



Nancy Mendelson · Dec 19, 2024 · 7 min read

Ally of the Month: John Schultzel, Chief Growth Officer, Olympia Hospitality

Our “Male Ally of the Month” column focuses on the men going out of their way to support women in the hospitality industry. While we all know they don’t have to help, these guys want to help, and this column takes the time to find out how and why they are determined to help us reach gender equality.

Meet Mr. December, [John Schultzel](#). Family man, sportsman and lifelong advocate for women, John joined Olympia in 2001 after serving in a variety of operational leadership roles in the hospitality industry. With over two decades at Olympia Hospitality, John brings a dynamic blend of expertise in operations, concept development, and financial analytics, allowing him to view hospitality from owner and operator perspectives. As Chief Growth Officer, John is as instrumental in guiding new development and expansion opportunities for the organization as he is in fostering a culture that advocates putting the right people in the right positions. We chat with John about this, his career path and how being open minded can lead to transformation and innovation.



Did you choose hospitality as a career, or did hospitality choose you, John?

My mom is the actual reason I'm in hospitality. One of the things that we used to do together all the time was cook, and so we would talk fancifully about how much fun it would be to start a restaurant together. Wouldn't it be awesome...you would do this, and I would do that...so we used to have a lot of playful conversations about it. But for the longest time I wanted to be a doctor and then, for some reason, in the middle of my undergraduate studies, I just couldn't envision myself spending the next decade in the classroom. So I did some soul searching and ultimately realized what I really liked doing the most was being in the kitchen and cooking for people and hosting. Even in my college space people always found their way into my room and I always really liked being the host...it suited me. And so that led me to graduate school, but ultimately it was my early experiences with my mother that led me to hospitality.

So, F & B was your way into the industry?

By the time I started my master's degree, I had waited tables for years and did rather well. Admittedly, I may have been a little naïve, because back in graduate school it just sounded like fun. You get to touch food and menu design, play around with wine, so I thought I would be a restaurateur, until I got knee deep into the restaurant world and realized how unforgiving and exhausting it is, and more importantly, how difficult on relationships it was. It's a burner of a business, right? It's late nights, it requires your full attention to be successful, you give up your weekends and holidays plus I read that restaurateurs and newspaper editors had the highest divorce rates in America. So, I decided to forego the exploration of restaurants and kind of jumped into the hotel through the F&B side of the industry. Thankfully, a group of hotel executives were regulars at the restaurant I was running!

Any lessons learned from waiting tables?

Waiting tables is one of those things where the more effort you put into it, the more successful you can be. The more friendly and engaged you are with your guests, the better their experience will be and the more fun you'll all have.

I worked at a Moroccan restaurant and the owner was this very dynamic woman who took me under her wing. A highlight of the dining experience was the ritual of pouring and serving mint tea and I remember her saying, "John, if you really want to impress, I need you to learn these tea tricks that I do, because they're so much fun, they create memories for our guests, and you'll do better." So, I started learning how to pour tea behind my head and balancing on my elbow, and got really good at it. I've told my kids a thousand times, if you want to learn a skill that you can bring with you anywhere you go, and you want to earn a living-no matter what career path you want to pursue- learn how to wait tables in a restaurant, because that's a universal skill and not everybody's good at it.

Starting with your mother, of course, it seems like women have played a significant role in shaping your life and your career.

Absolutely. My first non-food and beverage job in the hotel world was as the director of sales and marketing for the 300 room Crown Plaza Dallas Market Center...a job I was not qualified for, but really wanted. A woman named Donna Schmidt was an advocate for me. And she was willing to teach me how to do that and trusted me to sort of figure it out on the fly. She gave me the opportunity and gave of herself to teach me the business so that I could be succeed...and I credit her for springboarding me into what has turned out to be a great hotel career.

While the industry has made some progress in terms of gender equality, we still have a long way to go. How can we accelerate the process?

Our industry tends to gravitate to the expertise that's already there, so if you're always looking backwards to that leadership and not looking side-to-side or in front of you, then you're missing out on the potential for innovation and the contributions so many people can make to the growth of an organization. I think it's fundamentally about the objective appreciation of people regardless of gender, race, religion...that's why I struggle with the concept of being a male ally and the notion that you have to be intentional about diversity, as opposed to just being completely open to the qualities that everybody brings to the table... period.

Let's fast forward to your role as Chief Growth Officer for Olympia Hospitality, and the fact Sara Masterson is President, Hospitality. Bravo!

Sara's potential and talent shined from the moment I met her. I was a strong advocate for her when we selected her to be the GM for our flagship hotel. The initial feedback was that, on paper, her experience may not have seemed like an ideal match. But after several conversations and interviews, it was apparent that she was just so insightful, composed and intelligent. Here was a person of quality who would make our organization better. We had a direct report relationship for a little while, and shortly thereafter we were co-managing the portfolio. Sara really distinguished herself. She's so effective it became obvious that if we could pick a single leader for the hospitality management practice that it should be her. Back in the old days, somebody might have thought, "Well, Schultzel's got seniority, he should be the guy," but when you really look at skills and abilities and needs, she was clearly the best person to run the management company.

Olympia's home office org chart is female dominated. Coincidence?

Not necessarily. For example, our head of Revenue Management, our head of Human Resources...both women are simply the best and brightest in their skill sets. So, ultimately, when you prioritize talent and ability and skills over other qualities, that's simply where we ended up. As I said earlier, I struggle a little bit with the Ally thing... I don't think anything we've done has been intentional about creating opportunities for women within our organization. It's just being open to letting those individuals flourish without any preconceived mindsets.

In an earlier conversation I learned that you have two daughters and a son. What kind of future do you see for them?

My oldest daughter is going to be 22, and the younger one is 17. And they have the benefit of growing up in a household that is really led by my wife, who is a tremendous advocate for women in her own right. She's a doctor who sought to be a devoted mother at the same time, in a practice managed by men where there was not a lot of receptivity to making accommodations for what moms need to perform in such a demanding profession. Because she is empathetic and

patient, and puts those qualities ahead of profit, she's an exceptional physician and in high demand. So, my daughters have a great role model. And what they get in me as a role model is someone who frequently defers to Mom when it comes to important decisions regarding our family. I think one of the things I am as a husband is very attentive to my wife, because she's simply awesome - exceptional at being a doctor, exceptional as a mother, exceptional as a person, and so I do whatever I can to facilitate whatever she needs. My wife always says to our son, "Take good notes, because this is how I want you to be as a husband and a father." As for my daughters? I think they feel totally free to advocate for themselves and to pursue whatever aspirations they have without a fear of reprimand or being constrained by tradition.

Empathy, compassion, humanity...not skills that were valued in men or women until recently. It's a different world, and glad your kids are growing up in it.

Yeah, me too. And we all have an obligation to pay it forward.

Quickfire with John

What is your morning routine? Hendrix (our dog) and I start our day together with a short walk and a quality pot of coffee. He joins me in the living room (he prefers being next to me on the couch) while I scan the news and early email, then do a little bit of reading. A quick recap with the rest of the family on goals and needs for the day, and it's off to the races.

What do you do to relax? Reading and fishing lead the list on a routine basis, but always ready for a ski-day or a swim. I'm a sports guy, but sometimes watching the game has the opposite effect!

What is the best advice you ever got? Don't take life or yourself too seriously.

What is the worst advice you ever took? Look out for number 1. While self-care is important, putting yourself first as a mindset only works for a little while.

Any books / TV shows / podcasts you are into right now? The Three Pines series by Louise Penny is filling-up my library at the moment! Armand Gamache would be a wonderful role model. 😊