

All eyes on Farmville

How Farmville and Longwood aced the vice presidential debates

NOT MANY SMALL towns in America get the chance to hold the world's attention for a few days. To be thrust onto the world stage as part of the most sacred processes on which our country was established – the right to elect our own leaders – is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

On October 4, the small town of Farmville, with a population under 9,000, became the center stage in the most controversial presidential campaign in modern American history.

The story began at Longwood University when the school's leadership decided to apply to the Commission on Presidential Debates to be a site for one of four debates – three for the presidential candidates and one for the vice presidential candidates.

The university learned in September 2015 that it had been selected as the site for the vice presidential debate.

That gave the university and the town of Farmville roughly one year to prepare their community to host the candidates, their entourages, 3,000 journalists and 1,700 public safety officials.

The town administration was a true partner from the beginning. Its pledge of support was a critical ingredient in Longwood's application to the Commission on Presidential Debates.

In preparation, Longwood and Farmville representatives visited a few of the universities that had recently hosted presidential and VP debates. These schools' experiences provided valuable guidance on what to do and not to do as a debate host site.

For Farmville, the event was an opportunity to showcase the town as a great destination for visitors.

The town had no dedicated communications department or public information officer at the time, so the council hired a local PR expert to help them capture media attention and to assist them with the task of communicating with residents throughout the process.

Ilsa Loeser of Letterpress Communications in Farmville said her goal was to attract media coverage that would show-



The view from inside the media center during the live vice presidential debate on October 4.



Farmville Mayor David Whitus (left) and Longwood University President Taylor Reveley IV (center) greet vice presidential candidate Mike Pence.



The Downtown Farmville Partnership and local merchants decorated Main Street to celebrate the debate.

case Farmville as, “a great place to visit – full of history and outdoor activity.”

Preparing early to put its best face forward, the town and its partners expanded its new visitFarmville.com site, making a first-class tourism site that showcases the region’s history, natural assets and attractions. It promotes Farmville as the perfect day-trip destination for Washingtonians, Richmonders, and North Carolinians. “The site will benefit the town for years to come,” said Loeser.

Loeser and town officials worked closely with the Down-

town Farmville Partnership which transformed Farmville’s Main Street with stunning displays of red, white and blue streamers, buntings, and other street signs and décor. Local merchants dressed their storefront windows with patriotic décor and debate-themed merchandise and memorabilia.

Loeser coordinated media coverage on Farmville, including a live broadcast from Uptown Coffee. WUSA Channel 9 from Washington, D.C. interviewed the mayor and several council members and community leaders about what the debate would mean for Farmville.

Loeser notes that media coverage helped Farmville to surpass its highest google searches since 2008.

Putting residents first

While boosting tourism was an important goal, the town’s first responsibility was to ensure the safety of its residents and uninterrupted services to them during this historic event.

In preparation for the debates, the town developed an e-mail alert system for residents which will be used for all types of communications going forward. The system was used to keep residents apprised of schedules, street closures and to assure them of extra public safety measures being taken.

Security and public safety required the most manpower with approximately 1,700 law enforcement and public safety officials working various aspects of the event. These included the Farmville Police Department, the Longwood Police De-



LONGWOOD UNIVERSITY

Longwood students were enthusiastic and vocal participants in the debate events.

partment, the Virginia State Police, and the Secret Service. The team also included hundreds of experts from EMS, fire services, military and private security professionals who volunteered from across the state.

Remarkably, there were no law enforcement incidents throughout the event – a testament to the detailed planning and communications.

Likewise, Mayor David Whitus noted that there were almost no injuries. “The hospital worked for almost a year to get all of their resources and doctors lined up in case of any type of mass casualty event, but they had no incidents in the ER and only saw three people in the medical tent set up on campus.”

Whitus says the decision to host the debate at Longwood is proving to be a good one long-term for the town and the university.

“The debate put Farmville and Longwood on the map,” said Mayor Whitus. “We see people coming to visit who were made aware of what Farmville had to offer because of the debate. For years to come, people will point back to the debate as the event that made a real impact on our community.”

Longwood masters storytelling and media relations

Longwood University was responsible for accommodating roughly 3,000 journalists who came to cover the debate. This included orchestrating the technical facilities, equipment and bandwidth needed to support their live broadcasts.

Matthew McWilliams, Longwood’s Director of Communications and Media Relations, was the university’s liaison to the media. In addition to the hundreds of media stations inside the debate hall, “Four networks set up stages outside the perimeter and provided 12 hours of coverage,” said McWilliams. Longwood signs were present in the background of these sets and Longwood students showed their enthusiasm and energy in the

crowds behind the anchors. “We estimate we received \$80 million in ad value from the debate coverage,” added McWilliams.

Longwood hopes that exposure will help to attract more students to the university, especially from regions the school hasn’t fully tapped into, including Northern Virginia.

McWilliams said, “Hosting a debate isn’t right for every school. A lot of things have to conspire to make the school the right fit. Longwood hit all the marks and was well positioned to take advantage of the opportunity. We had a healthy reserve fund for strategic projects.”

McWilliams noted that debates are better suited to a mid-size college than a very large or very small school.

While Longwood didn’t have enough lodging accommodations locally, they partnered with Lynchburg and Richmond and the Virginia Tourism Bureau to accommodate the crowds.

Longwood also arranged an incredible itinerary of special events that celebrated the rich heritage of Farmville. An extensive guide published by the University for media and guests reads, “It’s America’s first two-college town, a place where the final hours of the Civil War unfolded and a student strike helped launched the modern Civil Rights movement.”

“We have a profound and rich history in two watershed moments in history,” McWilliams said. “We reached out to journalists who would have an interest in that story.”

Special events for the media and other guests included guided tours of the Moton Civil Rights Museum, a civil rights walking tour, a Taste of Virginia media picnic, a lectures series by Longwood faculty on topics related to the VP debates, and a live performance by the famed comedy troupe *Second City*.

In addition to special planned events, journalists appreciated the opportunity to get away from the media center and take a break in Farmville, grab a cup of coffee in a little shop and enjoy a stroll on Main Street.

McWilliams recalled a conversation with a network producer in which she admitted that she and other media colleagues groaned when they learned the debate would take them to Longwood and Farmville. Their expectations were low.

After the debate, the producer told McWilliams it was the best run debate site she had ever worked. “It blew their expectations out of the water,” said McWilliams. **VTC**

About the author: Nancy Chafin is Editor of *Virginia Town & City* and Communications Specialist for the Virginia Municipal League.