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Up Close: Bluemont President and Founder Peter Dunning



By [Ryan Lytle](#)
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Peter Dunning is the president and founder of [Bluemont](#), a non-profit cultural and educational organization that he started in 1976.

In the early 1970s, Dunning, 65, a married father of three, moved to [Bear's Den](#) in Bluemont, where he lived for 30 years.

Dunning did not start Bluemont with the intent that it would grow into the non-profit organization it is today. His only goal was to share the feelings of community through cultural events with the people of Bluemont.

Today, Bluemont has provided over 8,900 cultural programs to more than three million families and friends.

Dunning sat down with LoudounExtra.com to discuss the mission of Bluemont, memorable moments over the years and the importance of feeling connected to your work.

Q: How did you end up in the Loudoun area?

A: Well I went to the University of Connecticut, majoring in English. During, I guess, my sophomore or junior year of college, President Kennedy was shot. It was my birthday. Anyone who lived during that time knows how

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terrible all of that was, and to watch on a television set just an act of terrible violence. At that time, his administration had started the Peace Corps, and that just seemed like the right thing to do. So I did that and came back. I then worked for a publishing company in New York City and then went to Texas to work for an oil company. It really wasn't what I wanted to do but my dad was in business so I tried it. I mean, I liked it, but it really wasn't what I wanted to do.

My dad was the one that really opened my horizons. Ever since I had been a toddler, he would always take me for walks. Even when we were fighting, we would go for long walks together. At this time, I was living down in Texas and I made a visit to New York to see my parents. He had this idea for me. He said, "You know what I think you should do. You should walk the Appalachian Trail and write about it." So, we sat down on a weekend, and looked up every publication that may be interested in publishing my stories. I spent six months hiking, and literally crawled off the Appalachian Trail. I wrote all of my articles and paid off my loans. But with freelance, I didn't see all the money right away so I spent a couple years in construction. One of the stories was read by a man on the [Appalachian Trail Conference](#), and he sent me a letter correcting some of my mistakes. We started a correspondence and I was eventually hired as the editor for the Appalachian Trail Conference. And this is how I found out about the Bear's Den in Bluemont.

Q: As the president and founder, tell us where the idea to start a non-profit cultural and educational organization came from. Why did you think that Loudoun could benefit from an organization like this?

A: I did not start out with the idea of starting a non-profit organization and building this coalition of communities. We started out wanting to run cultural events just in Bluemont. At my house at Bear's Den, we started doing occasional concerts. For a couple years that's how we did it, and there wasn't really any money involved. You know, then we started bringing in musicians for the concerts and wanted to pay them, but we didn't have any money. When we first started doing this, there were people who were dead-set against having any money involved. They thought it wasn't right. But then we figured if we wanted musicians to come on, we would have to pay them. We were really going to have to find some support to pay for it. We were going to need some level of organization and that's when we decided we would need to develop a non-profit organization. What happened was some of these events were just amazing. It was really alive, and we wanted to keep that high quality with affordability, and within the community.

Q: It's been over 30 years since this organization was created. What does this say about what Bluemont has been able to accomplish?

A: Well, a lot of things I guess you can say are good. Our mission is really speaking to a need that is here in the community. What we are doing is focused on providing on-going cultural programs in communities and giving communities an identity. It becomes part of the fabric of the community. This is all about bringing quality to a community that is affordable. On an external basis, it helps people relate to what kind of community this is. Between 40 and 60 percent of the people that come to the concert are not from that actual community. So you are basically introducing your community to other people. These concerts have a distinct feel to them. If you don't know anyone at the concert, you will feel like you are a part of it anyway. It's just that sense of community that you get at these events. One of the things that many people lack in their lives is a sense of community. Many people don't get to have that feeling of being a part of that and we try to offer it during our events.

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Q: Bluemont offers a school program called [Artists-In-Education](#). What does this type of program entail?

A: This program is Bluemont's largest and most significant program. The [summer concerts](#) are the most recognizable events because those are right out in the community and they are well-known. What is not known is that we do five or six school programs between every concert. They really speak essentially to our program: a wide variety of cultural programs. We work along with the schools to increase their cultural curriculums. Basically we have a program that brings these cultural events to the schools. We've been doing these longer than the summer concerts. One of my favorite memories from this program is when we brought this African dance and drum troop to all the schools in the area from Senegal. The guy that headed the troop was like a prince. I've never seen anything like this guy and he was a very wonderful performer, and his events were just so amazing. Years after that concert, I'd be in a grocery store and someone would be at the checkout counter and they would look at me and say, "I remember you. You're the guy that brought those African dancers." That was just really cool. What it also means is that by doing these programs, you are building a constituency with a value for these programs in the community. It's apparent that many people will stay in this county and they will bring their kids to these events. That's what we are trying to build.

Q: Bluemont also offers [Healthcare Outreach Programs](#) for nursing homes and hospitals. What is the goal of these programs?

A: The mission is still the same, but we're just widening it. We do not charge nursing homes or hospitals for these programs. Whenever we bring a performer to the area to perform, we make sure in their contract that they do a half-hour performance for a nursing home in the area. We've been doing that now for well over 20 years. If you go walk into one of these nursing homes, you have a sense of sadness and sickness. But all of a sudden, there's live music in the room and it becomes very, very moving because, during that period of time, these people just come

to life.

Q: What has motivated you most over the years to continue running this program?

A: Seriously, I don't think there's anything more important to strive and accomplish in anyone's life than to be connected to their work and being able to feel deep down and know that their work is worthwhile. I mean, you have to pay your bills, but I'm talking about being connected to what you do regardless how much you make. I've had the great blessing to be able to work for the past 40 years with something that I feel has been worthwhile. I work for a non-profit -- a struggling non-profit -- organization where, you know, the money isn't in it. I made more money when I was in my 20s at the oil company than I'll ever make in this. You have to be connected to your work. You're going to spend a good percentage of your life on work, making a living. I tell my kids, and I have three wonderful daughters, that you need to find something you want to do that will feed you spiritually. When you find it, all you have to do is figure out how to get paid for it.

Q: Tell us about one of your most memorable moments during your time with Bluemont.

A: There's a lot, but the shining moment was the moment I hired my now wife, Melissa, to come down and sing for some concerts. And six months later I was married, but it took all six months to convince her to marry me. We've been married now for 27 years and have three girls. It's been a real blessing to have worked with my family and they've all been part of the program. It was their choice to get involved and now they are all enthusiastically involved.

Q: When you're not working, what do you enjoy doing in the Loudoun area?

A: I have been involved in a number of organizations. In terms of professional work, I helped found the Loudoun Tourism Council. It's now the [Loudoun County Convention and Visitors Association](#) and it's a great organization to help economic growth through tourism. I'm proud to have received the Judy Patterson Award for my work with them. I have also been involved in a number of youth programs as well.

Q: What are the best ways for community members to support and be involved in the Bluemont organization?

A: Well I guess the standard, political response is that Bluemont is a volunteer-based membership organization and we would not be where we are without the incredible support we get from our volunteers and from our members. People can sign up and be a friend of Bluemont and that information is on our Web site, www.bluemont.org. We really try to work very hard at our volunteer program. It can be a really interesting experience for people wanting to volunteer. You can do it with your family or friends from work, or even as a company. We've had companies such as [Middleburg Bank](#) that have given their time and have been gracious donors over the years. So my question to you is, when are you going to come out to a Bluemont event?

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