

# Valona More Than a Concierge

Oct 25, 2010 8:10 AM, By Eric Stoessel

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.

## 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 finds their preferences and requests and makes a shopping list for the week ahead. Tonight, on his way home, he plans to stop at Sam’s Club to buy supplies for next week’s guests.

He then turns his attention to the Desires guests arriving later today and this week. He upgrades them when possible and prepares and then delivers the goody bags to their rooms. Guests who aren’t members get just as much attention. “If you’re in this building, you’re my guest, hands down,” James says. “If you’re here, I want to make you feel welcome.”

## **TAKING CARE OF PEOPLE**

After running errands, James returns to the hotel and takes his favorite position, front and center in the lobby, chatting up guests as they’re coming and going.

“I love talking to people. I love hearing where they come from,” he says. “I’ve met so many crazy, fun people with interesting lives. Wow. You never know who’s going to walk through that door and I’ve told the staff that. You never know, so talk to everyone.”

James typically works a later weekday shift, starting around 11 and working until 9, so he can be on the floor during the busiest times. On Friday and Saturday, he works from 2 to 11 and focuses on “operations, managing, helping at the front desk, on the patio or at the bar,” he says. “I’m making sure everything is going smoothly and just talking to people.”

He covers breaks and helps behind the front desk and has done just about everything else in the hotel, too. He’s cooked in the kitchen one night after it closed when a guest sent back an order, he’s served drinks, done laundry, made up and turned down rooms and even run five blocks, in the snow, to clear and reserve a table for a celebrity guest when the popular restaurant was slammed and he couldn’t get through by phone.

“You just take care of people,” James says. “No one really cares about the Diet Coke and cookie. They think it’s nice, but they want to be spoken too, they want to have a great experience. That’s what you focus on.”

On this day, James glides effortlessly from the bar to the front door, striking up conversations with guests looking to chat, and just saying hi to others who don’t seem to want anything more. He opens the door for a bellman carrying luggage, he steps in to help sell Iron Horse merchandise to a customer at the front desk and when it slows down, he goofs around with co-workers.

He says one of the questions he was asked during the interview for the job was whether he could handle different types of people. “I came from mental health, I was a program director,” he explains. “I helped them obtain money for programs.

“I was dealing with very wealthy people, and people hearing voices. I can deal with anyone.”

## **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 general manager, 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.