

Hats off to Mrs. H

By Meredith Goad Wednesday, March 7, 2007



Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

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Honey (pronounced Hoe-nee) decided she needed a night out once in a while so she could talk to some adults. She scanned the local newspaper and found an ad for a position as front-desk clerk at Fisherman's Wharf Inn. The position was for Wednesday nights only, and would last only through the remaining seven weeks of the tourist season. Honey enjoyed herself so much she asked to come back the next year.

Today, more than 40 years later, Honey is a 72-year-old grandmother of seven, and she's still working at Fisherman's Wharf. She's gone from working one night a week to managing the hotel and restaurant. Through the years she has not only built the business, she's given hundreds of young people their start in the restaurant business by mentoring them in summer jobs.

On March 20, Honey will receive the Maine Restaurant Association's Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of her contributions to the industry. Past recipients have included Tony DiMillo of DiMillo's Floating Restaurant, Bill Zoidis of Pilot's Grill in Bangor, Billy Tower of Barnacle Billy's in Ogunquit, and Amedeo Reali of the Village Cafe in Portland.

"This came as a big surprise to me," Honey said. "I never, ever thought that my turn in the barrel would be coming up. It's quite an honor."

Dick Grotton, president of the Maine Restaurant Association, said the Lifetime Achievement Award winners are nominated by the organization's membership, then chosen by the 30-member board of

directors. He said Honey, who became the first female chairman of the board of the Maine Restaurant Association in 2003, was chosen because she "is one of those special people who walks into a room and everybody pays attention. She makes it her business to make sure that when everybody leaves, they love Maine."

"We refer to her as Mrs. Hospitality, and she really is because she gets it," Grotton said. "You recall in the last few summers when so many places, like perhaps Camden or Bar Harbor, were struggling and business was not good? It never happened to Boothbay Harbor because of folks like Laura Honey. She made it her business to attract bus tours, and she made reasons for folks to come to Boothbay Harbor."

Through the years, Honey has helped modernize Fisherman's Wharf and developed the function side of the business, adding wedding receptions and other social affairs to the list of services offered by the restaurant. She is also known for hiring local kids to work in the restaurant. She likes hiring locals because there's no housing involved, she knows their parents, and she figures local students need the opportunity to make money for college, too.

"They might not have the worldly polish that some kid coming from New York or Boston might have," she said, "but our clientele likes asking about a lighthouse and having the local kids tell them all about it and how to get there."

Honey is now hiring the children and even grandchildren of people who worked for her years ago. Her own three children worked at Fishermen's Wharf, as well.

Some of her young protégés, who call her "Mrs. H," have gone on to develop their own careers in the restaurant and hospitality industries. Greg Dugal, executive director of the Maine Innkeepers Association, was one of her employees. Another person she mentored was Bob Smith of Sebasco Harbor Resort, who is now president of the Maine Innkeepers Association and chair of the New England Inns and Resorts Association.

Honey said one thing she's loved about her job over the years is the opportunity to get to know people from other parts of the country who return to Fisherman's Wharf year after year. And she wants these people treated well.

Honey said she thinks there are people in the service industry who shouldn't really be there.

"I just think that people are in such a rush," she said. "You can't be rude. People don't realize they need to treat people the way they want to be treated themselves."

Honey does get away from work occasionally. Her husband's health is not good enough to travel, but she takes short trips with a good friend. They went to Italy last year, and just returned from a trip to London. For the past few years, they have taken short vacations to Florida together, renting a convertible and pretending that they are Thelma and Louise.

Honey, by the way, is Thelma.

She says she has no plans to retire.

"I hate to think of not being able to come to work every day," she said.

Among the other awards being presented March 20 are chef of the year and restaurateurs of the year. Jeff Landry, the chef at Eve's at the Portland Harbor Hotel, will be named chef of the year, in part because of his work with Share Our Strength, a charity that fights childhood hunger.

"It isn't just Share Our Strength," Grotton said. "It's that he seems to be in the middle as an organizer and supporter of almost everything that happens. If there's food involved, and if it's being done in Portland, you can sort of count that Jeff Landry is in the middle of it somewhere."

Clark Frasier and Mark Gaier of Arrows Restaurant in Ogunquit and MC Perkins Cove will be named restaurateurs of the year. The nationally known chefs are longtime members of the Maine Restaurant Association, and Arrows was named one of the 50 best restaurants in the country this year by Gourmet Magazine.

The chefs are planning a third restaurant inside the Marriott Hotel in Burlington, Mass., which should open sometime in September.

Grotton said Frasier and Gaier have been on the forefront of the buy-local/grow-your-own movement that has spread like wildfire through the Maine restaurant industry. But it is their willingness to stretch themselves and try new things that really got the board's attention.

"They haven't rested on their laurels," Grotton said. "They've traveled all over the world, they've cooked everywhere. Their cookbook is doing well. Like they needed the aggravation, but they came into Perkins Cove and did it again. And now they're going to go to Massachusetts and do it again."

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