



Realistic Fantasy: A local company created a fairyland on the Pittsburgh Steelers' field for a fundraiser.

Event Heaven

Party planners gather in L.A. for the first time since 1984

By **EMILY BRYSON YORK**
Staff Reporter

THERE wouldn't seem to be many similarities between rebuilding a hurricane-ravaged school in Mexico and recreating Frank Lloyd Wright's "Falling Water" on the Pittsburgh Steelers' practice field.

Both, however, are the work of Los Angeles events companies and both are nominated for "logistics" honors at the Special Events Magazine Awards.

The winners in that category and about 35 others will be announced at a Shrine Auditorium ceremony and gala on Friday. The honors will cap the Special Event Conference and Trade Show, which begins Tuesday at the Los Angeles Convention Center. It's the first time the event will be held in Los Angeles since 1984.

"This is *the* really big deal in our industry," said Marley Majcher, who will lead a session called "...But Are You Making Any Money?" as part of the proceedings, which also include break-outs, theme parties, coursework and a trade show. Majcher owns **The Party**

Goddess Inc. in Pasadena.

Andrea Michaels, whose company **Andrea Michaels Inc.**'s Extraordinary Events is coordinating the gala, describes it as a million-dollar event that's done for much less, because so many goods and services are donated. The awards will be interspersed with singing and dancing numbers. Gary Sinise, the Lieutenant Dan Band and flamenco guitarist Roni Benise top the bill.

Michaels said that, given their high standards, putting together an event for event planners is a stressful affair. Her 30-person company has been working on it for a full year.

"I want them to know that we're the best," said Michaels, who has won 29 Special Event awards over the years. She's nominated for six this year, but is proudest of talking a corporate client into making a team-building exercise out of rebuilding a school in Cancun. More than 300 executives worked with students, parents and teachers to lay cement, landscape, install plumbing and electrical wiring and haul books after a hurricane all but destroyed it.

The awards may not get the public's atten-

tion the way that the Academy Awards or Grammys do, but they are valued within the industry that often plays a major part in those kudos fests.

The categories include "best invitation," "best event for a corporation, budget over \$500,000" and "best wedding, budget under \$500 per guest."

When David Merrell, president of the company that owns **An Original Occasion**, won his first award after starting his 18-year-old company, he said he was still considered "kind of a rookie."

But when he beat out a number of seasoned vets for his first win, he said things really changed. He's won eight times since.

"It's not about whether we win or not, but the nomination itself is important because it sends a signal to the industry that we're still on top of our game," Merrell said.

Merrell is nominated in two categories this year, but is most proud of his firm's work on the "Falling Water" recreation, which helped raise money for cancer research and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.