

NEWS

Houston CVB Official Serves as City's International Face

Deanea LeFlore Welcomes Foreign Leaders, Dignitaries

By Jonathan Trager

Vladimir Putin of Russia. Jiang Zemin of China. Valdes Zatlers of Latvia.

These are just a few of the international heads of state that Deanea LeFlore has helped welcome to Houston as director of the Houston International Protocol Alliance (IPA).

Other cities in the United States have staff in similar positions. But the 35-year-old LeFlore is unique in that the IPA is a division of the Houston CVB and not part of the city's Mayor's office.

The enthusiastic cultural attaché heads a staff of five full-time employees whose mission is to welcome foreign dignitaries and serve as liaison between the city and the 88 consulates located there. These branches mark the third most in the nation behind New York City and Washington, D.C.

"[My employees are] all dedicated and committed," LeFlore told *USAE*. "You have to be passionate about this because protocol is a career that's behind the scenes. Some people think it's glamorous but you put in the long hours to make sure the principals look good and make sure there's a distraction-free environment so that business can happen."

LeFlore, who joined the office in 2001, noted Houston's status as a "gateway area," boasting one of the nation's largest ports,

an airport with many international flights, its status as capital of the energy industry, and the world's largest medical center. That's why the largest city in Texas gets more than 200 visits per year from ambassadors, dignitaries, and heads of state, she said.

However, each of these visits takes an enormous amount of time to prepare for and execute. That's where LeFlore comes in. After being notified by the consulate that a prominent foreign official will be visiting the city, LeFlore does extensive research. Has the official been to the Houston before? Have they been given a "Key to the City?" Have they received an honorary citizenship? These are just a few of the questions that need to be answered.

The research also entails learning about cultural norms in other countries so as to make a good impression and avoid any embarrassing faux pas.

"For example, if we're going to get a bouquet for a head of state, we have to know which flowers are appropriate," LeFlore said. "The color yellow might mean jealousy in some countries. Odd numbers of flowers might be given for funerals. We try to be aware of the customs of each country."

She also goes over the dignitary's travel itinerary with an "advance team" from the foreign nation, which approves the schedule. Occasionally, funny moments ensue.

"Once, an advance team from a Spanish-speaking country was concerned about some of the arrangements that were being made," LeFlore recalled. "They broke off and started speaking amongst themselves



Deanea LeFlore

in Spanish about it, not realizing that my team and I speak Spanish. They were pretty surprised when they found out that we had understood every word they said."

When the official's plane lands, LeFlore and staff have the literal and figurative red carpet rolled out and an arrival ceremony ready. LeFlore's office also acts as a liaison between the city and U.S. Secret Service agents who often provide security.

"It's weeks and weeks of work, and the head of state might only be here for 24 hours," LeFlore explained. "I'm very detail-oriented, so I like planning down to the last detail."

A native of Tulsa, Okla., LeFlore studied

at the University of Tulsa as well as at the University of Malaga in Spain and the University of Guadalajara in Mexico.

Since graduating from Tulsa in 1995, she has worked in a communications and translating capacity in the energy industry and for a CBS-TV affiliate before seeing the listing for a position with the Houston CVB.

"This was everything that I always wanted in a job," said LeFlore, who spends much of her spare time studying foreign languages and watching foreign films. "When I saw the job description, I was amazed. I didn't even realize this sort of position was available."

Now, LeFlore heads a staff of five full-time people. Her office offers a competitive internship program, which receives applications from prestigious schools all over the country.

She also oversees Houston's Sister Cities program—originated by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1956—which currently includes 16 sister city associations. Volunteers with the program undertake student exchanges, business exchanges, and other initiatives to strengthen economic ties and to promote a broader understanding of other cultures.

LeFlore was recently given an additional vice president title at the CVB, a testament to the passion she brings to her career.

"Even though I put in a lot of long hours, I love doing what I do," LeFlore said with a smile. "I'm absolutely thrilled about where I am. This is the apex in the field of international relations."