

A Fun Brand

An Interview with Andrew Harris, General Manager, Graduate by Hilton Bloomington

PROPERTY BRIEF *An undeniably local stay, Graduate by Hilton Bloomington combines hometown history and Hoosier traditions with creative interiors and college nostalgia. Located steps from Indiana University and Sample Gates, the property is a perfect base for exploring Bloomington. Guests can enjoy an on-site restaurant and inspired guest rooms, including the one-of-a-kind Stranger Things Suite.*



Andrew Harris

Will you discuss your career journey?

I got my start working in hotels after finding summer work at a new full-service hotel in a mixed-use development called City Center in Newport News, Virginia as a valet/bellman. I fell in love with it immediately, and I still think of it as one of the more fun jobs I've had throughout my life. I was a part of the opening team, and the manic atmosphere was something I found really refreshing after working in mostly retail jobs up until that point. I've heard someone say that you never have the same day twice in hospitality, which has always been part of the appeal.

After my time at that hotel, I worked at the front desk at a smaller property while I was in college. After I graduated in 2008, the economy had taken a dive and I wasn't really sure what to do with my degree, which was completely unrelated to hospitality. I moved to Richmond, Virginia, and while I was on the job hunt, I found myself applying to a hotel in the West End where I would spend the next six years. That property was 30 years old and well established, so it was a great place to jump-start my career. I think I did every job except for maybe maintenance at that hotel at one point or another. My first management experience was at that property, and I found a mentor there who I wound up working with for the next decade, following her to a dual brand hotel in the downtown area and then, ultimately, to Graduate.

I'll never forget talking to the person who was my Regional Vice President in late 2019, explaining that I was expecting my first kid. He said to me, "Your life is going to be totally different in 2020." Of course, I had no idea how right he was at the time. My daughter was born in February, and then the world shut down a

month later. I found myself without a job for the first time since graduating college with a new house and a newborn. I was fortunate to have some family connections, and I was able to get a job stocking grocery and convenience stores with snack cakes. I was considering picking up a route with them when I got the call to leave Virginia and serve as the GM of the Graduate location in Tempe, Arizona. After discussing with my wife, we packed up the family and moved across the country to Arizona, and I served in that role for almost three years before I accepted my current position as GM of Graduate by Hilton Bloomington.

Will you provide an overview of Graduate by Hilton Bloomington, and how the property is positioned in the market?

Graduate is such a fun brand. I've worked with Graduate since 2017, and each property is totally different from the others. Like the other Graduate hotels, Graduate by Hilton Bloomington has an A+ location, right off of Kirkwood Avenue, just blocks away from

Indiana University's Sample Gates. Design is embedded in the DNA of the brand and our hotel, and there are little nods to Bloomington lore everywhere you look.

Until very recently, Graduate had the honor of being the only 4-star boutique hotel in Bloomington. Even with new competition, we still position ourselves as the rate leader in our market and drive a team culture that ensures the product matches the associated expectations. The goal is always to provide excellent service, but also to ensure things like preventative maintenance and deep cleaning standards are being held up to make sure the hotel doesn't fall into the usual trappings that come with age and complacency.

How valuable is it to have such a strong suite product, and do you see this as a differentiator for Graduate by Hilton Bloomington?

Being anchored next to a prominent, nationally recognized university means we need to be able to cater to all walks of life and economic brackets. Maintaining a strong suite product ensures we have more options for meeting guest expectations and it allows us to



Graduate by Hilton Bloomington lobby



Front desk

say thank you to the most loyal members of the Hilton program. Giving that choice to our guests allows us to further curate a memorable stay. For those who are fans of the Netflix hit, *Stranger Things*, we even have a suite themed after the show.

How has Graduate by Hilton Bloomington approached its restaurant/food and beverage offering, and what are the keys to being effective in this part of the business?

This is something we've been talking about a lot lately. Graduate by Hilton Bloomington just secured a liquor license for the first time since opening in 2018, so we've been rethinking our model on a near daily basis. Our biggest success has been catering to the local community in addition to our guests. We've gained quite a following with students frequenting Poindexter (our lobby level bar and café), so we are careful to bear that in mind when considering menu changes or pricing updates. We try to keep our offerings approachable. We use local coffee (Brown County Coffee, which is amazing) and as many locally sourced products as we can. We may not necessarily advertise this, as we feel the quality of the food should speak louder than words on a menu. As a result of these efforts, Poindexter built its reputation and is one of the busier cafes in town. We recently remodeled the space with the inclusion of a bar, and we've seen those same efforts start to translate to more sales during the evening, which historically had been our slow period. This allows us to serve as the true day-and-night venue we had always envisioned.

The hotel also offers banquets and catering, scaling offerings in accordance with client preference. We host many of the Big 10 teams during basketball season, and with the addition of the liquor license, we're able to do more in the weddings and social spaces than

we once could. We're fortunate to have a strong sales team who collaborates with our food and beverage crew to ensure events run smoothly and exceed guest expectations.

How do you define the role of the general manager and what are the keys to being effective in the role?

I would define it as wearing many hats behind a revolving door. I've had colleagues refer to it as "generally managing," which feels right most of the time. Being an effective general manager is less about personal talent than it is surrounding yourself with a team

you can trust, rely on, and support. There's no way I could run this hotel or any hotel without first building a strong, trustworthy team. I generally give my department heads free reign to run their ship (within the confines of company policy and general empathy) toward our greater goals for the hotel. These goals are established and checked on during a weekly leadership meeting, with touch points and one-on-ones hosted intermittently to check progress. I find it more effective to tell my managers what it is we're trying to accomplish and let them work with their teams to make it happen rather than trying to micromanage their approach. I maintain an open-door policy (as do all Graduate GMs) to ensure I am available for guidance. Also, it may be old school, but I still keep a to-do list on pen and paper.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in building a career in the hotel industry?

Watch for those you see as "doing it well" and try and learn from them, whatever that may be. Look for a mentor. I have been fortunate enough to work with people that were willing to foster my talents and help me grow. One thing I found to be the most helpful as I was coming up in my career was walking into my direct manager's office at the beginning of my day and simply asking, "What do you have for me today?" I would get a run down on how the day had progressed, any projects or tasks that were earmarked for me, and it showed my manager I was engaged and ready to take on tasks. Also remember there is such a thing as work/life balance. In hospitality, this can be easy to forget. I tell my team to take the time available when they can because we all know there will be plenty of long days ahead. ●



Terrace Suite living room