

2018 Restaurateur Of The Year

Nate Lee

After Nate Lee received a call from John Getha, CRFP, Chair of the RFMA Board and Director of Facilities at Wendy's International, and learned that he was the 2018 winner of the Restaurateur of the Year award, he immediately called his wife and his mother.

Lee and his wife enjoyed a celebratory dinner that evening, and his mom shared the news with her circle of friends—like she always does for his accomplishments.

Lee began his facilities career three years ago as a facilities assistant at RPM Pizza. He was quickly promoted to facilities coordinator and then, into his current role. He credits RPM for being a large company with a highly supportive and smaller-company culture.

"I'm lucky to have started with a company that allowed me to fail so I can learn and improve in my role," Lee said. "In one example, earlier in my career, I had allowed a vendor to take on a job he wasn't equipped for. A pipe had burst under a foundation, and he didn't have a team to complete the job in timely fashion. Afterwards, my boss asked me what I learned from this, how are we going to fix it next time and to document it to ensure it doesn't happen again. Since that experience, I consider how a vendor will affect operations and how fast the job will get done."

"Nate is always trying to improve our processes in order to 'create smiles' with his internal customers (operations)," said Pennie L. Brogle, District Manager at RPM Pizza. "Our company's service vision is to 'Create Smiles by Making Lives Easier,' and Nate goes above and beyond to make sure he is doing just that."

Today, Lee is part of a two-person facilities team that supports between 185-190 Domino's Pizza restaurants across five states. He is responsible for maintaining building assets, the grounds and the fleet vehicles. He oversees repairs and maintenance and supervises projects and equipment installs. He verifies compliance with safety, health and environmental regulations and laws, and is charged with boosting site safety and security. He also sources and manages vendor partners, assists in managing the in-house tech program, and develops, refines and redesigns facilities processes to maximize efficiency and effectiveness.

"Nate continues to add value to the RPM brand by balancing budgets, developing management strategies and implementing cutting-edge technologies, but above all, his core strength lies in stimulating growth with all his vendors," said Nicholas Martin, Business Development of Broadway National. "His ability to drive clear communication and outline objectives has led to tremendous success in our business relationship, and I can't wait to see what is in store for 2018."

Though Lee has a demanding workload, he still devotes much of his time to RFMA. In the past year, especially, he has stood out as someone who is deeply committed to being involved with RFMA—not only to make connections with his peers but also to learn as much as possible. He achieved his CRFP in November 2016, volunteered to facilitate Peer-to-Peer calls, facilitated a roundtable at RFMA 2017, and he's participating in a panel breakout session at RFMA 2018. Nate also is the Co-Chair of the RFMA Resources Committee, is part of the mentor program and has written an article for Facilitator.

"It's almost easier to list what Nate hasn't done because he has practically participated in everything RFMA offers," said Ryan Byrd, Membership Services Manager at RFMA.

"I create many process documents to help make things easier for operations," Lee said. "RFMA is a resource for me to discuss facility matters with other facility professionals, and the website has documents I can reference to gauge whether my approach is correct. Recently, we were discussing parking lot striping at RPM—how often to reseal, how much it costs and whether it can be capitalized. I found all these answers in archived Peer-to-Peer calls in the Resource Library. Based on what other companies did, I was able to answer these questions for RPM and make recommendations to our finance and accounting team and to my boss."

"Nate is a young go-getter who is always striving to learn more about how to be better equipped to manage his stores," said Jeff Dover, CRFP, Facilities Resource Manager at RFMA. "He sees the big picture while learning all that is necessary to provide value back to his company. He's a great asset to have on your team and will be a future mentor for individuals entering the field."

Lee emphasizes relationship building as a critical part of his job.

"I can't do what I do unless I have great relationships with the people I work with—in the office and vendors," he said. "Everyone I work with is very important to me."

"Nate is always willing to help and find a solution to any question we may have," said Paola Malaver, Senior Accounting Technician of Franchise Services at Horne LLP. "He is always positive and available when we need him. It is a pleasure working with Nate."

Lee's professional goal is to be a facilities director one day. RFMA's mentor program helps him gain knowledge and insight from seasoned professionals in the field.

"It has been a pleasure speaking with Nate about his developmental goals and the ideas he has to optimize resources within RPM Pizza," said his mentor Preston L. Funkhouser IV, Facility Services Director at Cracker Barrel Old Country Store. "It's an honor to have been able to provide input during our monthly phone calls, and I'm excited to hear about what he comes up with next."

To be recognized for his commitment and involvement with RFMA is deeply validating, especially for a newer industry professional.

"It is an honor to be chosen for this award," Lee said. "To be recognized for my efforts shows I'm actually helping. I'm not just part of an organization, but that I'm truly involved in it."

To other restaurateurs, his advice is to jump into RFMA with both feet.

“Show that you care about your career, be as flexible as possible and be willing to do what it takes to make it easier for others,” he said. “Also, read as many articles as you can in the Dish newsletter and in Facilitator— especially the industry news—to stay informed about industry changes.”

“Nate is a dreamer in the best way possible,” said Alan Lovelace, Vice President of Administration at RPM Pizza. “He has brought many fresh insights to our facilities team that have improved our core business drivers of Quality, Communication, Timeliness and Reasonable Cost. Nate is successful at bench-marking other companies and technology platforms to solve specific needs. One of my favorite things about Nate is his self-driven desire to figure issues out on his own. Nate works to provide well-thought-out solutions to challenging situations. I am grateful to have worked with him over the last few years, to see him grow and to have been challenged by him continuously. Nate is very deserving of this award, and I am proud of his relentless pursuit of excellence.”

Lee will receive his award at RFMA’s annual conference in Phoenix, which he will proudly display in his office.