

Dans le Noir? Rydges Auckland

Diversability

In a reversal of the traditional imbalance of power between those who can see and those who cannot, Dans Le Noir? invites guests to dine in complete darkness, guided and served by blind waiters.

Dans le Noir? is an international project founded by a European social innovation group. More than 1.5 million guests have dined in restaurants in many cities including Paris, St Petersburg and Melbourne. In 2017, the concept came to New Zealand in partnership with Rydges Auckland.

Project Manager Anaelle Busnel says Rydges was the perfect fit as the hotel shared the same values as Dans le Noir? and was highly motivated by the opportunities the concept offered to the blind community.



Logistically, the project presents many challenges. The dining room needs to be completely dark, and chefs need to design a menu that suits the concept, while adhering to the safety requirements associated with dining in the dark. Perhaps the greatest challenge is finding waiters to join the Rydges team.

"There is no school or training for blind people to become waiters," says Anaelle. "We met with many local organisations, including The Blind Foundation, CCS Disability Action and Blind Sport New Zealand, for help finding blind people looking for work. Thanks to their support, we welcomed more than 20 guides to our assessment day. Ten of them were selected for the intensive training period."

Challenges for the trainees included learning how to guide guests in pitch darkness and put them at ease, set and clear a table, and be prepared to deal with unexpected requests and the potential of emergency situations. Ahead of opening night, they had 10 days of training with two experts from Europe - one sighted trainer and one blind guide.

For guests, Dans le Noir? is a chance to enjoy a unique dining experience and discover their sense of taste, smell and touch. For waiters, it's a chance to open up a new world of opportunity.

"In their own words, the guide team 'started a new life with this project'," says Anaelle. "Some of the guides were living at home, and did not dare to apply for jobs as every time they got the same answer - no thanks. With Dans le Noir?, they enjoy an income, responsibility, independence, and have a positive social experience."

Anaelle says the change in people after several months in the job is often remarkable. They are more confident, at ease in speaking front of groups of people, and share stories about living with a disability. In turn, this raises awareness amongst guests.

Jacinta worked for Dans le Noir? for 10 months before using the experience to move on to another opportunity. After many knockbacks, she was surprised to be offered the chance to work at Rydges. "I thought 'OK, another interview'. I had no experience in hospitality, and thought I would be the shyest person with no idea what I would be doing. When I was told I had made it in, I was shocked, but gave it a go. When I first started, I was nervous and thought I would be the first person to be let go or just quit. I realised how very anxious I was in front of people. Just talking to a crowd of people scares me. I faced my biggest fear - I did not want to let the Dans le Noir? French team down. They believed in me and saw potential that I did not see in myself. As I got myself used to settings and what to do, I felt more and more confident to do a good job."

The experience has also had a positive effect on the wider Rydges team. The guide team is integrated into the hotel staff team with the same rights and responsibilities.

"Initially, a Dans le Noir? representative accompanied the guides to facilitate interaction and create the opportunity for exchanges between all staff," says Anaëlle. "Now, it is an everyday occurrence to see a sighted staff member talking to a blind guide, leading them through the hotel if necessary, sharing the same table for meals, and coming to work together when they have the same shifts. Real friendships have developed. There is a real cohesion."

Anaëlle says the management team has been extremely supportive of the project, with General Manager James Billing following training closely and forming a close bond with team members. Initially, the agreement between Rydges and Dans le Noir? was for two months. But the common goal was to create long-term employment for the blind guide team. The concept is now into its second year and going strong.

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