



Disney Internship Helps George Mason Student Learn To Improve Services for People with Dementia

Orlando, FL—April 4, 2007 Guests at the Grand Floridian Resort, located within view of the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World, Florida enjoy all the amenities available from the vacation destination's premier resort. But for Maria Pokorny, a George Mason University student completing a semester internship in hospitality services at the hotel, the experience has provided a model for improving care for people with Alzheimer's and related dementia.

Pokorny, 21, a student within Mason's program in Assisted Living/Senior Housing Administration, has worked the previous five years in a Northern Virginia assisted living community for individuals with Alzheimer's and related dementia. Her goal in working at the Floridian is to learn how Disney's approach to hospitality can be used to improve quality of life for such residents. Nearly 5 million U.S. seniors suffer from the disease, with the number expected to grow to nearly 20 million as the Baby Boom population ages.

"We're taught in the Mason program how important it is to make seniors feel special and at home, and so much of that is incorporated in the way Disney approaches their guests," says Pokorny, a junior who is scheduled to graduate in 2008.

Pokorny is the second Mason student to spend a semester at the Disney World resorts, as part of a unique arrangement between the university and the Disney College Partners Program. In both cases, the students had previous assisted living experience. Students without such experience are required to complete internships within traditional assisted living communities.

"An Alzheimer's community can cost in excess of \$60,000 a year," said Andrew Carle, assistant professor and director of the Mason Program, which was the first in the nation dedicated to the field. "Maria understands the clinical side of Alzheimer's, but people with dementia know when things aren't clean, phones aren't answered, or staff aren't professional – as do their families. It's about raising standards in every area."

Pokorny's work involves or provides exposure to areas similar to those found in an assisted living community, including housekeeping, maintenance, security, transportation, dining, and front desk duties. In addition she will complete Disney coursework in hospitality and human resource management. Following her internship, Pokorny will return to Mason to complete her degree in health care administration, which has already included coursework in assisted living, aging, and Alzheimer's as part of a concentration in senior housing.

Pokorny's background has also been useful to Disney. "We have guests with disabilities, or older adults who need special assistance," she said. "We have to understand and adjust to their needs, which I'm used to."

Pokorny's experience has paid off. "She's was one of only two interns asked to extend their stay for an additional three months, as well as to become a Trainer for new interns," said Carle. "Which means she's outperforming the hotel management majors."

Program in Assisted Living/Senior Housing Administration

The Program in Assisted Living/Senior Housing Administration was the first in the nation to offer both undergraduate and graduate curricula dedicated exclusively to the field. More than 300 students have completed coursework within the program to date, which has been nationally and internationally recognized for its teaching innovations. Additional information about the program can be found on its website at: www.assistedliving.gmu.edu

George Mason University

George Mason University is an innovative, entrepreneurial institution with national distinction in a range of academic fields. Enrollment now tops 30,500, with students in 173 degree programs at campuses in Arlington, Fairfax, and Prince William Counties, Virginia. George Mason currently offers credit classes in Loudon County. This expansion is part of George Mason's mission to further establish itself as a distributed university in which each of its campuses has a distinctive academic focus that plays a critical role in the economy of its region.

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