

NRRDA Industry Spotlight: Julie Westfall and Ashley Weiss, The Cheesecake Factory

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This is a story about serendipity and two very good friends.

Julie Westfall and Ashley Weiss knew they were destined to be friends the moment they met during an April, 2021 Zoom interview. Ashley was being interviewed by Julie and Kurt Leisure for a Coordinator position at the Cheesecake Factory. After the formal interview was over, Julie and Ashley spent time talking and learned that they were strangely simpatico. They laughed to find out how they both like things to be color-coordinated, and Ashley shared that right before the interview, she was in Target and almost bought a packet of Sharpies with 40 colors.

Once Julie began training Ashley, they discovered some strange similarities. They both lost their fathers. They are both fitness freaks. Call it coincidence, but their significant others are chefs at the Cheesecake Factory's Corporate Center, and they knew each other before Julie and Ashley even met! The ladies also share a fear of flying, so on the way to NRRDA, they actually held hands during the landing!

Julie has worked for the Cheesecake Factory since she was 18. Her positions have included host, server and designated trainer. She then took a temporary position in the Performance Development Department before she started her full-time job eight years ago in Risk Services. Julie has climbed the corporate ladder from coordinator, then senior coordinator, moving to analyst, senior analyst and now Supervisor.

Ashley's trajectory is a bit different. While attending theater studies at a Los Angeles conservatory, Ashley began working as a bartender at the Cheesecake Factory. She spent five years at the Topanga location, which was located closest to the corporate center. In the beginning, Ashley said that it was intimidating to work at the Topanga site because of all the "corporate bigwigs" that came to eat at the restaurant. Eventually, however, she realized that working there provided an opportunity, and she began participating in some training videos. She also began to ask people who worked at the corporate center what it was they actually did. One of these individuals, who was the head of Bar and Bakery, invited Ashley to the corporate center to show her what went on there on a day-to-day basis. This is when Ashley met her boyfriend, Montie. It was also when Ashley decided that she wanted to work in corporate. She waited for the right opportunity, and when the Cheesecake Factory posted a job for a Coordinator in April, 2021, she interviewed and was hired.

Ashley and Julie love their GL general liability team. They speak highly of their other teammate, Carly Pfeiffer, who was unable to attend this years' NRRDA Conference, but Julie and Ashley describe Carly as incredibly kind and thoughtful, brilliant, and creative. They also say she has a way with claimants and uses her "Carly Charm" to win over unruly callers. Carly is a dedicated fire-wife, a super-mom of two amazing girls and a talented baker to which she treats her team with her yummy baked goodies!

Among their job duties, they make calls to guests and try to work out issues that arise. They also perform investigations and work alongside the TPA, and also the lawyers. Both credit Kurt Leisure, their boss, as a mentor. They describe him as wise, kind, patient and funny. Julie said when she is trying to solve a problem, she employs the "WWKD" rule which means, "What Would Kurt Do?" Julie says that Kurt often thinks out of the box and challenges her thought process. When she asks him a question, he does not simply answer but explains the "why" behind the answer.

Julie is a long-distance endurance runner. In fact, she has a 40-mile race coming up. She is also an avid skateboarder, and now that the pandemic is over, she is hoping to get back into that. When Julie was 25, she went on a "skate-cation" in Philadelphia and New York City, and even met Tony Hawk! Her guilty pleasure is eating cookies-and-cream ice cream and watching anything with Gordon Ramsey. She loves the TV show, *Kitchen Nightmares*.

Ashley began acting when she was 12. Her mother would drive her to acting school classes in Los Angeles every Sunday. She has performed in plays since middle school, and in high school she was the only senior who had performed in every play and musical throughout her high school career. Even though Ashley began as a biology major in college with a theater minor, she switched her major to theater because she was so passionate about it. Ashley enjoys kickboxing and her guilty pleasure is Cinnabon® and *The Bachelor*.

Both Julie and Ashley are driven women, devoted to their profession and their families. As friends and colleagues, it appears there is not much that they can't accomplish, either on a personal, or professional level.