



## **2025 Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Award Honorees**

### **Distinguished Leader in Sales, Marketing & Revenue**

Carolina Veitia, Destination Sales Executive, JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort & Spa



**Carolina Veitia**, Destination Sales Executive, with the **JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort & Spa** is the Honoree for the **Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Awards** in the **Sales, Marketing & Revenue** category. Carolina has demonstrated that with hard work and ambition, you can accomplish anything you set your mind to.

Originally, she began her hospitality career in the food and beverage department, but after volunteering for several other task force assignments in other departments, including catering sales, Carolina was later recruited to another property to serve as outlet manager and oversee five restaurants. This position not only helped her to hone her leadership skills, especially during challenging times when the area was struck by two major hurricanes.

With a strong desire to transfer into sales and catering, Carolina finally persevered and moved back to Orlando. After connecting with her current hotel's director of marketing, she was hired as an event manager and later was transitioned into sales as a destination sales executive. In just a few short years, Carolina has quickly established herself as a key player, contributing significantly to the property's success by closing 28 multi-year programs and generating more than \$30 million in revenue.

Carolina's 21-year journey from server assistant to a destination sales executive has truly showcased her abilities, including dedication, resilience and exceptional leadership skills.

## **Distinguished Leader in Culinary**

Addnan Ibrahim, Banquet Chef, Four Seasons Resort Orlando at Walt Disney World Resort



**Addnan Ibrahim**, Banquet Chef, with the **Four Seasons Resort Orlando at Walt Disney World Resort** is the Honoree for the **Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Awards** in the **Culinary** category. With humility, dedication, and cultural stewardship, Chef Addnan is not only an exceptional role model for the culinary team, but also a shining pillar for the entire resort community.

While leading a team of 20 to 30 culinary professionals and overseeing all aspects of banquet food preparation and execution, his mission is to elevate the standard of banquet cuisine, which is often perceived as predictable or uninspired. With a focus on quality, presentation, and precision, Addnan is dedicated to ensuring that every dish – regardless of event size - delivers restaurant-level flavor and visual appeal.

He is also committed to advancing the hotel's brand and consistently goes above and beyond his formal job duties. During a group-plated dinner, when the starter and entrée service had concluded (typically signaling the end of the evening for his role), Addnan chose to stay and, without being asked, stepped in to assist the pastry team with dessert service, ensuring that the event concluded smoothly and seamlessly. What made it more notable was his humble approach. With very few words and a kind smile, he executed the task with grace, never seeking recognition or praise. It was simply an instinctive act of support to his team – something those who work with him have come to expect.

These small acts create a lasting impact on not only the team dynamic, but also the guest experience and embodies the hotel's service philosophy of treating other team members and guests with empathy, respect, and generosity of spirit, making Addnan a valued role model within his culinary family.

## **Distinguished Leader in Operations – Front of House**

Aaron Gonzalez, Water Park Supervisor, Coco Key Hotel & Water Resort



**Aaron Gonzalez**, Water Park Supervisor, of **Coco Key Hotel & Water Resort** is the Honoree for the **Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Awards** in the **Operations – Front of House** category.

Aaron has demonstrated a calm demeanor, attention to detail, and possessed strong communication skills, including treating everyone with empathy and respect. He continues to impress others with his ability to manage complex operations, motivating his team, and responding effectively under pressure.

He has also received numerous positive reviews highlighting his approachable personality, reliability, and dedication to safety. Additionally, Aaron supports a team-oriented culture through clear and constructive feedback, which has motivated the entire team to stay focused on achieving the desired results. His contributions have significantly enhanced the team's effectiveness and trust in less than two years. In a testament to his rapid growth, adaptability, and exceptional performance, Aaron has been promoted several times since being originally hired on the team as a slide attendant in 2022. Now he is the water park supervisor and his willingness to go above and beyond and invest in his teammates, from onboarding new hires to mentorship does not go unnoticed.

In addition to participating in several leadership seminars, including CFHLA's Leadership Development Series, Aaron completed the Ellis and Associates Regional Instructor Course and became an Ellis and Associates ILTP Lifeguard instructor. With this certification, Aaron can now provide certified training in water rescue, as well as health care provider-level CPR, First Aid, AED, and Oxygen administration.

Whether it is mentoring new staff, handling emergencies calmly, or ensuring every guest leaves with a smile, Aaron truly exemplifies what it means to go above and beyond and was recognized as the Employee of the Year in 2024.

## **Distinguished Leader in Events & Meetings**

Maria Paula Chau, Event Services Manager, Hilton Orlando



**Maria Paula Chau**, Event Services Manager, of the **Hilton Orlando** is the Honoree for the **Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Awards** in the **Events and Meetings** category. Maria exudes confidence and remains calm and professional in any situation, regardless of the stress level. A sentiment that is infectious to those around her. Maria has consistently received compliments from guests stating that she was always available when needed and even anticipated needs so well that they hardly had to ask for anything at all.

Additionally, Maria is the type of team member that you'll never see sitting still. She is extremely active and consistently goes above and beyond to help other departments when needed to ensure the success of the property. Plus, her high work ethic and performance consistently exceeds her job duties, showing a deep commitment to the property and guests, that are treated like family.

Maria has also taken the initiative to be the unofficial trainer for the Event Services Manager role by updating previous training materials to properly reflect the property today and new procedural changes, while also implementing new items that ensure the role continues to evolve and operate as efficiently as possible.

Furthermore, on multiple occasions, the grab-and-go restaurant at the property has accrued very long lines due to the number of guests heading to a meeting at the same time. Without hesitation, Maria continues to jump right in to assist with making coffee and restocking the store. This is on top of another recent example of her ensuring that a bride and groom experienced their vision of a flawless ceremony, despite a spontaneous rain shower that happened moments before the ceremony began. While many other team members were pre-occupied with other in-house guest needs, Maria took it upon herself to pick up the debris and gathered towels to personally wipe down the chairs, so the wedding would not be delayed and go as planned.

This is the kind of team member and leader who will never let any of her peers or fellow departments fail. Maria effortlessly prioritizes her workload and client requests, while considering the operational status around her and the consideration of other departments at any time.

## **Distinguished Leader in Operations - Back of House**

Jason Heidel, Assistant Director of Housekeeping, Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando



**Jason Heidel**, Assistant Director of Housekeeping, with the **Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando** is the Honoree for the **Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Awards** in the **Operations – Back of House** category. Jason not only displays outstanding leadership qualities, but is known for being completely cool under pressure, even in the most trying days.

Jason has cultivated strong relationships with his team and has had a hand in developing and growing multiple team members. During a leadership transition period last year, Jason was able to balance his full duties and assist with the on-boarding of a new department director.

Additionally, he was selected to participate in a cross-campus project team, which focused on activating and auditing recruitment, as well as establishing on-boarding standards for all 11 hotels and support centers throughout the company. Jason was also a key contributor to many of the department's recent successes. This included exceeding expectations through managing the department's labor to standard, increasing the Housekeeping Mystery Shop Average, and receiving a perfect score on the Q1 shop.

Jason's crowning achievement was the results of his outstanding team member engagement survey that was 12 points over the department's company average. This resulted in Jason also receiving their company's Leader of the Year award in 2024.

## Emerging Hospitality Leader

Jamie Bentley, Assistant Chief Engineer, Walt Disney World Swan Resort



**Jamie Bentley**, Assistant Chief Engineer, of the **Walt Disney World Swan Resort** is the Honoree for the **Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Awards** in the **Emerging Hospitality Leader** category. Jamie is a rising star who has charted an inspiring career path throughout the hospitality industry.

With over 12 years of professional work experience, Jamie began her journey in hospitality with a focus in the housekeeping department, where she quickly rose through department ranks all the way up to Housekeeping Director and then Housekeeping Training and Hiring Manager at her property. Additionally, Jamie's approach to leadership has always been rooted in empowerment, creating structure, and proven results. As a Housekeeping and Training Manager, she has successfully hired and onboarded more than 150 employees – building a high-performance team that achieved full compliance training within a year.

Recently, she made a bold career pivot to the Engineering department. In just nine short months, her impact has been nothing short of transformational. Upon accepting the role, the team has driven guest satisfaction scores for maintenance and upkeep from 64% to an impressive 79.4%, with a strong momentum towards breaking the 80% threshold.

Jamie is also an active member of the property's Guest Service Satisfaction Committee, ensuring that the guest experience remains at the heart of every operational decision. Even in her new role, she continues to assist housekeeping leadership, by offering guidance on how to use the different job-related programs needed to operate and manage the department effectively. Furthermore, Jamie continues to mentor other team members by assisting them in resume preparation and offering interview skills training to others who are also trying to advance their careers.

Jamie is a shining example of what is possible within the hospitality industry: that with hard work, dedication, and unwavering effort, you can take your career anywhere you want to go.



## **Support Services/ Back Office**

Salathia Richburg, Senior Assistant Director of Finance, Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center



**Salathia Richburg**, Senior Assistant Director of Finance, with the **Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center** is the Honoree for the **Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Awards** in the **Support Services/ Back Office** category. With an open and approachable communication style, Salathia consistently delivers strong results, leads change with confidence, and fosters a positive work environment that encourages development and inclusion.

Salathia's strong relationship with other operational leaders has fostered a collaborative team dynamic with colleagues, frequently seeking her insight. Additionally, Salathia strives to constantly be a resource and mentor to those seeking guidance and takes great pride in helping others achieve success. Furthermore, other team members value her honest, friendly, and supportive leadership style.

Following feedback from team members, Salathia took the initiative to organize and lead a series of training sessions for all General Accountants at the property. These sessions covered a range of topics such as P&L statement reviews, and how to utilize Microsoft Outlook and Excel. They were so well received, with several team members expressing deep appreciation for the learning opportunities the sessions provided and have increased overall team productivity.

In addition, Salathia has demonstrated exceptional leadership during a period of transition, stepping up in response to the departure of a senior leader during the property's busiest season, while maintaining professionalism and a positive attitude.

Lastly, as a dynamic and results-driven leader, Salathia also supports some of the largest operating departments at her property and serves as the key business partner to the Rooms Division. She also plays an integral role in delivering best-in-class financial results by providing ongoing guidance, analysis, and strategic support. Plus, Salathia's passion lies in more than just the numbers – as she thrives on leading her team, fostering strong partnerships, and helping others reach their potential.

## **Executive of the Year**

August Decker, Golf General Manager, Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes



**August Decker**, Golf General Manager, with the **Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes** is the Inaugural Honoree for the **Distinguished Leaders in Hospitality Awards** in the **Executive of the Year** category. August has instilled a focus on creating excellence within his team and a commitment to providing top-tier experiences for members and guests.

In just two years, under his management, the golf club's revenue has now soared to more than \$10 million, reflecting significant growth driven by innovative initiatives and exceptional service quality. Plus, his efforts in membership development have also paid off with an impressive membership increase of over 450 members, showcasing his strong ability to attract and retain golf enthusiasts.

Furthermore, his team was recognized as the Marriott Golf Property of the Year for 2024 and once again in 2025, highlighting his outstanding leadership and superior quality. To receive this prestigious award back-to-back, there must be a balance between employee engagement, financial performance, the guest experience, and unique events. This includes August playing a significant role in the successful execution of the PNC golf tournament, ensuring that every aspect of the event was meticulously planned, including coordinating with various stakeholders, managing logistics, and delivering an outstanding experience for participants and spectators alike.

In addition, August has promoted two leaders out as Directors of Golf, which speaks to his ability to recruit and grow talent. Outside the golf club, August is also very involved in the property's sustainability team and through his leadership the team has grown to 32 individuals. The team has increased the trash diversion rate from 3.8% in 2023 to over 20% in the first four months of 2025. Additionally, he worked with other property leaders to replace all single-use plastic with cans or paper water vessels. Moreover, August has worked with the culinary team to create a new composting project at the resort's working farm, that has composted over 65 tons of wet waste since the beginning of 2025.