

Abu Dhabi Week got a chance to chat with Abu Dhabi Film Festival volunteer manager Bianca Arkeen to get a sneak peek into the world of the region's most-high profile celebration of film making



Bianca Arkeen has always loved films and after studying Media Studies, this California native was keen to take a look behind the scenes. With a background in theatrical venues, Arkeen has worked her way to the top, starting as an usher to now managing volunteers for the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (ADFF).

Her first time in the Middle East, she's also found the time to explore Abu Dhabi more. "It's such a refreshing, rich culture and the food here is fantastic! I want to ride a jet ski and do a desert safari before I leave."

As the volunteer manager, Arkeen is in charge of all the volunteers for the festival. With 700 active volunteers in the system, this is certainly no easy task. "Volunteering is something any

society should celebrate and support. Almost all of the departments here have a need for volunteers. Whether it's for theatre needs, administrative work or helping set up for events, there's a lot of different components and we have a need for all of them."

Let's find out just exactly how Bianca spends her day:

7.30am: "When I wake up in the morning, in my groggy state, I usually browse through my phone and see what messages I have received." If anything looks important, Bianca will respond immediately; otherwise she's off to the gym for a quick workout before her day begins.

9am: Most of the festival staff is housed temporarily at the Hilton Corniche Apartments, so shuttles come to and from the hotel to the ADFP offices. Admitting that she's always late to breakfast, Bianca enjoys catching up with other fellow staffers over the buffet. "All of the staff is very close knit, it's almost like a family. You don't just see each other at work, but at lunch, breakfast, to and from work so it is very fun."

10am: Finally at her desk, Arkeen begins every day by writing a to-do list. "I like to sit down and have a pow wow with my staff first thing and let them know what needs to be done today besides all of our other regular duties. We normally handle a lot of communication via email and on our scheduling site."

Keeping their online scheduling system up-to-date is key to organising volunteers. "We have three different venues this year, so you can imagine how many people we need. We upload shifts for volunteers, change or duplicate shifts and broadcast messages to one team or to everyone."

1.30pm: Arkeen usually grabs a quick bite to eat, either from the canteen downstairs in her office or when she gets time, after a quick shuttle ride to the local mall.

2pm to 5pm: "I'm either at my desk or running around trying to track people down. You can email people, call people but sometimes you just need to go and talk to them. The rest of the day can include scheduling meetings, chasing colleagues for confirmation and monitoring the

volunteer hotline number and email. It's constant, if you can imagine with 700 volunteers how many questions we get - my team is answering those at every point in the day."

Communicating in person is very important, especially since Arkeen describes the volunteer department as the "gate keepers to all of the departments at the ADFP. We have to suit everyone's needs".

6-9pm: Bianca tries to catch the first shuttle back so she can meet with her database assistant at the hotel to update new volunteer registrations or arrange outreach sessions to recruit new volunteers. When she finally does get home, she'll grab a bite to eat and relax by watching some TV.

9-11pm: "Recently, as the festival nears, I've been getting back on to my computer to finish up work and check emails. I really like to clear my inbox and categorise everything so that the next day I start fresh. My brain stops functioning around 11pm," she says with a laugh, so then it's off to bed.

Arkeen's routine however will change drastically once the festival starts. "During the festival you're in the trenches, you are just handling things as they come. Usually I am centrally located in my office so I can be a resource to volunteers who have questions or are checking in, but having said that, because there are three different venues I also try to make it to the other venues and check in if I have time.

"I always say it's like riding a unicycle and juggling at the same time because even though you have a set schedule, things can change. We have to deal with volunteers who don't show up and put out fires that inevitably arise.

"Most people, including myself, unfortunately will not have time to view the screenings during the festival. I've picked a handful of movies I'm looking forward to and I'll probably get to see two, three films if I'm lucky."

It's not all work, however. Arkeen says there are quite a few perks that come with working for a

film festival. In addition to catching a glimpse of celebrities (Bianca's seen Robin Williams, Matthew McConaughey and Jack Black), if there's an event or any red carpet galas she'd particularly like to attend, she can usually see if the department needs a hand and manage herself an invite. Not bad for a hard day's work.

Sawaiba Khan