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How Prince Waikiki is approaching workforce development

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Even before the Covid-19 pandemic and related labor challenges hit, the hospitality industry for years has been grappling with the question of how to attract and retain its workforce.

In an effort to combat those challenges, Prince Resorts Hawaii has created a pipeline of workforce development initiatives that aim to bolster industry interest among the next generation of employees.

The company launched a monthly job shadowing program at Prince Waikiki for high schoolers in 2018 as a way to give students a first-hand look at what it's like to work at a hotel. Last year, it expanded the efforts with a program called Junior Ambassadors, led by two long-time managers: Rod Suzumoto, director of property operations for Prince Waikiki, and Shirley Lau Chan, director of human resources for Prince Waikiki.



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Prince Waikiki

“The hotel staffs are aging in Hawaii and not enough is being done to train and mentor younger people who want to have a career in hospitality,” said Lau Chan, who has been working at Prince Waikiki since 2003. “This is our way of helping to build for the future in our industry, while providing opportunities for those high school graduates who want to stay in Hawaii with a good-paying job.”

“Too many of our young, talented people are moving out of state because they can’t find a job here,” added Suzumoto, who started at Prince Waikiki in 1990. “We’re hoping we can help to reverse that trend and help those who might think they aren’t qualified to work at a luxury hotel to feel comfortable and confident here.”

Lau Chan told PBN that the Junior Ambassador program grew out of the student job shadowing offering when they realized that recent high school graduates interested in the industry could also benefit from a similar education.

“Not all kids want to go to college, so we thought, hey, why not develop a program where they can actually have a career in hospitality even if they decide not to pursue a [college] education,” Lau Chan said. “The Junior program was a steppingstone because we thought it would be hard for an 18-year-old with no work experience to jump into a regular position.”

The Junior Ambassador program provides hands-on training across various departments. It’s a paid position — each Junior Ambassador is hired as an on-call part-time staffer.

Beyond hospitality, the program also features educational sessions geared toward general career and life skills, such as resume writing and interviewing for a job.

“It [allows] the students to have a deeper dive and a true experience of the department and roles while building confidence and lasting relationships with the employees,” Lau Chan said.

Lau Chan also noted that many high school students might not know yet what they want to do in the future — and she hopes that these initiatives can help them find some direction.

“We hope through this program, we can educate the students at a younger age, introduce the hospitality industry and provide them

with better insight of the different career opportunities they can find at a hotel,” she said.

While the Junior Ambassador program targets recent graduates, Suzumoto noted that it’s not exclusive to that group — it can be “open to anyone who does not have the work experience, but has the sincere passion to learn.”

“Our Junior Ambassador program focuses on the qualities of being a good employee. Dedication, reliability, safety, teamwork, self-awareness and the passion to learn are the main values we share to set them up for success,” he said.

The mentorship initiatives are currently ongoing at Prince Waikiki, but the company said it plans to launch similar programs at its Hawaii Island properties — the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel and the Westin Hapuna Beach Resort — next year.

The efforts have led to direct hires at the hotel.

Lau Chan said that as one example, a student joined the job shadowing program when he was a junior in high school, and was hired as a Junior Ambassador after graduation. Now, he’s been promoted to a permanent position in the maintenance department.

Lau Chan and Suzumoto acknowledge that they spend extra hours running the program, but to them, it’s worth it.

“Someone gave all of us an opportunity at the start of our career and even though we may have not had the knowledge and experience, they believed in us and gave us the opportunity to learn. We want to provide the same opportunities and guidance to make a positive difference in the students’ lives,” Suzumoto said.

Plus, Lau Chan said, it’s also about helping to sustain the industry at large.

“The hospitality industry isn’t easy — it is very hard and demanding as it is a 365-day operation. Many are moving away from the hotel industry due to its high demand, physical requirements, etc. We feel that students can gain a better understanding of the industry if they are given more exposure [of] hotel sites, hotel jobs, [and] real life stories of career paths and how rewarding hotel jobs can be.”

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