

Nashville artist manager draws upon success from WSU, student activities

By MEGAN PAULY
managing@thesunflower.com

From kicking off her own high heels at Kirby's bar in Wichita to toting around \$2 million designer shoes in a plastic bag for singer Alison Krauss the night before the Academy Awards, Denise Stiff has been around the block of the music industry for 30 years.

"From the time I was young, I was attracted to music and particularly acoustic roots music," Stiff said.

The music-lover addressed students and faculty during the first speaker of the season's Entrepreneurship Forum Series.

While Stiff said she aspired to become a professional musician herself, she admitted that her real skill and talent was helping other people "get their music out there."

After completing a graduate degree from a student-activities focused program at the University of South Carolina, she served as program director for the Campus Activities at WSU for eight years.

"We had an Easter egg hunt with real eggs," Stiff said. "The grounds crew mowed the lawn and ran over them all...that was a really special moment."

While Stiff recalled the silly times, she accomplished a lot of serious

work during her stay in Wichita as well.

Michael Madecky, a grant writer and program coordinator for the University of Kansas Medical Practice Association, recalled working with Stiff at WSU.

"She taught me an awful lot about event management," Madecky said.

During Denise's last year in Wichita, Hippodrome and Homecoming—previously run by the Student Government Association—were shifted to the activities office.

"There was confidence in Denise to shift those where they belonged," Madecky said.

Madecky also remembered purchasing Denise's dining room table when she made the big move to Nashville in 1984.

She sold all of her furniture, packed her belongings into her little Volkswagon and was off.

It wasn't an impulsive decision. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind she knew it was time to move on.

She spent the first three months learning from different songwriters.

She frequented the Bluebird Café and began listening to country radio non-stop.

At a bluegrass convention, she had an accidental encounter with a talented 15-year-old musician.

That musician happened to be Alison

Krauss, who has now yielded 26 Grammy awards and countless other honors.

"You should always pay attention to things that seem to happen naturally to you, and that you're naturally good at but don't really think of as a career," Stiff said.

Stiff was good at managing talent and she had an eye to spot it, too.

"You have to trust your gut," Stiff said. "I just knew that she was something very special."

She soon developed a booking relationship for Krauss' band.

"The important thing is to know what's right and what's not right for an artist," Stiff said.

Stiff said that a typical arrangement includes a 15% gross commission for the artist management position. She also prefers to work hands-on with her artists.

"I'm very detail-oriented," she said.

This orientation for details paid off when faced with the unknown.

"I faked my way through an awful lot of stuff," Stiff said. "When lawyers wanted to represent Alison, I'd just nod my head and then go back and do a lot of homework afterwards."

Stiff has experienced phenomenal periods of growth along side Alison, going from \$500 to \$5,000 almost suddenly.

"Every major record label tried to sign Alison, but she was wise enough—and I was in agreement with her—that

we should never change labels," Stiff said.

Now the labels themselves are glad that she stayed with Stiff, admitting that they would have tried to make her into something that she wasn't.

Stiff currently managed Sarah Jarosz, a twenty-year old artist with two albums, two years of college and two Grammy nominations.

Jarosz came to Stiff this time.

Throughout her career, Stiff has learned not to settle, but to always be open to new risks.

"It takes so much to make it work," Stiff said. "For me it's a learning curve. It takes a lot of time...you've got to learn and stay focused on what's happening. You can't get married to anything because the next week it will be something different."

Those counseling courses from her master's in activities management paid off when dealing with super creative—but volatile—personalities. To talk through decision processes, she does a lot of listening.

"I have been known to spend six or seven hours on the phone with someone talking it through," Stiff said.

Stiff credits her experience as WSU's Campus Activities director for helping her management skills to grow and flourish.

Please see **ARTIST** *on*
PAGE 4

From **ARTIST** on page 3

"It helped me do it all," Stiff said.

Founder of DS Management, a Nashville-based artist management company, she has served as Executive Producer of Music for the award-win-

ning film, O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000) and in 2004 produced the Great High Mountain tour, highlighting music from movies Cold Mountain and O Brother, Where Art Thou?

In 2007, she was honored at the Country Music Hall

of Fame and Museum's first annual Louise Scruggs award.

"She is an authentic, well-informed, highly intelligent woman," Dr. James Rhatigan said of Denise. "She went from the total outsider to the ultimate insider."