

Published: 2008-06-02

## Certified to impress tourists

By JOEL JACOBSON Bright Spot

THANKS TO supportive employers and enthusiastic employees, the numbers seem to grow each year.

More than 180 men and women in the Nova Scotia tourism and hospitality industry will receive their national certification on this night, proudly walking to the stage to be acknowledged as professionals who make visitors welcome in Nova Scotia.

Each year, an official from the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia or the Nova Scotia Tourism Human Resource Council, or its national counterpart, or the provincial Tourism Department boasts of how Nova Scotia has the highest number of certified tourism employees per capita in Canada.

Why do tourism and hospitality workers want to be nationally certified through this personal development program that had its Nova Scotia debut about nine years ago?

To a person, they will say that being certified offers a chance to move ahead in the industry, gives them flexibility within their chosen field, and because they have that additional knowledge as well as a certificate of proof, provides them with a chance to find work in any other area of Canada, if they choose.

Those being honoured come from various sectors of the industry. There are taxi drivers, bartenders, food and beverage servers and managers, housekeeping attendants, supervisors, front desk agents, reservation sales agents, heritage interpreters and visitor information counsellors. Some are industry veterans, others are reasonably new. All are excited about advancing their careers.

They have studied textbooks, written exams and been tested by "mystery" guests, as well as their own supervisors.

"You are continually striving to improve your service to our tourists," says Kelli Ann Dean, Nova Scotia's deputy minister of tourism.

"You all have the power to make a difference," she tells them, as she notes there are 36,000 employees in the province's \$1-billion tourism and hospitality industry.

These men and women realize they are the backbone of the industry because they are the front-line people who give tourists an initial welcome to Nova Scotia.

It is often the talkative taxi driver at the airport or cruise ship dock who creates the first impression. A smile from the front desk clerk at a hotel or motel can mark the start of a great vacation. A friendly greeting from a room attendant can make a guest's day.

"Nova Scotia may have its sights and sounds, but it's the tourism professionals who make the industry what it is," Kelli Ann says.

Here's what Lisa LeDrew of Via Rail Canada says about her experience learning more about being a heritage interpreter.

"I'm what's called a learning co-ordinator. I'm part tour guide and part host on our trains from Halifax to Montreal," she tells the audience of more than 200. "The certification course was challenging but very relevant to our job. By achieving this national certification, we can add to the product and services we deliver and translate that into a rewarding experience for our customers."

Melissa Labrador of the Wildcat reserve in Queens County works at the Acadian First Nation as a heritage interpreter.

"My culture is important to me," says the young woman, who was an interpreter for several years at Kejimikujik National Park near Caledonia, Queens County, where her mother, Jean Augustine-McIsaac, is a senior Mi'kmaq interpreter.

Melissa teaches singing and chanting for Acadian bands throughout the province. She's also an artist who works in acrylics on canvas.

"Having certification means I can transfer my skills to any other interpretive centre, not just one related to the Mi'kmaq nation," she says. "Our workbook covered from dealing with people and situations to establishing programming for our centres."

This certification program, like the others, is not an easy ride.

"We spent four days a week in a four-week program studying, then had oral exams and written presentations to get our certification," Melissa says.

Ashley Marsh of Chester Basin and Donald Devoe of Alder Point in Cape Breton work at the Blue Ocean Contact Centre, a Halifax call centre that handles requests for Check In, Nova Scotia's year-round reservation and information system, and Bay Ferries. These two young people are the first ones to impress potential tourists.

"The job is interesting," says Donald, who works part time while studying for his MBA at Dalhousie University. "Nothing's ever the same, and we learn a great deal about the province."

Ashley started there in a summer job "but when I realized how close I was to certification, decided to stay on. My plan is to be in management, either in a restaurant or a property," says the former hospitality student at the Nova Scotia Community College in Bridgewater.

Her certification as a reservation sales agent will be a benefit.

"It's an acknowledgement of experience and accomplishment," she says.

It's also an indication that she and the other recipients on this night are committed to a future in the tourism industry.

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Joel Jacobson appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

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