

Seaside hotelier navigates pandemic uncertainty

By **ETHAN MYERS**
The Astorian

When Masudur Khan came to the coast and got involved in the hotel industry, he saw a problem with how employees were hired and managed.

Workers were brought on for the busy tourism season and then laid off in the winter. There was often no loyalty in either direction.

"I found that wasn't the right way to do it because we are a team and family," Khan said.

As he took over Seaside Lodging LLC and came to oversee more than a dozen hotels along the coast, he made it a policy not to lay off workers. The result was low turnover and high retention rates for more than a decade.

When the coronavirus pandemic struck, many in the hospitality industry laid off workers. Khan said he had to furlough around half of his employees.

As government restrictions to contain the virus lifted and hotels welcomed back more guests, many have reported a significant labor shortage, which has disrupted the recovery.

But Khan has, for the most part, eluded that issue and said he was able to hire



Saltline Hotel, one of the Seaside Lodging LLC properties.

back the majority of his furloughed employees.

"There is a huge demand and this is a market for the employee," he said. "So I had to sit down with my management team and say, 'OK, look at their pay. What are other people offering?'"

While Khan only made slight adjustments to wages, he added bonuses and incentives.

"We have value in this company and we are a good company that offers a lot of benefits," he said. "We have long-term relationships (with workers), but still ... we looked at that and made some changes."

Khan is also looking to develop housing. Cognizant of the housing crunch on the coast, where workers in hospitality and other service

sector jobs are often priced out of market-rate rentals, he wants to help construct more affordable units downtown.

"We want to attract people from Portland, if they want to move over here to work, so that we can solve some workforce problems," he said. "It would not only help solve the housing problem, it will also solve some of the workforce problems because we will get some talent that will have a nicer place to stay in new buildings ... while also giving the local people a place to stay."

Khan said his workers will get first priority on units and a discount on price.

As occupancy rates for hotels climb back toward pre-pandemic levels, the workforce remains in flux.

Earlier this summer, the American Hotel & Lodging Association estimated that 1 in 5 hotel jobs lost during the pandemic won't return by the end of the year. Many people who are looking to return to work are reconsidering hospitality or want higher wages, better benefits and flexible schedules, according to a survey by Joblist.

With the labor shortage, workers who are employed in hospitality are often tasked with extra hours and additional duties.

While the shortage may not be affecting Khan's hotels as much as others, as the board chairman for the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, he sees the impact it is having across the state.



Masudur Khan is a Seaside hotelier.

"It should be a priority for industry leaders like ORLA and everybody to bring the workforce back and make them confident in the hotel industry," he said. "We should work together to bring them back because it is a huge thing."

Khan said he knows hoteliers who cannot use all of their rooms because they don't have the staffing to properly clean them on time.

Some have pointed to the extended unemployment benefits during the pandemic as one reason for the labor shortage. State economists calculated the average unemployment benefit equaled about \$16.75 an hour.

But the extended benefits expired over the Labor Day

weekend.

Considering that most people are vaccinated and there is a better understanding of how the virus spreads, Khan said the government is right to end the benefits. He expects to see an increase in job applications in the coming weeks.

Despite the uncertainty of the pandemic and the changing workforce, Khan chose to move forward with construction last year of the 65-room SaltLine Hotel in Seaside. The hotel opened in August 2020.

"We did a lot of work in-house," he said. "It was not easy, but it was fun — working together through the challenge we had."

"I like when there is a challenge and I can overcome it."

Out of this world: Seaside artist creates 'spacescapes'

By **ZOË BUCHLI**
For Coast Weekend

Marrying science and art is what Seaside artist David Lehigh describes as a challenge.

He jokingly says he hears from people his pieces "give them nightmares."

"It's not always pleasant stuff I'm painting, I'm not interested in creating more 'acceptable' themes," Lehigh explained.

Owner of Spaceprint, Lehigh creates large and small-scale paintings that he uses as a vessel to investigate the environment of the universe and how solar systems, planets and galaxies interact with one another.

"It's a satisfying challenge," Lehigh said.

One of Lehigh's recent works is called "Copernicus," which Lehigh describes as a take off on Mars and the Milky Way as co-joined planetary systems. Another striking piece by Lehigh is titled "Spacescape XII." This project was a commission of Pacific University, inspired by scientific principles of outer space and the solar system.

His pieces typically range from about 2 to 3 feet wide and 8 to 30 feet long. The larger pieces or multi-sectioned spacescapes can be up to 12 feet long and 76 feet tall. There's a process that goes into creating his larger pieces. Lehigh will start with buying wood to build a



"Copernicus," by David Lehigh, is named after the great astronomer of the 14th century.

frame. From there, he'll purchase about 10 yards of canvas and stretch it until it's ready to be painted on.

Lehigh is a mixed media artist, and uses a combination of oil on canvas, watercolor, acrylic paint and india ink to create his pieces.

Recently, Lehigh completed a commission for a

dining room that was a massive space. For this project, Lehigh designed three pieces that would fit the allotted space and let the customer choose.

Since much of Lehigh's work delves into conceptualizing the universe and constellations, it's only natural he draws inspiration

from space. In the 1960s and 1970s when NASA was shooting rockets into space, Lehigh recalls wondering what it was like up in the great unknown. With limited access to telescopes and TV programs that didn't frequently touch on celestial concepts, he turned to NASA for information about

space and constellations.

"Space was so fascinating to me," Lehigh said. "It still is."

Early in his life, Lehigh found a knack for drawing and realistic painting.

"Art came to me at a very young age," he said. "It was about fourth grade when I started having an eye for



Nikki Davidson/Coast Weekend
David Lehigh uses oil paint to create his space-inspired art pieces.

what was in front of me."

Throughout his college career, he remembers always being especially interested in physics and chemistry. From there, his passions for art and space and science naturally intertwined. He received a master's degree in teaching from Pacific University in 1999. He now not only has art on the wall at the university, but occasionally teaches there, too. He has work featured at the Ford Foundation in New York City. He also was accepted into the Watercolor Society of Oregon.

When he's not painting, Lehigh is building his house in Seaside, another extension of his love of constructing and designing.

"I love creating," he said. "But it's all about having fun and taking on new challenges."

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