

The Making of the Holiday Pizza Hut Commercial

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The other day we were watching TV and were pretty excited to see Malmark handbells featured in the latest Pizza Hut commercial. The ad itself is quite a production, with singers, a brass band, horses, fireworks and, front and center, a small handbell choir. Soon we found out that a friend of ours, Karen Eskew-Wyllie, and the Utah Valley Handbell Ringers were the ringers in the ad. She was kind enough to share their experiences filming the commercial with us.

Karen's story follows below and you can [watch the full ad here](#).

One day the phone rang and on the other end was yet another fun and interesting experience for my community bell choir. The voice on the line was a pleasant young man asking if I was the director of a handbell group and would I like to participate in a YouTube commercial for Pizza Hut. Would !! A chance for my humble little group to shine and to participate in a once in a lifetime experience, who could say no? My excitement grew as he explained the premise of the commercial. My disbelief also grew as he explained the number of people that would be involved in this creative endeavor. Gospel choirs, a brass band, a rock band, a horse drawn carriage and pyrotechnics, all done in a suburban setting and in secrecy. This is going to be something to be seen and experienced. So the planning began.

The young man I spoke with was David Thorpe, a freelance film producer, and the company putting together this cinematic masterpiece is a YouTube advertising group called ShareAbility. Together with the delightful young man that arranged the music, Josh Aker, a two-step plan was made to first record all the parts and then do the on-location filming. Getting volunteers from my handbell group was no problem. But little did they know all the work and the hours to which we were committing. My wonderful ringers volunteered their time, talent and energy. And as the fates would have it, the outdoor filming occurred on the coldest day of the year thus far.

Due to the large number of people recording we had to travel to a sound studio in Salt Lake City for our recording session. I had received the music days earlier and had immediately noted that it was obviously not written by someone familiar with handbells. Luckily working with Josh was great as I helped him with several re-writes. As much as I wanted to include the wonderful warmth of the bass, he was adamant that there were only to be 8 ringers with two bells each. So working within those limitations we learned our parts and recorded our sounds for the video.

The day of the filming we arrived at our staging area about two P.M. Luckily the day was clear but frigid with a slight wind. I had the forethought to provide my guys with chemical hand and foot warmers that hunters use, and I am so thankful that I did. The staging area was a large parking lot of a city park that had lots of room for all the people, horses, and equipment. Because the director already knew the layout of each house that we would "surprise", we knew where to approximately stand and wait until our cue. For the first few hours of rehearsal we only played "air



1 Sherilee Alford, Lissa Wall, Abby Bunn, Linda Chahal, Glen Hicks

bells" and if you watch the "making of" video you can see use waving our arms without bells. As more and more people arrived, the rehearsal came together beautifully, much to my amazement. I was also astounded to see just how many people it takes to put together such a production.

Watch the [making of video here](#).

The "surprise" element of the video was, in fact, real. According to the director, there was one person in each house that was aware of the duplicity but kept the fact of the upcoming onslaught from members of the families. The goal of this entire project was to get genuine responses from ordinary people experiencing extraordinary circumstances.

When the director deemed us ready we all piled into 2 school buses and were taken to our first shooting location. The setup for each location took a minimum of 30 minutes. Getting all those people, trucks and carriages took a tremendous amount of coordinating. My little ensemble was lucky because we were directly behind the principle singer, the pizza delivery person. Having this advantage allowed us to see the faces of surprise up close and personal. I have to laugh remembering the first house because the person answering the door could not get the rest of the family to come out! I could see into the house and saw them hiding behind corners seemingly afraid to come out to see what the ruckus was. Once we "started our performance" there was no way to stop it. So we had to film the first house twice. That meant resetting over 150 people, horses, wagons, flatbed truck and fireworks. Luckily the second time was just as fun and the looks on their faces just as genuine. Then we all bundled up in our busses, the horses and carriage put in their respective trailers and raced to the next filming location.

The second house was to be the biggest production. This time as well as all the singing, ringing and jolliness, there were "extras" to be added cheering and sharing pizza. In the commercial you see lots of Pizza Hut delivery cars pulling up filled with holiday cheer and wonderful pizza. After our "performance" we all shared pizza and milled around a bit as the film crew took random, unscripted pictures and even used a drone to take overhead pictures. The free pizza was the pay for all the "extras". Once again though we needed to do a second take because of the same issue, they couldn't get everyone to the door before it was over.

At last, running a couple of hours behind schedule, we arrived at the third house. By this time the magic of movie making had worn a bit thin. Though full of pizza, we were very cold and very tired. This time we stayed on the heated busses until the very last minute because after all, we were old pros at movie making by now. We were fortunate because this very large family all poured out as soon as we began. Once again it was wonderful to watch the expressions on their faces as each of the groups added to the growing sounds of yuletide cheer.



2 Sherilee Alford, Lissa Wall, Abby Bunn, Nicole Lopez, Amy Fussell, Josh Aker, Karen Eskew-Wyllie, Linda Chahal, Glen Hicks