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Circ: 419,070
UVM: 593,036

Canadian takes charge of concierge group



Virginia Casale, international president of UICH (Union Internationale des Concierges Hoteliers) Les Clefs d'Or, poses for portrait at the Royal York Hotel. Casale is the first Canadian president of Les Clefs d'Or.

Delivering husky pups to a penthouse suite in New York was a little tough. And the stuffed moose heads for a German client took some creativity.

But it's pretty hard to throw someone as skilled and determined as Virginia Casale off her game. Which is why the Montrealer this week was elected president of the prestigious Union Internationale Des Concierges D'Hotels (UICH) Les Clefs d'Or society, a worldwide group of the top concierges from exclusive hotels around the world.

Casale, concierge at the Sofitel Montreal, said being a member of Les Clefs d'Or is "like being in a fraternity."

"There's no rivalries between us, Monsieur," she told a reporter. "No, no, no, no. If someone loses their luggage I can call someone I know in Moscow. Someone might call me from Budapest to ask for hockey tickets. We have no competition, so I can call the Chateau Champlain and talk to my friend if I need Lady Gaga tickets."

"We do get some unusual requests, but we also have the crème de la crème of clients and they're willing to pay. Restaurateurs know us because we're there 365 days a year. If a place is sold out but Virginia calls, that little table for two? They can make it happen. If you want front row seats for the World Cup, we know the ticket brokers."

Casale wanted to be a teacher growing up and studied languages but got what she thought was a temporary job at the Hyatt in Montreal in 1984, working as a hostess on the executive floor. One thing led to another and she moved on to become a concierge, then was elected president of the Canadian chapter of Les Clefs d'Or in 1999.

"It really broke the mold," said the vivacious Casale. "Other presidents were always Torontonians and always male. It was like, 'A French woman? What the hell?'"

Working at the Montreal Sofitel, Casale was happy to help a client in California get a pair of young huskies delivered to his significant other in New York City. She enlisted a limo driver to speed his way from Montreal to upstate Vermont, pick up the pups and then deliver them to the Plaza, where a worker tied them up nicely with a bright bow around each neck.

"Some Grand Prix clients called me once and wanted stuffed moose heads, so I called someone who knew a taxidermist," Casale recalled. "They weren't entirely finished with the stuffing but I said 'I don't care if they're all stuffed or half-stuffed, just get them.'"

There are, of course, requests of a more personal nature.

"We'll touch anything that's legal and moral. Of course we're asked about escorts and other stuff but we have little magazines lying around here and there. We pass it on and say, 'Everything is there, you can make your own arrangements,' or maybe we'll say, 'There's a certain bar that might have what you're looking for.'"

There are, also, some things a concierge simply can't do, such as make Niagara Falls less than a six-hour drive from Montreal.

"I had a woman come to the desk in Montreal and say 'I want to see a rodeo.' So I said, 'Okay, I'll get you to the horse races.' And she said, 'No, I want to see a rodeo.' So I suggested maybe horseback riding in the countryside. But she said, 'No, I mean a real rodeo.'"

"I had to explain the rodeo was in Calgary and that she'd have to get on a plane the next day. She said, 'Oh, I can't, I have a hair appointment.'"

Simon Thomas, concierge at the historic Brown's Hotel in London, called Casale a go-getter of the highest order.

"She's a bit like Margaret Thatcher," he said with a laugh. "She's an iron fist inside a silk glove, but she's also lovely and charming and has a vision of where to take this organization that's very impressive."

Casale is the first Canadian and the second woman to head the organization. Their convention, held this past weekend and on Monday at the Royal York Hotel, attracted more than 600 concierges from 42 countries, including India, which recently joined Les Clefs d'Or.

Holly Stiel, a former concierge in San Francisco who has written two books about the profession, told the Star the job is a combination of "artistry and science."

"It's being willing to help others connect to an experience that will create lifelong memories, versus simply saying, 'This is a place I've recommended 400 times before so it'll do again this time.'"

Information is everywhere. But that doesn't mean hotel concierges are about to be made redundant, the UICH meeting was told.

Sofitel Worldwide chief executive officer Robert Gaymer-Jones said someone who goes onto a website and finds the 10 best restaurants in town might end up with a bunch of the worst places to eat.

"People want authenticity, and they want for once not to look at a computer screen but to talk with a real person," he said.

JUST THE FACTS

There are some 3,379 members of Les Clefs d'Or worldwide.

Members of Les Clefs d'Or can be distinguished by a pin with two gold keys.

In a poll taken by Les Clefs d'Or, 38 per cent of hotels said they require membership in the group as a qualification for hiring a concierge.

More than 50 per cent of hotel guests use concierge services, according to Les Clefs d'Or.

Forty three per cent of concierges say most of the requests they get are about restaurants.

Ninety four per cent of concierges say guests do research on the Internet and use the concierge to confirm their decisions.

www.uichlesclefsdor.org