



genjal host

BY JEREMY WAYNE

Robert Sanders is a man on the move, a busy man, a Westchester man, the founder and chairman of Hospitality Resource Group Inc. (HRG), a group of three companies – Event Solutions, Strategic Training Solutions and Allegis Communications – which integrate vertically to form a powerhouse of hospitality industry products in the tristate area and beyond.

Sanders grew up in Chappaqua and is a standard-bearer for an industry he has loved since high school years, when he worked at the famous Vinny's in Pleasantville.

"I cut my teeth there, first as a cook and then as a chef, so that my first introduction to hospitality was definitely on the culinary side of things."

The University of South Carolina followed, with a business degree in hotel and restaurant management. He then went to work for Marriott for 17 years, starting in Hilton Head in 1983.

"Oh boy," he told me, when we caught up in a recent phone conversation and I pressed him on his early years in the industry. "Hilton Head in those days was very different from how it is now. There were just a few hotels, it was pretty much undeveloped. I worked for Marriott in Shipyard Plantation, a great experience. To be able to go into an environment like that, and a resort like that – it was amazing. I loved it!"

While hotels and resorts have evolved over the years, I wonder if hospitality, the art of hospitality, has changed in any measurable degree. Put another way, can hospitality actually be taught?

"Aha," he says, "a great question!" (Something the interviewer always wants to hear) "I think the answer is yes, you can teach great hospitality." He pauses for a moment. "However, I think the more successful folks in the industry have the innate ability to serve – to be helping others, to be selfless, to help other people have great experiences."

This is one of the things that Sanders especially loves about the industry, the sense of giving back. "I love to have people that I'm working with, whether it's a simple interaction, an event, whatever it might be, to have them have a great experience."

But while he believes great hospitality can be taught, he is emphatic that hospitality is not for everybody. "You have to be willing to put yourself out there to see that people have a good experience. When I do an event, for example, and I'm told afterwards that the attendees had a great time, that makes me feel good, right? I like that!"

But hospitality is only half the story. Sanders is extremely active in community affairs and serves on the board of the Hudson Valley Economic Development Corp. (HVEDC), the leading economic development organization for the Hudson Valley region.

But perhaps most importantly of all, there is the volunteerism and HRG's work with nonprofits in Westchester County.

"It's something that's very important to the entire company," he says. "The company has to give back. We're passionate about it."

Among other great causes, HRG is currently working with the Boys & Girls Club of

Mount Vernon and the Boys & Girls Club of New Rochelle – two organizations HRG and Sanders personally feel very strongly about. "These two are very near and dear to us," he says with great thoughtfulness, and you feel his sincerity and devotion to the cause. "Hospitality in general it needs to give back, it's so, so important because there is such a lot of need out there."

Sanders' two personal passions, he tells me, are education and children. "We are going to be opening up a foundation in a couple of years that will be addressing those two very specific areas of focus." He says "we" and indeed his company's track record in philanthropy and giving back is consummate, but I am reliably informed that it is Sanders himself who spearheads so much of the great work, although he is far too modest a man to ever acknowledge it.

In April 1999, Sanders received the honor of being the first recipient of the American Red Cross Samuel J. Friedman Humanitarian Award. He also works with Bridges to Community, and has developed and led humanitarian efforts for business executives to travel to Nicaragua to build homes for families in need.

While devoting so much of his professional and private time to enjoyment of others, I wonder how he himself relaxes – if he has time to do so. "I'm an avid sports person," he says. "I play a lot of golf, a lot of tennis. I also have a boat on Lake Mahopac to get away and relax and do some fishing." He loves anything outdoors, he says, anything in the sunshine.

A reflection, no doubt, of the sunshine he and HRG bring to the lives of others. ☀

For more on Hospitality Resource Group, go to www.hrginc.net.