

Managing the mayhem

by Holly HARVEY



Sondra Shipp

Slogging through a job search can be difficult and demoralizing and can even make someone consider a career change.

For Collin College student Sondra Shipp, taking the plunge and choosing a drastically different career path has made all the difference. Shipp was living in East Texas looking for a job when she asked herself an important question.

"I thought to myself, 'What can I do that I enjoy?'" Shipp asked. "I had been working healthcare and retail jobs, and I wanted something that was different and exciting. I had a little experience planning small local and church events so I focused on that area."

After exhaustively researching, Shipp found the hospitality and foodservice management program at Collin College and packed up her

belongings in Longview to make the move to Frisco.

"I read all kinds of incredible reviews about how Collin College's program was spectacular and excellent," Shipp said. "It made me excited to start the program."

Collin College's Institute of Hospitality and Culinary Education Chair Karen Musa said the hospitality program gives students a chance to gain real-world experience and shows the variety of careers available in hospitality management.

"The program has high standards and challenging classes and provides students opportunities to work at events and businesses to get a feel for their future career," Musa said.

Shipp and other Collin College students in the program regularly assist with local community events, and this year they catered the Wildflower Festival in Richardson with headliners such as Joan Jett and Kool & the Gang. In the past, Shipp has volunteered and helped with ESPN's Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly Award (ESPY).

"When students are out in the field managing an actual event they really have to think on their feet," Musa said. "They have to quickly adapt to situations and that's where their training from classes helps."

Shipp uses her skills at Bridal Shows Inc., a job she learned about through a Collin College classmate. Her role involves administrative tasks, managing industry contacts, checking on insurance, prepping kits for vendors and managing special projects.

"For the hospitality industry, you have to be extremely organized and have precise time management skills," Shipp said.



Naomi Butler, CEO of Bridal Shows, Inc., has produced tradeshow for more than 25 years.

"Thousands of details go into producing shows," Butler said. "It's important to produce a quality, long-lasting event that is a complete package. Treating exhibitors fairly, budgeting wisely, getting anywhere from hundreds to thousands of brides to come to shows is all part of the package."

Also certified in exposition management, Butler routinely hires students like Shipp to work at Bridal Shows, Inc. to help get their foot in the door in the industry and other jobs.

Classes at Collin College such as Group Tours, Leadership, International Management and more also provide students with a firm foundation in management, Musa said.

"There are an incredible amount of options in the industry," Musa said. "Students can work with trade shows, become meeting planners, work for associations or corporations or even work independently for themselves."

The hospitality industry has been described by the U.S. Department of Labor as one of the fastest-growing industries. Musa keeps a database of job leads and internships that she frequently shares with students to help them get a leg up when starting their careers. Musa also works to help students with their skills outside of the classroom.

"Networking is a huge part of the

business, and we really push our students to get involved with an industry group," Musa said. "One group we've really gotten involved in that has helped our students is Meeting Professionals International (MPI)."

This year, three students from Collin College received scholarships from MPI to attend its national conference in Minneapolis. Collin College is actively working to create a student chapter of MPI in the fall to give students a better understanding of the industry and greater networking options.

People skills are a huge plus and are necessary for success in the industry. "My passion is building people and businesses," Butler said. "A lot of business is building relationships. People are more than just a name and an email address."

Though networking, building relationships, planning and fulfilling client needs can be difficult and labor-intensive, it's worth it. "Even when the day is challenging and there's a million things to be done, I still love working with people," Shipp said. "When I'm able to help someone and I slowly see their frown turn into a smile, it's the absolute best thing." ❖

Holly Harvey is a public relations writer at Collin College.

Photos: Nick Young, Collin College.