

The Southampton Press

Arts & Living

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By Mary Cummings
elp!
HIt's the cry heard 'round the Hamptons every summer. Caterers need a full cast of servers and captains to choreograph the season's 10 weeks of spectacular tent fetes. The country squires of the new economy, helpless in their huge, wired mansions, need cooks and nannies, butlers, gardeners and computer-savvy estate managers to keep the family fed, the kids out of trouble, the sprinklers sprinkling, mowers mowing, alarm systems on the alert.

The problem, as everyone knows (and the rich never tire of telling us), is that good help is hard to find. Which means that what the new millionaires need most of all is help finding help.

Enter Mark Casaburi, an entrepreneur for the Age of Excess whose stock in trade is helpful humans. Fifteen years ago he conceived of AYS (At Your Service) to provide catering personnel for the Hamptons party circuit. Last year he added his new EstateStaff service "to meet the ever-increasing need for the placement of experienced household professionals in the estates of the Hamptons and New York City," to quote his promotional material. Headquartered in Sayville, the twin services are also offered from a satellite office in East Hampton, though in May lease negotiations were still unresolved.

Earlier this month, Mr. Casaburi, looking boyish and fresh-faced despite his sober businessman's suit, was in Bridgehampton to talk over lunch about the AYS business plan he drew up as a college senior and the way it has played out over the last 15 years. With him was his second-in-command, Jeanine Cosgrove, whom Mr. Casaburi placed as a seasonal maid at the Spielberg estate the summer after she graduated from Siena College, and who now serves as AYS general manager.

The idea for AYS came to him when he was at Albany University studying business management, said Mr. Casaburi, who grew up in Sayville and came out to the East End "as a kid."

An observant kid, as it turned out, he noticed things. And when it came time to draw up a business plan for his college course work, he thought about all those Hamptons parties. He thought about how caterers would often have to bus people in from afar to work at them, and he concluded that there was a

promising business niche to be filled by someone who could provide skilled personnel on the spot.

"Before AYS there was no Long Island agency doing that," said Mr. Casaburi, "and there was a tremendous need to provide staff."

Just a hunch, but did he, by chance, deliver papers when his pals were still in the sandbox?

Bingo! Little Mark was, in fact, a news carrier for Newsday, and even then he stood out.

"Talk about customer service," he said. Though at the time it was not the practice, he used to wrap his customers' papers in plastic on rainy days.

The extra effort didn't go unnoticed. "Whenever it rains my paper comes dressed in a raincoat," a grateful client wrote in a note to his boss, who was so impressed he gave him an award.

It's been like that ever since.

At Albany, Mr. Casaburi's AYS game plan earned an A from his professor, who told him he had an outlook and acumen that didn't match his age. "The professor said I'm older than I am," laughed Mr. Casaburi, who was 20 and is now 34, married and with his first child on the way.

Over the years, AYS has provided wait-people, bartenders and other personnel for affairs ranging from dinners for six to huge benefits for Southampton Hospital, Bay Street Theatre, Group for the South Fork, The Peconic Land Trust and others.

Perhaps the trickiest, he suggested, were the parties he handled at which the president was a guest.

"A discreet staff goes on these parties," he said, noting that President Clinton attended affairs at both the Spielberg home and the Baldwin estate, where "everything had to be approved by security and every staff we were sending had to be checked out." In fact, he said, it is not at all unusual for his high-powered celebrity clients to send over a confidentiality form to be signed by staff members, presumably to prevent them from blabbing to columnists about who got drunk and who left with whom.

In general, however, the clients' needs are rather more straightforward, according to Mr. Casaburi.

"What do clients want?" he asked, then answered his own question. Most just want people "to show up, to smile and be skilled. Professional, prompt, courte-



Professionalism is the watchword for butler Dan Gebhardt.

DANA SHAW PHOTOS

A Company That Makes Good Help Not So Hard To Find

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SERVICE: Help With the Help

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ous, that's our mantra," he said.

But if, indeed, good help is hard to find, how then did AYS manage to assemble the 360 names of reliable workers that fill the company's Rolodex?

Time and a good record, according to Mr. Casaburi, who noted that in 15 years AYS has come in contact with many estate managers and others in a position to recommend AYS to trusted friends looking for work.

Which doesn't mean they can skip the candidate screening—a particularly important step for their new EstateStaff division, which is now entering its second year of placing seasonal and year-round residential staff, including estate managers, chefs, butlers, personal assistants and housekeepers.

"We interview, screen, reference check, which is really important," said Mr. Casaburi. "You would think you wouldn't put a negative reference down, but they do."

Once they have made a placement, they check back "to make sure it's going well."

And what if it isn't?

Rare, very rare, insisted both Mr. Casaburi and Ms. Cosgrove. But for the rare—very rare—cases when the chemistry just isn't working, there is a remedy.

"We have a 30-day guarantee," said Mr. Casaburi. "If it doesn't work out, there is no obligation, we don't charge anything."

Ms. Cosgrove, who applied for an office position with Mr. Casaburi after her enlightening experience on the job with the Spielbergs, started out as a booking representative for the catering side of the business. Since the new estate division was added, however, she has been very involved as a matchmaker, arranging for the alliances between demanding clients and accommodating service people that are like marriages without the romance.

The best candidate with the highest potential for success on the job is still the person "who just wants to be accommodating—we call it a service heart."

First, if possible, there is the site visit, she said. A recent walk-through at the construction site for a 15,000-square-foot residence that will have to be staffed was extremely helpful, she said. "Afterwards, I knew what was going to be in the house, what the hands-on physical needs would be," said Ms. Cosgrove.

She also meets with the clients to discuss their needs. "I don't just listen to them, I hear them," she said. "By hearing them, I know what their needs are."

And their needs are not anything like what they once would have been

in the days when the wealthy typically hired a European couple to keep the brass polished and maintain a suitable formality even in summertime.

Now estate managers are often expected to be college-educated and computer-literate, said Ms. Cosgrove, who recently attended a seminar on "smart houses" to bring herself up to speed on the technological changes that have transformed estate management into a high-tech profession.

"How you manage the system can save the employer a lot of money," she said, "and security and privacy are very important to our clients."

Nannies, too, are expected to be college-educated, "and if they're not," said Ms. Cosgrove, "they're on their way. A lot of families make arrangements to be sure their nannies are going to school."

Among this new cadre of skilled professionals, the greatest demand is for housekeepers and private chefs, according to Ms. Cosgrove, who confirmed that they are well paid and often receive medical benefits as well as living quarters and other perks.

"Yes, they are well paid," she said, "but they have a lot of responsibility. They are expected to work 24 hours."

The new professionalism is clearly making estate work more attractive to young people who might have had trouble envisioning themselves doing such work just a decade ago. But one thing hasn't changed, according to Mr. Casaburi. The best candidate with the highest potential for success on the job is still the person "who just wants to be accommodating," he said. "We call it a service heart."



Maid Lisa Gruner, chef John Rock and butler Dan Gebhardt divide up responsibilities in a client's kitchen.

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