

Catering at the Pontch is anything but 9 to 5

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Four years ago, all Jan Johnson knew about hotels was that you sleep in them while vacationing.

Today, she is director of catering for the posh Pontchartrain in downtown Detroit. From that and earlier experiences in Southfield, she is very aware of many different facets of the hotel business.

"Most people don't realize how much goes on in a hotel," said Johnson, who quickly moved up in the competitive business.

"Every day is different. You don't have time to get bored."

AS PONTCHARTRAIN'S director of catering, Johnson works with groups holding lunches, dinners or meetings in the elegant hotel on Jefferson at Washington-Boulevard.

That could mean planning an eight person VIP dinner, a day-long business meeting, or a party for 350 in the gilded Versailles Ballroom.

It's a job that's different every day with weddings and reunions in the summer, spring and fall conventions, and holiday parties this time of the year. And there's no such thing as a nine to five shift when you're overseeing three and four events at a time. "Sometimes it's eight hours, sometimes 15. If I'm needed I stay," said Johnson.

"Then I go home and collapse."

A GRADUATE of Western High School in Detroit, Johnson studied business administration at Henry Ford Community College.



DAN DEAN/WAFT photographs

Pontchartrain Hotel director of catering Jan Johnson works closely with the kitchen staff.

She got into the hotel business "quite by accident" four years ago after answering an ad for a sales secretary at the St. Regis Hotel. Previously, she worked as an office manager for the Posidon Co., Redford.

At St. Regis during its renovation, she moved up in six months to sales assistant working on room and banquet sales. "My heart went to the catering

side," said Johnson, who gets great satisfaction from working with people.

While at the European-managed hotel, she also learned the value of personal service to customers. "The attitude here was 'Let's do something for the people.'"

AFTER TWO YEARS, she became catering coordinator at the Hamada

Inn, Southfield. Named "employee of the month," she also lived through a hotel fire.

Johnson was catering manager at the Holiday Inn in Southfield for a year before arriving at the Pontchartrain seven weeks ago. In a month she moved up from catering sales manager to director of catering.

"It's all been just experience - going in and doing it," she reflected on her quick rise in the business.

"And I'm doing something I really love."

A DOWN-TO-EARTH person who likes to be on a first name basis with customers, Johnson works closely with them while planning parties.

There is always a "walk-through" to check preparations. And a follow up call the next morning to see how things went.

"I check on clients several times. They know I'm there," she said firmly.

She prides herself on "professional, personalized service." Working with the Pontchartrain's new executive chef Mark Kuzma, the catering director aims for a menu and decorations that will exactly suit the customer's needs.

A big part of her job is bringing in new business. To attract customers, she has several parties planned around themes like the Mardi Gras and Hawaiian Luau.

She also works on special events, like the upcoming New Year's Eve festivities. For the gala evening, there will be special dinners and brunches to plan.

"We customize each party," explained Johnson. "If the customer

doesn't like what's on our menu, we ask what they want.

"As a lot of hotels, you are there - that's it. You go once, but you don't go again. We're after repeat business."

IN DAILY STAFF meetings, Johnson coordinates her work with all the many departments which she depends on each day. Between 600 and 700 employees work at the Pontchartrain in areas as diverse as housekeeping, florist, audio visual, room service and parking.

"I'm not working by myself," explained Johnson, who sees the 425-room establishment as a "warm, family-type hotel" where people cooperate to get things done.

"People walk in and see the table set and the waitresses scurrying around. They don't know that it takes two to three hours to set the room for a party," she said.

"To everyone else it's smooth, but we're really got to work hard to get it there."

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OU group works on Herpes relief

Permanent relief from Herpes I and II, the venereal diseases, seems hopeful through a new treatment under study by Oakland University researchers.

The treatment has already proven effective against Herpes I (most often a nagging, recurring cold sore). The research team has applied for a government patent covering topical application of the product.

The participants have incorporated as Delta Metals Inc., and have a won a six-month, small business Innovation Research Award to complete testing.

Company members are R. Craig Taylor and Parbury P. Schmidt, OU chemists, and Sarah G. Ward, an OU biology graduate and former student of Taylor's. Ward has combined her interest in biology and chemistry and been a research associate on the project for about four years.

THEY FORMED Delta Metals, Inc. in 1983 to qualify for the nearly \$50,000 small business award made by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The grant is to complete a feasibility study for the product.

They will then apply for a Phase II grant for marketing and commercial application.

Taylor said the treatment is centered on cisplatin, a platinum-based compound. Its anti-cancer properties were discovered by Professor B. Rosenberg of Michigan State University in 1969. Cisplatin has proven to be effective against a wide range of human tumors. On the market for just over a decade, it is already the largest selling anti-cancer drug in the United States.

In the late 1970s, Taylor became interested in the interaction between cisplatin and the DNA molecule, the building block of the cell. He and Sarah Ward studied this interaction, using nuclear magnetic resonance equipment just purchased by the university on a grant from the Matilda R. Wilson Foundation.

They found that cisplatin attacks the DNA molecule, and that the target site was (N-7 on guanine), a base present in all DNA.

TAYLOR AND his research associates then turned their attention to Herpes simplex virus. It is widely present in humans with no known cure, and it appeared linked to their previous research. Taylor said the DNA base content of Herpes sim-

plex virus is about 66 to 68 percent guanine, an cytosine (G & C), while normal human DNA has a (G & C) content of only about 40 percent.

It appeared reasonable, they felt, that a Herpes treatment could be developed capitalizing on cisplatin's normal disposition to attack guanine in the DNA.

Preliminary tests have shown that the new treatment is not only very effective against Herpes I, but appears to stop recurrent outbreaks of the virus, something that is very common.

ADDITIONAL TESTS are being performed on Herpes I and II in laboratory cultures.

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