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East End businesses hiring from near and far

BY KEIKO MORRIS | keiko.morris@newsday.com

Hiring for the summer season is typically an intense and competitive affair for establishments on the East End, but this year employers said the recession has helped ease some of the usual recruitment stresses.

Just how much of an upside a down economy can bring a business in the hospitality industry or a related field depends a lot on geography, the job offered, the availability of affordable housing for workers and the relative ease and costs of a daily commute. While some restaurants and inns in the Hamptons and on the North Fork have received massive responses - including some from laid-off financial executives - to online job ads, several Montauk employers continue to rely heavily on foreign students and workers.

That means employers like Gurney's Inn Resort & Spa in Montauk still have had to hustle to find additional summer workers, drawing their staff from foreign student visa programs, temporary guest worker programs, domestic internships and, this year, workers from Puerto Rico.

Others, including Mark Smith, owner and operator of several East End restaurants, are fielding applications from MBA graduates as well as veteran waiters who would not typically seek jobs out east.

"Last summer and in summers past when business was unbelievable everywhere, it was hard to compete with the city in terms of wages and because the labor pool was very small and because everybody was gainfully employed," Smith said. "So in that respect, a lot more people are looking for work, unfortunately for them and fortunately for the industry out here."

East End businesses said they are seeing a larger pool of applicants, among them displaced workers from New York City's hospitality industry, and that it has become commonplace to be inundated with responses to ads.

The Mill House Inn in East Hampton placed an ad recently and got more than 100 responses for a part-time night position. A February ad for a group of openings - from front desk staff and chef to house manager - generated more than 300 responses.

"Usually we will not get even 100," said Lee Ellis, general manager of the inn. "Usually our responses are concentrated in a local area. This time it went all the way back up island to Nassau and mid-island."

Restaurateurs in particular have reported receiving numerous applications from people with a wide range of backgrounds, many of them with little or no related experience.

Smith, whose group owns Nick & Toni's and Rowdy Hall in East Hampton, notes that while job seekers span all industries, he has seen quite a few applications from those who used to work in the financial sector.

"We actually had a guy who was the CEO of a \$30-million company who was married and has kids," Smith said. "The company went under. He was a waiter back in the day and was looking for waiting or bartending positions. It was a really sad commentary on what's going on out there."

Many Montauk businesses tied to the resort industry have found themselves in a tough spot in the past 18 months in terms of seasonal hiring. For several years they depended heavily upon the H2B visa program, which allows employers to hire foreign employees on a temporary visa after certifying that they were not able to fill those posts with native workers. The government caps the visas at 66,000 but for many years provided an exemption that did not count against the cap.

Since the end of 2007, Congress has failed to renew the exemption, causing a shortage of seasonal workers for Montauk's resort establishments.

"It's always the same problem. The non-glamorous jobs such as cleaning rooms and washing dishes and groundskeepers and night porters are just not jobs that unemployed American workers feel that they should be doing," said Paul Monte, chief executive and general manager of Gurney's.

Merle Aaron, owner of the Harborside Motel in Montauk, was unable to hire anyone on the H2B program in 2008. The same happened this year, although she did hire someone outside of the program. Slow business under these conditions might not be so bad, Aaron said.

"The upside to this is that business is so bad that I don't need any workers," she said. "Last year I was doing housework and laundry. I was running myself ragged. . . . If business picks up, I could find myself in the same situation."

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