

HCHS students learn impact of hospitality on local, state economy

Harlan County High School students have the opportunity to be “Career Ready” in hospitality careers when they graduate from high school.

The hospitality course is a part of the Career and Technical Education program promoting both skill development and practice in the hospitality industry in a high school classroom.

Karen Phillips has been the instructor for the program that began three years ago. Phillips said “students really didn’t know a lot about hospitality or the economic impact it has on our local community or state.”

Phillips brings a background in food and nutrition and hospitality industry experience to enlighten the students on this fast paced and growing career.

These students serve as hosts for many school functions including receptions, formal dinners, and fund raisers. Students team up with food and nutrition classes to serve these special functions. At a recent 13th region principals’ luncheon, students served a buffet meal complete with linens, table service and centerpieces. The students show off their skills like formal napkin folds; they admit they like the most complex ones, because they love a good challenge.

The largest group that has been accommodated was spring graduation for the Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College.

“We were able to pull off a reception for 200 and turn around an hour later to provide drinks and fresh homemade cookies for 2,000,” she said. “It’s a student driven operation — it has to be to succeed at all levels. The students know I expect perfection and wouldn’t settle for anything less. I always want every customer that comes through our doors to leave saying that’s the best event they’ve ever attended,” says Phillips.

Students learn hospitality pioneer J.W. Marriott’s standard operating procedures developed in the 1930’s are still important today. Students have to be trained and follow procedures to be successful in the hospitality industry.

Probably the biggest compliment received for the program was from current Education Commissioner Dr. Terry Holiday’s visit a couple of years ago. The commissioner had just returned from Washington, D.C. and claimed the students’ food and service was better than what he had received while visiting the nation’s capitol and staying at a Marriott property.

After completing the hospitality course, students can obtain a career major in hospitality and become eligible to test in the Kentucky Occupation Skill Standards Assessment (KOSSA).

The test is an industry credential that can lead straight to employment after high school. Harlan County High School had its first group of five students completing the requirements to be eligible to test last year. One passed this very rigorous test to achieve the honor last year.

“I know we are heading in the right direction if we are producing students on the state level who are competing with larger metropolitan area schools where kids have opportunities to work in the hospitality industry on a daily basis,” said Phillips.

Completing the third year of the program, several more students will meet the requirements to test this school year. The passing of the KOSSA test is equivalent to completing the first level of college course work in hospitality.

Phillips predicts several other students will receive credentials in hospitality services this year, providing unique opportunities for student employment in the future.