

CTICC's Julie-May is in her element

Friday Files



By Gasant Abarder

CARRYING a bright red hard hat, her boots covered with dust, Julie-May Ellingson arrives a few minutes late for her interview for the Friday Files. But the chief executive of the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC) has a huge smile on her face that makes the wait worth it. You see, unlike most people, Monday is Ellingson's favourite day of the week.

She has just returned from her weekly visit to the construction site for CTICC II – the next big thing for Cape Town and especially the Foreshore precinct.

The reason Ellingson loves Mondays is because her weekly visit puts her in her element among scaffolding, building material and the din of construction.

Ellingson is an urban planner by profession who found herself in the convention and hospitality industry. Now, as head of the CTICC, she enjoys the best of both worlds – running arguably the most successful convention centre in the country (and Africa) and having regular access to a construction site.

"It's an incredibly exciting project... the wonderful thing about the building site is that it makes it real. We can look at all the plans, the artists' impressions, all the architectural drawings and it means nothing until you're actually on site. I love going on site, it's my favourite part of the week. It's where you get an update on what's going on," she says beaming.

"To live with a project where you started from scratch. I've been very fortunate, even before I started in my job, I was invited to the first sod-turning so I've been here since the construction started. I've been right through the iterations of the changes in terms of the design.

"For me the heart of it is that construction site. Until that is going and you're climbing over scaffolding and you're walking down steep stairs, and you're dodging wet work – that's when it's real. That's the absolute best."

It's hard to believe that the CTICC will celebrate its 12th birthday next week. But despite its unprecedented success, Julie-May knows now is not the time to be complacent. Yesterday, the Rabie Group gave its first hard-hat tour of Century City's new Convention City.

But Ellingson believes the expansion gives the CTICC the edge.

"We are doubling up the exhibition space, so we're building over 10 000m² of exhibition space. We're building another almost 3 000m² of meeting space as well.

"What people are looking for are smaller break-away areas. The days of a person standing at a podium in an auditorium speaking for two hours where everybody else just listens... are over. A few years ago everybody was talking about conferences being replaced by webinars but this has not happened. What we have seen is that people want face-to-face interaction and not just content. That is not to say technology has not influenced the way conferences are held and the architecture of meetings has most definitely changed from what it was a few years ago. You will still have the plenary sessions but these are interspersed with a series of small break-away sessions in which detailed



DREAM JOB: Julie-May Ellingson, the CEO of the Cape Town International Convention Centre, has nothing but praise for the city.

PICTURE: IAN LANDSBERG

issues are discussed and then reported back into the larger plenary sessions.

"The nature of our building has to speak to this demand as well as take account of changes in technology which in turn impact on how conventions and exhibitions are held.

"About the Century City business, I think competition is good. I think that it keeps us all on our toes. And the fact that a private sector investor has actually put down the money, which doesn't happen often, is good. I think that although the CTICC is a venue of choice, we have no intention of underestimating the Century City Development... so be sure the competition is on."

The CTICC East is being constructed next to the new Christiaan Barnard Memorial Hospital which includes a flagship Virgin Active gym that promises panoramic views of the city.

"Part of the challenge of the Foreshore is that it has no real public activity during the day. Even our coffee shop that feeds out on to the square has no interaction along the Rua Bartolomeu edge. What we want to do is create attractive public spaces which draw people into the Foreshore area. This will include developing retail spaces, coffee shops and restaurants that spill out into public realm and create active edges – the kind of open space that the people want to come to.

"Within two years this entire precinct will be completely different. It will create a whole new vibe for the city, a whole new area of the city, which is really important for Cape Town."

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Ellingson cut her teeth in the conference and hospitality game in her previous job for four years as chief executive of the Durban International Convention Centre. She turned the fortunes of the facility around and was snapped up to run the CTICC.

"It was really about taking a business that was losing money and turning it around to making substantial profits.

"I know that people get upset when we talk about profits within this kind of context, but what you have to understand is that what we really want to ensure is that these facilities are not a burden on the ratepayers.

"Once they are constructed they should be able to 'wash their own faces' and the only way we can do that is if we're making sufficient returns to re-invest. That is something that we've really learnt in the context of Durban.

"It was applying the business principles first and applying the same rules to everybody. It was looking for ways in which we could actually be more innovative. For example, when we hosted COP17, we turned our entire basement parking into country delegation offices and then we charged them to use that space. It's about being innovative in terms of how we use our space and understanding what the market is prepared to pay.

"People often say 'how can you charge that?', but I knew what they charged in Mexico and I knew what they charged in Germany. You do the research and you know who you're competing against. That is essentially what we did in Durban."

Ellingson heads up a permanent staff complement at the CTICC of 150. Between 300 and 500 temporary workers are brought in for events. That number can increase to 800 for big events like the recent WEF Africa summit or the Cape Town International Jazz Festival.

The CTICC has an annual turnover of R150 million to R160m. "Maybe a bit more this year," she says.

But it's the staff that motivate Ellingson. One of the four projects the CTICC is involved in is a corporate social investment programme in Mitchells Plain, the Mitchells Plain School of Skills. Many of the current staff at the CTICC have come

through the programme.

"The staff here are just fantastic and professional. They go out of their way to help the clients. Nothing is too much trouble. I think that is a testament to the success of the CTICC, so as much as management is important, the staff are really the heart of the business and we should never underestimate the importance of the role they play.

"Essentially what we do is bring the kids, who particularly want to go into specific sectors like the culinary sector, into our kitchens and when they are trained in their schools they become our students, so they can work here and apply for permanent jobs.

"We have quite a few who have come through the system and who work here. So if I think of what we get back, it far outweighs what we give. That is the wonderful thing about the hospitality sector, it is a low-entry level sector, and you can grow and work your way up. If you are prepared to put in the effort and put in the hours, and if you are prepared to really work hard, those opportunities are there. It's not the job that determines your success, but the person.

"We also have a partnership with an urban agriculture group, Abalimi Bezekhaya, who grow vegetables. We buy their vegetables from them and then serve them in our coffee shop. You will see on the menu a salad called 'a harvest of hope' – that's the English translation of the name of *Abalimi Bezekhaya*."

Ellingson has had many standout moments at the CTICC, like the jazz festival and WEF Africa, but the highlight was hosting thoroughbred horses for the annual yearling sale.

"I am a horse person and in January we had all the stables and everything indoors and all of these magnificent specimen of thoroughbred horses.

"Then obviously the jazz festival, and it was my first festival, so I couldn't believe what was built up in the precinct. It really is something for Cape Town. It is a great event and we should build on that. We are really looking forward to the expansion so that we can have even more indoor stages.

"They are the major events that showcase Cape Town, showcase South Africa,

and they showcase Africa.

"To think about the people who were here at WEF Africa, the heads of states and the heart of industry in Africa who are here deliberating on critical issues.

"I was fortunate enough to go into one of the sessions, and the level of debate was just incredible."

Ellingson, a Durbanite whose family still lives there, either commutes there or her family visits her. But there is no denying she has fallen in love with our fair city.

She is trying her hand at running and cycling and loves the fact that it's safe around the city. One of her favourite things is walking on the Sea Point promenade at night.

"This is like the dream job. I couldn't have thought of a better fit for me. I am an urban planner so I don't think of the expansion site as just a site but rather as an integral part of the city. My first way of thinking is, 'okay, where is the precinct, what role is it playing within the city, how does the site support this and then, okay, how does the business on the site support this?' It's not the other way around.

"I have been fortunate enough to travel to a lot of centres and I have to say that Cape Town's is right up there among the absolute best in the world.

"Cape Town is such an attractive destination, but I also think that it's important that we don't rest on our laurels. There are a lot of people who say we don't need to market Cape Town. That's not true. You have to always, always market. Coca-Cola didn't stop marketing its products despite being the number one beverage.

"It is very important that we continue to promote Cape Town as well as we can, and I think that there is a greater partnership among stakeholders here in Cape Town. While we are a convention centre, we don't sell the convention centre first, we sell the city, the country and then the venue. You've really got to have an attractive destination, and Cape Town is such an attractive destination, it's really on everyone's bucket list and we need to keep it on that bucket list.

"Absolutely love Cape Town. I must say. It's just such a vibrant city, there's always something going on, there's always something to do.