

COVER
STORY



MASKS & MATRIMONY



Lawrence and Karley Monberg incorporated masks into their outfits for their wedding in 2020.

ALEX AND CAMMY
WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY

A REBOUND FOR JAX WEDDING BIZ?

BY Tyler White

N

ortheast Florida wedding photographer Cammy Austin had a stacked schedule going into 2020, and she felt sure that her best year was ahead.

After eight years working as one half of Alex & Cammy Photography, she launched a side business, Jacksonville Wedding Creative, and roughly 43 weddings were on the books for the couple. Austin loves to travel and three of those ceremonies gave her reason to dust off her passport.

“I was really, really, really excited about having a wedding in France and having a wedding in Italy and Aruba,” said Austin, noting the potential impact those trips would have on her portfolio. “Obviously, that did not happen. Any of that.”

Roughly 15 clients postponed or canceled weddings in March, April and May as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States. Austin said the financial hit was substantial.

“We had no income for like three or four months, which was a little rough especially since we both do it full-time,” she said.

As Austin and others in the wedding industry continue to recover from a year that saw significant losses in potential revenue, several vendors and venues are hoping for a better and busier year in 2021.

2020 brought a lot of bad news, with venues, service providers and others struggling to adapt, but it also spurred creative thinking and pivots. As the 2021 spring wedding season approaches, the First Coast wedding industry is adapting in new and exciting ways in response.

SMALL VENUES, BIG PROFIT

With reduced occupancy for weddings, some small venues have found success amid Covid-19.

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Springfield venue Brick and Beam benefited from offering small event space. Venue director Ashley Smith said smaller venues like hers offer extremely affordable price points on off-days of the week and also accommodate smaller budgets aiming for a weekend wedding.

Smith said the goal for venues should be to make their space as unique and personalized as possible.

“The days of appeasing their family or traditions are gone,” Smith said. “Couples in the states are wanting their wedding to be a reflection of themselves ... of who they are what really empowers them to customize as much as they possibly can.”

Brick and Beam works as a “shell,” offering no in-house food and beverage services. This provides more options for the couples planning their event with freedom to use their desired vendors and caterers, Smith said.

Other venues are improving the quality of their space to better ensure safety and peace of mind for couples and their guests.

River House in St. Augustine, which hosts senior citizen activities during normal business hours, pays for the mortgage on the building with the revenue made from weddings they book on weekends, said sales and marketing manager Constance Wiecking. She said the event space saw about 40 of its more than 80 weddings get postponed in 2020. They came back in July with strong safety protocols, masks for staff and vendors and UV air scrubbers in the building’s HVAC system.

Due to the staff’s interactions with senior citizens during the week and working weddings on weekends, Wiecking said River House has required all staff members to get the COVID vaccination, with most staffers receiving their second dose of the vaccine later in January. She said she wants to ensure staff can safely work all the events without worry of transmitting the disease to a high-risk population.

“We want to make sure that everybody still gets to have the day that they hoped for and maybe it will be with less guests than they originally hoped but we want them to still have a memorable wedding day and not have the worry of what could possibly happen,” she said.

‘DEEMED UNESSENTIAL’

Vendors had a difficult year with large-group events put on hold to combat the

◀ *Shelby and Sonny MacCurrach enjoy a day at the beach with their dog for a socially distanced engagement shoot during the 2020 pandemic.*

ALEX AND CAMMY WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY

spread of Covid-19.

“It’s like the ‘Wild West’ here,” said Kevin Tos, DJ and owner of Party Solution Entertainment. In 2020, Tos said it was crucial to stay on top of the fluctuating regulations.

“We had to adapt to every weekend,” he said. “Every weekend the rules were different, every weekend the venue rules were different, whether we were in downtown Jacksonville or in St. Augustine.”

Tos had lofty ambitions for 2020 after the company cultivated some great relationships in 2019. New venues were lined up for the year, but more than 100 couples postponed their weddings, and corporate events all but vanished. Tos said he almost lost his office off Bowden Road due to the setback.

He said more and more weddings are shrinking in size, relocating to venues with outdoor spaces. His staff all wear masks and practice social distancing strategies such as limiting song requests. Microphones are sanitized and equipped with disposable cones at weddings to prevent transmission.

Austin’s friend and colleague Krissy Weeks, co-owner of Ivey Photography, usually has four or five a month weddings booked out nearly a year in advance. Some clients have pre-paid for family photo sessions to help ensure their business makes it through the pandemic, Weeks said.

Austin and Weeks both said they’ve had to update their contracts and include clauses to protect them from legal fallout should any issues arise down the road. This became especially important when Cammy and Alex both tested positive for Covid-19.

“I’m fairly confident we got it at a wedding,” said Austin, who recalled attending several larger weddings with guest lists exceeding 80 people. One wedding appeared to have around 200 people, Austin said. The Austins wore masks, stayed away from people and used long lenses to maintain distance, but they aren’t able to control what happens once dancing and alcohol come into play.

Christian Joransen, director of sales and marketing at the Renaissance World Golf Village Resort, said it can be quite difficult to maintain social distancing despite the property’s best efforts.

“We start out everybody’s social distancing and you try to keep them to do that,” Joransen said. “They’re all family and they wanna enjoy it.”

Weeks also got COVID in 2020 and had to self-quarantine, fearful of endangering her family, notably her 3-year-old immuno-compromised son, Sumner.

“I thought that after I had it that I would be OK,” Weeks said. “I’m still just terrified.”

When she got COVID, Weeks and her husband Chad hired Austin’s husband as a substitute photographer for two weddings but lost

“

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ASHLEY SMITH,
VENUE DIRECTOR

money in the process.

Austin said the financial pressure has been tough and she intends to take any photo work she can, including cheaper weddings and elopements, which may only take a couple of hours to photograph with a minimum guest count.

“There’s a lot of people who are reconsidering working in the wedding industry because of this year,” Austin said. “It’s definitely not as secure as people thought it was. When you are deemed unessential and you can’t work for four months, it makes you really reconsider your life.”

DOWN THE AISLE IN 2021

With social distancing a priority now in planning the big day, large weddings with packed ceremonies are falling out of favor for more intimate settings with fewer guests, more money put toward enriching the overall wedding day experience and exciting new ways to celebrate love and romance.

Biscotti’s, a local favorite for their bistrot-style cuisine and decadent wedding cakes, catered seven “microweddings” in December 2020, a trend allowing for bigger budget weddings to transition into smaller, higher-end wedding experiences in large, rented homes with views. Restaurant owner Barbara Bredehoeft recalled some being held on yachts, which offered a limited occupancy and plen-

ty of fresh air.

Mandy Roy, Biscotti’s catering manager, said these opportunities allow couples to curate unique experiences that fit their personal taste. The microwedding locales also offer cheaper rental fees, so more money can be spent on food, wine, decor and other aspects of the day.

Despite postponements and cancellations, Bredehoeft said the one safe ritual that’s continued to thrive: Wedding cake tastings.

“It’s kind of a rite of passage when you get married,” she said of the more than 100 tastings held in 2020. She said it’s a reliably popular activity for the grooms, as well.

Krissy Weeks said she’s seeing more and more brides have a portion of their dress turned into a matching mask they can wear on their wedding day, which she found to be a wonderful way to personalize the outfit and can be passed down to future generations.

“That’s part of her keepsake,” she said. “It’s something to speak to this time period and our history, no matter how horrible it is, they make the best of it.”

Austin said she has noticed an increase in weddings having a designated live streamer to coordinate snapshots and video with family and friends unable to attend the wedding. She said videographers are now including live-streaming as an additional service for free or a small fee.

“That’s definitely something that I don’t see going away,” Austin said.

Weeks said she has also seen an increase in tips from wedding guests, which has been a welcome surprise.

As a popular destination wedding locale, Wiecking at River House said she hopes more people will get the vaccine and become comfortable with traveling for weddings once again.

At the World Golf Village, Joransen said some clients have called to postpone or cancel weddings more than 5-6 months out for 2021, but with factors such as the vaccine rollout potentially shifting the time frames for people to marry, it’s a balancing act to not jump the gun on rescheduling a date.

Austin emphasized vendors should prepare for 2021’s wedding season in one important step: Get the COVID vaccine.

Weeks is also putting a lot of stock in the vaccine rollout’s success, with the family’s livelihood, health and sanity depending on it.

“I love what we do and I want it to continue,” she said. “I just want people to be safer.”

Austin anticipates a busy year and an even busier 2022 with lots of interest from couples who may have gotten engaged in 2020 or early 2021.

“It almost feels like the opportunity to rebirth your business,” she said. “There’s gonna be an explosion of weddings and I’m looking forward to it.”