

Devoted concierge is key to guests' comfort

■ Industry experts say position adds value to hotel

BY BILL SPURR
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HALIFAX — James Robar knows exactly what led him to his job as a concierge, a job he loves.

"Sheer luck," he said.

As a young man, Robar moved from Bridgewater, N.S., to Halifax with no clear idea of what he wanted to do with his life. After some service industry jobs, he went back home and took a two-year hospitality course.

"Then I came back to the city and started at the bottom, working in laundry, housekeeping, banquets, you name it, just to get my foot in the door," said Robar, who has been at the Radisson Suites Hotel for almost 12 years.

As a concierge, Robar said his job description is to "do anything that is needed" for guests.

"The thing that comes to mind that I do the most is making reservations for dinner," he said. "I would have some pull that way because I have the contacts. (Restaurants) know who James at the Radisson is; they know how much business I bring their way so they will squeeze somebody in and make room for a table."

"We had a guest that was checking out and her luggage was accidentally put in the wrong vehicle. Another group of people were here for a golf tournament



Halifax Radisson Suite Hotel's James Robar has two new pins for his uniform after being named one of the top concierges in the country.

and they had all their luggage piled in the corner. They were loading up vans and grabbed this lady's luggage by mistake."

"I knew who the guests were and how to contact them in the van. They were on their way to Moncton, but I caught them before they hit Truro, got them to stop at a hotel there and drop off the bag. The guest who lost her bag was on her way to P.E.I., so she was able to pick up her bag in Truro."

Robar's devotion to guests of the hotel is such that he recently won the right to wear a badge of gold keys on his lapels, emblematic of membership in Les Clefs d'Or (Golden Keys). The organization has 3,000 members in more than 30 countries, mostly working at four- or five-star hotels. Some high-end hotels hire only Clefs d'Or members for their concierge staff.

"They know when they have this member on staff . . . they have all these other people around the world working for them," Robar said. "I can pick up the phone, call a concierge in Paris, Argentina, wherever, identify myself as a Clefs d'Or (member), tell them what I need and it's done."

There are five Clefs d'Or members in Halifax hotels, and the group is working to get certified as a "region" within the national body.

"For a long time, we have wanted to add a region in the Atlantic part of the country," Hugo LeGrand of Clefs d'Or Canada said during a visit to Halifax. "I'm here to support them in their final stages of applying to become an official region inside Clefs d'Or Canada. At the moment, we are six regions and they would be our seventh."

The organization originated in France in the 1950s. LeGrand said people who travel extensively recognize Clefs d'Or members and know their presence means they can expect an elevated level of service.

"When a guest comes to the Radisson here in Halifax, checks in, comes to the concierge desk and sees the keys on James's lapels, most people who travel a lot know exactly what that means," he said.

"It means this gentleman didn't start working yesterday. . . . He has the contacts; he knows the city; he'll send you to where you need to go. It's an added value for the hotel."