

1/28,000: Working for Disney World in The Midst of A Pandemic.  
Is a Wish All It Takes To Work For the Happiest Place on Earth?

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**Abstract:**

The Walt Disney Company is facing the biggest employment crisis it has had in years. Since March of 2020, the company has been laying off and furloughing college students, interns and even upper management culminating in the firing of 28,000 part-time and full-time cast members in September. While this may not sound like a big deal, most cast members think of this as not just any job, but of THE job for them. ( I know I did.)

In this written feature article and accompanying photo essay, paired with personal anecdotes, I intend to highlight a few of the employees that threw themselves into their roles and what it meant to work for the Walt Disney Company. I intend to focus on those in their mid-twenties who have participated in the Disney College Program and then made the choice to stay on with the company, and those who are based out of the Orlando theme park.

***Key Words:*** *Journalism, Disney College, DCP, Orlando, Disney Parks, Interview, Position, Magic, Safety, Courtesy, Show, Efficiency, Career, Internship.*

“This is where I’m meant to be,” I said to my roommate as we stood in front of Cinderella castle waiting for the fireworks show. There was a wave of tranquility I had on that Florida evening, feeling the cool breeze on my sunburnt face as I watched the nearest cast member smile at a blonde-haired toddler and hand her a sticker and balloon. A whiff of fresh churros hit my nose as the show began with “And they all lived happily ever after.”

“Each of us has a dream, a heart’s desire. It calls to us. And when we’re brave enough to listen, and bold enough to pursue, that dream will lead us on a journey to discover who we’re meant to be. All we have to do is look inside our hearts and unlock the magic within.”

I had finally unlocked my magic, standing in the middle of Main Street USA on a warm January night.

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There’s never been a place that I feel more at home than Disney World. When I found the opportunity to work at the parks and live in Florida it was an obvious choice during the spring of my junior year, even though most students are preparing for an internship in their major of choice.

The Disney College Program is an internship program located in both Florida and California that allows college students to live, work, and play in the parks for a semester. Though the program is accepted for credit at certain colleges and universities, SUNY New Paltz does not view it as an appropriate internship and does not offer credit for the program. According to DMJ internship coordinator Nancy Heiz, there are no exceptions to this rule.

But while some might see the Disney College Program as a way to slack off for a semester and get free park admission, others use it as a “foot in the door” for the Walt Disney Company and a career in the future. Alexis Marena, 23, used the college program as a stepping stone to move up in her desired field of wedding planning, and eventually became a professional intern at Disney Weddings and Programs.

Mikayla Fleisher of Issaquah, Wisconsin just decided to extend her College Program in January 2020, which is an option for those who wanted more time at their current role. Fleisher had plans to start work full-time at Chef-Mickey’s buffet as a seater and assigner.

Bronwyn Miller, an influencer with a brand titled OnceUponABron, did two programs before stepping into her dream role as a Fairy-Godmother-In-Training at the Bibbidi-Boppity-Boutique. The Boutique is a place for young girls and boys to be transformed into princesses or other royalty at an extra cost for the parents.

Katelyn Elliott was an intern in guest relations. Cheyenne was a merchandise worker at Animation courtyard. Madeleine Wilson was a character attendant. Jordan Slater was on planet Batuu. Ivy Combs was a VIP Tour Guide. Georgia Koski was a Seater at Garden Grill in Epcot.

They all lost their footing on March 15, 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the Disney College Program, International College Program, and Professional Internships to end abruptly. Some had called Disney home for a year, and some for only three months, but it was home no longer. The parks were officially closed for a “short two-week pause” and interns (including myself) were sent home with nothing but an email that promised “more information when they had a plan in place.”

The Walt Disney World parks were closed until July 11, 2020, when Magic Kingdom and Animal Kingdom opened to the public once again. EPCOT and Hollywood Studios officially opened on July 15, 2020. Socially distant markers adorned the queues and mandatory temperature checks were at the gates, but the Disney magic was alive and well again in Florida.

“It was crazy to be able to go back again, even with reservations and face masks and the new rules,” said former CP Jada Chace Connor. She was a merchandise cast member at Big Top Souvenirs in Magic Kingdom, and planned to move into a part-time position after her program ended. “The only thing that sucked was that when I walked in all of the memories I had of the last day as a cast member resurfaced. It meant the world to know that you were part of something much bigger than yourself, and I’d give anything to have that back.”

Full-time Cast members were among the first to be called back, and most were relocated to parks and attractions that needed assistance to be run and kept socially distanced. Part-Time and seasonal employees were still in limbo, with most collecting unemployment while they watched their co-workers embrace the four keys: *Safety. Courtesy. Show. Efficiency.*

*Safety:* This involves masking up while in the parks and social distancing when possible, as well as mobile ordering food to limit congregation and putting a cap on capacity in the parks. In order for Disney to keep a hard limit in place, Fastpass+, which is a way for guests to bypass the stand-by line, was temporarily disabled and park reservations were required at every park.

Another staple of the Disney experience: park-hopping, was also put on pause when the parks initially reopened. As of Jan. 1, 2021, park-hopping has returned with limitations and capacity is up to 35% from the 25% initial on July 11, 2020.

*Courtesy:* Guests were asked politely to abide by the rules, and though cast members do their best, it can still be tricky at times to stick to the rules and give people the magical experience

they came for. Just recently, a guest [was](#) involved in a legal battle with Disney after suing them for not allowing him on property after he failed to participate in the temperature check, according to Tampa Bay News.

Oh, that Disney magic.

Ivy Combs actually left her position at Walt Disney World after dealing with one too many guest experiences and being thrown from location to location with no training.

“I just didn’t see any more growth,” said Combs. “Everyone was angry about working long shifts and it was impossible to learn or help guests with a face shield and mask and three layers of gloves on. Sure, I wish I could go back as a tour guide. But not as an Attractions cast member; I have my Master’s degree.”

It wasn’t always like that. In my experience, guests were usually upset for valid reasons such as a lost reservation or a bus delay that lasted 6 hours (yes, that really happened.). However, one of the main priorities of the Walt Disney Company has always been to appease the guest, and make their stay magical. Cast members are trained in how best to assist a party who has been faulted, and often there is a personal plea that comes along with each apology. We are told to make the situation “right.” Whether that means some extra fastpasses or simply a change of hotel room is up to the discretion of the cast member.

Making magic was one of my favorite parts of the job, and it was a favorite among my leaders. There were multiple days where I would walk a party straight to a table full of balloons and confetti “just because.” The bright smile on a child’s face and the tears welling up in their parents eyes are images I never want to forget.

*Show:* This is a big one. Every time a cast member is on their shift they are “on-stage.” We are playing out the parts of a huge master production, and usually we get a standing ovation at the end of the night. Most of that comes because the cast members are smiling and interacting with the families in a way that is not usually seen at a massive theme park. On any given day (pre-pandemic) cast members (myself included) were encouraged to make magic for families and guests that stood out to us. Whether it was a celebration or simply a child that made an impression, giving out gifts and extras was part of the gig.

Though my experience was cut short, I did get to make some magic for a few specific guests. One in particular was a little boy who was supposed to play baseball at the ESPN Wide World of Sports, but his game got rained out. While I couldn’t control the weather I did get a few extra desserts brought to the table and some stickers to go along with the meal.

Katelyn Elliott, a guest relations intern stationed at the Magic Kingdom, had many occasions where she was able to give a guest a wonderful experience they hadn't planned. She had a couple come into her post at City Hall during a Halloween party, and ask to buy tickets for the next night because they had missed out on meeting Winnie the Pooh. Unfortunately, all tickets were sold out for the next week.

“She explained that Winnie the Pooh was something her and her mother loved together and her mother had passed away only a few months ago,” said Elliott. “I could see how much it meant to her to get this photo so I offered her and her husband complimentary tickets to the party, a voucher for a free photo print from PhotoPass and a picture frame for her to hold her special memory in. The guest cried and hugged me and said she couldn't explain what this meant to her.”

Elliott has struggled with mental health and motivation since losing her dream position in March 2020. She had intentions to move up within the company and use her B.S. in Health Informatics and Info Management to “market and connect with cast members for higher health.”

“The hardest part of losing this job was watching everyone else in these same roles and in the same company continue to prosper and return to work,” continued Elliott. “It feels like being frozen in time while the rest of the world continues to turn around you as if nothing changed.”

*Efficiency:* Georgia Koski was a college program participant at Chef Mickey's long before I started training for the mouse. She was one of the only people I saw on social media that had worked at my location. Though she accepted a role at the Garden Grill after her program ended, she picked up shifts at Mickey's as long as she could. Koski was one of the few college program starters that was called back to work after a long year.

“I think we all got used to our “new” lives so the call back was alarming!” said Koski. “I was in shock for a week and it really hit me when I finally walked back into work with my name tag on again. I know how much of a family the cast is and seeing how many people had been called back was hard for a very long time.”

Disney has since realized that with increased capacity and decreased regulations, the current cast is not fit to handle a post-COVID surge. Though many cast members had to decline their offers to return, others were not given the chance to begin with.

“It was like having my entire plan change within the span of one email,” said Fleisher. “I thought that we would be called back so I didn't unpack when I got back to Washington for almost 2 months.”

She is planning to go back to Walt Disney World as a part-time merchandise cast member as of May 10, 2021.

As of May 3, 2021, Spring and Fall 2020 College Program participants are able to apply for a program lasting from June or July until spring of next year. At this time, those are the only people invited to apply for the program through a special link.

The Reopening of the College Program, even for limited amounts of prospective students, signals a return to normal in the Walt Disney World Operations. CPs are often known as “cheap labor” for the company, and most work up to 50-60 hours a week on a \$12 an hour pay. This isn’t just a semester of fun, it’s also about proving yourself to the company and the leaders who could help you move into the role of your dreams one day.

“Also in a company as big as Disney, any foot in the door can help you move up to bigger and better things if that’s your goal with the company,” concluded Koski. “It is so easy to move around to different job levels, locations, fields, and experience different things to find what fits for you.”

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Joy. Relief. Magic. Those are the words that come to mind when I read the email after getting out of my workout class at 4:07 on Monday afternoon. I didn’t realize how much I was thinking about going back until I had the chance to actually go back to where I started my dream. And even nearing the end of a pandemic, I’m willing to make it work.

Laughter in a cramped apartment at 3 a.m. after a long shift. Driving past Little Lake Bryan through the low-hanging trees with music blaring through the speakers. Soaking up the sun at Blizzard Beach on a day off. Walking down Main Street and seeing the castle on a beautiful sunny day. That castle is my favorite thing about the Walt Disney World experience.

There was one class that I went to on my shortened program that featured a Guest Relations cast member. She had worked in Anaheim for Disneyland’s grand opening and knew Walt Disney personally. This woman often spent time at the park after its opening with her parents, who were also cast members. According to her, Walt Disney took her by the hand one day on Main Street and pointed to the castle, before saying “that castle isn’t just a beautiful piece of architecture. It holds the hopes and dreams of every single child who sees it or knows about it.”

We have a duty to make those dreams come true.