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NOVEMBER 2010

DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CONCIERGE

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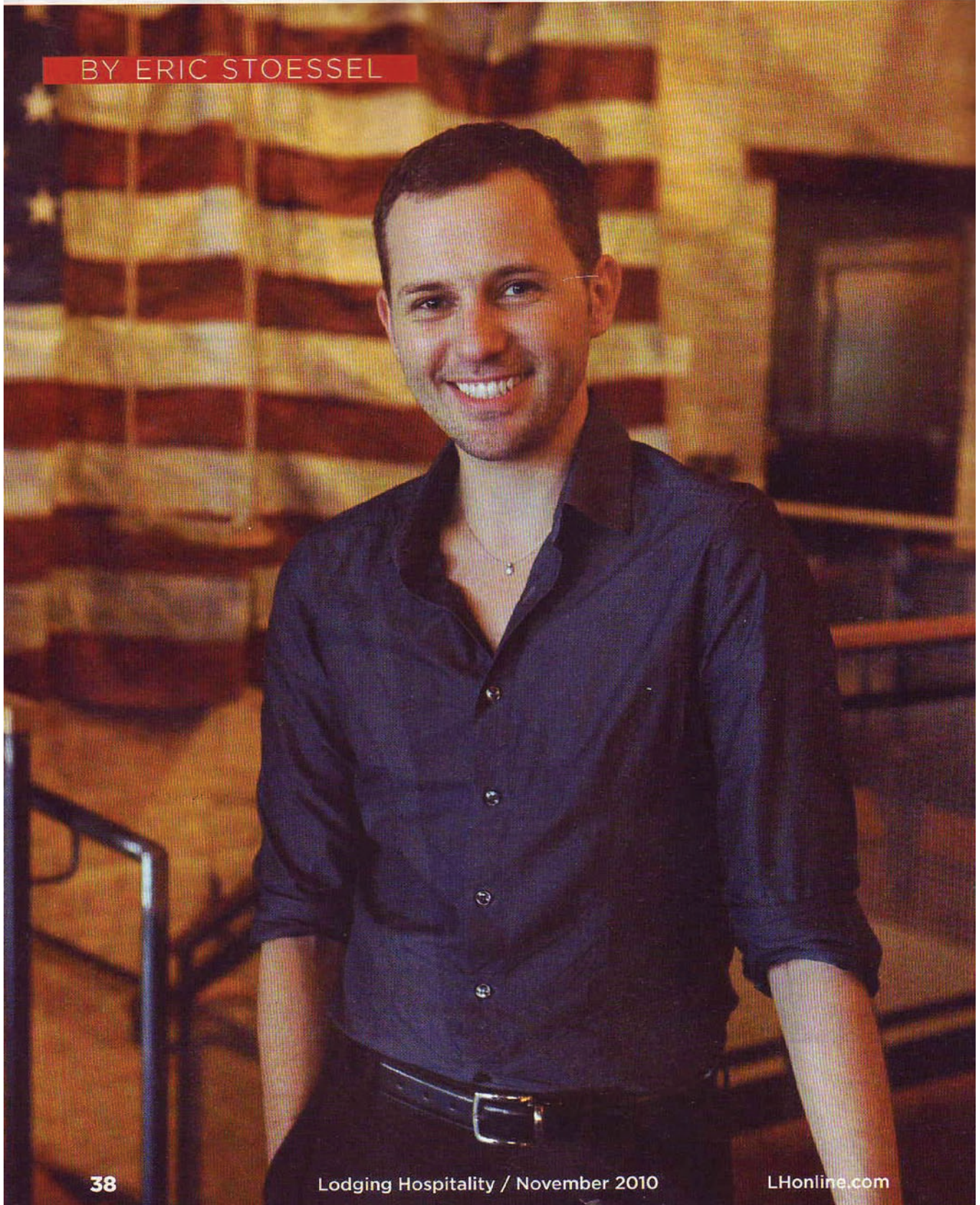
Homewood Suites
by Hilton
Tops 300 Hotels,
Readies
New Brand

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The Homewood executive team (from left): Carla Raynor, vp-marketing; Don Willingham, senior director, national brand sales; Mike Mallott, director, internal culture/communications; Dawn Koenig, vp-brand support; and Bill Duncan, global head.

MORE THAN A **CONCIERGE**

BY ERIC STOESSEL



A DAY IN THE LIFE WITH JAMES VALONA, THE MANAGER OF DESIRES AT THE IRON HORSE HOTEL

It's not easy talking to James Valona in the lobby of the Iron Horse. The manager of desires can't go more than a couple minutes without getting interrupted by a hello or some good-natured ribbing from a fellow employee or guest. The 28-year-old has held the odd sounding job title for the Milwaukee boutique hotel since it opened two years ago.

I'm in town to spend an afternoon with James, to try and figure out what a manager of desires does exactly, and what makes this one worthy of being named the outstanding manager of the year and a star of the industry by the American Hotel & Lodging Association.

James works at the Iron Horse for boutique management company Desires Hotels, a division of Tecton Hospitality, and his main job description is to coordinate the "Your Desires" membership program for guests. It is an example of Tecton's firm belief in hospitality and personalized customer service. The program is described on Desires' website as "a step above your average concierge service."

James is in charge of making sure Your Desires guests are treated to a unique lifestyle experience with perks customized to their preferences. They have a complimentary beverage and snack waiting in their room after check-in, with a personalized note from James, and get room upgrades when available. James also helps with special room requests, planning itineraries and securing reservations to local hotspots.

Just Another Day at the Iron Horse

Considering the 100-room Iron Horse Hotel has run at nearly 80-percent full this year, it's not surprising that on my visit the property was buzzing with activity. Thursdays are bike night during the summer, and with one of the biggest motorcycle rallies going on in Milwaukee the first week in September, there were approximately 75 Harley-Davidsons parked out front Thursday night despite occasional rain. Branded, the bar, was mobbed. Tables were full at Smyth, the restaurant, and the outdoor venue, The Yard, was packed with people wearing everything from leather to suits to jeans and shorts.

A producer from the Today Show was visiting to film a spot with owner Tim Dixon for a piece on the potential relocation of Harley's manufacturing operations to another state. The night before, at Branded, someone from Marriott's Autograph development team was trying to sell Dixon on the virtues of the new collection of independent hotels.

Anna Anderson, the GM, says the property's occupancy percentage is in the upper 70s and 10.4 percent ahead of the hotel's competitive set. It's getting \$18.92 more in rate and was recently honored as the boutique hotel of the year by the Boutique & Lifestyle Lodging Association.

HIRING NICE

"That's his technical duty," says Anna Anderson, the property's GM and his boss. "But his real job is to ensure individual and personalized service to all our guests. He is the face and soul of the service of this hotel ... He is a cultural leader. He is a teacher, a trainer and role model."

What's amazing is this is James' first job in the hotel industry. It's evidence of Tecton's philosophy, which James and Anderson both mention and something I've heard numerous times from Tecton CEO Richard Millard: "We don't train people to be nice. We hire nice people."

James had been working as a program director for the Recovery Network, a non-profit organization helping people with mental health issues, when he interviewed with Anderson. He is a lifelong resident and supporter of Milwaukee, with all the connections that come with 10 years of work as a bartender and server. He came highly recommended, she says, and was widely known throughout the area for his involvement in community and charity events.

"No one doesn't like James," said Sara Baumann, the person who recommended him and an account executive at Company B, a marketing firm that works with the hotel. "He instantly makes you feel like he's your best friend."

MANAGING DESIRES

I meet James a little after lunch on the first Wednesday in September. After talking in the lobby, we walk to the nearby Harley-Davidson Museum to pick up four tickets that are to become part of a package for incoming guests. We then drive to the Milwaukee Art Museum for more tickets.

"Every day is different," says James, who graduated from the University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin with a degree in anthropology. "I run the Desires department, do concierge work, help create promotions and packages, do a lot of work with the front desk and other departments."

Although James is always moving quickly, he finds time to chat with every employee we pass. His day started at 9 a.m., when he got to work in time for the morning huddle, a meeting with Anderson and all the available associates to discuss and review parts of Tecton's "red book" of cultural beliefs.

"I love this hotel. I love Tecton," he says. "When I came here, they said we have a special culture we maintain and follow. A lot of places say that, but what they say is true."

After the huddle, James heads to his cubicle in the command center to scour the hotel's software systems for upcoming Your Desires guests. There are more than 4,000 members, and many times guests don't note their status when making reservations, so James searches and double-checks names. He