

Morey's provides cultural education to J-1 workers

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

WILDWOOD — College students in Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia don't celebrate the American holiday of Thanksgiving, but some of the J-1 work/travel visa students working at Morey's Piers experienced turkey, pumpkin pie and NFL Football July 13 during "Thanksgiving in July."

The event for J-1s featured employees dressed as pilgrims and one young man portraying a turkey.

J-1 workers are required to be college students in their home country, speak English with enough proficiency to interact in an English-speaking environment and have a job waiting in the U.S. They spend three to five months in the U.S. working at mainly minimum-wage jobs.

According to Morey's Piers Communications Director Maggie Warner, each tourist season the amusement company fills some of its nearly 1,600 seasonal job openings with about 600 J-1 visa workers.

J-1s have been working at amusement piers for at least 20 years, according to Denise Beckson, director of operations/human resources.

Will Morey, president and CEO of Morey's Piers and a Cape May County freeholder in charge of economic development, said that initially a number of Irish students came to the piers via the J-1 program mainly as a work opportunity.

"It's really much more now of a student cultural exchange," he said. "It's students that are here to learn English, to see America, less so 'I've got to go work somewhere.'"

Beckson said the work component of the program affords the J-1s the opportunity to stay for a longer duration, "to be able to afford it." In the past, many J-1 students came from Western Europe, but that has shifted to Eastern Europe, Asia, China and South America, she said.

J-1s are also coming from Egypt, Jordan and Turkey.

Morey said having 25 percent to 30 percent of his work force as J-1s was the target. He said it enriches the work experience for their American employees.

Being at the southern tip of the Jersey shore, employment has its challenges, he said.

"It would be less expensive for us to hire all Americans if we could," Morey said. "We have job fairs, we do outreach programs for Americans, and



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

J-1 workers participate in Thanksgiving in July at Morey's Piers on July 13 as part of the cultural component of their employment.

we're not really able to staff our facility as needed."

He said Morey's has to live up to its end of the deal and make sure the J-1s' work experience is one of learning.

While a J-1 worker may spend their days operating a

ride or working in food service, a job that may not seem to be a cultural experience for foreign students, Beckson said Morey's Piers holds events such as Thanksgiving in July, a Fourth of July barbecue and a country-western night. She

said trips are available for J-1s to Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York City, Niagara Falls and Boston.

A "professional" series takes J-1s to visit county courts to learn about law in the U.S., a local police station and Vol-

unteers in Medicine, Beckson said. She said J-1s participate in volunteer work such as beach sweeps and races.

A deterrent to youth from Philadelphia and South Jersey holding summer jobs in Cape May County is the high cost of apartments. Morey said the J-1s face the same problem.

Morey's offers a limited number of rental apartments for employees. Of about 1,600 seasonal employees, more than 90 percent find their own housing, Beckson said. She said Morey's Piers owns some housing and can accommodate 140 workers, about half domestic and half international, or a little less than 9 percent.

"We're fortunate in Wildwood to have a lot of older boarding houses that house folks for the summer, so some of the same places the internationals stay, we have Americans staying as well," she said.

Morey said recruitment of J-1s begins in the fall with nearly 100 representatives of Morey's traveling abroad in teams of two and three people.

Beckson said Morey's advertises for J-1s on websites around the world and through agents in various countries to make them aware of opportunities at the amusement piers.

Oversight of J-1 visa program responsibility of State Department

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Morey's Piers this summer, said she has a master's degree in accounting in her home country. She said she was spending her second summer season here. Her job at Morey's was working in the cash room, she said.

Sacaliuc said the U.S. is as she expected based on watch-

ing American movies.

"I have that America feeling, I don't know how to explain it," she said.

Sacaliuc said it was expensive for her to obtain her J-1 visa through an agency, about \$2,000 including insurance, visa fees and travel costs. She said banks in Romania will advance the money to the agency, which the J-1s pay back when

they return home.

Lerner said if she wanted to go to Kenya on a program, she would probably pay an organization to help her get there and find something for her to do and act as an intermediary.

"That's what the sponsors do," Lerner said. "First they have to say they are responsible for these participants while they're here, so they don't go

disappearing."

The sponsor is responsible for responding to any problems that occur. She compared a sponsor to a "matchmaker," in this case joining students with Morey's Piers. "They find the jobs or they vet the jobs and ensure they have housing and they make sure the jobs are the right kind of jobs according to our regulations," she said.

The State Department maintains a relationship with the sponsors.

Many J-1s work two jobs while staying in Wildwood.

"We know that they want to work when they come here, so we have set a few requirements... which means they need opportunities to interact with Americans during the workday."

— Robin J. Lerner,
State Department



LERNER

Lerner said J-1s can work two jobs if it is approved by their sponsor.

Albert Dorau, of Romania, is working at Morey's Piers and seeking a second job. In his home country, he is studying mechanical engineering.

He said he found Americans to be friendly. He visited New York City for a few hours and hopes to see Washington, D.C.

"I can't wait to explore the

other cities and attractions," Dorau said.

At the end of their three months of work time in America, J-1s use the money they have saved to travel America for as long as two months, Lerner said.

"We know that they want to work when they come here, so we have set a few requirements in our regulations, which means they need opportunities to interact with Americans during the workday," she said.

Sponsors are responsible for ensuring they have a cultural component to their program. That involves the employer providing the activities or giving the J-1 workers time off to pursue those interests.

"Culture can happen at work, it just means they need to be interacting with Americans and employers need to be thinking about that," Lerner said.

She said some sponsors offer discounted bus tours. Groups of J-1s will also band together to rent a car and take road trips, Lerner said.

The jobs are required to be seasonal or temporary as a protection for the American worker, Lerner said.

Some local residents complain J-1s take jobs away from American workers, but Lerner said that is not always the case.

"What you hear from the employer is that the J-1s can come during the shoulder seasons," when U.S. students attend school, Lerner said.



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