

The future of the hospitality industry lies in encouraging and investing in bright, able people who are passionate about their jobs. Leigh Jenkins recently received the Shine Young Achiever of the Year award, and it's not difficult to see why.

At just 29 she is the general manager of Von Essen's New Park Manor Hotel and Spa in Brockenhurst, Hampshire. Under her stewardship turnover has risen from £600,000 to £2.5m. Leigh talks to *Hospitality Matters* about her career and why she loves working in hotels



The way I see it...

ABOUT THE SHINE AWARDS

Established in 2004 by Shine People and Places, the Shine Awards have celebrated some of the most inspirational and successful women in the UK travel, tourism and hospitality industries. By recognising their valuable contribution and by showcasing their achievements, the awards continue to provide role models for other women in the industry as well as contributing to raising standards.

This month the Shine Awards' website – www.womenshine.com – will feature a mentoring network for women working in the travel, tourism and hospitality sectors.

Its aim is to help a new generation of female professionals by offering the community of Shine winners as mentors who can offer personal guidance, advice and experience and help women find role models, expand network circles, share information and career advancement strategies.

"I've been at New Park Manor Hotel and Spa for 18 months. I joined in November 2005 just before the spa opened. One of the reasons Von Essen appointed me is because I had previous spa experience from my time at Careys Manor Hotel, also in the New Forest. I worked there for four and a half years, most recently as deputy general manager but also as business development manager. Before that I was at Hilton.

I took a six-month break from the hotel industry before I went to Careys Manor. I worked for a company called Maydown Tools to give me raw sales experience. I was out on the road selling engineering products. I went from Hilton – a luxury hotel brand – to selling tools but I wanted to get some sales experience. At Hilton a lot of the work I'd done had been front office and sales was very much handled regionally or at head office, so it was difficult getting that experience.

Working at Maydown Tools certainly helped me and boosted my confidence. I would turn up to a workshop to sell a man something he didn't think I knew anything about. But I did know about the products, so more often than not I'd get a sale. It was a huge challenge. I wouldn't say that I liked it but I thought I had to do it. When I'd done it I felt like I'd achieved something. You're in a comfort zone when you're in a hotel. To go out on your own with no one to talk to or bounce ideas off was hard.

I started off in the catering business when I was 12, although I'm not sure that's legal! I started washing up in a pub in Winchester as we'd just moved there and I needed to meet people and improve my confidence. I moved out onto the food counter and then went back as a waitress following a refurbishment. I realised then that I wanted to stay in the catering industry whether it was in pubs or hotels.

I studied three A'levels and a GCSE in Spanish – at that time I wanted to travel and I'd already studied French and German. I then worked at a Whitbread pub in Winchester while I was a student, and then afterwards got a job at Hilton. I still worked in the pub – I'd do an early shift in the pub and then work on reception at the hotel. Hilton had good career prospects and training, plus they are a worldwide company. It got to the point where I was offered a more senior role within Hilton on reception and was also offered the chance to go through all the training courses in the pub sector. I had to choose between pubs or hotels, so because I wanted to travel I took the hotel option.

I have yet to do the travelling I set out to do. Circumstances change. I met my husband when we were at Hilton and we bought a house and my career has gone from strength to strength. When does the point come when you say you can take a break? My husband is in a stable job so it would be a risk.

Before I joined Von Essen I went to a recruitment agency and said I wanted to be a general manager. They looked at my CV and said that I hadn't been a deputy for that long, and hadn't got any London experience. I was then interviewed again and told about the job at New Park – which was one hotel where I really wanted to work. It was just down the road and it meant I wouldn't have to relocate.

When I first went to New Park I thought it would be fine – it was only 24 bedrooms with a spa. I'd already been through lots of changes at Careys Manor and I thought a 24 bedroom hotel would be easy. But I had one thing after another. When I joined in 2005 turnover was £600,000. I was there for three days and didn't see a single guest! I thought my God what have I done? How are we going to get this hotel on the map and get more people through the door?

I had to look at my heads of department. There were lots of people in jobs that really they shouldn't have been in. There was no revenue structure in place, no sales structure and no marketing plan. I had to get a team together I could trust. I kept one head of department and seven had to go. Now we have a full team in place, who have been with me since I started. We've put together clear objectives for the heads of department and for the hotel.

We turned over £1.7m last year, and are planning to do £2.5m this year. A lot of it has had to do with the spa coming on board, which has helped the rate and occupancy. Our market mix has completely changed. A lot of people are coming out of London to stay now. Younger people are coming because of the spa. It's been a hard slog with the marketing – it's tough trying to get your name out there and get the hotel awareness you need. We have open days, to try to encourage people to come in. We bought a database so we could do direct mail and email, we've attended various shows and exhibitions and we've even gone door-to-door. Some things have worked but other things haven't – we've had to learn from the mistakes. Occupancy at the moment [April] is 62% year to date and we hope to end the year at about 79%.

No two days are the same in the hotel business. I've learnt so much about managing our bank account, the day-to-day finance and the different personalities that you work with. Sometimes I don't know how I'm going to get through, but you surprise yourself.

I think it's important that your team likes you, but at the same time there's a job to be done. It's not a question of telling people what to do, but more of 'when you've got a moment would you mind?'. I've never found it a problem that I'm female in this business. Sometimes I think when customers ask to see the general manager they are shocked by the fact I am a woman and that I'm so young.