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TRAYLESS:



Fad or Future?

Colleges all over the country have been giving trayless dining a try in order to cut back on food waste, cut costs and create a more sustainable dining program. But some colleges, along with the rest of the industry, still aren't sure about the initiative's prospects. This month, we examine if trayless dining has staying power across all segments. **MORE ON P. 24**

USC's The Lot Marketplace Opens

LOS ANGELES—The newest addition to the 33,500-student University of Southern California, The Lot Marketplace, opened its doors recently as an interim facility that will serve the campus until the 192,000-square foot, \$130-million Ronald Tutor Campus Center is completed in 2010. The 20,000-square foot Lot Marketplace houses eight different dining concepts and a marketplace.

"The Lot Marketplace represents the first major changes to the university's hospitality program with the end goal of catering to the needs of our internationally diverse and food savvy campus population," says Scott Shuttleworth, director of USC hospitality services in a press release.

The concepts inside The Lot Marketplace were meant to rival permanent offerings at other schools' dining halls. The offerings include Wolfgang Puck Express, Carl's Jr., Starbucks, Red Mango, Baja Fresh, ZAO Noodle Bar and Submarina. Additionally, Traditions, a beloved campus pub originally located in USC's Commons, will be temporarily relocated to The Lot Marketplace before making its permanent home at the Ronald Tutor Campus Center.

The Lot Marketplace is located on the southwest side of campus in a former parking lot. It is housed in a 39-foot tall dome surrounded by outdoor patios that seat 140. Inside, there are seats for approximately 350. The Lot Marketplace will also feature six flat-screen TVs and free wireless Internet throughout. There is also a c-store that sells beverages, snacks and grab-and-go items. The building is open from 7 a.m. to midnight seven days a week.

FSD OF THE MONTH
Robert Darrah aims to make the Legacy Retirement Community's first class. 34



Going for Gold



accomplishments

ROBERT DARRAH has transformed the Legacy Retirement Communities in Lincoln, Neb. by:

- **SWITCHING** from banquet style service to a sit-down restaurant, which has helped increase resident satisfaction to 98%
- **REDUCING** operating costs by \$120,000 this year by renegotiating contracts with suppliers
- **PARTNERING** with Don Miller & Associates to help train his culinary and wait staffs
- **CREATING** Chef Fest, an open house event in which the community had the opportunity to learn more about foodservice in a retirement community

Robert Darrah's goal is to create a first class foodservice program.

by Becky Schilling

Robert Darrah often uses sports analogies to describe the foodservice program at the Legacy Retirement Communities in Lincoln, Neb. "We're going for the gold. We want the perfect 10," Darrah says. That competitive quality has served Darrah well in his 10 years as foodservice director at the four facilities that make up the company. When he was hired, the department was struggling, but now, resident satisfaction is at 98% and Darrah managed to shave \$120,000 off his operating costs, even with the current challenging economic climate.

Beginnings: Darrah began his career working in Lincoln area restaurants during high school and college until realizing the atmosphere was not for him long-term. "Everything was profit driven and it just didn't seem like the career path I wanted to take," he says. Darrah moved into the noncommercial market after a friend referred him for a position at an area hospital. It was here that Darrah learned the clinical nutrition side of foodservice. A few years later, the position at Legacy "found" him.

"The Legacy owners were looking for someone who had a restaurant background and a nutrition background, but they didn't want a restaurant manager," he says. "They wanted somebody who had the complete package with a little bit of a human resources background, but also with business knowledge behind the scenes."

In 1998, Darrah joined the Legacy team, taking over three 200-resident retirement communities and one 50-resi-

dent Alzheimer's care center. He inherited an operation that was faltering financially and had issues with high employee turnover and theft. "The first thing I said was, 'I am going to run this kitchen as if it were my own business and the decisions that I make will be as if I was spending my own money,'" he says. From that point on, Darrah has been building a foodservice program that he hopes will "outshine all the other retirement communities, not only in Lincoln but also in the Midwest."

Last year, Darrah thought the program at Legacy was getting close to that goal, but his competitive nature wouldn't let him stop there. "Resident satisfaction scores were an average of 90% and the owners were happy," Darrah says. "But it seemed like there was something missing and we wanted to know, how we rank and compare to other retirement communities across the country."

Good to best: To help improve Legacy further, Darrah partnered with Don Miller & Associates, a healthcare foodservice consulting firm, in December 2007. "They were taken back. They said, 'You don't have any financial problems, you don't have any satisfaction problems, why are you calling us?'" Darrah recalls. His response: "We want to be the best."

Don Miller & Associates confirmed Darrah's suspicion that Legacy was doing good things with its foodservice program but that improvements could still be made. The main suggestion was switching from banquet style dining to restaurant style dining. Residents were selecting dinner entrées one week in advance and were served much like at a catered event. Now, residents are seated at white tablecloth-adorned tables and served by waiters who take their orders at the point of service.

Before the switch could be implemented, however, changes had to be made in the facilities and with the staff. Darrah worked closely with Don Miller & Associates' John Giambraresi, executive director for senior dining, to set up a game plan. "It was kind of like a football team. He gave us the playbook.

We studied it, we practiced it and then we went out and we did it," Darrah says about working with Giambaressi.

To accommodate the change, the layout of the dining rooms was changed by adding sideboards for beverage service. The menus also received a significant facelift. Residents now have 11 entrée options for dinner, as opposed to two under the old system, and the menus are more upscale than before.

Don Miller & Associates also helped in another big endeavor: training the staff for the switch to restaurant style dining. The waitstaff had three weeks of training to learn how to serve customers properly in a five-star dining atmosphere. Servers wait on no more than four tables; previously, the number was eight. Additional kitchen staff was added to help with the change from bulk cooking to cooking to order. Part of that training was also teaching the staff, many of whom are students, the importance of their jobs. "Anybody can go to McDonald's, work there for six months and leave," Darrah says. "When our staff come to work for us we teach them a career. Not only how to wait tables, but how to act as adults. We teach them self respect." Darrah says mentoring the younger staff is the most rewarding part of his job.

Jay Bohlken, director of retirement living for Legacy, also recognizes Darrah's mentoring. "Robert is very good with our young servers. For many, this is their first job and Robert can relate to them well." Bohlken says relating to the staff is one reason the switch to restaurant style dining was so successful. "He sold the idea to the staff by saying this is going to increase resident satisfaction, and if the residents are happier our jobs will be easier."

The change to restaurant style service was made in increments in March. The first community to go to the new service was Legacy Estates. By the end of the week, all three communities had changed to restaurant style dining. The fourth facility is an Alzheimer's memory care unit, and its dining service remains banquet style because it is easier for those patients. The menus at all four facilities are the same, however.

The change didn't affect only the foodservice staff but residents as well. "They have been ordering their food the same way for the last 10 years so it could be a little confusing," Darrah says. To make the transition as smooth as possible, Darrah sent out letters and had resident meetings explaining the changes and what he hoped to accomplish.

It seems to have worked. "We just got our satisfaction scores back and we went from 90% to 98% in one year,"



Resident satisfaction has increased since implementing restaurant style service in March.

Darrah says. "That was a compliment to everyone involved because implementing this was no easy task. We had to order the menu jackets, rewrite our menus and plan out a nightly menu instead of doing a cycle menu."

Darrah adds that the changes in foodservice and the resulting satisfaction increases in both staff and residents have spread into other departments as well. "It's very contagious because other departments want to be like us," he says. "It's kind of like the old 'I want to be like Mike' commercials. Everybody sees that dining services is taking a new approach to customer service and they want to be like us."

Bohlken also sees the department's attitude spreading. "Robert's enthusiasm and his ability to impart that enthusiasm to his staff is a great asset." Bohlken says it was Darrah's will and enthusiasm that helped sell the change to restaurant style dining. "We said, 'If Robert thinks we can do this, we're not going to stand in his way.' It was this striving for improvement at each meal that has been crucial to the successes we've enjoyed so far and for our future successes."

Chef Fest: After making the changes, Darrah felt it was time to let others know about the foodservice at Legacy. He started with the local community. In August, 11,000 people were invited to an open house at the Legacy Estates, the community's newest facility. "There is this stigma it's blended peas and chopped-up chicken breasts, and what we were trying to do was get that stigma off of our name," Darrah says about the idea behind Chef Fest. "At our facilities, we serve beef tenderloin, prime rib, fried shrimp, lobster tail. When our residents go down to our dining rooms, we have the menu set up so that it's like going to a different restaurant every night. Everything is five-star service."

Fifteen hundred people attended the event and sampled selections from the new menus. "It was kind of like *The Wizard of Oz*," Darrah says. "Nobody knows what goes on behind the magic curtain. We brought the chefs out from the kitchen in their full dress whites. You could just see the pride in their faces." The event was a coming-out party for the department. Now, Darrah hopes to

take the momentum from the event and turn it into national recognition. "We want to put ourselves in the national spotlight and show the world this is what we're doing in little Lincoln, Neb."

Cutting cost: Implementing the new service style was difficult enough, but Darrah wanted to shave costs as well. "We didn't want to put this program into place and have it cost an arm and a leg," he says. "We wanted to make sure we did it cost effectively." By renegotiating contracts, Darrah cut \$120,000 off his operating costs.

For example, for steaks to be cut, packaged and delivered, it cost \$22.50 per pound. Darrah worked out a deal with the company so the meat would be delivered and Legacy's staff would cut the meat to specification. This move meant beef would cost \$11.50 per pound. Savings like this enabled Darrah to hire additional culinary staff to implement the restaurant style dining service. About renegotiating the contracts Darrah says, "My philosophy is, the worst thing they can say is no but at least you tried."

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