

Rancho Mirage Writers Festival to become weekend event

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Rancho Mirage Mayor Dana Hobert, David Bryant, Jamie Kabler at last month's Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. Gregg Felsen/Special To The Desert Sun

The Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, which has sold out its last two events more than six months in advance, will offer fewer passes to its January 2017 event.

But it will add a hotel space and move it to a weekend to make it more accessible to younger working people.

Festival founder Jamie Kabler said Wednesday the festival will move back one week to Jan. 28-29 – one week after the Career Builder Challenge and one week before the Super Bowl. It also will add the Omni Rancho Las Palmas Resort & Spa as a venue in addition to the Rancho Mirage Public Library. But it won't have a Thursday night opening, as it has had the past three years.

And because the festival is moving into a hotel ballroom, two-day passes will cost \$400 per "reader" (as it calls its attendees), instead of \$250 for two days and three nights.

By comparison, the Sun Valley Writers Conference in Idaho, which Kabler has long attended, costs \$950 for four days, including daily lunches and continental breakfasts. Both events feature talks and book-signings by internationally known authors.

"The reaction of a lot of the people we surveyed was two nights and two days was plenty," said Kabler, "and the increase in price is directly related to moving to a hotel, which is costing us about \$150 a person. You have to guarantee rooms, catering, it's a whole package.

"The three nights was too much. By the third night, we lost half of our readers. Our first night, we had 887 show up. By the last night, we lost about half of that. They said they were worn out by the daytime and the evening (programs). So we felt it would be easier for our readers to have two nights and two full days."

Rancho Mirage Writers Fest stimulates smart dialogues

More than 900 mostly older people attended last month's festival, but Kabler said next year's event will attract more young people because of the convenience of the schedule and a grant from snowbirds Raymond and Jeannette Galante, who are funding a Scholars Program to provide passes for Coachella Valley teachers and their top students. The festival has invited students in the past, but often had to get them out of school to attend.

"By having the festival on the weekend, we felt this should be a major initiative," Kabler said. "Having the weekend means that people from out of town as well as local residents can attend."

Kabler said he and his nonprofit board, including city and library leaders, are looking into having single-day and/or single event tickets.

"We're still fine tuning it," he said. "But I think we have a good format. We know we have a good program. We want to eliminate the lines and overflow rooms, and we're going to ask our most popular panels to repeat themselves so that every reader has a chance to hear them. We're going to work on the schedule so everybody gets a chance to hear our most popular writers."

Passes for the 2017 festival go on sale March 1. Information: rmwritersfest.org