

For Immediate Release

The School of Hospitality Business Honors Alumni Association Hall of Fame
Inductees, Industry Leader of the Year

Celebration of Leadership also Brings 65 Students to New York City

(November 24, 2015, East Lansing, Michigan) The Waldorf Astoria in New York City was the setting on Saturday, November 7 for The School of Hospitality Business at MSU's Celebration of Leadership which inducted four new members of the Alumni Association Hall of Fame, Class of Innovators. In addition, **Mark Laport, co-founder, president and CEO of Concord Hospitality Enterprises Company**, was named Industry Leader of the Year.

The new Hall of Fame members are **David C. George (BA '79), president of Olive Garden Restaurants; John M. Keeling (MBA '74), executive vice president of Valencia Group; John G. Malone (BA '82), area director for Choice Hotels International; and John W. Pharr (BA '69), president of Strand Development Company, LLC.**

Nearly 250 alumni and students, faculty and staff members filled the Empire Room, just off the famed lobby of the legendary hotel on Park Avenue. School Director Dr. Michael McCall welcomed the guests, including Dean of the Broad College of Business Dr. Sanjay Gupta. Celebration of Leadership Master of Ceremonies was Alumni Association President Chuck Day (BA '91), regional director of revenue management for InterContinental Hotels Group.

Chuck noted the generosity of the evening's many sponsors, as well as the longstanding relationship enjoyed by The School and the Waldorf Astoria where nine School alumni currently serve in management and executive positions. He also highlighted the 65 select students who were present, each of whom traveled to New York with the aid of scholarships earmarked for student travel.

Assisting Chuck with the honors were Hall of Fame Members Dan Burdakin (BA '81) and Richard Farrar (BA '73). Each honoree addressed his remarks to the students.

- President of Olive Garden since 2013, **Dave George** leads a company with 828 restaurants, more than 95,000 employees, and \$3.6 billion in annual sales. He has demonstrated extraordinary leadership, innovation, and tenacity in the restaurant industry, and has held executive positions with Houlihan's, Battleground Restaurant Group, LongHorn Steakhouse, and The Capital Grille. He is known for getting on the "front lines," in the kitchen and with those closest to the action. A leader by example, he has mentored and developed hundreds of individuals in his companies, including many, many Spartans. He is an active alumnus who frequently returns to campus to speak in classes and recruit interns and graduates.

In his comments to the students, Dave noted with pride the way "our School has transformed the landscape of hospitality business education and remains one of the top-ranked in the nation. He then shared wisdom he had been given early in his career, speaking in language the students could understand and appreciate. He said, "When you get into the business world, be the best you can be at whatever level you are currently assigned to. Focus on the present." In "student speak," he said,

“#betheobviouschoice.” He urged the students to “Know what it takes to make money in your area of responsibility and how that contributes to the big picture success of your business.” In other words, **“#makemoney.”** Finally, he said, “Remember that in the long run, leadership skills will prove to be more important than technical knowledge: **#bealeader”**

- **John Keeling** majored in Middle Eastern Studies at UCLA, served and earned a Purple Heart with the 1st Battalion 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division in Viet Nam, then earned his MBA at MSU. After working with Marriott International, John joined Laventhol & Horwath, becoming regional managing partner of the Southwest Region. He established Hospitality Counselors, Inc. in 1990, which merged with PKF Consulting, where John became senior vice president and shareholder. He has been with Valencia Group since 2009, which specializes in the development and operation of upper-upscale and luxury independent hotels. Through his 40-year career he has earned awards and honors, guest lectured in a variety of industry and academic settings, and has even gone back to school to earn a Master’s degree in Theological Studies. He is a member of *The School’s* Real Estate Investment Management Advisory Council.

Accepting his award, John said he only considered one school for his MBA in Hospitality Business. MSU was the obvious choice. He reminded the students, “Anything worth doing is worth doing wrong...the first time.” Don’t be afraid to make mistakes, but “don’t make the same mistake twice.” Integrity is essential, he said. “Always learn with integrity. Experience and skills plus integrity will see you through to success.”

- **John Malone** has been area director of Franchise Services for Choice Hotels since 2012, responsible for cultivating effective franchise relationships, owner engagement, and proactive service to clients in central and northern Michigan, with 65 properties across seven hotel brands. He is known for building high-performance teams, improving performance, and maximizing profits for owners and for Choice Hotels. He built a stellar reputation early in his career as general manager with Drury Inns and Red Roof Inns, and had a very successful tenure with Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group, eventually serving as regional vice president, overseeing the Country Inn & Suites Western Division. John is actively involved in *The School’s* Alumni Association, serving on its Appointed Board of Directors, mentoring students, and returning to campus frequently for alumni and student-led events.

John talked about his long history with MSU, where from 1967-82 there was always an immediate family member enrolled. All five children in his family plus “countless cousins” are Spartans. In fact, his father’s cousin was legendary MSU President John A. Hannah, who often stated, “Only people are important.” John said that is certainly true in hospitality. He urged the students to remember their roots and the “people who have helped you.” He also encouraged them to “contribute every day as a leader, using your education and the mission and values of MSU and *The School.*” Recalling the words of MSU Football Coach Mark Dantonio, John said to “reach higher,” and to “strive for something greater, and give back when possible.”

- **John Pharr** has been with Strand Development Company since he started his career, opening the 312-room Ocean Front Holiday Inn in Myrtle Beach in 1971. By 1984, he was president of the company, which today has earned a place among the leading hotel management companies in the Southeast. The company specializes in the two- to four-star hotel segments, and operates hotels under all the leading hotel brand families. Through his career, John managed over 200 properties and served in a number of leadership positions with the Myrtle Beach and the South Carolina Hospitality Associations, as well as the AH&LA. John is a member of the Appointed Board of Directors for *The School’s* Alumni

Association, and he served for 36 years in the United States Air Force Reserves, advising on the operation of over 100 hotels worldwide. He retired in 2006 as a colonel.

Addressing the students, John said, “Find the right partner to have by your side.” Develop integrity, he said, and build relationships. Find a good mentor, develop leadership skills, and “take on problem hotels” and tough assignments. “Work hard,” he said, and “Don’t take a job just for the money. Take a job you love.”

- **Mark Laport** is the co-founder, president and CEO of Concord Hospitality Enterprises Company. He founded Concord in 1985, and it has since become one of the hospitality industry’s largest and most respected owners, operators, and developers, with nearly 100 hotels in 20 states and two provinces in Canada. Mark has a reputation for energy, integrity, hard work, and good decisions, leading the way in sustainability efforts and giving back to the communities where Concord operates.

Under Mark’s leadership, Concord’s portfolio generates profits in excess of \$150 million and the company has earned more than 100 prestigious industry awards. This success is driven by Mark’s values, which form the cornerstones of the company’s culture: Quality, Community, Integrity, Profitability, and Having Fun. Mark has actively recruited and employed many graduates of *The School* who he says, “support and drive tremendous results in several of the company’s upscale and upper-upscale hotels. . . I am very proud that MSU graduates have lifted my company’s status and heled lead our consistent growth as an industry leader.”

With nearly two dozen of Mark’s colleagues in the audience, Mark recounted for the students his early career, when he really “learned how to sell.” But he also had a strong sense of competition and drive. The students were impressed with the story of his first hospitality venture, in which he borrowed \$500 from friends to purchase the Girard Diner. He opened another restaurant, and then built homes, and along the way, he said, his hard work was noticed, leading to opportunities to develop hotels. Mark told the students that leadership requires focus, diligence, and honesty. As for the career and success he has had with Concord? “You can do it too,” he suggested. “Be charged up, focused, and want to win.”

The 65 students at Celebration of Leadership also participated in the weekend’s HX: the Hotel Experience, Rooms to Restaurants trade show at the Jacob Javits Center. In addition, they engaged in several days of professional development programs hosted by alumni and industry partners at a variety of hotels and restaurants in the City, all arranged by *The School*’s Student and Industry Resource Center (SIRC).

“Celebration of Leadership is an important tradition in our School,” says School Director Dr. Michael McCall. “The event acknowledges the contributions of hospitality industry greats, and it demonstrates for our students all the possibilities that are before them. We thank the Waldorf Astoria New York, our sponsors, and our honorees.”

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