

“The GACCA: A History”

In the beginning (*cue exorbitantly large, blazing hot sun slowly ascending an oily horizon, at an extremely glacial pace, over the Serengeti*)... The Greater Atlantic Concierge Association was an idea... a concept... dare I say... a dream. It was a small group of hospitality professionals, formed by (what I consider to be) the Queens of Atlantic City, Vonnie Blake Clark (of Resorts and Hard Rock Casinos) and Doreen Prinzo (of the CRDA), getting together on a semi-regular basis, checking out different restaurants and attractions in the city to learn about the venues so they could then in turn go back and share the experiences with their customers. The root of the word "concierge" is from the Latin word "conservus", meaning "fellow slave", and then adopted into the French language, by King Louis XI, who had his Keeper of Keys open the palace door for when VIPs came-a-calling, and then said Keeper of Keys essentially catered to said VIPs' every whims. The word and concept soon spread to all across Europe faster than the rats carried the bubonic plague. When castles hosted visiting nobility, the concierge kept the keys to the castle rooms, and ensured that guests had everything they needed during their stay. By the late 1700s and early 1800s, a number of buildings in Europe, from government offices to prisons, had their own concierge on staff. Can you just imagine being the concierge for the Tower of London? "And here are thy lodgings until thou art to be executed, m' lord. I do so hope the stack of straw to lay thy head upon is to thy satisfaction. If there is anything else I can possibly do to make thy stay more comfortable prior to thy beheading, please, do not hesitate to ring this bell".

In the 20th century, what with the whole industrial boom going all... boomy... the introduction of steamships and steam trains helped launch the modern travel industry. Guests from distant locales relied on hotel employees for tour assistance and other services during their stays. Hotels throughout Europe began creating concierge positions to take care of their guests. In 1929, Ferdinand Gillet, head concierge at the Hotel Scribe in Paris, founded Les Clefs D'Or (which roughly translates to "the keys of gold"). This association enabled concierges throughout Europe to share ideas with one another. Today, Les Clefs D'Or has 3,000 members in 39 countries and sheds SO MUCH light on the origin of the phrase "the keys to the kingdom".

Back in 1995 when Vonnie and Doreen started this, there wasn't any truly sought after structure, but merely a group of colleagues, sharing ideas and business. They later elected a board to keep the group more controlled and respected, a group that companies would grow to appreciate, rely on and want to be involved with. With the help of the founding members, (shout out to Rosemary Slate, former head concierge of The Trump Taj Majal, who was the first concierge in Atlantic City to join the prestigious Les Clefs D'Or organization, setting the precedence for future concierges in the city), in 2004 it officially became The GACCA, a nonprofit organization with structure and an official purpose, and juicy things that go along with all of that like bylaws and newsletters and dues and scholarships and partnerships, with Doreen Prinzo at the helm as President of the board, instilling the success of the organization to include members both concierge and non-concierge allied partners to create a strong foundation. (*breathe... slowly... you can do it*) The goal in all of these efforts was to create an environment in Atlantic City in which neighbors and colleagues could prosper and thrive and in turn help the city flourish. Because the truth of the matter is any city wouldn't thrive on tourism alone. It takes friendships and partnerships. Everyone scratching everyone else's back. Which... paints a rather odd visual if you're picturing it like I am in the literal sense right now... an entire city filled with thousands of people in one immensely large circle scratching the back of the person in front of them.

Some years back the GACCA teamed up with the CRDAF (Casino Reinvestment Development Authority Foundation) and created a partnership to raise funds and distribute scholarships for education in the hospitality industry, and to promote the value of that education, with the scholarships available to students attending Richard Stockton University, Atlantic Cape Community College and Fairleigh Dickinson University. And contrary to what I first thought, the intention of the scholarship is NOT to breed a team of super hybrid concierge heroes, saving this city one client at a time, but simply stated, by

Doreen Prinzo, “Atlantic City provides a great visitor experience; however, the area’s growth over the next several years requires a larger and well-trained workforce. This program will help eligible students gain the knowledge and skills they need to serve the industry with distinction.” I will keep my fingers crossed for the super hybrids though.

Granted, when I moved here 4 years ago, I was new, completely un-learn-ed of the area. The only thing I knew about Atlantic City was that it was the city we used to frequent when I was a little girl because my family had a house in Margate, and once in a blue moon it was the devil city that took my dad’s hard-earned money. It was the city where I saw the most amazing concerts (not many girls can say they witnessed the legends that were George Burns, Alan King, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., Red Skeleton, Frankie Valli or be dazzled by the magical stylings of Doug Henning and David Copperfield all by the time they were 10 years old) and enjoyed the most amazingly delicious meals (the next 5 paragraphs I REALLY want to write about because, well, food, BUT for your sake, I will abstain) and I really can’t leave out my most favorite place on the planet when I was a kid, the bowling alley at Showboat. All I knew of Atlantic City was when I was a young girl. I moved away and pretty much forgot about the place. So when I came back here, decades later, I feel like I needed to totally relearn what this city was all about. So when Jen Miltner, now the president of The GACCA, approached me and mentioned the group and the benefits of joining, a light bulb over my head lit up (and yes, it was in fact an antique-style incandescent light bulb with the squiggly wires inside and carbon filament, because, well, I’m me, and there’s a whole bunch that goes along with that statement). What better way to get to know the city than join the group of people who were the keepers of the keys to this city? So I joined, and never looked back. And they’re not paying me to say this next part, because this is 100% volunteer, this truly is an amazing organization comprised of hospitality professionals having each other’s backs (scratches and all), perpetuating success in tourism all while giving back to the community and ultimately going above and beyond to exceed our guests’ expectations.

I try and imagine that first meeting way back in 1995 with Vonnice and Doreen and their crew gathering together and discussing their idea over happy hour priced margaritas (with muddled, exotic fruit apparently, since when I googled “top cocktails of 1995” that’s what popped up). I wonder if they ever fathomed that first meeting would evolve into what we are today. So! My “fellow slave”, if you would like to learn more about The Greater Atlantic Concierge Association please go to our website at www.aconciierge.org or email me at jbrenna@cubalibrerestaurant.com. I have zero problem talking your ear off about the organization and other things (because I have A.D.D. and will literally go on and on and on and before you know it you’re sitting with me in Cuba Libre’s Main Bar munching on Cuban Sandwich Spring Rolls and sipping Rosé Sangria and somehow our GACCA conversation morphed into me blabbing on about when and why the Salem Witch Trials started and the socio economic fallout from the Santorini Caldera eruption of the late bronze age).

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