

PROFILE

By the Numbers

Dr. Walter Klages reads the future of Lee County tourism in numbers...and people



by Chelle Koster Walton

I understood Dr. Walter Klages a little better after I watched Gwyneth Paltrow and Anthony Hopkins in the movie *Proof*. Like its math-tracked protagonists, Dr. Klages' mind works in patterns and numbers. And for him, all of life falls into the patterns and can be explained by the numbers.

So while many in the Lee County tourism world view him as some sort of soothsayer or guru, Klages' predictions of where the local economy is headed come not from a crystal ball or intuitive visions, but more likely from a computer...and surprisingly enough, from listening to people.

"I like people," he says, defying strict math-nerd typecasting. "In fact, I study people. They are more my business than anything else."

And what is that business? Where it

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applies to Lee County, Klages is in the business of tourism statistics. As founder and president of Data Research Services, Inc., a Tampa-based market research firm, he prepares monthly visitor profile reports for the Lee County Tourism Development Council (TDC). The reports tell the TDC how many visitors come to the area each month, where they come from, how they got here, what they did while here, how many room nights they account for, and how much money they spent in the county.

Recently, he prepared a Reader Profile Survey for *Times of the Islands* that identified this publication's readership in terms of age, income, and habits. Other clients range from

Tampa General Hospital and Walt Disney World to Pizza Hut and Lufthansa German Airlines. His Klages Group handles business litigation as well as market research. He loves the variety of it all. "It's eclectic, it's alive!" he proclaims in his distinguished European accent and in that vivacious way he makes statistics jump, jive, and tell the future.

Born to a German father and French mother in Eastern Europe and trained as an economist in Munich, Germany, Klages started his education in the fields of history and medicine. Then the Fulbright scholar fell for math, and then for a woman in Paris while an exchange student there. But his mother decided he needed to learn English, so off he went to

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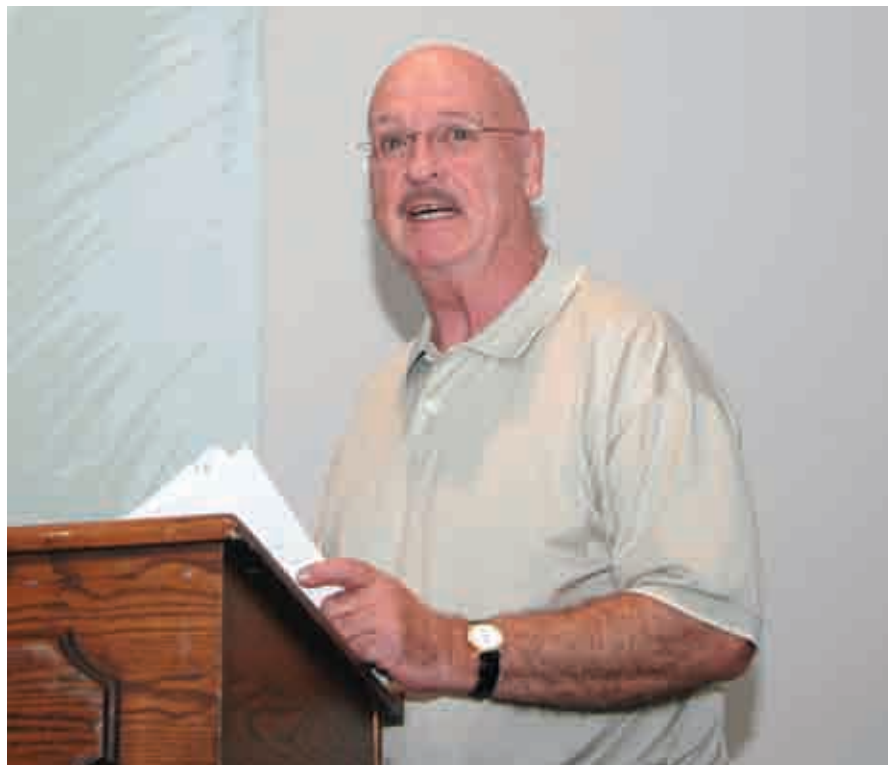
Southern Methodist University in Texas on a teaching fellowship, landing later at the University of Alabama, and then York University in Toronto. In the mid-'70s a friend lured him from the cold to Tampa, where he intended to stay for two years before returning to Toronto to continue teaching economics. Instead, he served as an assistant professor and later full professor at the University of Central Florida for ten years.

"After you've done that, what do you do?" Klages said. "I just didn't want to do it anymore; I'm too selfish. So in the interest of the students [I went another direction]... Now every day's different; I like that."

Klages' work keeps him on the road, which he regrets as it means leaving his wife and son, Jacob Alexandre, 13 years old. He travels to personally present his profile reports, and to do research, often talking face-to-face with tourists to look for trends and deduce stats. The bulk of his data comes from using a complex system he explains with incomprehensible terms (for me, anyway) such as key drivers, sample weight, potentials, and random selection. Oops, sorry I asked.

Back to the human side of Dr. Klages' persona, I discovered his love for scuba diving and his vision of where tourism is or should be headed in Lee County and beyond. Hurricanes, gas prices, and baby boomers drive much of what he foresees.

He has borrowed from the insurance industry the softer term "windy season" for the summer months, to try to allay the fear he senses. "There's nothing more prevalent today than fear," he says, shooting, as he does, straight from the hip. "People don't



Dr. Klages is passionate about scuba diving as well as his vision of where tourism is or should be heading in Lee County.

want to expose themselves to risk. People try to be risk-avoiders. It's really changing behaviors. Would you want to go somewhere where your vacation might be interrupted by a hurricane?" He admits he wouldn't be happy if a dive trip to Cozumel, his favorite dive destination, was called off because of a weather event.

As far as gas and traffic problems go, he bemoans the nation's inability to compete with European countries as far as public transportation efficiency. The baby boomer issue, however, doesn't so much pose problems as it does signal a need for awareness and adjustment.

"There's a new generation coming on, probably, for a lot of people, unexpected," Klages says. "They are picky, selective, never giving up, healthy, vibrant, and alive. The first group is swaying into retirement, which creates this metamorphosis. They are more likely to become year-round residents... They are not staying in hotels."

These are the issues tourism officials must face head-on with solutions, according to Klages. How does he know?

"To me it's all in the map," he answers. "Research is just filling in the gaps. I deal with facts, which are alive to me. Numbers live; digital reflections of what's going on in every facet of life. I wouldn't do what I'm doing if I didn't think there's life behind that. Of course there is!"

Dr. Klages' is an orderly world. The tagline on his home page at www.KlagesGroup.com reads "Apply Knowledge and Make the Right Decision." You want your life to be that simple and tidy? Just make like Dr. Walter Klages and do the math. 🐘

Chelle Koster Walton, unlike Walter Klages, is totally right-brained. As Times of the Islands travel editor and contributor to several travel publications nationwide, she does, however, pay close attention to his forecasts.

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