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Happy Valley Hospitality Awards recognize excellence in service and leadership

Five local individuals received inaugural HVAB honors

STATE COLLEGE, Pa – Nov. 10, 2022 - The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau (HVAB) announced the honorees of the inaugural Happy Valley Hospitality Awards at its annual event on Thursday, Nov. 10. Before an audience of nearly 150 hospitality, university, business and government leaders, five individuals were recognized for excellence in hospitality leadership and service.

“After the challenges our hospitality businesses faced during the pandemic, and with continued labor and supply chain hurdles, we feel there is no better time than now to celebrate the dedicated, hard-working individuals driving Happy Valley hospitality,” said HVAB President and CEO Fritz Smith. “It is something we have wanted to do for quite some time, but reinforcing the value of our hospitality workers – true frontline tourism ambassadors – holds even greater meaning now.”

The awards are a component of a comprehensive campaign launched in summer 2022 to recognize and appreciate hospitality workers. In October, nominations opened in five categories: Food & Beverage Excellence in Service; Food & Beverage Excellence in Leadership; Lodging Excellence in Service; Lodging Excellence in Leadership; and the Peter J. Walker Spirit of Hospitality Award.

Smith said the Spirit of Hospitality Award is in memory of Pete Walker, who served for 50 years as manager of Penn’s Cave & Wildlife Park, and who passed away unexpectedly earlier this year. This award honors the individual who exemplifies the traits that Walker brought to his role: leading by example with an incomparable work ethic; a commitment to serving others; leaving a positive impact on those around him; and being an enthusiastic ambassador for Happy Valley.

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2022 Happy Valley Hospitality Award recipients:

Excellence in Service, Food & Beverage - Judy Karaky, General Manager, Penn Stater Hotel & Conference Center

Karaky has been with the Penn Stater for 20 years. Peers acknowledge her as the “glue that helped hold the hotel together during the pandemic,” taking great care in providing visitors with a wonderful experience. Following the announcement of the sale of the hotel earlier this year and the subsequent departure of some staff, Karaky stepped up to work with upper management to consider solutions to the resulting strain on the hotel’s ability to service customers. Leading by example, she was and is a leader everyone wanted and wants to help.

“I am incredibly honored to be nominated by my peers for this award. Every single one of my co-workers know that I would not be successful in this position without their dedication, high standards, focus on service, flexibility, passion, teamwork, grit, and sense of humor,” Karaky said. “I am accepting this award for our entire team, because it’s been as a team that we’ve provided consistent and memorable hospitality despite the challenges we continually face.”

Excellence in Leadership, Food & Beverage - Kieran Kempton, Bar Manager, Olde New York

Kempton has worked in hospitality almost his entire life. His father owned the historic Bush House in Bellefonte, and Kieran began selling soft pretzels when he was just 5 years old. Now with 15 years at the family’s restaurant, Olde New York, Kempton has a true passion for customers, staff and the products he provides to others. It has been said, “Walking into Olde New York is more like walking into your neighbor’s house rather than into a bar, and Kieran’s leadership has a lot to do with that.” He treats his employees like family as well.

Excellence in Service: Lodging – Michael Houser, Guest Relations Manager, Comfort Suites

Houser has a dedication and passion to serve others, and going beyond in the process. The Comfort Suites was the frequent hotel home for Connecticut parents during the time their daughter was a Penn State student. He made their four years “the most amazing time,” with memories they will cherish forever. These are their words, “We have told everyone we know about Michael and what an amazing young professional he is. We have stayed at many hotels around the world and some amazing places, but never have we met anyone that can fill Michael’s shoes.”

Houser expressed gratitude for those who observed his hard work and dedication to Happy Valley’s hospitality industry.

“I really appreciate this award-giving system as it helps us to know our value, and work more energetically,” he said.

Excellence in Leadership, Lodging – Lyndsey Greenland, General Manager, Rolling Rails Lodge

Lyndsey handles being a mom of three and growing a wedding and event venue from the ground up. Through a lot of sacrifice, she helped the business survive a very tough time during the pandemic while raising her children, who were at home doing online studies. She did so with grace and compassion for her clients, who were so uncertain of what their big day looked like that they never blinked. Despite the stress that was often visible to her family, her clients saw nothing but an assuring professional who did not let anything get in the way of providing the best experience.

"I am so incredibly honored to be recognized alongside this wonderful group of hospitality professionals," Greenland said. "I share this award with my family; Gerald and Kelly Greenland, my husband, Shaun, and our three beautiful kiddos. It is a total team effort in our small family business. We have met so many incredible people along the way and it means the world to us that we can share in the excitement and joy of their special days. I truly believe that every interaction you have is an opportunity to make a positive impact, it doesn't matter how big or how small as long as it's positive, I hope I'm able to do that."

Pete Walker Spirit of Hospitality – Pat Romano, Jr., owner/chef, The We Are Inn

A "hands-on" owner, Romano treats guests like family, and dedicates his time to running the Inn with his wife, as well as creating a delicious menu for customers. He enjoys not just giving visitors a place to stay, but interacting with them and making The We Are Inn feel like a community. True friendliness, a passion for Penn State, and memorabilia reflecting the history of Penn State can be found at the We Are Inn, and more so through Pat's stories and genuine friendship to everyone he meets. A charitable member of the community, Pat often prepares and donates food for local charity golf events, and hosts free tailgates for anyone staying at the motel on Penn State football weekends.

"I am honored to have my name mentioned in the same sentence as Peter Walker, and I am truly humbled by this recognition," Romano said. "The spirit of hospitality is really a culture fostered across a team. My team includes my wife, Jennifer, our five children, and all of our staff at The We Are Inn. We work together to achieve goals, and we share the spirit of hospitality."

Romano said it is also important to recognize the many guests and patrons who support the hospitality industry in Centre County.

"We would not be here without them," he said.

Smith said the Board and team of The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau are proud of the contributions of this year's honorees, and of the contributions of the entire Happy Valley hospitality community.

"Through the hospitality campaign itself and the awards nomination process, it is clear that Centre County has some truly amazing people driving our hospitality industry," he said. "We look forward to honoring some of these individuals each year, and encourage residents and visitors to get to know their stories."

For more inspiring profiles in Happy Valley Hospitality, visit Dispatch.Happyvalley.com/happy-valley-hospitality.

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