

Catering job at Pontch offers different challenge every day

By Kathy Parriah
staff writer

Four years ago, all Jan Johnson knew about hotels was that you sleep in them while vacationing. Today, the Redford Township resident is director of catering for the posh Pontchartrain in downtown Detroit. And she's 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 serving 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.

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 Company, 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 Ramada 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 "EARTH" person who likes to be on a first name basis with customers, Johnson works closely with them while planning parties.



Don Deen/staff photographer

Jan Johnson, director of catering for the Pontchartrain Hotel, works closely with

new executive chef Mark Kuzma, on party preparations.

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."

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

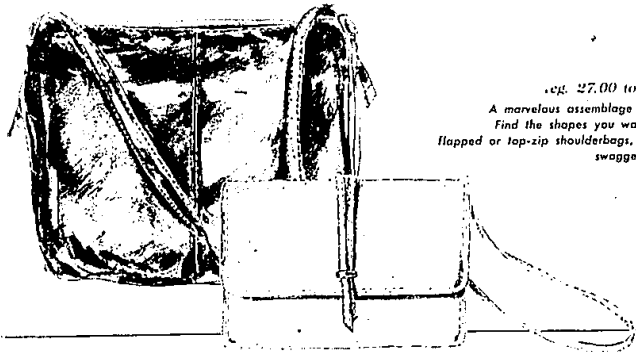
IN DAILY STAFF meetings, Johnson coordinates her work with all the many departments which she depends on each day. Between 600 and 700 employees work at the Pontchartrain in areas as diverse as housekeeping, florist, audio visual, room service and parking.

"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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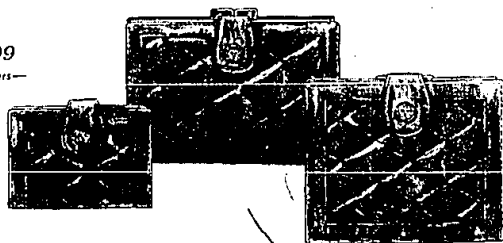
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