Freeman instructor helps bring Jazz Fest to life

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EJ Encalarde, president and COO of Festival Productions and coordinating producer of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, at the Fair Grounds, where Jazz Fest is held. This semester, Encalarde is teaching a new course on the principles of festival management.

The New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival is a crown jewel of cultural tourism. A celebration of Louisiana's vibrant culture, the 8-day event brings together people from all walks of life to vibe to live music, dine on regional cuisine and admire the creations of local artisans.

"Of all the festivals and events I've helped produce, Jazz Fest is my favorite," says EJ Encalarde. "It's iconic, it's internationally renowned, but most importantly, it's about the cultural experiences and traditions we honor."

Encalarde is coordinating producer of Jazz Fest and president and COO of Festival Productions, the New Orleans-based company that co-produces the festival in

partnership with AEG Presents. She also serves as adjunct lecturer at the Freeman School, where she teaches a new Cases in Hospitality course focused on the principles of festival management.

Given her love of New Orleans music and culture, it seems only natural that Encalarde ended up with Jazz Fest, but she didn't start out on that path. After graduating from Loyola University New Orleans with a degree in criminal justice, she initially had her sights set on law school.

"I was on my way to law school when I took a temporary job at Festival Productions," she recalls. Driven by her love of music, she began traveling around the country, producing musical tours and other events. What started as a temporary gig became a decades-long career.

"It was kismet," she says.

As COO of Festival Productions, Encalarde wears many hats. With 35 years of experience, Encalarde leads cross-departmental initiatives, aligns teams, oversees comprehensive planning, and evaluates performance — all while paying special attention to her team's wellbeing.

"Festival production takes so much energy and so much focus," she says. "It's easy to burn out in this industry, so self-care is a necessity. If the staff is feeling accomplished and morale is high at the end of the festival, then that tells us we've been successful."

Jazz Fest also measures success by the number of happy festivalgoers, and for Encalarde, the numbers speak for themselves. Approximately 500,000 people attended the festival in 2024, and many of those attendees were repeat customers. "We have a very large, loyal festival base," Encalarde says. "And some of our base consecutively attends the festival for 12-14 years."

Those numbers have a big impact on Louisiana. Jazz Fest brings about $540 million to the state annually in hotel, restaurant and retail sales.

The business side of Jazz Fest inspired Encalarde to develop the new course, a one-of-a-kind learning opportunity that gives students an insider perspective on event production through hands-on activities, site visits, and meet-and-greets with key industry players. A recent addition to Freeman's Hospitality Certificate program, the

course covers a wide range of skills necessary for successful event management, including logistics, communications, security protocols, contingency plans, artistic vision and creative direction.

And there’s no better city in the world to study festival production and management.

“Here in New Orleans students have a living laboratory of cultural experience, and the intersection between cultural heritage and festival production is unique,” Encalarde says. “Students are learning something that they can’t learn anywhere else.”

Throughout the course, Encalarde brings her students face-to-face with the day-to-day challenges of putting on large scale events. “We combine theory with a hands-on practical approach,” she says. “For instance, we do a case study of some of the festivals that were disastrous — like the notorious Fyre Festival. We also take a tour at the fairgrounds so that students can have a behind-the-scenes look at pre-production. We walk through the grounds, and the various directors who play a role in the production come and speak with the class.”

Encalarde also connects her students with resources to help them launch careers in festival and event production. She has personally introduced students to industry leaders, helping them land internships and jobs. “It’s very important for students interested in the music and festival industry to have these connections,” she says. “I’m making sure that these students are actually meeting with the professionals in these industries so that they can take the next step in their careers. And I’m so happy that I’ve been able to directly impact students’ lives and help them find work.”

For the culminating project in the course, students created their own festivals, pitching their ideas to industry professionals who provided them with feedback.

Then, they have a chance to see their instructor’s work in action. This semester, the end of Principles of Festival Management coincides with the kickoff of Jazz Fest. For Encalarde’s students, the festival promises to be another unforgettable educational experience.

Encalarde can’t wait.

“I love running into my students at the festival.”