

Here to Serve

While troops are doing their duty at home and abroad, some Choice hotels are doing theirs

BY ROB HEYMAN

No one can deny that running a hotel is, first and foremost, a business, but to be truly successful and make a positive and lasting impression with guests often means going the extra mile when it comes to service and amenities.

Every year, many Choice hotels across the country go above and beyond basic lodging service by becoming actively involved in their local communities, donating to regional charities and showing support for those in need. This is especially true for hotels located in communities with active military bases, where there's a strong need for extra living facilities and other services for visiting or training soldiers as well as their families.

Many of the hotels that support their local military say they do so not strictly because of the business benefit, but because it's the right thing to do. Some also see it as their duty.

Traci Hackley is the general manager for the **Comfort Inn Prince George** in Prince George, Va., which is located about a quarter of a mile from the Fort Lee U.S. Army base. She says it's not uncommon for military personnel working or training at the base to stay at her hotel for extended periods of time, especially if there aren't enough living units available on the base.

"I have soldiers that stay with us three and four months at a time. We had soldiers that were with us for a year," says Hackley, who's been general manager of the hotel for five years.

"We had a lot of them that chose to stay with us because they liked the hotel. Some brought families down with them every now and then on the weekend, and to be honest with you, they were spoiled-rotten," she adds jokingly. "They really were—they become like your family when they stay with you that long."

Before serving as GM for the hotel, she worked as a victim's rights advocate for the nearby Hopewell police department and bartended at the hotel part-time. She noticed that the community was limited in the shelter it could provide for victims of crime. She says she spoke to the hotel owner about it, who was willing to house the victims there for a discounted rate—a service, she says, that she continues to this day as general manager.

over to my house because they weren't able to go home. The staff has done that many times," she says. "When they're with you that long, they have to get out of the hotel. You get to know them real well and you get to know their families when they come to visit."

Hackley says several hotel staff members have served in the military themselves, which has proved helpful. "One of my front desk workers helped one of them study for

special accommodations for the soldiers' families.

"Fort Dix tends to pull in the military from the four- or five-state area to transport them overseas, and when that happens, we do get quite a few army families coming through to visit before they're deployed or when they come back," he explains. "We've set up a special rate with them ... giving them some 20 percent off their bills to try to help them through their hard times. We try to make sure they have everything they need."

The Quality Inn hotel is also actively involved in the local community. For example, Peraria says the hotel donates 50 cents of the money received per rented room to charities in the area. Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the hotel has made donations to the liberty fund of 108th to help support the families of fighting soldiers deployed overseas and to a fund set up by American Airlines on behalf of Ed States, who was the captain aboard American Airlines Flight 587, which crashed in Queens, N.Y., on Nov. 12, 2001. States lived in Plainsboro, N.J.

Peraria says the hotel has also sponsored and fully funded the last three of its township's National Nights Out, a community safety awareness festival sponsored by the National Association of Town Watch. It has also donated unused hotel furniture for use by HomeFront, a Lawrenceville, N.J.-based organization that helps provide affordable housing for the homeless.

"As a company we're always looking for a worthwhile charity to donate to," he says. "We also sponsored a Veteran's Day function for one of the schools in [nearby] Jackson Township; it was called Run for the Vets. They were raising money and collecting canned goods to ship overseas to the troops, so we were very proud to do that as well."

For its good will and work with local charities, the hotel has been recognized by the Jackson Township Chamber of Commerce as a Business of the Year.

"It was a nice event. We were the only Choice property to win their Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year," he comments. "We were really ecstatic to win it because we're not really a part of Jackson Township, which made the honor more prestigious for us because we're actually a couple towns over."

As far as military assistance goes, he says, "We've worked so hard to help the bases,



Alex Stamoutsos/Black Diamond Photography

The Cookstown Quality Inn (NJ114) has been repeatedly honored for its unwavering dedication to helping and supporting its community as well as the local military and its families.

"Only one time in my five years [as general manager] did I have to turn [a victim] away because we didn't have the availability. Agencies will call and ask if we have a room available. The Red Cross uses us. The police department uses us. Fort Lee uses us, so it's a very good working relationship with the community."

Hackley says she often hosts holiday dinners at her home and barbecues for soldiers staying at her hotel, especially those who cannot leave or don't have transportation to go off site.

"This past Christmas, I had three soldiers

an exam because he came out of his room and set up in the lobby and studied," says Hackley.

The Cookstown N.J. Quality Inn's general manager, Ed Peraria, says holiday donations are a normal part of the hotel's service to military personnel stationed at nearby McGuire Air Force Base and Fort Dix United States Army installation. McGuire is home to the 305th Air Mobility Wing and also hosts the 108th Air Refueling Wing.

"Every year we donate 25 to 30 [holiday] turkeys to the First Sergeants' Association with the 108th," Peraria says. "We distribute to the men who can't afford to buy turkeys on their own. That's been a working thing we've done since practically day one."

Peraria, who's been with the Quality Inn hotel since 1999, says the hotel also makes

help the men that are deployed. We just do anything in our power to help out where we can.”

“It’s the right thing to do. Our partnership group feels that we need to be involved with the community and help out, and the Air Force Base is a big part of this community,” he says.

Dave Spain, owner of the **Comfort Inn & Suites hotel in Cocoa Beach, Fla.**, also feels that the service he and his hotel have given to the local military, as well as the overall community, has been the right thing to do.

Spain, whose hotel is located several miles from Patrick Air Force Base and Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, chairs the Civilian Military Foundation (also known as CivMil), which is the fundraising group for the Civilian Military Community Relations Council. The council is made up of 250 regional civilian representatives and 30 to 40 military personnel.

“The purpose of the foundation is [largely]



dedicated to either active-duty military or their spouses or their dependents,” Spain explains. “Right now, for instance, the average American sees an honor guard at a military retiree’s funeral and they think that person is assigned that job and that’s what they do. In actual fact, while they are active-duty mil-

itary people, they’re doing it on their own time; they have other jobs and they volunteer to do that.”

“When they volunteer, it doesn’t come with a bunch of money to pay for additional haircuts and dry cleaning,” Spain adds. “The honor guard ends up having to get a haircut each week. One of the things we’ve been doing for years is funding their extra haircuts. We also help with their dry cleaning.”

Additionally, the Comfort Inn & Suites hotel’s director of sales, Michelle Martindale, serves as member of the Cocoa Beach Chamber of Commerce’s Military Affairs Council, an organization that Spain founded in 1983 to work with enlisted officers in ranks ranging from E-1 to lieutenant and captain. Earlier this year the council held a White Elephant auction at the hotel as a fundraiser for the council. The proceeds help the council hold picnics, holiday parties and other events to bring the military and civilian community together.

“There are a lot of enlisted troops that can’t afford to go to dinners,” Spain says. “This helps the military pay for lower-rank personnel to go to social functions.”

Spain, who is originally from Richmond, Va., and moved to Florida in 1972, says he’s always had a strong connection to the military.

“All of my life, I’ve had military people who



(above) The Comfort Inn Prince George (VA430) is a popular location for military personnel to stay during training at nearby Fort Lee U.S. Army base.

(left) Dave Spain, owner of the Comfort Inn & Suites in Cocoa Beach, Fla. (FL521), accepts a plaque from the 920th Rescue Wing in appreciation of the Civilian Military Foundation’s support of the Wing.

were my friends growing up. I grew up in between Fort Lee and the Defense General Supply Center, so I went to school with a lot of kids whose parents were in the military," he says.

As for those who serve in the military, Spain says, "It's something that's very necessary and it goes to the heart of why I've been able to do what I've been able to do—because we have a military that keeps us free. The military has been good to this community, and it's been good to me."

"The way that we [as a staff] see it is, their lives have been put on hold, ours have not," says Hackley. "We feel the need to want to make it as comfortable for them as possible."

She adds, "Some of these folks, especially those we've had for a year, they have children that have gone on to college that they haven't seen. We've got kids that don't even look wet behind the ears when they are leaving us; they're going to Iraq. And from a mother's standpoint, that just breaks my heart because I can see that they're scared

and I can see that that's not what they want to do, but they feel a duty to do it."

Hackley gives considerable credit to the owner for the great response the hotel has received from the military concerning accommodations.

help keep the soldiers entertained. "A lot of them do come without vehicles, so he has really tried to provide as much as he can for them."

"When the soldiers come in, at first they're not used to coming into a hotel and

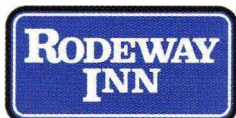
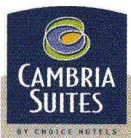
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– Traci Hackley, general manager, Comfort Inn Prince George

"The owner has been very accommodating in trying to help them in whatever their needs are," she says. "He spent thousands and thousands of dollars getting extra things for their rooms so they would be comfortable."

For example, Hackley says the owner has "beefed up" the technology in the rooms and installed new TVs in the restaurant to

being greeted every single day by first names," Hackley says. "Our staff makes it a point to do that. At first they come in very quiet, then they start opening up, then you find out what their needs are. That's when I start communicating with the owner—this is what they're asking for, this is what their needs are. He is very willing to provide for that." ★



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