



NCRLA

Stars of the Industry

AWARD NOMINATIONS

February 23, 2026

Sheraton Imperial Hotel RDU

Durham, NC



About

The Stars of the Industry awards gala celebrates hospitality employees at all levels who excel in service, leadership, and innovation—contributing to the industry's positive image. The gala brings together 300+ hospitality professionals and kicks off with a reception featuring emerging food and beverage trends, followed by a formal awards ceremony.

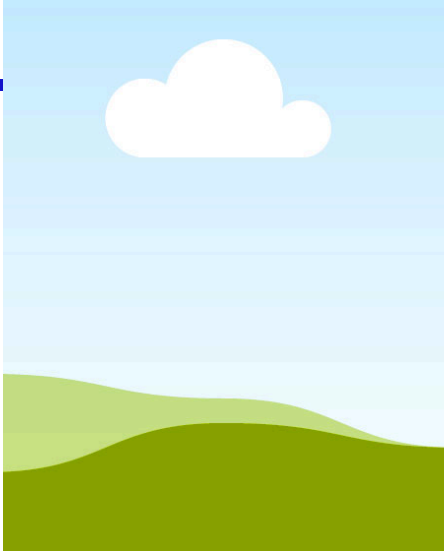


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Stars of the Industry 2026

Nominee:	Daniel McCallum
Employer:	Hampton Inn Tunnel Road
Title:	Guest Service Agent
Location:	Asheville
Nominator:	Jessica Bell
Employer:	Hampton Inn Tunnel Road
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Daniel’s impact is defined by a consistent pursuit of excellence and a genuine commitment to elevating every guest interaction. He is widely recognized as someone who sets the standard for hospitality within his department and across the hotel. His influence reaches well beyond his assigned responsibilities, shaping both the guest experience and the culture of service among his colleagues.

Daniel is known for his positive attitude and readiness to step in wherever support is needed. Guests frequently benefit from his thoughtful dining recommendations and local insights, which help create personalized, memorable stays. He approaches each shift with professionalism and warmth, arriving prepared and greeting everyone with “a warm smile and a kind word,” a detail repeatedly noted by those who work alongside him.

One of Daniel’s most defining qualities is his unwavering commitment to proactive service. He anticipates guest needs before they are voiced and identifies potential issues before they escalate, ensuring smooth operations and exceptional experiences. This approach is reflected clearly in guest feedback. Daniel is mentioned “day after day and week after week” in post-stay surveys and online reviews, with guests consistently praising his personalized attention and ability to exceed expectations.

His recognition among guests has reached what colleagues describe as “celebrity-level,” driven by the sheer volume and consistency of positive reviews that mention him by name. These testimonials highlight not just great service, but the lasting impression Daniel leaves on guests. Through attentiveness, anticipation, and authentic care, Daniel exemplifies hospitality at its highest level and is a truly deserving candidate for recognition.

Nominee:	Charissa Wright
Employer:	Homewood Suites by Hilton Asheville/Tunnel Road
Title:	Guest Services Representative
Location:	Asheville
Nominator:	Troy Ferguson
Employer:	Homewood Suites by Hilton Asheville/Tunnel Road
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Charissa’s impact is defined by unwavering dedication, genuine care for guests, and an ability to turn everyday interactions into meaningful connections. Over the past year and a half, she has established herself as a true standout, consistently showing up with professionalism, warmth, and a deep commitment to the guest experience.

Her dedication was especially evident following a severe storm in the area. Despite experiencing flooding where she lived, Charissa still came to work so the hotel could continue serving guests. That decision reflects her sense of responsibility and selflessness, qualities that set her apart as a hospitality professional.

Charissa excels at creating personal, memorable experiences. She takes the time to learn what guests love, remembers their names, and checks in on their stay throughout the week. Guests regularly ask for her by name, even on her days off, a testament to the trust and connection she builds. Her care extends to guests’ pets as well, further reinforcing the sense that everyone is truly welcome. As one nominator shared, she can greet a guest at check-in and later, days afterward, recognize them across the lobby by name and ask how their stay is going.

She is equally respected by her colleagues. Charissa often takes the lead on guest recognition programs and is eager to teach teammates what it takes to deliver on the hotel’s service promise. When the need arose to recognize long-term guests, she volunteered, developed the collateral, selected rewards, and fully implemented the program within a week. Her ability to see a need, take ownership, and follow through is repeatedly highlighted as one of her greatest strengths.

Charissa’s smile, positivity, and drive brighten the hotel each day. She is known as someone who “gets things done” while remaining a favorite among guests and teammates alike. Through dedication, initiative, and heartfelt service, Charissa embodies the spirit of hospitality and is deeply deserving of recognition.



Nominee:	Noel Jennings
Employer:	Hyatt Place Durham Southpoint
Title:	Guest Host
Location:	Durham
Nominator:	Matt Smith
Employer:	Hyatt Place Durham Southpoint
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Noel’s impact is overwhelmingly reflected in the voices of the guests he serves, whose comments paint a clear picture of an associate who consistently defines excellence in hospitality. Across dozens of reviews, guests repeatedly single Noel out by name, crediting him as the reason their stay felt welcoming, seamless, and genuinely cared for.

Guests describe Noel as attentive, compassionate, and proactive, often noting that he goes far beyond standard expectations. One guest shared, “Noel at the front desk went above and beyond to help make our stay special,” while another wrote, “Noel provided the highest level of service—truly one of the best check-in experiences I’ve had.” Many guests emphasize that Noel’s warmth and professionalism set the tone for their entire visit, with one noting, “Noel was my first and final point of contact. Thanks for having such a great person on the team.”

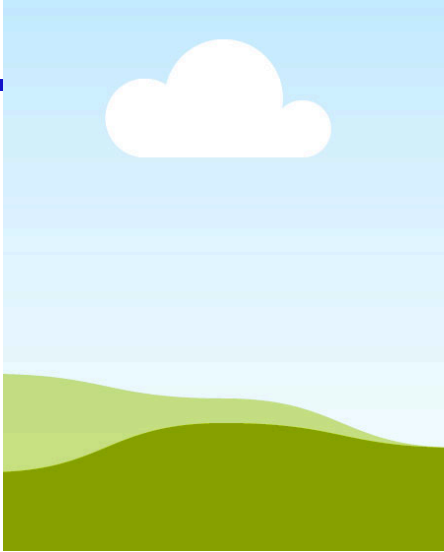
Several testimonials highlight Noel’s sensitivity during difficult or emotional stays, particularly for guests visiting nearby hospitals. One guest wrote, “We were at the hotel for two weeks to be with our son at UNC Hospital. Noel had so much compassion for our situation. We were very grateful.” Another shared how Noel noticed a medical bracelet and took the initiative to adjust their rate, saying his help was “extremely helpful” during repeated clinic visits. These moments demonstrate not just service, but empathy and awareness.

Guests also consistently describe Noel’s demeanor as cheerful and reassuring. Comments such as “His personality was very cheerful and uplifting,” “He truly seems to enjoy his job and helping guests,” and “Noel is always a pleasure to deal with” appear again and again. Several guests noted they return specifically because of him, including one who wrote, “Noel continues to amaze and is a primary reason for coming there many times.”

In addition to guest praise, Noel is recognized as a dependable, team-oriented associate who is always willing to stay late, step in when needed, and support both guests and coworkers. Collectively, these testimonials make it clear that Noel does more than check guests in—he creates comfort, trust, and loyalty, embodying the very best of hospitality service.



Nominee:	Thomas Barton
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Guest Services Supervisor
Location:	Asheville
Nominator:	David Cron
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Thomas Barton’s impact is felt the moment guests walk through the doors and continues throughout every aspect of the hotel’s operation. Those of us who nominated him see Thomas as a cornerstone of the guest experience at Embassy Suites by Hilton Asheville Downtown and a leader who sets the tone for professionalism, warmth, and consistency at the front desk.

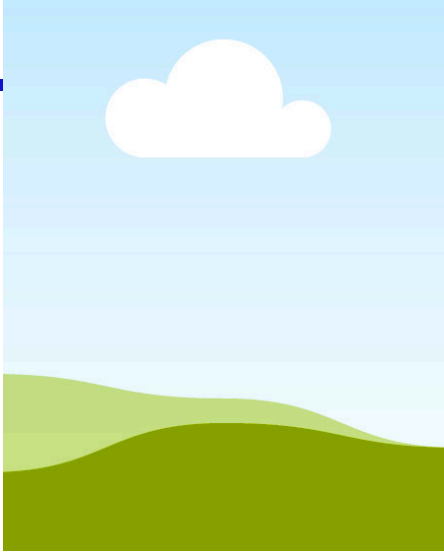
Guests regularly mention Thomas by name in surveys and reviews, praising his friendliness, attentiveness, and the genuine way he connects with people. His approach to service has directly contributed to the property’s strong performance, including its #7 stay score ranking out of 264 Embassy Suites locations. As one nominator noted, he reflects “everything we want our hotel to stand for,” creating a sense of comfort and welcome that makes guests feel at home from the moment they arrive.

Thomas is also recognized for his exceptional dependability. He shows up prepared, remains calm during challenging shifts, and steps in wherever help is needed to keep operations running smoothly. He frequently goes beyond his role, assisting other departments and taking extra time with guests who require additional care. His kindness and patience are hallmarks of his service, and guests respond to the way he treats everyone “like family.”

Beyond guest interactions, Thomas plays a vital role in shaping team culture. He builds strong relationships with coworkers, models high service standards, and consistently supports those around him. His steady presence elevates the entire front-of-house team and strengthens collaboration across the property. Through hard work, compassion, and leadership by example, Thomas embodies the true spirit of hospitality and is a deserving candidate for Lodging Employee of the Year.



Nominee:	James Holden
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Guest Services Representative
Location:	Wilmington
Nominator:	Noah Latta
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

James Holden’s impact has been evident since the very first day the hotel opened. As one of the original Guest Services Representatives at Tru by Hilton Wilmington Wrightsville Beach, he helped shape the service culture from the ground up. His professionalism, warmth, and consistency set the standard for how guests are welcomed and cared for, and that influence continues to define the guest experience today.

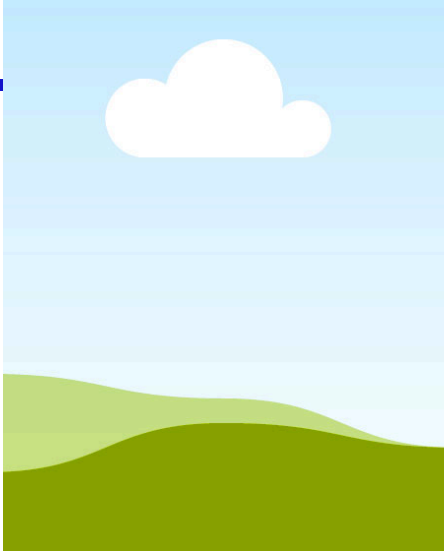
James is consistently recognized by guests, leading the property in positive survey mentions and ranking among the top performers in Hilton Honors enrollments. He has earned multiple Employee of the Month recognitions for his ability to anticipate needs, listen attentively, and deliver personalized service that makes guests feel genuinely valued. His communication style is clear, respectful, and sincere, creating an atmosphere at the front desk that reflects true hospitality.

Reliability is one of James’s greatest strengths. He is dependable, trustworthy, and committed to delivering the same high level of service every day. New team members naturally look to him for guidance, and he willingly steps into a mentoring role by sharing best practices and modeling service excellence. He even takes the initiative to post daily service scores to keep the team aligned and motivated.

James regularly goes beyond his role to support hotel operations, assisting with laundry, cleaning shared spaces, and keeping the lobby market welcoming. His creativity and problem-solving skills are reflected in moments like sourcing mini soaps during a supply shortage to ensure guests were never inconvenienced. Through dedication, initiative, and kindness, James exemplifies the very best of hospitality and is a deserving candidate for Lodging Employee of the Year.



Nominee:	Freddy Veliz
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	Banquet Server
Location:	Charlotte
Nominator:	Christophe Le Chatton
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Freddy’s impact is felt quietly but deeply throughout the banquet team and across all of Food and Beverage. He is widely regarded as one of the strongest pillars of the operation, someone whose steady presence brings stability, care, and confidence to every shift. Since joining the team in 2008, Freddy has played a vital role in keeping service running smoothly, even from his earliest days as a server assistant, where his support of the team never went unnoticed.

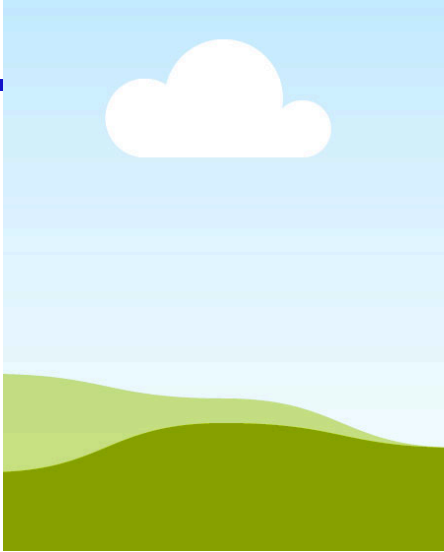
When Freddy transitioned into the banquet department in 2014, his influence became unmistakable. He is often described as a “silent leader,” someone who leads through example rather than title. His dependability, consistency, and kindness naturally set the tone for the entire team. Without seeking recognition, he creates an environment where others feel supported and motivated simply by working alongside him.

Freddy has been encouraged multiple times to take on a management role because he possesses all the qualities of a strong leader. However, he has chosen to remain in his current position, where he takes genuine pride in his work and in supporting those around him. That decision reflects his character and commitment to service. What matters most to Freddy is showing up each day ready to help, no matter the task.

One of Freddy’s most defining qualities is his thoughtfulness. He remembers coworkers, details, and moments, and is always the first to step in when someone needs help. His reliability and kindness strengthen the entire department, making him the quiet force that holds everything together and a truly deserving candidate for recognition.



Nominee:	Maria Garcia
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	Room Attendant
Location:	Charlotte
Nominator:	Christophe Le Chatton
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Maria’s impact is woven into the daily life of the hotel and felt by everyone who works alongside her. With 24 years of service, she is the longest-standing member of the housekeeping team and is widely regarded as its backbone. It is difficult to imagine the department without her steady presence, deep knowledge, and unwavering commitment.

Maria is a natural mentor and leader. She takes personal responsibility for training every new team member, doing so with patience, care, and pride. Her approach helps set the standard for the entire department and ensures that new employees feel supported from their very first day. Her love for the hotel is evident not only in how she speaks about it, but in the consistent quality and care she brings to her work.

She arrives each day with a positive, dependable attitude and a genuine desire to make guests feel welcome and cared for. That dedication does not go unnoticed. Guests have come to trust her work so deeply that some request her by name, drawn to the warmth, consistency, and attention she brings to every room.

More than a dedicated employee, Maria is considered family. Over more than two decades, she has helped shape the culture of the housekeeping department and has played a key role in creating the welcoming environment guests experience throughout their stay. Her heart, pride in her work, and long-standing dedication make her a truly deserving candidate for Lodging Employee of the Year.



Nominee:	Anderson Owens
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Bellperson
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	Leah Goodnight
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Director of Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Anderson Owens’ impact is defined by consistency, positivity, and a genuine love for the work he does. Those of us who nominated him see Anderson as a steady presence and a source of energy across the property. For nearly 15 years, he has proudly served as part of The Umstead family, earning a reputation for his incredible smile, upbeat spirit, and contagious laughter that lifts both guests and colleagues.

Anderson has dedicated his entire tenure to the Housekeeping Department, where he approaches every shift with pride and enthusiasm. He takes ownership of each task, no matter how routine or demanding, and completes his work with focus and care. One nominator described him as “the rock in the laundry room,” noting that he handles one of the most critical and physically demanding roles with a smile every single day. His work managing, sorting, and delivering linen is essential to the hotel’s operation, and he performs it with reliability and attention to detail.

Beyond housekeeping, Anderson regularly steps in to support the Banquet Department, where he has quickly become known as the fastest and most cheerful bar back on the team. His flexibility and willingness to help wherever needed reflect a true team-first mindset. Colleagues consistently describe him as focused, reliable, and flexible, with a positive attitude that never wavers.

Before joining the hotel, Anderson honorably served in the military, and that discipline and work ethic continue to shine through in everything he does. Anderson exemplifies what it means to be a true ambassador: hardworking, warm, dependable, and committed to creating a positive experience for everyone around him.



Nominee:	Carlos Bacugan
Employer:	Washington Duke Inn & Golf Club
Title:	Bellperson
Location:	Durham
Nominator:	Alex White
Employer:	Washington Duke Inn & Golf Club
Title:	Area Director of Human Resources



Nominee’s Impact:

Carlos Bacugan’s impact is woven into nearly two decades of unforgettable guest experiences and quiet, unwavering excellence. Those of us who nominated him see Carlos not simply as a bellman, but as the living embodiment of what genuine hospitality looks like in practice. From the moment a guest steps out of their car, Carlos sets the tone for their entire stay, creating a sense of welcome and reassurance long before they ever reach the front desk.

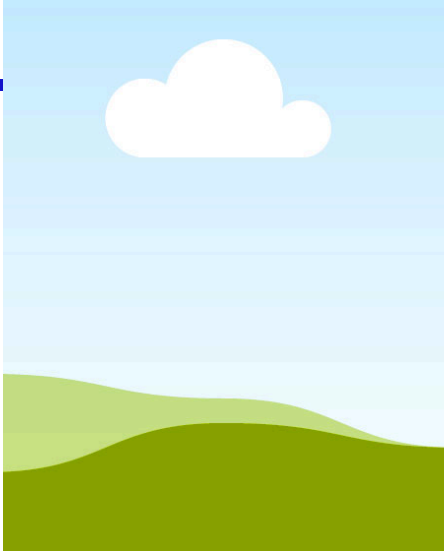
Carlos possesses a rare, intuitive gift for service that cannot be taught. He anticipates needs before they are spoken, reads situations with empathy and calm, and delivers care with a humanity that defines the heart of this industry. Guests do not just remember him, they seek him out. Many call ahead to ask if he is working, coordinate return visits around his schedule, and consistently mention him by name in reviews. As guests have shared, “He always remembers us. He makes us feel like family,” and “Excellent service, always a delight. He is a true asset to this hotel.”

His service is especially meaningful for guests navigating medical visits at Duke. One guest wrote, “My husband has to go to the Duke Cancer Center... Carlos is the man, we love him and the bell staff, so great.” For long-term repeat visitors, Carlos provides continuity and comfort during some of life’s most difficult moments.

One story captures his impact perfectly. When a mother rushed to the hotel after her daughter was injured at a Duke soccer camp, Carlos acted immediately. He waited at the entrance with crutches in hand, gently helped the injured child from the car, reassured her and her mother, and stayed with them until they felt supported. It was not dramatic or public. It was simply hospitality at its highest level.

Carlos’s long history of Employee of the Month recognitions reflects what we all know to be true: this is not occasional excellence, but a lifelong standard. Through compassion, consistency, and care, Carlos elevates not just a department, but the entire hotel. He represents the very best of our industry.

Nominee:	Caroline Sepulveda
Employer:	Hampton Inn & Suites Asheville/Biltmore
Title:	Guest Services Representative
Location:	Asheville
Nominator:	Cassie Pressley
Employer:	Asheville Hotel Group
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Caroline’s impact is felt in the steady, thoughtful way she elevates both the guest experience and the daily rhythm of the front desk. She is widely recognized as a calm, dependable presence, especially during busy weekday mornings, and has become a trusted anchor for both guests and coworkers. Through consistency, kindness, and genuine hospitality, she quietly makes the entire operation stronger.

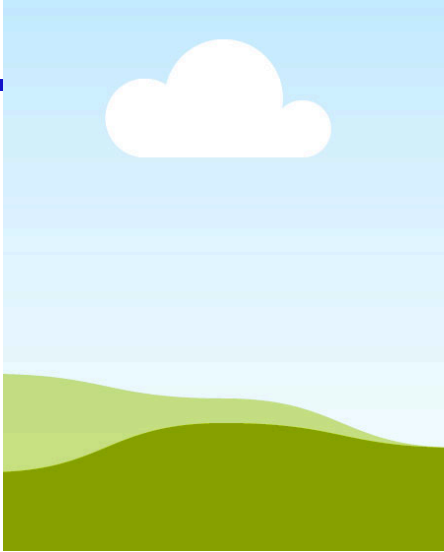
Caroline is known for how intentionally she cares for people. She remembers repeat guests, notices small details others may miss, and often checks in before a guest even needs to ask for help. When challenges arise, she remains composed, listens carefully, and focuses on solutions. Guest surveys regularly mention her by name, praising her as “helpful, patient, and friendly,” and crediting her for turning difficult moments into positive experiences.

Her operational impact is just as meaningful. Caroline is organized, forward-thinking, and dependable, keeping the desk and shared spaces clean, stocked, and running smoothly. She readily assists other departments, supports new team members, and quickly becomes the go-to resource for questions about systems and policies. She also takes initiative in her own development, engaging fully in training and stepping into a larger role in improving review scores through thoughtful guest problem resolution at checkout.

One moment in particular reflects her approach to service. When a guest checked into a room that had not been properly cleaned, Caroline immediately reassigned them, personally inspected a new room to ensure it met standards, and followed up to confirm their comfort. The guest later praised her “impeccable customer service,” noting she was the reason their stay turned around.

Through ownership, empathy, and consistency, Caroline creates trust, strengthens team culture, and delivers hospitality that leaves a lasting impression.

Nominee:	Scott Bucher
Employer:	Courtyard Triangle Town Center (Concord Hotels)
Title:	General Manager
Location:	Raleigh
Nominator:	Sean Fahim
Employer:	Courtyard Triangle Town Center (Concord Hotels)
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Scott Bucher’s impact is defined by technical excellence, proactive leadership, and a deep commitment to guest satisfaction. As Chief Engineer, he plays a critical role in ensuring the safety, reliability, and comfort of the property, while also fostering a culture of accountability, collaboration, and service across the hotel.

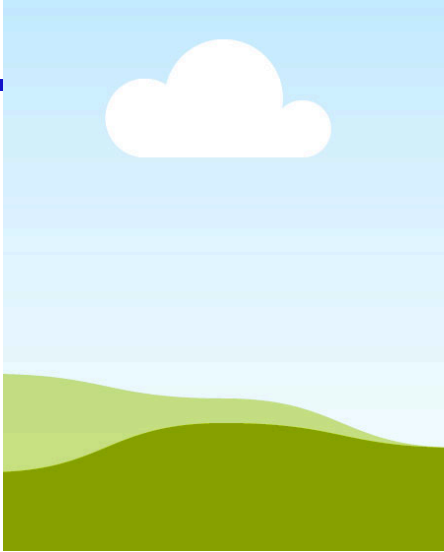
Scott is widely recognized for his forward-thinking approach to maintenance and innovation. Under his leadership, the engineering team has implemented energy-efficient systems that have reduced operational costs while enhancing the guest experience. He consistently anticipates potential issues and addresses them before they affect guests, ensuring the property reflects quality and care at every touchpoint.

Equally impactful is Scott’s leadership style. He is a hands-on mentor who invests in developing his team through training, certifications, and a solutions-driven environment. Colleagues describe him as calm, approachable, and professional, even under pressure, and his demeanor sets the standard for excellence not only within engineering but across departments.

Scott works seamlessly with front desk, housekeeping, and food and beverage teams, stepping in wherever needed to support guest needs and operational demands. Whether responding personally to urgent maintenance issues or assisting with event setups, he models teamwork and a guest-first mindset. His efforts have led to improved guest satisfaction scores, reduced downtime, and stronger overall efficiency. Through innovation, integrity, and genuine care, Scott exemplifies hospitality leadership and is a deserving candidate for Lodging Manager of the Year.



Nominee:	Margarita Hernandez
Employer:	Fairfield Inn Raleigh-Cary (CMC Hotels)
Title:	Executive Housekeeper
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	Sean Grady
Employer:	Fairfield Inn Raleigh-Cary (CMC Hotels)
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Margarita Hernandez’s impact is reflected in both measurable results and the culture of excellence she has built within the housekeeping department. As Executive Housekeeper, she plays a critical role in shaping the guest experience, ensuring that cleanliness, consistency, and attention to detail remain at the highest level across the property.

Under Margarita’s leadership, the hotel has achieved a year-to-date Cleanliness GSS score of 90.6, representing an 11-point improvement over the previous year and nearly 16 points above the 2025 brand average. These results placed the property among the top 60 Fairfield hotels in North America for cleanliness, a significant accomplishment that speaks directly to her standards and hands-on leadership. Her influence also extends to overall guest satisfaction, contributing meaningfully to the hotel’s Top 80 ranking for Intent to Recommend scores.

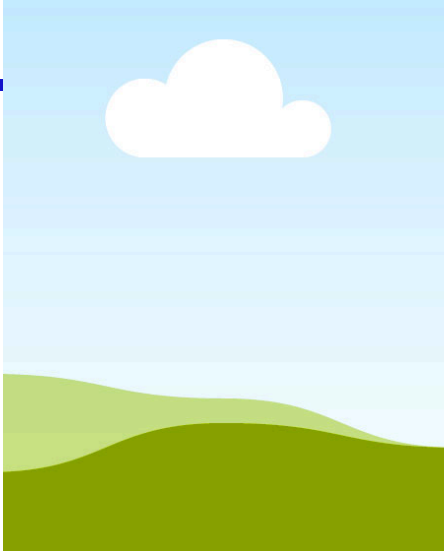
Margarita’s operational impact is equally strong. She consistently balances staffing needs with cost control, maintaining high service standards while managing labor efficiently. Her proactive planning, accountability, and attention to detail ensure the department operates smoothly and reliably, even during demanding periods.

What truly distinguishes Margarita is her personal pride in the work. She goes above and beyond every day to ensure that rooms and public spaces are clean, welcoming, and fully guest-ready. Her commitment and consistency have fostered a culture of pride, ownership, and excellence within the housekeeping team.

With 13 years of dedicated service, Margarita is not only an exceptional Executive Housekeeper but a driving force behind the hotel's success. Her leadership, operational excellence, and unwavering focus on guest satisfaction make her a highly deserving candidate for Lodging Manager of the Year.



Nominee:	Travis Hawkins
Employer:	Hampton by Hilton Roanoke Rapids (FCM Hotels)
Title:	Chief Engineer
Location:	Roanoke Rapids
Nominator:	Wiley Davis
Employer:	Hampton by Hilton Roanoke Rapids (FCM Hotels)
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Travis Hawkins’ impact is defined by 15 years of unwavering dedication, reliability, and behind-the-scenes excellence that keeps the hotel running smoothly every day. As Chief Engineer, he is widely regarded as the steady force and “glue that holds the hotel together,” ensuring that both operations and guest experiences are consistently maintained at the highest level.

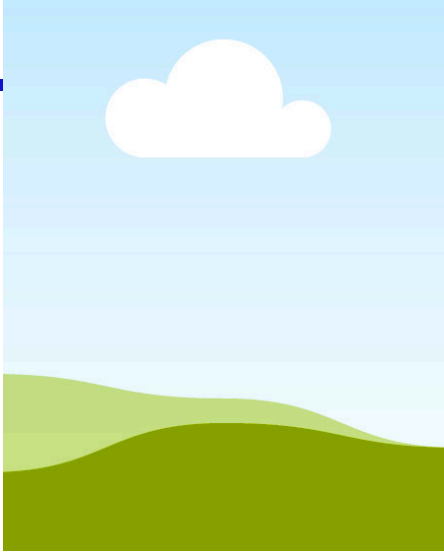
Travis is known for his ability to anticipate needs and respond quickly to any challenge. He approaches every situation with urgency, care, and professionalism, whether resolving complex maintenance issues or stepping in to help guests with unexpected needs. One nominator shared that his willingness to assist truly “knows no bounds,” citing moments such as helping a guest jump-start a car with a dead battery or locating lost keys buried deep inside a packed suitcase. These examples reflect his belief that no task is too small when it comes to guest satisfaction.

Dependability is one of Travis’s defining qualities. He is always responsive, frequently on call, and known for taking initiative before being asked. Team members trust that when something needs attention, Travis will handle it thoroughly and without hesitation. His passion for his work and genuine care for guests set him apart and elevate the entire property.

Through consistent leadership, technical expertise, and a strong service mindset, Travis has made a lasting impact not only on his hotel, but on the Hampton brand and the broader hospitality industry. His commitment over the past 15 years exemplifies hospitality excellence, making him a truly deserving Stars of the Industry honoree.



Nominee:	Cassandra Fox-Eley
Employer:	Hampton by Hilton Roanoke Rapids (FCM Hotels)
Title:	Executive Housekeeper
Location:	Roanoke Rapids
Nominator:	Wiley Davis
Employer:	Hampton by Hilton Roanoke Rapids (FCM Hotels)
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Cassandra Fox-Eley’s impact is defined by genuine care, tireless dedication, and a commitment to hospitality that is felt throughout the entire property. As Executive Housekeeper, she consistently goes above and beyond to ensure the hotel is spotless, welcoming, and guest-ready, while also making every guest and team member feel seen and valued. Her work ethic and compassion set a standard of excellence that resonates across the hotel.

Cassandra’s approach to service has earned significant recognition, including the 2024 Halifax County Convention and Visitors Bureau’s Spirit of Hospitality Award and the FCM 2022 Employee of the Year Award. These honors reflect what guests and colleagues experience daily: warmth, sincerity, and a willingness to help in any situation. One nominator described her dedication as “a true class act,” noting that every guest she encounters feels genuinely cared for.

Her versatility and hands-on leadership are among her most defining qualities. Cassandra does not hesitate to step in wherever needed, whether repairing equipment, carrying furniture up stairs, or addressing maintenance issues herself to ensure guest comfort. As shared in her nomination, she will “do whatever it takes” to make sure each person who enters the hotel receives the best possible care.

Cassandra’s compassion, reliability, and commitment to excellence make her a cornerstone of the property and a trusted leader within the team. She embodies the belief that results come from people, and her daily actions demonstrate what it truly means to be a star of the hospitality industry.



Nominee:	Earlene Bailey
Employer:	Holiday Inn Rocky Mount
Title:	Director of Sales and Marketing
Location:	Rocky Mount
Nominator:	Gwen Fuller
Employer:	FCM Hotels
Title:	Corporate Director of Sales and Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Earlene Bailey’s impact is defined by service-driven leadership, deep community engagement, and a genuine commitment to advancing hospitality beyond the walls of her hotel. As Director of Sales for FCM Hotels at the Holiday Inn Rocky Mount, she has played a central role in strengthening the property’s reputation as a welcoming, guest-focused destination for interstate travelers, corporate clients, and group business alike. Under her leadership, the hotel consistently earns praise for staff friendliness, cleanliness, and overall guest satisfaction, with service scores regularly exceeding 90 percent.

Earlene’s influence extends far beyond daily hotel operations. She is a highly respected leader within the Rocky Mount business community, serving as an active Ambassador with the Rocky Mount Area Chamber of Commerce and earning the Chamber’s 2025 Ambassador of the Year award. This recognition reflects “countless hours of volunteering” and a level of trust that led to her personal invitation to serve on the Chamber’s Small Business Committee, where she focuses on supporting and uplifting local businesses.

Her approach to hospitality is both strategic and personal. Earlene has led engagement with IHG Business Edge, creating tailored solutions that allow North Carolina small businesses to access negotiated value traditionally reserved for larger corporations. At the same time, she remains a visible, hands-on presence at the hotel, greeting repeat guests by name, hosting site tours, and mentoring team members on delivering “True Hospitality.”

Earlene’s leadership was instrumental in the hotel receiving Rocky Mount’s 2025 “People’s Choice – Favorite Hotel” honor. As one nominator shared, her impact “reaches far beyond the four walls of the Holiday Inn Rocky Mount,” making her a champion for guests, associates, and the broader hospitality industry in North Carolina.



Nominee:	Amy Brophy
Employer:	LODEN Hospitality
Title:	Director of Revenue
Location:	Raleigh
Nominator:	Catherine Kobe
Employer:	LODEN Hospitality
Title:	Director of Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Amy Brophy’s impact is defined by strategic leadership, deep industry expertise, and a steady presence that has strengthened hotel performance and professional growth across multiple properties. With decades of experience, beginning at the Sheraton Imperial, she brings a rare combination of historical knowledge and forward-looking vision that continues to shape long-term success.

As Director of Revenue for LODEN Hospitality, Amy plays a central role in guiding revenue strategy across the portfolio. She is widely recognized for her ability to navigate complex and shifting market conditions, consistently driving revenue growth even during challenging financial cycles. Her analytical approach, paired with an ability to anticipate market trends, has made revenue management one of the organization’s greatest operational strengths. Colleagues note her capacity to guide Sales and Revenue teams through uncertainty with clarity and confidence.

Amy’s influence extends beyond numbers. She is an exceptional mentor who manages and supports multiple Sales Managers with patience, intention, and care. Her leadership style balances strategy with compassion, ensuring teams feel empowered, capable, and supported. She invests in developing emerging leaders, models professionalism, and sets clear expectations that inspire trust and accountability.

What truly distinguishes Amy is her unwavering steadiness. She leads with optimism, calm, and a strong sense of responsibility, making her a reliable source of confidence for both peers and direct reports. Through expertise, mentorship, and consistent leadership, Amy Brophy has made a lasting impact on revenue performance, team development, and the broader hospitality industry.

Nominee:	Kevin D'Amico
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	General Manager
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	Nicole Ebersole
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Regional General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Kevin D’Amico’s impact on the Hilton Garden Inn Raleigh–Cary is both measurable and deeply cultural. As General Manager, he leads from the front, remaining highly visible, hands-on, and fully engaged in the daily life of the hotel. He models the standards he expects, stepping into any role when needed and reinforcing a culture built on accountability, consistency, and genuine hospitality.

Under Kevin’s leadership, the hotel has undergone a remarkable turnaround. Guest stay scores increased from the upper 60s to the high 90s, elevating the property to #4 out of 784 Hilton Garden Inn hotels worldwide. This achievement positions the hotel to earn the 2025 Conrad Achievement Award, recognizing the top one percent of the brand, and reflects an extraordinary climb of 113 spots in just one year. The property also received the Q1 2025 Hilton Make It Right Award, another top one percent distinction for exceptional guest satisfaction and service recovery.

Kevin pairs strong operational leadership with sharp financial acumen. He is widely recognized as an internal expert on systems, technology, and reporting, using those tools to drive strategic improvements in GOP while maintaining high service standards. He also successfully led a full renovation of guestrooms and public spaces, keeping the project on schedule and minimizing guest disruption.

Equally important is Kevin’s approach to leadership. He routinely supports laundry, banquets, engineering, and front desk operations, reinforcing trust and teamwork across departments. The hotel’s consistent Outstanding Hilton Quality Assurance scores reflect his ability to uphold brand standards while elevating the guest experience. Through hands-on leadership, industry involvement, and exceptional results, Kevin has transformed the property into a top performer and exemplifies excellence in hospitality management.



Nominee:	Aimee Droz
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Regional Executive Housekeeper
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	TK Franklin
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Aimee Droz’s impact is defined by exceptional leadership, sustained excellence, and a genuine commitment to the people she leads. For more than nine years as Executive Housekeeper at Parks Hospitality’s DoubleTree Raleigh–Cary, she has set an extraordinarily high standard for cleanliness, service, and operational precision, earning recognition as one of the most meticulous and talented leaders within the organization.

Under Aimee’s guidance, the DoubleTree Raleigh–Cary has ranked in the top five percent of the brand for cleanliness, service, and stay scores for seven consecutive years. Her influence extends beyond a single property. Through her leadership and coaching, housekeeping teams across multiple PHG hotels have achieved similar results, demonstrating her ability to scale excellence and build consistent performance across the portfolio.

Aimee’s leadership style is rooted in compassion and respect. She treats her team like family, creating an environment where collaboration, trust, and accountability thrive. This approach has resulted in the lowest turnover rates within the portfolio, a powerful reflection of her ability to nurture and retain talent. Colleagues note that her team’s loyalty is unwavering and that “they would follow her anywhere,” a testament to the respect she has earned.

In her expanded role as Regional Executive Housekeeper over the past two years, Aimee has continued to elevate standards across multiple hotels, cultivating future leaders and strengthening operational consistency. What truly sets her apart, however, is her humanity. Her caring heart, combined with unmatched professional skill, makes her impact both measurable and deeply personal. Aimee Droz exemplifies the spirit of the Star of the Industry Award and continues to shine as a leader within North Carolina’s hospitality community.



Nominee:	Tryphena Mundell
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Operations Manager
Location:	Morrisville
Nominator:	Kevin Raney
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Tryphena Mundell has made a remarkable impact at the Tru by Hilton Raleigh-Durham Airport in a short period of time, especially as a first-time manager. From the moment she stepped into her role, she embraced every challenge with enthusiasm, professionalism, and a clear desire to grow. Her leadership has strengthened the team, elevated the guest experience, and brought consistency to daily operations.

Under Tryphena’s guidance, the hotel has maintained a strong year-to-date service score of 90 percent. She has motivated the team to meet and exceed key goals, including improved response times on the guest text messaging platform, increased Hilton Honors enrollments, and strong participation in the Everyone Sells program. She sets clear expectations, keeps the team engaged, and leads with accountability. At the same time, she remains committed to her own development, joining the Raleigh Chamber’s Young Professionals Network to expand her knowledge and build meaningful connections within the hospitality community.

Tryphena leads with a growth mindset and genuine care for her team. She actively seeks feedback, asks thoughtful questions, and looks for ways to improve. Her leadership is personal and intentional, from celebrating birthdays and work anniversaries to creating an environment where team members feel supported and appreciated. By leading through example, she shows her front office team what professionalism, consistency, and true hospitality look like.

Guests frequently mention Tryphena by name in reviews, describing her as friendly, attentive, and easy to work with. The positive feedback about the staff as a whole reflects the culture she has helped create. Beyond her department, Tryphena supports new managers and contributes to the Manager in Training program, serving as a steady mentor during busy and challenging moments. Her calm presence, organization, and positive energy make her a trusted leader and a deserving candidate for Lodging Manager of the Year.



Nominee:	Michelle Schroeder
Employer:	Hampton Inn Winston-Salem Hanes Mall (Quality Hospitality)
Title:	Director of Sales
Location:	Winston-Salem
Nominator:	Candice White
Employer:	Quality Oil Company
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Michelle Schroeder’s impact is defined by extraordinary generosity, deep compassion, and a tireless commitment to people. As Director of Sales, she embodies what hospitality looks like at its very best, bringing warmth, care, and intention into every interaction with her team, guests, and the broader community. Her leadership is not limited to revenue goals or sales calls; it is rooted in service to others.

Within the hotel, Michelle is known for going far beyond her role to support her coworkers. She has personally helped team members navigate healthcare needs by finding providers, scheduling appointments, providing transportation, and even covering copays so someone would no longer be in pain. She has written character references for employees applying for citizenship and created step-by-step instructions, in both English and Spanish, to help team members enroll in 401(k) plans and insurance benefits. When the laundry area became uncomfortable due to a broken air conditioner, she brought cold water and folded linen alongside the team. She regularly drives employees home when needed and checks on the hotel during evenings and weekends, ensuring no one feels unsupported.

Michelle’s care extends powerfully into the community. She volunteers extensively at her children’s school, serves as a Junior Girl Scouts Bronze Award project leader, and dedicates approximately 250 hours each year to planning service-focused activities for the girls. She leads local blood drives, partners with Second Harvest Food Bank, and actively supports senior services through organized bingo events, often recruiting coworkers to join her. As president and community service chair of her county’s Hospitality Alliance, she is a visible, trusted leader, attending ribbon cuttings, sales meetings, and industry events while serving as a mentor to other Directors of Sales across her portfolio and market.

Her impact on guests is equally personal and thoughtful. Michelle creates care baskets for long-term stays, purchases specialty items like gluten-free cereal on her own time, and celebrates guest milestones in memorable ways. One regular guest described being “thrilled” when he arrived to find his room decorated to celebrate his lifetime Diamond status, complete with favorite snacks, drinks, and a personalized welcome. Guests routinely feel known and valued because Michelle takes the time to truly know them.

Selfless, tireless, and deeply human, Michelle exemplifies Hilton’s “light and warmth of hospitality.” Her influence is felt across her hotel, her community, and the industry as a whole, making her a truly deserving Stars of the Industry honoree.



Nominee:	Ashley Tjaden
Employer:	SREE Hotels
Title:	Regional Director of Operations
Location:	Charlotte
Nominator:	Kunal Patel
Employer:	SREE Hotels
Title:	Vice President of Operations



Nominee’s Impact:

Ashley Tjaden’s impact on the hospitality industry is both expansive and deeply personal, shaped by 16 years of dedicated service, fearless leadership, and an unwavering commitment to developing people. Her career with SREE Hotels reflects continuous growth, from Assistant General Manager roles across multiple Marriott brands to her current position as Regional Director of Operations, where she now leads and supports multiple properties with the same passion and integrity that defined her early career.

Ashley is widely recognized as a leader who inspires others to rise beyond their own expectations. Colleagues consistently describe her as fearless, driven, and endlessly dedicated, noting her rare ability to “spark a flame of desire to excel” and then nurture that growth through intentional mentorship. One nominator shared that Ashley saw potential where others might not, taking the time to train, guide, and believe in emerging leaders. That investment has resulted in a strong pipeline of General Managers within SREE Hotels, many of whom began their careers in housekeeping or assistant roles and credit Ashley’s support for their advancement.

Her leadership is hands-on and rooted in humility. It is not uncommon to find Ashley folding sheets in the laundry room, inspecting rooms, covering the front desk, or stepping into operations during staffing gaps. During a period when one hotel was without both a General Manager and Assistant General Manager, Ashley covered both roles for months while still overseeing seven hotels. As one nominator noted, “No task is beneath her when it contributes to the success of her hotels and the well-being of her teams.”

Ashley’s influence extends beyond operations and performance metrics, though those results are strong. Under her guidance, properties have seen significant improvements in guest service scores, QA results, and overall performance. Just as important, she creates a culture where team members feel supported, heard, and valued. As one colleague shared, “Ashley leads with heart, grit, and a drive that sets the standard for our entire organization.”

Her mentorship continues long after promotions, with many leaders noting she remains “always just a phone call away.” Ashley’s legacy is reflected not only in the success of the hotels she leads, but in the confidence, loyalty, and growth of the people she has championed throughout her career. She exemplifies what it truly means to be a star of the hospitality industry.



Nominee:	Hannah Talbott
Employer:	The Longleaf Hotel & Lounge
Title:	Hotel Manager
Location:	Raleigh
Nominator:	Catherine Kobe
Employer:	LODEN Hospitality
Title:	Director of Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Hannah Talbott’s impact is felt in every corner of The Longleaf Hotel & Lounge. As Hotel Manager, she has become the heart of the property, setting a standard of leadership that balances operational excellence with genuine care for both guests and team members. Her presence ensures that guests feel truly looked after and that staff feel supported, valued, and empowered to do their best work.

Hannah has transformed team culture by leading with empathy, clarity, and integrity. She builds trust by listening, creating clear pathways for growth, and celebrating her team’s successes with sincerity. Under her leadership, the staff operates as a unified, motivated group, and that cohesion is reflected in the elevated guest experience guests consistently feel.

Her approach to hospitality is deeply personal. Hannah is known for going far beyond expectations, acting not out of obligation but out of care. One moment that stands out involved a guest whose rental car broke down just before a flight. Hannah personally arranged and paid for emergency transportation, coordinated with the rental company, and ensured the car was towed, allowing the guest to travel without stress. This act captured what guests experience regularly: thoughtful, seamless service rooted in compassion.

Hannah’s care for her team is equally intentional. She creates personalized birthday care packages for every staff member and makes a point to recognize hard work after demanding periods. Following a sold-out Dreamville weekend, she treated the entire housekeeping team to lunch as a personal thank-you, reinforcing her belief that hospitality begins behind the scenes.

Alongside this people-first leadership, Hannah has driven measurable financial growth, proving that strong business results and exceptional service go hand in hand. She leads with heart, discipline, and vision, making her impact profound and her leadership a true benchmark for the hospitality industry.



Nominee:	Gina Whitney
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Retail Manager
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	Leah Goodnight
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Director of Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Gina’s impact is felt in every corner of the Gift Shop and far beyond it. Since joining The Umstead in 2021, she has become the heart of the operation, bringing kindness, enthusiasm, and a genuine love for people into every interaction. Guests and associates alike describe her presence as warm, thoughtful, and uplifting, noting that she has a rare ability to make people feel truly seen, welcomed, and valued.

Her leadership has had a measurable and lasting effect on her team. The Gift Shop has experienced almost no turnover in the past four years, a testament to the supportive, respectful environment Gina has created. Team members consistently express how valued and encouraged they feel under her guidance, crediting her steady leadership and sincere care for their decision to stay and grow. She manages every aspect of the shop, from in-person guest experiences to online sales, with meticulous attention to detail and an unwavering commitment to excellence.

Gina is deeply invested in developing her associates. She intentionally schedules tours across the property, including the spa, dining, and housekeeping, so her team can better understand the hotel and speak confidently with guests. When new training binders were requested, Gina was the first to submit hers. It was also the most thorough and thoughtfully organized, setting a new standard for training materials across departments.

One of Gina’s most meaningful contributions is her “Favorite Things” initiative, a simple yet powerful way to learn what brings each associate joy. This idea, now adopted throughout the property, allows her to recognize and celebrate her team in deeply personal ways, reinforcing a culture of appreciation and care.

Through grace, intention, and heartfelt leadership, Gina exemplifies hospitality at its most human and most impactful.

Nominee:	Rowena Arroza
Employer:	Doubletree and Tapestry by Hilton New Bern
Title:	Area General Manager
Location:	New Bern
Nominator:	Robert Ambersley
Employer:	FCM Hotels
Title:	Corporate Director of Operations



Nominee’s Impact:

Rowena Arroza’s impact is evident in the strength of her hotels, the loyalty of her teams, and the respect she has earned within her community. Since joining FCM Hotels in 2019, she has consistently demonstrated thoughtful, results-driven leadership, earning progressive promotions and most recently the role of Area General Manager overseeing both the DoubleTree by Hilton and the Tryon Riverfront Inn Tapestry by Hilton in downtown New Bern.

Rowena leads with warmth, visibility, and accountability. She is deeply engaged with guests and staff every day, setting the tone through example. Guests regularly comment on how meaningful it is to see the General Manager present at breakfast, greeting and serving them personally, and remaining visible throughout the property. Her hands-on approach, from owning guest hellos and goodbyes to inspecting cleanliness and maintenance standards, has driven exceptional service culture and attention to detail across both hotels.

Under her leadership, the hotels have reached record highs in revenue, profitability, and guest satisfaction. The DoubleTree recently became the number one traveler-ranked hotel in New Bern on TripAdvisor. In January 2025, Rowena successfully opened the Tryon Riverfront Inn Tapestry, a thoughtfully restored riverfront property previously closed since Hurricane Florence. The hotel has been met with strong praise from both guests and the local community.

Rowena’s impact extends beyond her properties. She supports multiple local charities, serves as a board member of the Craven County Tourism Development Authority, and has helped grow conference business in partnership with the local convention center. As FCM Hotels’ Hilton Brand Expert, she also provides guidance and training to seven Hilton properties across Eastern North Carolina.

Rowena Arroza exemplifies hospitality leadership through service, community engagement, and consistent excellence, making her a truly deserving Star of the Industry.



Nominee:	Brenda Durden
Employer:	South Asheville Hotel Associates
Title:	Chief Operating Officer
Location:	Fletcher
Nominator:	Celia Worley
Employer:	South Asheville Hotel Associates
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Brenda’s impact as a lodging operator is profound, lasting, and deeply personal. Over more than 30 years, she has built South Asheville Hotel Associates from a single hotel into a five-property, award-winning portfolio, all while maintaining Hilton compliance, navigating multiple renovations, and consistently growing revenue, even through major challenges such as Hurricane Helene. Her leadership is both strategic and hands-on. She is present at all five hotels every week, strengthening operations, supporting leadership teams, and ensuring alignment, consistency, and long-term success.

What truly sets Brenda apart is how she develops people. She holds high standards and inspires managers to rise to them, often creating a healthy sense of competition that drives performance. At the same time, she leads with trust, clarity, and compassion. As one nominator shared, “She sends us to challenges because she believes we can rise to the occasion, and she is usually right.” She coaches through P&L reviews, accountability conversations, and celebration of wins, while still fully showing up for every employee, even while managing active renovations and major brand requirements.

Brenda’s mentorship has been life-changing for many. One team member shared, “When I say Brenda changed my life, I mean it in every sense.” She saw potential where others did not, encouraged growth at critical moments, and quietly stepped in to support an employee facing a family health and insurance crisis, reducing premiums without fanfare or recognition. As that nominator explained, “She didn’t announce it. She simply helped because she believes in taking care of her people.”

Brenda will never brag about the groceries she bought for employees during a government shutdown, the late nights, or the personal calls she makes when someone is struggling. But these moments define her leadership. She is not just an operator; she is the reason many leaders are where they are today. Her philosophy is simple and lived daily: build a dedicated team, care for each other and guests, and always support growth.



Nominee:	Matthew Park
Employer:	Springhill Suites by Marriott Raleigh-Garner
Title:	General Manager
Location:	Garner
Nominator:	Robert Ambersley
Employer:	FCM Hotels
Title:	Corporate Director of Operations



Nominee’s Impact:

Matthew Park’s impact is defined by exceptional performance, authentic leadership, and an unwavering commitment to hospitality excellence. At SpringHill Suites by Marriott in Garner, he consistently delivers results that place both his property and his service standards among the very best not just locally, but nationally.

In 2025 year to date, Matthew’s achievements distinguish him across the entire United States and Canada. He ranks number one in Elite Appreciation among all SpringHill Suites, second in Staff Service, second in Maintenance performance, and tenth in Cleanliness. The hotel also holds the highest Google review ranking of any hotel in Garner. These results reflect more than strong operations; they reflect Matthew’s ability to connect meaningfully with guests, particularly Marriott Bonvoy Elite members, who frequently mention him by name as a key reason they choose to return.

Matthew’s leadership aligns seamlessly with Marriott’s core values of putting people first, pursuing excellence, and acting with integrity. His recognition as FCM Hotels’ Marriott Brand Expert and his national acknowledgment for industry-leading Elite Appreciation underscore the trust placed in his expertise and approach.

Beyond the metrics, Matthew is a true culture driver. He leads by example, supports his teammates without hesitation, and continually looks for ways to improve both the guest experience and operational efficiency. His professionalism, reliability, and genuine passion for hospitality elevate those around him and strengthen the entire team.

Matthew Park’s national-level accomplishments, combined with his daily dedication to guests and coworkers, make him a standout hospitality professional and a highly deserving nominee for the 2026 Stars of the Industry Awards.



Nominee:	Christophe Le Chatton
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	General Manager
Location:	Charlotte
Nominator:	Arlexis Brea
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	Human Resources Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Christophe Le Chatton’s impact is defined by inspiring leadership, intentional people development, and a vision that consistently elevates both performance and culture. He is widely regarded as a leader whose presence immediately builds trust and confidence. Following his example feels natural, not because it is required, but because his leadership is authentic, steady, and deeply motivating.

Under Christophe’s guidance, The Ballantyne earned Marriott’s Hotel of the Year for 2024, one of the highest honors in the industry. This recognition reflects the culture he has built and the high standards he sets across every department. Christophe does not simply manage operations; he develops people. His leadership is rooted in humility, patience, and genuine care, creating an environment where excellence becomes the norm.

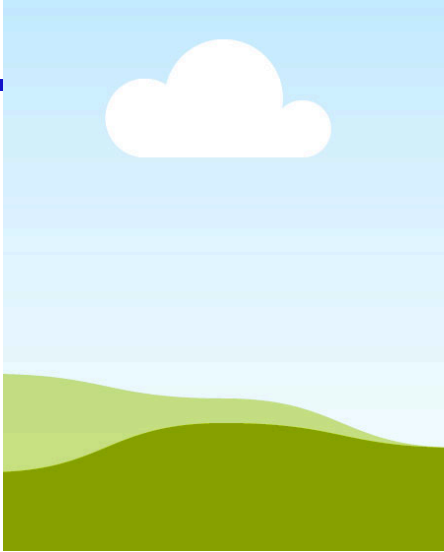
A defining hallmark of Christophe’s leadership is his commitment to growing others. He identifies potential early and invests in it fully. In the past year alone, 15 team members were promoted, a direct result of his mentorship and belief in developing talent. He provides the tools, encouragement, and trust people need to succeed, and his teams respond with loyalty and pride.

Christophe also leads with purpose beyond the hotel. He is deeply engaged in community service, consistently stepping up to organize and participate in local events, reinforcing his belief that hospitality extends into the neighborhoods the hotel serves.

With six years at The Ballantyne, along with prior experience overseeing multiple properties as Area Vice President, Christophe brings both strategic foresight and hands-on leadership. As one colleague noted, he is “already two steps ahead,” always thinking about what’s next. Through heart-driven leadership, vision, and an unwavering commitment to excellence, Christophe embodies everything the Lodging Operator of the Year award represents.



Nominee:	Charles Tolo
Employer:	Parizade
Title:	Server
Location:	Durham
Nominator:	Muihrienne Leggat
Employer:	Giorgios Hospitality Group
Title:	Operations Director



Nominee’s Impact:

Charles Tolo’s impact is best understood through the voices of those who work beside him and the guests who return to Parizade again and again because of him. He is described as a “silent giant” and “a beautiful soul,” someone whose heart is defined by love, hospitality, and an unwavering commitment to others. For decades, his care for guests and teammates alike has been tireless, intentional, and deeply personal.

Charles has been part of the Giorgios Hospitality Group since 1991, beginning as a teenage dishwasher and growing into the lead waiter at Parizade, a role he has held since 2009. He does not seek leadership, yet he is consistently chosen for it because of his effectiveness, high standards, and quiet authority. As one colleague shared, “In all of my career of hospitality, he shines the brightest with his quiet, respectful mannerisms.”

Guests know Charles by name. He is the most frequently requested server, and many long-term guests plan their visits around him. He remembers names, families, anniversaries, birthdays, dietary needs, preferred drinks, and even how guests like their butter softened or their coffee heated. He never forgets a milestone, often handwriting cards years after a guest’s last visit and personally recognizing celebrations or offering condolences when needed. One nominator noted, “He never fails to write a handwritten card... even if it has been years since they visited.”

Behind the scenes, Charles sets the tone for excellence. He oversees nightly setup, ensures silverware, glassware, and stations meet exacting standards, assigns and checks side work, and is always the last to leave. He quietly supports other servers during service, filling waters, clearing plates, and assisting without drawing attention to himself. He also mentors younger staff, including hosting an annual lunch for graduating high school employees.

“Waiters cannot be trained to be like Charles,” one teammate wrote. “There is no one else like this soft-spoken man.” His care is genuine, his service instinctive, and his presence unforgettable. Charles does not just serve meals; he creates moments that stay with people for a lifetime.

Nominee:	Christopher Lovegood
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Restaurant Server
Location:	Asheville
Nominator:	Boone Hollar
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Food & Beverage Assistant Outlets Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Christopher Lovegood’s impact has been evident since the earliest days of Soprana Rooftop Cucina. As one of the restaurant’s very first hires in October 2023, he helped establish the tone, culture, and level of service that define the guest experience today. His presence has shaped the restaurant in meaningful ways, and he continues to serve as one of its strongest ambassadors.

Chris brings genuine passion to his work and reflects Parks Hospitality Group’s core values through every interaction. He is known for his warm, bubbly demeanor and his ability to make guests feel welcome and cared for from the moment they arrive. He approaches each shift with energy and intention, consistently looking for ways to improve operations and elevate service. His initiative is steady, and he willingly steps in wherever support is needed, always with a positive, adaptable mindset.

As a peer leader, Chris plays an important role in training and coaching new team members. He leads with patience and clarity, helping others understand expectations and grow in confidence. He regularly shares thoughtful ideas to enhance the guest experience and is fully invested in the restaurant’s success.

Chris is dependable and emotionally present, someone his teammates trust and rely on. He celebrates his coworkers, participates in nearly every team event, and speaks proudly about the opportunities and culture within the organization. His passion, leadership, and commitment to hospitality have left a lasting mark on Soprana Rooftop Cucina, making him a highly deserving candidate for Restaurant Employee of the Year.

Nominee:	Gergana 'Gerry' Mincheva
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	Restaurant Server
Location:	Charlotte
Nominator:	Christophe Le Chatton
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Gergana “Gerry” Mincheva’s impact is deeply felt throughout The Ballantyne Hotel and especially within the Food and Beverage team she has helped anchor for the past decade. Over ten years of dedicated service, Gerry has become a true cornerstone of the operation, known for her extraordinary work ethic, gracious spirit, and genuine care for others.

From the moment she joined the Gallery Restaurant, it was clear that Gerry brought something special. She is often described as a “force of nature,” someone whose presence elevates every space she works in. Over the years, she has seamlessly supported multiple areas of the department, including the hotel’s beloved Afternoon Tea service. Many regular guests return specifically hoping to see her, a testament to the relationships she builds and the sense of welcome she creates. She has a rare gift for making people feel truly seen, valued, and cared for.

What sets Gerry apart most is her kindness and instinctive willingness to help. She consistently steps in without hesitation whenever someone needs support, regardless of the circumstance. Her selflessness and quiet strength have shaped the culture of the team in meaningful ways, reinforcing a spirit of collaboration, compassion, and professionalism.

In recognition of her impact, Gerry was named Team Member of the Year in 2023, an honor that reflects the respect and admiration she has earned from both leadership and peers. She is not only an exceptional employee, but also a role model and steady presence others rely on.

Gerry represents the very best of hospitality. Her heart for service, consistency, and genuine connection make her deeply deserving of recognition as Restaurant Employee of the Year.



Nominee:	Karen Lopez
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Hérons AM Captain/Server
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	Leah Goodnight
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Director of Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Karen’s impact is defined by steady growth, genuine care for guests, and a deep commitment to her team. Over nearly 10 years at The Umstead, she has built a remarkable path grounded in grace, curiosity, and service. Beginning as a concierge with the Spa Team, she was a natural with guests from the start, quickly earning a reputation for poise, warmth, and thoughtful connection. That same presence followed her as she moved into the Herons AM dining team, where her leadership potential continued to shine.

Karen’s progression has been driven by both skill and heart. She has grown from server assistant to server and now serves as acting Captain and Trainer, frequently stepping in as a Supervisor when needed. Teammates consistently note her reliability, versatility, and willingness to support others in any role. As one nomination shared, “Karen is hard working and can fill in any position... she always has helping hands for her team,” and “we can count on her”.

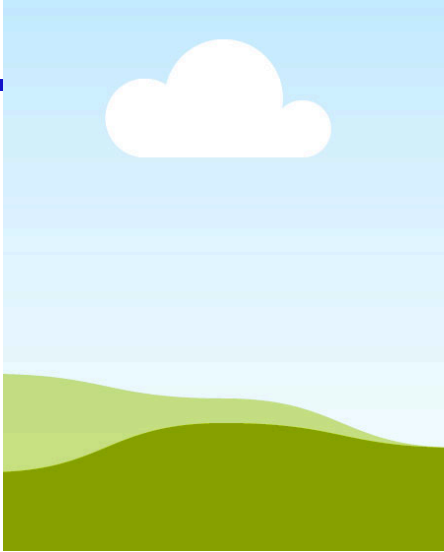
What truly distinguishes Karen is how she creates meaningful guest moments while teaching others to do the same. She leads by example, using her own ideas as training opportunities for new associates. One moment captures this perfectly: when a regular family shared that their young son, Adam, was about to become a big brother, Karen saw an opportunity to create a true “WOW” experience. Together with a newer associate, she arranged a custom menu with Adam’s name and Wild Kratts-themed coloring on the back, and surprised the parents with a congratulatory baby gift. It was thoughtful, personal, and deeply memorable.

Colleagues consistently describe Karen as cooperative, supportive, and someone who “always goes the extra mile for the guest and team,” even staying late to help coworkers after completing her own work.

Through quiet leadership, heartfelt service, and genuine mentorship, Karen exemplifies the true Umstead experience and leaves a lasting impression on everyone she serves.



Nominee:	Pearl Greenway
Employer:	BISCUITVILLE Fresh Southern
Title:	Operator
Location:	Graham
Nominator:	Agnes Stevens
Employer:	RLF Communications
Title:	Vice President



Nominee’s Impact:

Pearl Greenway’s impact on the Biscuitville organization extends far beyond the walls of her Graham restaurant. As both a high-performing operator and a Certified Training Manager, Pearl is widely recognized as a leader who develops people, strengthens teams, and consistently puts the greater good of the organization first.

Pearl currently leads one of Biscuitville’s busiest locations, serving more than 270,000 meals annually and generating over \$3 million in sales, while maintaining exceptional People Excellence scores and one of the lowest turnover rates in the company. Team members routinely say, “People love to work with Pearl,” a reflection of the culture she has intentionally built through care, accountability, and celebration.

Her influence is multiplied through her role as a Certified Training Manager. Pearl has personally developed and launched more than 30 operators and assistant managers now leading restaurants across the brand. Her Graham location serves as a Certified Training Location, welcoming approximately 10 trainees each year to learn firsthand what high-performing leadership looks like. Pearl is known for willingly releasing her strongest managers to support the broader organization, even when it means short-term sacrifice for her own restaurant.

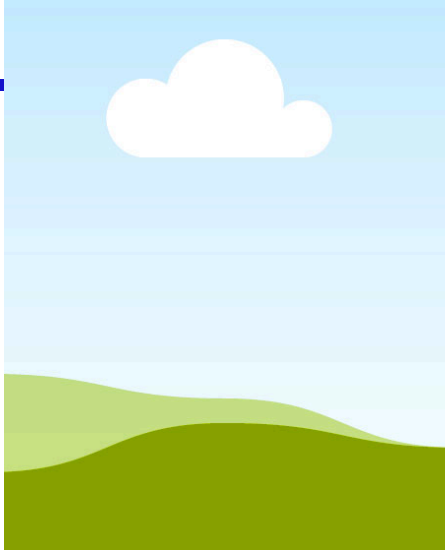
Pearl’s leadership style is deeply relational. She is a mentor to peers, a coach to new leaders, and a trusted guide for teens and young adults entering the workforce. Her hiring and onboarding process is intentional and values-driven, centered on Biscuitville’s core principles of authenticity, integrity, gratitude, accountability, and passion. New hires are paired with “Biscuit Buddies,” checked in on daily, and welcomed into a workplace that celebrates milestones and supports one another during difficult times.

Her manager, Wendell Williamson, shared a defining example of her leadership: “Pearl learned about a struggling location and called to let me know she was on her way. She arrived with one of her assistants and another operator. It would have been a difficult day otherwise. Pearl does not let others suffer.”

Pearl’s career journey—from a teenage food service employee to one of Biscuitville’s most trusted leaders—reflects her belief that every step matters. She leads with generosity, discipline, and heart, and her legacy is visible in the people she has developed and the culture she has created. Pearl Greenway exemplifies the very best of hospitality leadership.



Nominee:	Lori Miller
Employer:	Kipos Hellenic Cuisine
Title:	General Manager
Location:	Wilmington
Nominator:	Muihrienne Leggat
Employer:	Giorgios Hospitality Group
Title:	Operations Director



Nominee’s Impact:

Lori Miller’s impact on Kipos Hellenic Cuisine is impossible to miss. Under her leadership, Kipos has grown into one of Wilmington’s premier dining destinations, not just because of its food, but because of the culture, energy, and hospitality she brings to the restaurant every single day. Lori leads with clarity, high standards, and an infectious positivity. She shows up happy, engaged, and ready to lead, and her team knows exactly what is expected of them because she communicates with honesty, fairness, and consistency.

Lori has overseen tremendous growth, expanding Kipos from a single dining room to include two private dining spaces and a garden that has multiplied in size. What began as a restaurant has evolved into one of Wilmington’s most vibrant social scenes, with the Kipos Garden Party becoming a signature experience. Through it all, Lori manages complexity with confidence, grace, and the belief that hospitality, while serious, should still be fun.

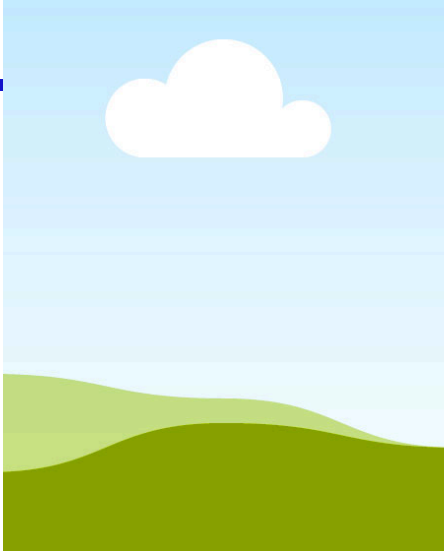
Those who work closest with her speak passionately about her leadership. Executive Chef and partner George Delidimos shared, “Lori is an exceptional general manager whose dedication and leadership elevate every aspect of Kipos... Her ability to solve problems, inspire those around her, and maintain a high standard of excellence makes her an outstanding contender for Restaurant Manager of the Year.”

Lori is also a mentor and incubator for future leaders. One manager shared that when times get tough, she simply asks herself what Lori would do. Another reflected, “She is fair, fun, hardworking, and resilient... guiding, supporting, and elevating those around her.”

On a personal level, Lori’s hospitality leaves a lasting impression. Long before she led Kipos, she welcomed guests into a nearly closed restaurant with warmth, care, and generosity that felt like being invited into her own home. That moment revealed exactly who she is and why her leadership has transformed Kipos. Lori’s influence is felt in every space she leads, and honoring her would reflect the very best of our industry.



Nominee:	Erin Macon
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Food & Beverage Operations Manager
Location:	Asheville
Nominator:	Heather Hickman
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Director of Food and Beverage



Nominee’s Impact:

Erin’s impact is felt in the steady, behind-the-scenes leadership that keeps the entire operation moving forward. As Operations Manager, she is described as the quiet force who holds the team together, leading with meticulous organization, foresight, and a genuine heart for the people around her. Excellence is not something she turns on when needed; it is a daily habit reflected in how she works and how she cares for her team.

Erin consistently goes far beyond her role, often coming in on her days off simply because she refuses to let her team feel unsupported. She thinks several steps ahead, anticipates challenges before they arise, and brings a level of care and consistency that elevates the entire operation. Her presence creates stability and confidence for those who work alongside her.

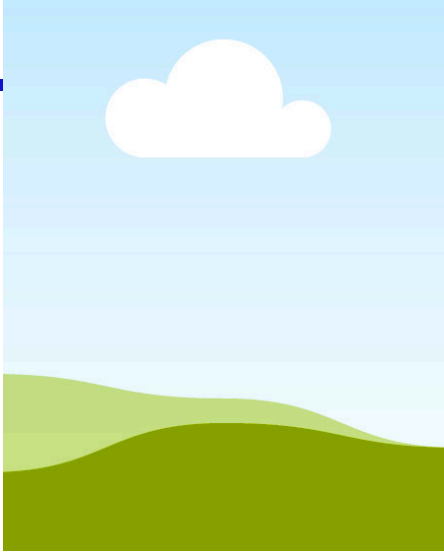
Her leadership was most powerfully demonstrated during Hurricane Helene. While uncertainty affected the entire community, Erin showed up every single day without hesitation. She coordinated meals for her team, ensured they had a safe place to stay within the hotel, organized resources, and personally checked in on staff members. In a time when nothing felt stable, she created structure, safety, and reassurance.

Beyond caring for her team, Erin extended that same compassion to the broader community. She helped coordinate free meals, supplies, and support for neighbors impacted by the storm, balancing the needs of guests, staff, and the community with calm, efficient leadership. As one nominator shared, her actions “became a lifeline for many.”

Erin leads with integrity, serves with heart, and shows up when it matters most. Her dedication to her team and community exemplifies the true spirit of hospitality and makes her deeply deserving of recognition.



Nominee:	Jeremy Fox
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Food & Beverage Director
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	TK Franklin
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Jeremy Fox’s impact as a restaurant leader is felt immediately and consistently across our operation. He is a hands-on, deeply committed manager whose presence elevates both the guest experience and team culture every single day. Jeremy leads from the front, staying in motion and stepping wherever he is needed, whether that means supporting the front of house, troubleshooting behind the scenes, or assisting other departments across our two hotels.

What speaks most clearly to Jeremy’s leadership is the loyalty he inspires. Team members trust him, respect him, and choose to follow him. Several have moved with him from previous properties because of the way he leads: fairly, consistently, and with genuine care. Jeremy models the behavior he expects from others, and he does so without ego. There is truly no task beneath him. He has been seen plunging toilets, helping at the front desk, and even climbing into dumpsters to recover lost items for guests. His actions set a powerful tone that resonates throughout the team.

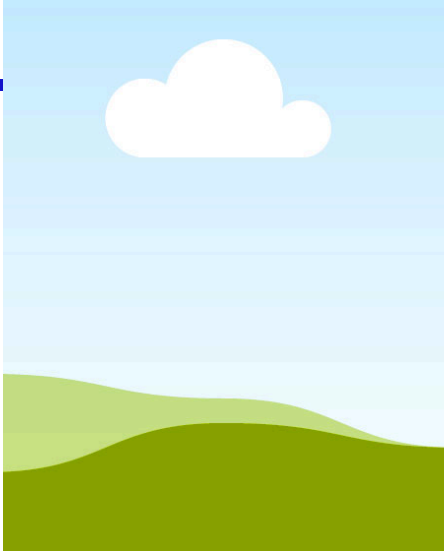
Jeremy’s versatility is another defining strength. He is often described as a “Swiss Army knife” because of his deep understanding of how all parts of the hotel and restaurant operation connect. He can step into nearly any role when needed, and he does so confidently and effectively.

Problem-solving comes naturally to Jeremy. He remains calm under pressure, thinks quickly, and always centers his decisions around guest satisfaction. Guests return because of the service culture he reinforces, and teams thrive because of the stability and support he provides.

Above all, Jeremy leads with heart. His loyalty, integrity, and work ethic make him an exceptional manager and a true example of hospitality leadership at its best.



Nominee:	Kelsey Alonso
Employer:	Persimmons Waterfront Restaurant
Title:	General Manager
Location:	New Bern
Nominator:	Dean Quadir
Employer:	FCM Hotels
Title:	Corporate Director of Food & Beverage



Nominee’s Impact:

Kelsey Alonzo’s impact on Persimmons Waterfront Restaurant has been both immediate and transformative. Since joining as General Manager in March 2024, relocating more than 600 miles to take on the role, she quickly assessed the operation with clarity and purpose. Rather than making surface-level changes, Kelsey recognized that lasting improvement would require rebuilding culture through deeper relationships with staff, vendors, and guests.

From the start, Kelsey led with presence and intention. She begins each day by personally greeting every team member in the building and takes the time to explain not just what is changing, but why it matters and how each individual contributes to success. She is deeply hands-on in hiring, personally interviewing candidates and leading comprehensive service-oriented onboarding. This approach created trust, accountability, and alignment across the team.

Within months, the shift was unmistakable. The energy of the restaurant changed, service attitudes improved, and guests took notice. Reviews reflected higher satisfaction, repeat business increased, and by the end of her first year, the team was fully dialed in on delivering great food and great service. As one nominator noted, “It was very obvious...that a fundamental change in the culture of the Persimmons staff had occurred under Kelsey’s leadership.”

That cultural transformation delivered exceptional results. Throughout 2025, the restaurant consistently exceeded revenue forecasts, improved operational efficiency, and achieved record-high revenue and profit levels, even as others faced year-over-year declines. Kelsey’s leadership proves that “results come from people.” Her love of service is infectious, her standards are high, and her impact on staff, guests, and ownership truly reflects what it means to be a Star of the Industry.



Nominee:	Sonya Gonzales
Employer:	Prime Bistro & Wine Bar
Title:	General Manager
Location:	Morehead City
Nominator:	Liza Merrell
Employer:	81 Hospitality Group
Title:	Owner



Nominee’s Impact:

Sonya has been an integral part of our hospitality family for more than 13 years, and watching her growth has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. She started as a server at Circa 81 and, through pure dedication, curiosity, and heart, grew into a confident leader and manager who helped shape the identity and success of Prime Bistro from the ground up.

When we opened Prime Bistro, Sonya stepped into the challenge of managing an entirely new concept with a different atmosphere and service style. She poured herself into learning every detail of what we wanted Prime to represent: elevated service, exceptional food and drink, and a welcoming culture that guests feel the moment they walk through the door. Today, Prime’s strong reputation is a direct reflection of her commitment, leadership, and unwavering standards of excellence.

Sonya leads with poise, compassion, and strength. She consistently goes above and beyond for both guests and her team, and she is always the first to step in when help is needed, no matter the project or circumstance. Her growth is especially meaningful because she built it through experience and determination. Without formal training, she taught herself POS systems, financial reporting, and key performance indicators, fully buying into our vision and pushing herself to learn what she didn’t yet know.

Guests regularly feel the impact of Sonya’s leadership and hospitality. One recent guest shared, “Sonya and her team treated us like royalty,” highlighting the personalized care, attention to detail, and memorable touches that define the Prime Bistro experience, from thoughtful birthday surprises to exceptional service throughout the evening.

Her heart for service extends far beyond the restaurant. During Hurricane Florence, while her own home was without power, Sonya worked tirelessly serving meals from the Dank Burrito food truck to people in need. She did the same during Hurricane Helene, volunteering her time in Western North Carolina. She shows up for her community and for the people around her without hesitation.

Sonya is unwavering in her commitment to service, her team, and her community. Prime’s growth and reputation are largely due to her dedication, and it is truly a pleasure to work alongside someone who embodies hospitality so fully, both inside and outside the restaurant.



Nominee:	Eric Hamann
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	Assistant General Manager
Location:	Charlotte
Nominator:	Christophe Le Chatton
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Eric’s impact on our restaurant is so deep and far-reaching that it is difficult to capture it fully on paper. He is not just a manager; he is the person who shapes our culture, develops our people, and sets the standard for what leadership looks like every single day.

Eric is an extraordinary mentor. Every new manager and emerging leader who joins our department benefits from his patience, guidance, and genuine desire to see others succeed. He never hesitates to step in, teach, or support someone through a challenge, and his influence can be seen in the many strong leaders who have grown under his care. His knowledge of our operations, systems, and service standards is unmatched, and he leads by example in everything he does.

What truly sets Eric apart is how he shows up for people. Even on the busiest or most difficult days, he finds time to check in, encourage the team, and make sure everyone feels seen and valued. He wants people to enjoy coming to work, and that care is felt the moment he walks through the door.

Because of his leadership and impact, Eric was recently promoted to Assistant General Manager at our Dunbar restaurant, a well-earned recognition of the respect he has earned across our team.

Eric is the heart of our operation, the person everyone turns to, and the kind of leader who leaves a lasting mark on both people and performance.



Nominee:	Laura Ray
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Food & Beverage Manager
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	Glaziela Mendonça
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	In-Room Dining Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Laura Ray’s impact on The Umstead Hotel is deeply personal, transformational, and felt every day by both the team she leads and the guests they serve. She is the kind of Food & Beverage leader many of us wait our entire careers to work for. Her professionalism, work ethic, and compassion have reshaped the culture of the department in a way that feels genuine, human, and lasting.

What sets Laura apart is how intentionally she listens. She puts employees and guests first in a way that goes beyond policy or procedure. She works side by side with the team, teaching, guiding, and inspiring through action. She doesn’t just talk about hospitality and kindness, she lives it. Being around her has reignited passions that some of us thought were lost. One nominator shared that after reading *Unreasonable Hospitality*, it was Laura who truly showed what that mindset looks like in real life. “I didn’t think I knew anyone who could have a mindset like Will Guidara,” the nominator wrote. “Laura is that person.”

Her leadership shows up most clearly in quiet moments. After working a 12-hour day, Laura made a point to check in with every Food & Beverage team member, simply asking what she could do to help. When she learned an employee was having a particularly hard day, she stayed for hours longer, offering support and listening until that person felt better. She did not leave because the job was done; she stayed because the person mattered.

Laura is strong, thoughtful, and unafraid of the challenges of hospitality. She supports with a smile, leads with intelligence, and makes people feel heard and valued. Leaders like Laura are rare, and her presence has changed The Umstead for the better.



Nominee:	Zuzana Vargova
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Herons Restaurant AM Manager
Location:	Cary
Nominator:	Leah Goodnight
Employer:	The Umstead Hotel & Spa
Title:	Director of Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Zuzana Vargova has been a defining presence at The Umstead Hotel and Spa since opening day nearly 19 years ago. Her journey from AM Herons server to Dining Manager reflects a career built on dedication, leadership, and an unwavering commitment to exceptional hospitality. Colleagues and guests alike describe her as “one of a kind,” a leader whose warmth, attentiveness, and professionalism elevate every experience she touches.

Zuzana is known for creating what The Umstead calls “Golden Nuggets,” thoughtful, personal touches that turn great service into unforgettable moments. Guests consistently feel seen and cared for through her intuitive approach to hospitality, while her team benefits from her steady guidance, empathy, and genuine investment in their growth. Team members regularly note how deeply she supports them, celebrates their milestones, and fosters a sense of pride and belonging within the AM Herons dining room.

One guest interaction perfectly captures her impact. While checking on a couple celebrating their 45th wedding anniversary, Zuzana learned that the husband’s favorite drink was an espresso martini, one his wife had lovingly made for him for decades. After sharing a laugh, Zuzana quietly printed the recipe for The Umstead’s signature espresso martini and gifted it to the wife so she could surprise her husband at home. It was a small, thoughtful gesture that turned a memorable evening into a lasting story.

This same care defines Zuzana’s leadership. She leads with authenticity, creates meaningful connections, and models the kind of service that cannot be scripted or taught. Her dedication to guests and her team makes her a truly deserving Stars of the Industry nominee.



Nominee:	Meggan Mendoza
Employer:	Weldon Mills Distillery
Title:	General Manager
Location:	Durham
Nominator:	Samantha Jordan & Abigail Chavarria
Employer:	Weldon Mills Distillery
Title:	Bartender



Nominee’s Impact:

Meggan Mendoza has been a powerhouse in Durham’s hospitality community long before I ever arrived here, and in the short time I’ve been part of this industry locally, her impact has been impossible to miss. From the moment you encounter Meggan, you understand why so many people look to her as a leader and mentor.

What stands out most about Meggan is her ability to lead with both empathy and strength. She is deeply kind and understanding, yet her professionalism and authority never waver. That balance is rare. It is empowering to watch her excel in a male-dominated industry and do so with confidence, grace, and undeniable competence. She commands respect not by force, but by example.

Meggan gives everything she has to this industry and the people in it. She works incredibly long hours, supports her team through personal and professional challenges, and is often the person others turn to when they need guidance or reassurance. Even after exhausting shifts, she still finds the energy to give back to the community, including spending her own time feeding unhoused neighbors. That speaks volumes about who she is and what she believes hospitality should be.

To me, Meggan is more than a manager. She is a true leader and a mentor, not just to me, but to countless others across Durham’s service industry. She teaches with patience, intelligence, and genuine care. She is approachable, thoughtful, and deeply invested in helping others grow.

I genuinely believe that anyone who has met Meggan would say the same. She sets the standard for what leadership in hospitality should look like, and our industry is better because of her.

Nominee:	Ashley Harrell
Employer:	Gaffer's Restaurant
Title:	Owner
Location:	Emerald Isle
Nominator:	Maria Joana Anderson and 6 Other Nominations
Employer:	Gaffer's Restaurant
Title:	Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Ashley Harrell’s impact on her team, her guests, and her community is extraordinary and far-reaching. Those of us who nominated her consistently describe a leader whose compassion, resilience, and generosity have reshaped what hospitality looks like in practice. Working for Ashley is often described as a complete shift from the transactional, cost-cutting culture many of us experienced elsewhere in the industry. She leads with heart, invests deeply in her people, and believes that success means lifting others along the way.

Ashley’s journey informs everything she does. After losing everything during the 2008 market crash, she and her family started over from nothing, living in a tent and later a camper while selling dresses out of a shipping container. Through determination and grit, she rebuilt and went on to create multiple thriving businesses. That lived experience fuels her empathy. She listens, mentors, and supports her team in tangible ways, from flexible scheduling and mental health days to sharing clothing and essentials. As one nominator shared, “She values her staff in ways I have never seen from a boss.”

One of the most powerful examples of Ashley’s leadership came during the local “sign wars” trend. While others used their marquees for playful messages, Ashley used Gaffer’s sign to shine a light on children being denied hot lunches due to unpaid school lunch debt. She spoke plainly and passionately, saying, “No child should ever feel ashamed for being hungry.” That single act sparked a countywide response. Within days, donations poured in, ultimately raising more than \$35,000 and completely erasing school lunch debt for every student in Carteret County. What began as a lighthearted trend became a movement rooted in empathy and action.

Her commitment to service extends even further. After a devastating hurricane destroyed Ocracoke and Gaffer’s original location, Ashley, having lost everything herself, vowed to give back once she rebuilt. She continues to travel and work alongside Mercy Chefs to feed disaster-stricken communities and remains deeply engaged in local giving, from scholarships to year-round fundraising.

Ashley leads by example through hands-on service, required community service tied to staff trips, and constant presence in her restaurants. Her authenticity, work ethic, and care for others have earned deep loyalty and admiration. To those of us who nominated her, Ashley Harrell is not just a successful restaurateur, she is the definition of servant leadership and a truly deserving Restaurateur of the Year.



Nominee:	Douglas Rodriguez
Employer:	Niko's Greek Taverna
Title:	Executive Chef
Location:	Durham
Nominator:	Negin Naseri
Employer:	Giorgios Hospitality Group
Title:	Marketing Director



Nominee’s Impact:

Chef Douglas has made an extraordinary impact on Nikos, not only through his culinary talent, but through the way he leads, mentors, and connects with people. His leadership has been central to positioning Nikos as a regional standout and earning recognition in the MICHELIN Guide, yet what impresses me most is how deeply his influence reaches beyond the kitchen.

As Executive Chef, Douglas brings Greek cuisine to life with authenticity, creativity, and respect for tradition. Every dish reflects intention and story, and guests consistently comment on the balance, precision, and emotional resonance of the food. Many mention specific plates that “exceeded expectations” or defined their entire dining experience. His close collaboration with the front-of-house team ensures that what leaves the kitchen translates seamlessly to the guest, creating a unified and elevated experience.

Douglas leads with calm focus and integrity. New team members regularly describe him as patient, supportive, and inspiring. He invests time in training, shares knowledge openly, and builds confidence in those around him. Even during the busiest services, his steady presence and high standards set the tone for consistency and excellence.

One moment perfectly captures who he is. During a busy service, a guest shared that Nikos was the final stop on a milestone birthday trip and their first chance to experience true Greek hospitality. Douglas stepped out of the kitchen, listened to their story, and personally prepared an off-menu dish inspired by his own childhood. He presented it tableside, explaining its meaning and origin. The guest later said it was “the most heartfelt gesture I’ve ever received in a restaurant.”

That instinct to create meaningful, personal connections defines Douglas’s leadership. He is a culture-builder, a storyteller, and a true ambassador of hospitality whose impact is felt by guests, team members, and the broader culinary community alike.



Nominee:	Christopher Prieto
Employer:	Prime Barbecue
Title:	Owner/Pitmaster
Location:	Knightdale
Nominator:	Jennifer Noble Kelly
Employer:	JNK Public Relations
Title:	Founder/Publicist



Nominee’s Impact:

Christopher Prieto’s impact on North Carolina’s hospitality and culinary landscape is both profound and far-reaching. From the moment he opened Prime Barbecue in Knightdale in early 2020, it was clear that this was not simply another restaurant, but a destination built on craft, heritage, and genuine hospitality. In a remarkably short period of time, Prime Barbecue earned national recognition, including a Michelin Bib Gourmand and placement in the first historic Michelin Guide to the American South, alongside honors from Southern Living, the News & Observer, and Texas Monthly.

What makes Christopher truly exceptional is that his accolades are matched by substance. His barbecue is the result of decades of dedication, beginning with childhood memories in Texas and evolving through years of competitive excellence. His resume includes championships on the professional barbecue circuit, a perfect 180 brisket score, Master Certified Barbecue Judge credentials, and appearances on national television. Yet, despite this success, he leads with humility, living by his mantra to “stay humble and stay hungry.”

At Prime Barbecue, Christopher’s leadership is felt in every detail, from custom-built smokers and scratch-made sides to the way heritage and storytelling are woven into each dish. His Puerto Rican roots, Texas training, and North Carolina home come together in food that feels both personal and inclusive. Guests consistently experience



Nominee:	Clarke Merrell
Employer:	Prime Bistro & Wine Bar
Title:	Owner
Location:	Morehead City
Nominator:	Sonya Gonzales
Employer:	Prime Bistro & Wine Bar
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Clarke Merrell is the first person who comes to mind when I think about what it truly means to be Restaurateur of the Year. His impact reaches far beyond the walls of his restaurants and into the heart of the communities he serves. Clarke leads with integrity, generosity, and a deep sense of responsibility for both his team and his neighbors.

What sets Clarke apart is how intentionally he invests in people. He builds his teams by fostering growth, collaboration, and a culture rooted in genuine hospitality. His restaurants reflect his values, from strong local partnerships to thoughtful sourcing, whether that means showcasing fresh catch from Blue Ocean or supporting producers like Marshallberg Farm. Every decision reflects his belief that restaurants should strengthen the communities around them.

Clarke’s commitment to service is especially evident in moments of crisis. After Hurricane Florence, when many were still without power or basic resources, Clarke and a small team immediately put his food truck to work. For an entire week, he provided hot meals to anyone who needed one, no questions asked. When Hurricane Helene devastated Western North Carolina, Clarke again acted without hesitation, loading up the truck with Danksgiving burritos and heading straight to the mountains to serve those impacted.

These actions were not done for recognition; they were instinctive responses from someone who believes hospitality is about showing up when it matters most. Clarke consistently gives back through charitable efforts, support for local schools and businesses, and hands-on service during times of need.

His leadership, compassion, and unwavering dedication to making a positive impact define his work. Clarke Merrell represents the very best of our industry and is deeply deserving of this honor.

Nominee:	April Moon Harper
Employer:	Sunny Point Cafe
Title:	Owner
Location:	Asheville
Nominator:	Michelle Alexander
Employer:	Sunny Point Cafe
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

For more than two decades, April Harper has been the heart and driving force behind Sunny Point Café, and her impact on our restaurant, our team, and our community is profound. As the leader of a high-volume, independent, farm-to-table breakfast and brunch restaurant, she has built a business that balances financial strength with genuine care for people. Her leadership is steady, thoughtful, and grounded in deep respect for both the craft and the individuals who make the restaurant what it is.

April leads by example. She is calm, present, and endlessly supportive, even in the most challenging moments. During the COVID-19 pandemic and again during Hurricane Helene, she navigated uncertainty with integrity and resolve. When Hurricane Helene devastated Asheville and left many without homes, power, or water, April opened the restaurant to the community and served free breakfast and lunch every day. The line stretched down the street, and those meals became a source of comfort and hope for countless neighbors during an incredibly difficult time.

Her commitment to community extends far beyond emergencies. Each month, she highlights a local nonprofit in the restaurant and donates a portion of the funds collected. She regularly provides food and gift cards to local schools and organizations and supports local farmers through intentional sourcing. Guests return not only for the food, but for the sense of belonging she has cultivated.

Michelle Alexander, who has managed at Sunny Point Café for 16 years, shared this personal reflection:

“I have worked closely with April through some of the hardest moments in our restaurant’s history. In every situation, she leads with calm, integrity, and compassion. During Hurricane Helene, watching her open the restaurant and serve our community for free was incredibly powerful. Our staff felt honored to be part of that work, and even now, people still talk about those meals. I can say with absolute confidence that we are proud and grateful to work under her leadership.”

April Harper’s vision, resilience, and humanity have shaped Sunny Point Café into a cornerstone of Asheville’s food community and make her truly deserving of recognition.



Nominee:	William Dissen
Employer:	The Market Place Restaurant
Title:	Chef & Owner
Location:	Asheville
Nominator:	Erin Mitchell
Employer:	Intellisound
Title:	Director



Nominee’s Impact:

For decades, Chef William Dissen and The Market Place Restaurant have stood as a defining force in Asheville’s dining scene and a national leader in sustainable hospitality. For more than 46 years, the restaurant has helped shape the farm-to-table movement across the South, and under Chef Dissen’s leadership, it has continually pushed the boundaries of what responsible, community-centered dining can look like.

Chef Dissen has built one of the “greenest” restaurants in America through intentional, values-driven decisions. The Market Place operates with solar power, recycled and reused building materials, a zero-waste kitchen, water-powered HVAC and refrigeration systems, and a deep commitment to sourcing ingredients from farms within 100 miles of the restaurant. Sustainability is not a talking point here; it is the foundation of every decision.

That commitment became even more evident during Hurricane Helene. While the restaurant was closed for more than 70 days due to lack of clean water, Chef Dissen and his team focused outward, feeding thousands of people in need across the community. At the same time, he worked tirelessly to advocate for recovery, engaging local, state, and federal leaders to push for aid and resources to help Asheville rebuild. One testimonial notes that Chef Dissen “selflessly fed thousands of people in his community” and was “instrumental in the comeback of his city.”

Even amid this crisis, The Market Place and Chef Dissen were recognized by the James Beard Foundation as among the nation’s most outstanding restaurants and chefs, underscoring a rare ability to uphold excellence during profound hardship.

Chef William Dissen leads with humility, purpose, and an unwavering belief that food can be a force for good. His impact extends far beyond the kitchen, making The Market Place Restaurant a true reflection of what Restaurant of the Year represents.

Nominee:	Ashley Harrell
Employer:	Gaffer's Restaurant
Title:	Owner
Location:	Emerald Isle
Nominator:	Maria Joana Anderson and 6 Other Nominations
Employer:	Gaffer's Restaurant
Title:	Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

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Nominee:	Ranbir Bakhshi
Employer:	Alpaca Chicken
Title:	Co-Owner
Location:	Raleigh
Nominator:	Allie Nelson
Employer:	Tabletop Media Group
Title:	PR Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Ranbir Bakhshi’s impact is defined by a deep belief that hospitality extends well beyond food service and into meaningful, sustained community care. Those of us who work with and alongside him see his leadership reflected not only in how his restaurants operate, but in how they show up for the communities they serve. As a co-owner of Alpaca Chicken, a minority- and veteran-owned business, Ranbir consistently uses his platform to uplift others and turn good intentions into lasting action.

One of the most meaningful examples of his leadership is Alpaca Chicken’s annual Hispanic Heritage Month fundraiser, which Ranbir leads with purpose and heart. This initiative is not symbolic; it is carefully aligned with organizations that are deeply rooted in community impact. This year, the fundraiser supported Casa Azul de Wilson, an organization dedicated to empowering Latin youth through education, leadership development, and cultural enrichment. By choosing this partner, Ranbir ensured the effort created real, tangible benefits for local families and young people.

Ranbir also believes community service should be shared and inclusive. To that end, he introduced a company-wide store decorating contest tied to the fundraiser, giving team members at every location the opportunity to participate creatively. This approach fostered pride, collaboration, and a sense of ownership, reinforcing the idea that giving back is a collective responsibility.

His commitment continues throughout the year. During the holidays, Ranbir led a partnership with A Note in the Pocket to address clothing insecurity for children across North Carolina. Through this effort, Alpaca Chicken helped provide essential clothing so children could face the winter months with dignity and confidence.

Ranbir does not view service as a one-time effort, but as part of who he is and how his company operates. His leadership demonstrates how hospitality can be a powerful force for good, making him a deserving embodiment of service to the community.



Nominee:	Dean Neff
Employer:	Seabird
Title:	Owner/Chef
Location:	Wilmington
Nominator:	Jennifer Noble Kelly
Employer:	JNK Public Relations
Title:	Founder/Publicist



Nominee’s Impact:

Chef Dean Neff’s impact reaches far beyond his kitchens and into the very fabric of North Carolina’s coastal communities. Those of us who nominated him see a leader whose work is grounded in deep respect for the land, the water, and the people who depend on both. Through Seabird and Zora’s Market & Kitchen, he has created not just exceptional dining experiences, but lasting community institutions that nourish livelihoods, preserve heritage, and educate the public.

At Seabird, Chef Neff models what true boat-to-table hospitality looks like. His daily-changing menus, built around direct relationships with local fishers, farmers, and foragers, provide an economic lifeline for North Carolina producers. As one nominator shared, this is “not merely a business model; it’s an economic lifeline” that sustains coastal livelihoods while teaching diners about the value of responsibly sourced seafood.

His commitment to community preservation was powerfully demonstrated when he stepped in to steward Zora’s Market & Kitchen, Wilmington’s oldest seafood market. Rather than allowing a beloved neighborhood institution to disappear, he ensured its survival for the families who have relied on it for generations, even reinstating food stamp access to meet community needs. This act reflected a belief that hospitality is about service, not recognition.

Beyond his restaurants, Chef Neff serves tirelessly on behalf of the broader community, supporting the North Carolina Oyster Trail, addressing food insecurity through the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, and contributing his expertise to public health and environmental stewardship. His generosity is often quiet, but always consistent.

Through mentorship, advocacy, and selfless leadership, Chef Dean Neff exemplifies the spirit of service that strengthens entire communities and leaves a legacy far greater than any single restaurant.



Nominee:	Chris Pence
Employer:	HAAND Pottery
Title:	President & Co-Founder
Location:	Burlington
Nominator:	Tracy Navratil
Employer:	HAAND Pottery
Title:	Hospitality & Operations Executive



Nominee’s Impact:

Chris Pence’s impact is rooted in genuine care, humility, and a style of leadership that puts people first. Those of us who work alongside him credit our own passion and dedication to the example he sets every day. As one team member shared, “I would not be so passionate, or so dedicated to the work I do if it were not for Chris’s inspiring leadership.” His commitment to both the business he created and the people he employs consistently raises the bar for how we show up for each other and for the hospitality partners we serve.

Chris leads in the moments that matter most. He celebrates his team in thoughtful, personal ways, from buying lunch for the shipping department during a large order to surprising an employee with a custom cake and speech to mark a 10-year anniversary. He is also deeply hands-on, willing to “wear whatever hat he needs to,” whether that means loading kilns, helping produce pieces, or handling the most routine tasks. His presence makes coming to work feel meaningful and reinforces pride in the craft we create “one plate at a time.”

One nominator shared a deeply personal story that reflects Chris’s character beyond the workplace. During a difficult living situation, she finally confided in him. “Without a second thought, he told me I could stay in the mother-in-law apartment in his home for as long as I needed.” He then showed up “with a U-Haul and a group of co-workers” to help her move. As she shared, “He didn’t do it because he felt obligated. He helped because that is exactly who he is.”

Through this experience, she learned that “kindness is its own form of leadership,” and Chris embodies that truth every day.



Nominee:	Joshua Vukelich
Employer:	Kitchen Guard of North Carolina
Title:	Owner
Location:	Greensboro
Nominator:	Nate Roberts
Employer:	NCRLA
Title:	Digital Communications Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

From the moment Joshua and his team at Kitchen Guard entered the North Carolina market, their impact has been immediate and meaningful. Since joining the hospitality community in late 2024, they have shown a clear commitment not just to growing their business, but to actively supporting the restaurants and hotels they serve.

What stands out most is how intentional they have been about building relationships. They did not hesitate to immerse themselves in the industry, showing up consistently, supporting events, and investing time and resources into understanding the unique needs of North Carolina hospitality operators. That level of engagement speaks volumes about their long-term vision and respect for this industry.

Their work on the ground reinforces that impression. Feedback from customers consistently highlights professionalism, reliability, and a deep understanding of safety and compliance. One operator shared, “Matt and his team at Kitchen Guard are incredible to work with. Punctual, professional, and very detailed.” Another noted, “We have used several kitchen hood cleaning companies over the years and none compare to Kitchen Guard. They are more thorough, more organized, and far more consistent.”

Beyond standard hood cleaning, the team brings valuable expertise that helps operators stay compliant, efficient, and confident in their fire safety systems. As one review put it, “They are not just another hood and exhaust cleaner. They can do maintenance, repairs, and restoration.” That ability to provide knowledgeable recommendations and fast, dependable service allows restaurant operators to focus on what matters most: serving their guests.

Joshua and his team have quickly earned trust through action, follow-through, and quality work. Their early contributions and customer feedback make it clear they are already a valued and impactful partner within North Carolina’s hospitality industry.



Nominee:	Rhonda Benna
Employer:	Tarheel Linen Service
Title:	Director of Hotel Operations
Location:	Charlotte
Nominator:	Kelly Brookins
Employer:	Tarheel Linen Service
Title:	Director of Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Rhonda Benna’s impact on our hospitality partners is profound, long-standing, and deeply personal. For nearly 40 years, she has been a constant and trusted presence in our region, building relationships rooted in integrity, accountability, and an unwavering commitment to service. She is not simply a representative of our company; she is the standard by which our service is measured. Many hotel partners request her by name because they trust her judgment, experience, and genuine care for their operations.

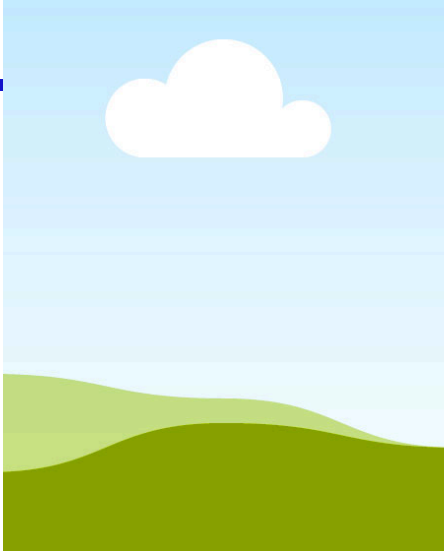
Rhonda’s leadership extends far beyond her title. She develops and trains internal teams while also investing directly in the success of the hotels she serves. From training housekeeping staff to educating managers on best practices, she ensures every property has the tools, knowledge, and confidence to operate at the highest level. She is especially known for empowering others, mentoring young professionals, and instilling pride and precision in the work they do.

One moment consistently cited as emblematic of Rhonda’s character occurred during a winter emergency, when a partner hotel lost heat overnight. Rather than waiting until morning, she drove to the property in the middle of the night and worked alongside the maintenance team to resolve the issue. Because of her swift, hands-on response, “not a single guest experienced discomfort,” preventing what could have been a major service failure.

Her customers often describe her as “family,” “a trusted partner,” and “someone we couldn’t operate without.” Many of our longest-tenured partners remain with us specifically because of Rhonda’s professionalism, follow-through, and care. She protects not only individual businesses, but the reputation of the hospitality industry as a whole. In every respect, Rhonda represents the gold standard of hospitality partnership and service.



Nominee:	Nick Edwards
Employer:	The SEALS of North Carolina
Title:	Regional Manager
Location:	Raleigh
Nominator:	Andy Dinkin
Employer:	The SEALS of North Carolina
Title:	President



Nominee’s Impact:

Nick has made a meaningful and measurable impact through his leadership of our newest initiative, the Small Business Energy Saver program in partnership with Duke Energy. He has taken ownership of this program from the ground up and turned it into a valuable resource for hospitality businesses looking to manage costs and operate more efficiently.

Through Nick’s work, our customers are realizing significant savings on critical equipment and upgrades, including gaskets, strip curtains, EC motors, door closers, and other energy-efficient improvements. These enhancements not only reduce immediate out-of-pocket expenses but also deliver long-term savings by lowering future power bills. In an industry where margins are tight, this program has provided real financial relief and long-term operational benefits for participating businesses.

What truly sets Nick apart is his commitment beyond his own accounts. He has taken a leadership role in expanding this initiative throughout Eastern North Carolina, ensuring that more small hospitality businesses are aware of and able to take advantage of the program. His proactive outreach, guidance, and ability to clearly communicate the value of energy-saving solutions have helped broaden the program’s reach and impact across the region.

As one nominator shared, “Nick is saving our customers a significant amount of money now, and even more on their future power bills.” His dedication, initiative, and regional leadership have made a lasting difference for operators who are navigating rising utility costs and looking for sustainable, cost-effective solutions.

Overall, Nick exemplifies the kind of leadership and service that drives meaningful progress for hospitality businesses across North Carolina.

