

Hilton manager fills the needs of the neighborhood with the excesses of city hotels and commercial buildings

## Description

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Thousands of used mattresses, blankets, pillows, decorative bolsters, linens, furniture, and unclaimed swag from conferences â?? hotels produce a mountain of waste. What to do with it?  For many hotels, the answer was, and remains, sell it to a liquidator, hold an employee sale or haul it to the dump.



Hilton Community Project Manager Jo Licata. Photos by Judy Goddess.

Holger Gantz, general manager of the San Francisco Hilton Union Square from the mid-80s to 2003 and an icon of the hospitality industry, offered a different response: Pay it forward. Employee Jo Licata, who eagerly took the challenge, recounted his words. â??Our hotel is in the neighborhood. Weâ??re part of this changing neighborhood. Weâ??re here and we want to be a good neighbor.â?•

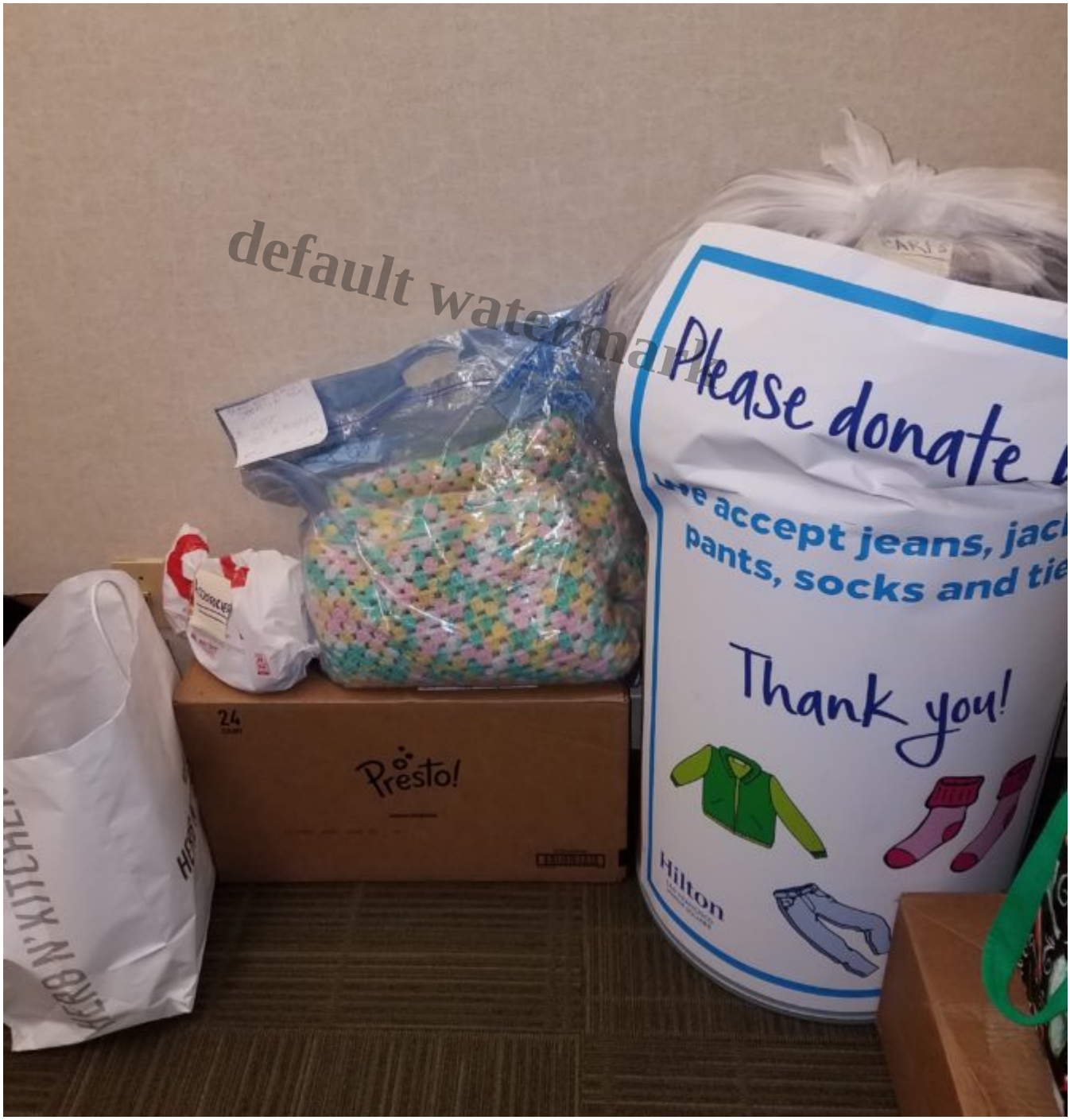
There are thousands of items hotels need to give away, said Licata. â??Furnishings, mattresses and bedding. Tote bags and T-shirts from conventions, pens, paper, sandwiches and salads from our catering service. Some group can make use of them.â?•

**â??A great neighborhoodâ??**

â??The Tenderloin is not just a holding pen; itâ??s a great neighborhood,â?• she said. â??We are home to 5,000 children, 3,500 frail elderly, three wonderful school and after-school programs and countless agencies. A good neighbor makes sure nothing is wasted.â?•

She had been working at the Hilton for almost five years when she became the hotelâ??s Community Project Manager, a job sheâ??s now held for 25 years. As part of that, she heads up the hotelâ??s community donations program, distributing items to 50-60 local nonprofits.

Thanks to Licataâ??s leadership, the Hilton is not the only hotel in the give-away business. Many years ago, while lunching with June Michaels, a friend who was the concierge at the Marriott, Michaelsâ?? began bemoaning all the excess items hotels create. That conversation spawned the Hotel/Nonprofit Collaborative, which has been well-received at conventions where Licata has presented.



The pile begins.

Once a hotel notifies Licata they have items to donate, Licata calls the agencies on her list. If thereâ??s a match, she informs the hotel and a pick-up is arranged. â??The Hilton doesnâ??t store these items, we just facilitate the match. The agency has to arrange its own transportation.â?•

Her list of organizations that might need items includes the Curry Senior Center, the Downtown Senior Center, Larkin Street Youth Services, Glide, St. Anthonyâ??s, Swords to Plowshares, the Boys and Girls Club, homeless shelters and other nonprofits.

Adding to her matchmaking job, the Building Owners & Managers Association recently joined the effort.

**Furniture, equipment and toilet paper**

â??Commercial buildings have a lot of excess. Furniture, equipment, daily supplies â?? if more than a quarter of a roll of toilet paper is used, they throw it out,â?• she said. When theyâ??ve gathered maybe 10 large trash bags of toilet paper, for example, they call Licata, who leafs through her rolodex and arranges a match.

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â??Mine is the best job in the world,â?• she said. â??I work with the best people in the world. Iâ??ve got a great team, everyone is on the lookout.â?• As if on cue, a housekeeping manager walked in to report on extra supplies he saw upstairs. â??I may be leading but everyone helps, everyone is wired.â?•

Licata wanted it known that the give-away program is not the Hiltonâ??s only charitable venture. Every month staff holds a special collection â?? socks, lightly used jeans and so on â?? which they give away. Theyâ??re running a team in the Susan B. Komen race for breast cancer; and their new general manager will be tossed in the pool to raise funds for a Tenderloin after-school program.

The hotel also donates holiday gifts to Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly and a local after-school program. And each month, a Hilton baker prepares a large sheet cake for birthday celebrations at the Downtown Senior Center.

The hotel also invites neighborhood agencies for tours, special events and encourages their participants to apply for open positions. â??Thatâ??s when I meet many of the recipients,â?• Licata said.

She didnâ??t plan to work at a hotel or become a major player in the donation business. â??I read about Margaret Mead and wanted to be an anthropologist and travel.â?• But growing up in a strict Italian Catholic family in St. Louis, she lived at home while attending business college and then took an office job. That all changed after her first trip away from home.

â??I took a trip to Honolulu. Got off the plane, smelled the plumeria, and said â??Iâ??m not going back.â??â?• When the multi-national firm she worked for relocated to San Francisco, Licata came with them. When that firm went bankrupt, she accepted a job with a company building an air base in the Negev desert.

**A job created**

Three years later, Licata returned to San Francisco and after holding a variety of jobs was hired by the Hilton. â??I started in the executive office and they gave me an opportunity to work in different departments: front desk, culinary, the business center. They wouldnâ??t do that today. We didnâ??t have a model for what this job entails. I created it as I went along.â?•

Now 65, Licata has no plans to retire. â??I like what Iâ??m doing and I think Iâ??m doing a good job. When you have the opportunity to create a position, whatâ??s needed for the job is what youâ??re good at.â?•

Though she no longer travels overseas, Licata still makes an annual pilgrimage to New York. Then there are visits with her family; she has 28 first cousins.

Art fills much of Licataâ??s free time. Weekends find her at the DeYoung Museum or Legion of Honor, where she is a docent. While sheâ??s trying to trim down her personal collection of art books, Licata said, she canâ??t seem to stop adding to her library.

And she canâ??t stop collecting discards. She recently rescued 2,500 decorative bolsters in burgundy and gold silk from the dump. Though new homes could not be found for all of this unanticipated bounty, thanks to Licata and her rolodex, some saw new life in shelter programs, while others made the long trip to Burning Man â?? a festivity beyond her travel plans.

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