



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.

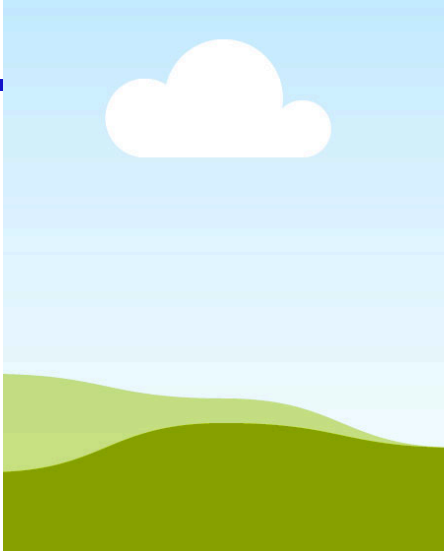


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Stars of the Industry 2026

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.”

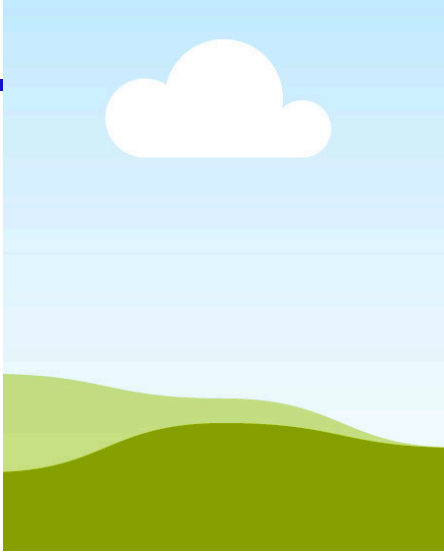
Several testimonials highlight Noel’s sensitivity during difficult or emotional stays, particularly for guests visiting nearby hospitals. One guest wrote, “We were at the hotel for two weeks to be with our son at UNC Hospital. Noel had so much compassion for our situation. We were very grateful.” Another 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.

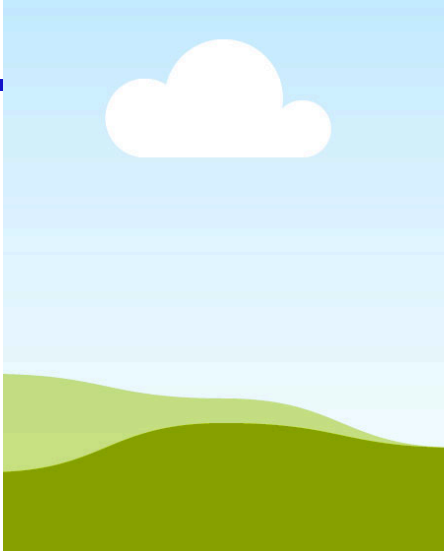
Guests regularly mention Thomas by name in surveys and reviews, praising his friendliness, attentiveness, and the genuine way he connects with people. His approach to service has directly contributed to the property’s strong performance, including its #7 stay score ranking out of 264 Embassy Suites locations. 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.

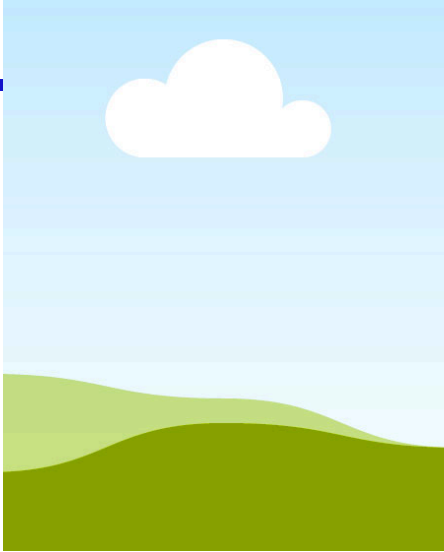
James is consistently recognized by guests, leading the property in positive survey mentions and ranking among the top performers in Hilton Honors enrollments. He has earned multiple Employee of the Month recognitions for his ability to anticipate needs, listen attentively, and deliver personalized service 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.

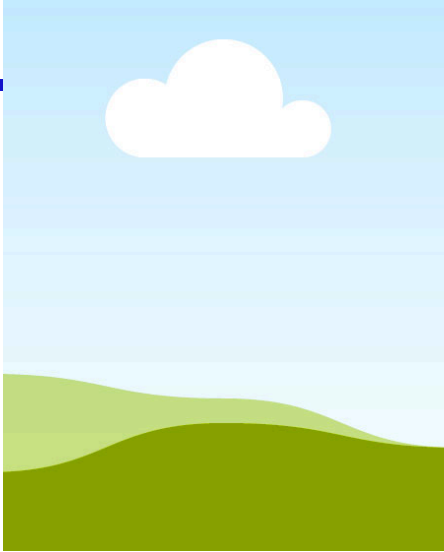
When Freddy transitioned into the banquet department in 2014, his influence became unmistakable. He is often described as a “silent leader,” someone who leads through example rather than title. His dependability, consistency, and kindness naturally set the tone for the entire team. Without seeking recognition, 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.

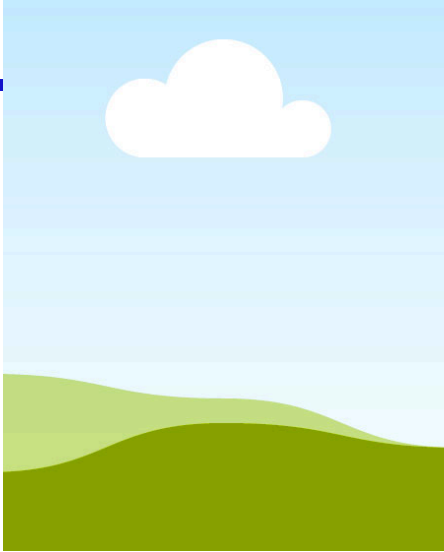
Carlos possesses a rare, intuitive gift for service that cannot be taught. He anticipates needs before they are spoken, reads situations with empathy and calm, and delivers care with a humanity that defines the heart of this industry. Guests do not just remember him, they seek him out. Many call ahead 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.

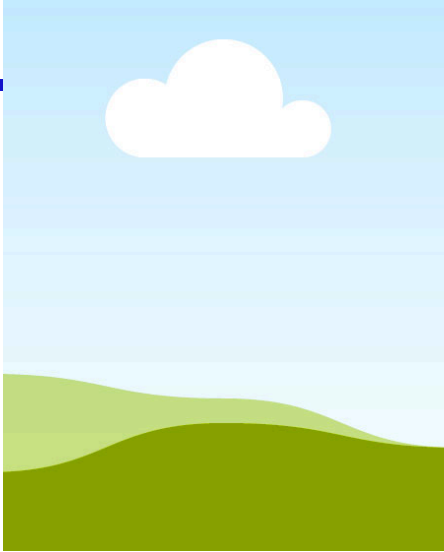
Her operational impact is just as meaningful. Caroline is organized, forward-thinking, and dependable, keeping the desk and shared spaces clean, stocked, and running smoothly. She readily assists other departments, supports new team members, and quickly becomes the go-to resource for questions about 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.

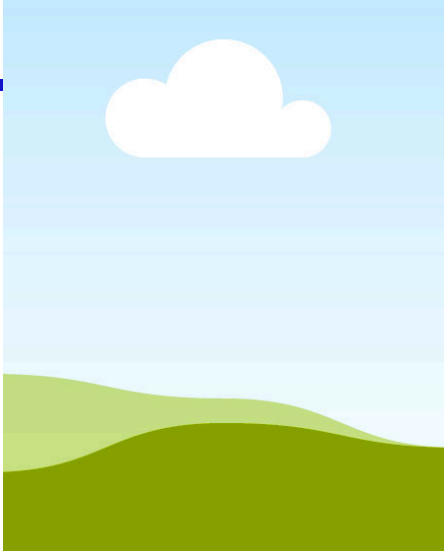
Scott is widely recognized for his forward-thinking approach to maintenance and innovation. Under his leadership, the engineering team has implemented energy-efficient systems that have reduced operational costs while enhancing the guest experience. He consistently anticipates potential issues and addresses 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.

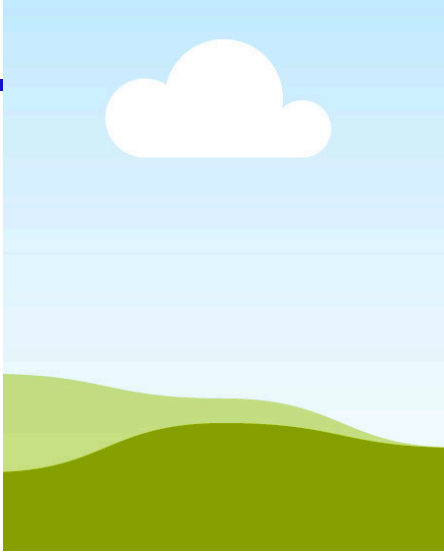
Margarita’s operational impact is equally strong. She consistently balances staffing needs with cost control, maintaining high service standards while managing labor efficiently. Her proactive planning, accountability, and attention to detail ensure the department operates smoothly and reliably, even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

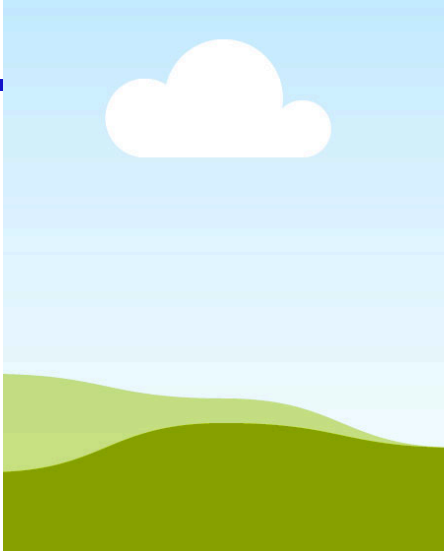
Travis is known for his ability to anticipate needs and respond quickly to any challenge. He approaches every situation with urgency, care, and professionalism, whether resolving complex maintenance issues or stepping in to help guests with unexpected needs. One nominator shared that his willingness 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:	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:	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.

