are open to that.

Meanwhile, she's called on to plan relatives' parties for free — even several states away. One result: On her birthday last month, "I went to a movie and crashed.

"People don't realize it takes months and months to plan an event that lasts five hours," Moore says. It can take time to plan an event career as well. Moore hopes to earn ISES certification and own her own company someday. For now, she's happy using her skills to make clients happy.

"Not everything in life has to be about paying bills," she says. "Let's have fun."

Written by Express contributor Ellen Ryan

Photo by Lawrence Luk