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LOCAL TRAVEL AGENT HONORED
FOR HURRICANE SANDY WORK

ASTA Honors Top Travel Professional for Going Above & Beyond

At last week's Global Convention in Miami, ASTA's outgoing Chairman Nina Meyer presented its first annual Extra Mile Award to Debbie Tenny of Options Travel. ASTA received hundreds of nominees and thousands of votes from consumers and agents. Winner Debby Tenny stood out by her dedication and tenacity in helping her client's business operate during the mayhem of Hurricane Sandy. Tenny was hit with challenge after challenge in accommodating the booking of over 5,900 room nights over a three month period in the middle of a devastated area. This resulted in her working nearly 24/7 for three straight months, using cobbled communications tools and a lot of care and ingenuity.



Debbie Tenny, a veteran corporate travel agent for Options Travel in Des Plaines, was recently honored by the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) for the work she did on behalf of one her clients during the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which hit the New York-New Jersey area on October 29, 2012.

Each year during their national convention, ASTA, the world's largest association of travel professionals, recognizes one agent who has gone above and beyond the typical role of a travel agent by providing exceptional service to their clients. This year it was Tenny.

ASTA's Extra Mile Award is one of the most prestigious awards an agent can receive from this large organization which represents travel agents, tour companies, cruise lines, hotels, car rental companies and so forth.

Over a three-month period following the Sandy disaster, Tenny was hit with challenge after challenge in booking over 5900 room nights in the middle of a disaster area for one of the leading salvage auto auction companies in North America. Her client was faced with identifying, evaluating, hauling, storing and disposing of approximately 40 percent of the estimated 230,000 automobiles damaged during the storm, which took many man hours to complete. The damaged cars were ultimately sold for parts or crushed or, in the case of some cars which sustained less damage, clearly identified as formerly flooded cars and sold at auction.

The firm needed to get their employees into and out of the area over and over again to deal with the massive job. Facilitating that travel was Tenny's job.

With so much devastation in the area, securing housing during a time when there was sporadic phone and/or computer service was a real problem. This was only compounded by the fact that many area hotels were either lost or filled with media, local residents and FEMA personnel and getting the client staff members into the area was extremely difficult, according to Donald J. Buynack, president of Options Travel.

To facilitate communications, one person on the client side was designated to work exclusively with Tenny. Together, they canvassed airfares between key airports across North America to ascertain the best areas from which to pull additional personnel and then got those people as close to the affected area as possible so they could then drive onto Long Island to work.

“The client had no idea the extent of the impact of the damage right away, so the travel requirements were assessed daily, leaving little lead time for Debbie,” Buynack explained. “Her greatest challenge was finding hotel rooms for individuals, not for just one or two nights, but for weeks at a time, in some cases.”

Added to the mix was the firm’s directive that they be billed directly for all of the hotel rooms. They did not want their staff members’ credit cards billed so all of the arrangements had to be made by phone, working directly with each hotel.

“So Debbie, assisted, as necessary, by her other Options Travel colleagues, placed phone calls to each and every hotel that could possibly accommodate the client. She negotiated the number of rooms, best rates based on time frame and volume, completed pre-payment forms and direct bill applications and then faxed them into the properties accordingly,” he recalled.

Then after everything was set up at a given property, the inevitable would happen and she would have to re-do everything because the dates would change; the travelers would change; or the client’s staff member would decide that the property was too far from where they needed to be. Because the requirements seemed non-stop for awhile and ever changing, a system was established whereby several back-up agents were faxing requirements into the hotel properties, sometimes into the late night hours, for more than ten weeks.

In addition to managing all the reservations and direct billing process, Tenny was also running reports of who was staying where and communicating daily with the client so they, too, knew what was going on, as the requirements were constantly changing.

“Debbie is a true veteran of the travel industry,” Buynack added. “She has never been the nine-to-five employee who just does her job. She does much more than her job and never looks at the clock or the day of the week when she does it. She is dedicated to excellence in everything she does.”