

Hilton Albany's Claude Long wins bellman of year honor

By Paul Grondahl

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Albany

Claude Long of the Hilton Albany downtown has pulled off a major upset by winning the 2014 out-of-town bellman of year honor sponsored by the New York State Hospitality & Tourism Association.

Beating out bellmen at New York City's world-class hotels and bringing the honor to Albany for the first time since the Tri-City ValleyCats defeating the New York Yankees.

"Claude exudes hospitality," said human resources coordinator Pam Mislak, who nominated Long.

For Hilton guests arriving from out of town, Long, 55, who is in his 15th year as a bellman, is the first person to greet at 4:30 a.m. and is the first person who greets early morning arrivals with a smile and warm hello as they enter the revolving door.

He is the last person they see at the airport, as he holds open the door of the shuttle van and unloads luggage.

His first airport run at 4:45 a.m. is filled with airline flight crews and pilots who stay regularly at the airport by the time his shift ends at 10:30 a.m., as well as drop-offs at the train station and station.

He can maneuver a brass bell cart piled high with suitcases through a crowded baggage storage room. He has a knack for summoning an elevator.

"Claude is friendly, nice and very accommodating," said Winifred Schiff, a lobbyist with the Inter-Developmental Disabilities Agencies, who takes the train from New York City each week during the winter. "He's always putting people in a good mood."

Long is soft-spoken and low-key, a stocky 5-foot-3-inch man dressed in a head-to-toe black Hilton uniform. He has a Brooklyn accent that manages to round vowels. He is unfailingly polite.

"Did you ladies enjoy your stay?" he asked two women on a late-morning van run to the Amtrak train station to talk about predictions for a heavy snowfall downstate. He congratulated the woman's daughter on her upcoming swearing-in ceremony for new lawyers.

He keeps the van radio tuned to 98.3 FM, an inoffensive playlist of '60s and '70s hits. "I like that it's a mix."

He is comfortable around celebrity guests. He chatted up B.B. King and carried the blues great's bag. "I like Lucille," he said of the guitar that King guards like an overly possessive parent. He posed for a picture in front of the hotel.

Long's honor is all the more noteworthy considering his past. He grew up in Brooklyn, became addicted to drugs, and spent time in state prison after being convicted of a robbery to support his drug habit. He was paroled in 1991 and joined a 12-step program in Albany, where he was trained in the hospitality industry at the Schuyler Inn in Menand for 19 years.

"This could be a whole different story," he said.

He credited his sobriety to a 12-step program, Sunday Mass at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, and the support of friends placed in him.

"A lot of people believe in me," he said.

He is grateful for the support of Tori Bellamy, a longtime cook at the Hilton who is like a sister to him.

"This is his moment to shine," Bellamy said. "Claude goes above and beyond all the time."

A frequent guest wrote a thank-you letter to hotel management after Long, unbeknownst to them, tore a hole in a shirt.

"We were going through renovations and I was worried her clothes were going to get all dusty in the process," he said.

"We often hear what a wonderful employee Claude is," said John D'Adamo, general manager of the hotel, praising his professionalism of a full-service Hilton hotel.

The hospitality association has 1,200 member hotels and more than 200 hospitality workers were nominated. Winners were chosen by three out-of-state judges.

Long works two jobs. After he finishes at the hotel, he drives to his apartment in Pine Hills, grabs a car, and starts a 3-to-11 p.m. shift as a housekeeping supervisor at St. Peter's Hospital, where he has worked for 10 years.

He and partner Constance Brown, a pharmacy technician at the Stratton VA Medical Center, have a 4-year-old daughter. He is a doting father who plays dolls with her.

Long will receive a trophy and will be the subject of a video montage at a Stars of the Industry gala in Colonie. Winners will receive an overnight stay package at the Marriott.

A vacation to Wolf Road might not be as glamorous as, say, a stay at the Plaza overlooking Central Park, but it's a chance to carry luggage.

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