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Style

The rise of party planner AJ Williams

By [Christopher Muther](#) | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 30, 2014



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

AJ Williams makes some adjustments prior to an event she planned at the Lenox Hotel earlier this month.

It may sound as if party planner AJ Williams is telling tales when she explains that she's the reason why the Custom House Tower is brightly lit every night, but under playful cross-examination she's stubbornly sticking to her claim.

"I'm absolutely taking full credit for all of that," Williams said. "It was because I brought together the Custom House management with the management from Philips [Lighting]. I married the two. And look what happened."

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Williams, president of AJ Williams Events, was instrumental in orchestrating the meeting that resulted in Philips donating \$300,000 worth of lighting to the landmark Custom House Tower in 2008. Now when she sees the tower aglow, she thinks of it as her handiwork, at least in part.

When she's not lighting up the town, Williams has been bringing glamour to some of the biggest fetes and fund-raisers in Boston. When Patriots coach Bill Belichick celebrated his 60th birthday at a Boston hotel, his girlfriend Linda Holliday asked Williams to create an opulent, Moroccan-themed, 250-guest, celebrity-studded party. It was so exclusive that smartphones were confiscated from servers to avoid any unauthorized photos of guests. Two years later, Williams remains tight-lipped on attendees.

“My party was great,” Belichick said. “Linda and AJ put together a lot of great ideas and the night was unforgettable. AJ has a great personality, always smiling and laughing — a lot of fun to be around.”

Williams also planned Holliday's pink-themed 50th birthday extravaganza (or, as Holliday calls it, her 39th birthday) and has become a part of the couple's close circle of friends. Williams's parties have included guests such as Bill Clinton, Jennifer Hudson, Jon Bon Jovi, Queen Latifah, and Wyclef Jean. When Williams threw her own 40th birthday party last summer on Nantucket, it was a coveted invitation.

Over the past decade, Williams has steadily increased the caliber of her events, focusing primarily on creating parties for nonprofits and working to bolster their bottom line.

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As she gathers steam, she is setting her sights on her much-praised competition, Bryan Rafanelli, Boston's best-known and most exclusive event planner.

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CHERYL RICHARDS

AJ Williams (center) with (from left) Bill Emery, Bianca de la Garza, Linda Holliday, and Bill Belichick at Williams's Nantucket birthday party.

“He’s priced very high,” Williams said. “. . . I think we’re in a very good position to compete.”

Williams came to Boston from Kingston, Jamaica, when she was 11 years old. AJ is a nickname for Anjealetta (pronounced Ann-jah-lehтта), which means “little angel” in French.

“My mother lost her second baby, Olivia, and she unexpectedly became pregnant and thought I was a gift from God,” Williams said. “Hence the name Anjealetta.”

She was teased endlessly by classmates and even teachers for her Jamaican accent. Hoping to sound more like her classmates, she plopped in front of the television and stayed there, giving herself elocution lessons through “The Brady Bunch” and “The Cosby Show.” When her mother learned that she was being teased, she was immediately yanked from public school and placed in Catholic school.

Her diction training worked, because even with careful scrutiny, it’s difficult to discern any Jamaican accent in her voice.

“I always wanted people to like me, that was such an issue. To feel like an outsider was tough,” Williams said. “I think that’s where the party planning came into play. I was always trying to plan something to get friends together.”

But her path to chic society parties was anything but linear. As Williams eloquently puts it: “I have more layers than an onion, but I’m prettier and smell a lot better.”

After graduation from high school, she was offered a fashion scholarship from the Massachusetts College of Art. But when she arrived she realized that it wasn’t the path she wanted to follow. Part of the reason why she left fashion was that she didn’t find it competitive enough. This is a woman who thrives on obstacles.

She changed her major to graphic design, but continued dabbling in the fashion world by modeling. She started modeling in high school, and continued through college and after graduation. But she ended that career after she launched her party planning business and started seeing clients in the audience. She did print and runway work for Talbots, Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Reebok before stepping aside.



CHERYL RICHARDS

A scene from Williams’s Nantucket birthday party.

“I think it groomed me into a more elegant person,” she said. “I have a presence now because of my background in modeling.”

She also learned poise from years of participating in pageants. After a string of almost-wins, she worked for Donald Trump’s Miss Universe Organization in recruiting and event management. It was where her career of event production was really born.

Williams is elegantly attired and perfectly coiffed as she describes the many turns of her life. It’s sometimes difficult to follow a timeline of her achievements because they’re so numerous and are tangled and woven like a complicated series of thick tree roots.

She got her big break with political fund-raisers. When the Democratic National Convention came to Boston in 2004, she planned an event for the Congressional Black Caucus. At an event celebrating 40 years of civil rights, she met Darryl Settles, founder of the BeanTown Jazz Festival (now run by Berklee). He had recently fired his event planner, and asked Williams if she would take on the job. She knew next to nothing about organizing a jazz festival, but under her guidance, attendance grew from 15,000 to 35,000 the first year alone. She’s hoping for similar growth as she plans the Martha’s Vineyard Food & Wine Festival for this October.

Last summer she took on a massive 700-person fund-raiser to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the nonprofit Ad Club, a trade association for the marketing industry.

Ad Club president Kathy Kiely said Williams was undaunted by the endless process of pulling permits from the city to make the party happen.

“I told her I wanted fireworks, and she didn’t flinch,” Kiely said. “This was a huge undertaking.”

Williams’s determination does not surprise her friend Holliday.

“Even though as the host of the party you might have ideas, she takes them and goes beyond your imagination,” Holliday said. “I think that’s why you’re seeing her grow so rapidly. She’s hands-on. She never seems to stop.”

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