

HOSPITALITY IS TANYA'S CAREER

In 2017, Tanya Vitela had two options for her Project SEARCH internship through the Albuquerque Public Schools: UNM Hospital or a brand-new program with Embassy Suites.

“The hotel industry sounded really fun,” Vitela recalls. As a kid, she had watched *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, a Disney Channel sitcom set in a hotel, “So I decided to go there.”

Now 29 years old, Vitela is a night auditor and front desk agent at the Sheraton Albuquerque Uptown. As night auditor on weekends, she “balances the house;” works with third-party providers like Expedia; and checks on settlements for reservations, food charges, pet fees, and other miscellaneous things. Working the front desk three days a week, Tanya checks guests in, pre-blocks rooms, answers phone calls, makes sure housekeeping is on track, and handles special requests.

The hotel also hosts crews from seven different airlines that fly into the Albuquerque International Sunport, and she ensures they are taken care of.

“I make sure the guests are happy. I always felt I could help others and make people happy,” says Vitela, who moved from California to New Mexico in 2005. “It’s pretty fun seeing all my guests.”

She adds that, unlike many of her coworkers, she enjoys the paperwork involved in her full-time job. Vitela hopes her experience and knowledge of hotel operations will lead to a promotion to supervisor or manager one day. “I feel I have a purpose. I’m very determined,” she says.

General Manager Damen Kompanowski says Tanya is already on track. “When you’re night auditor, you’re kind of the manager on duty. She makes a lot of big decisions and takes control of the hotel. We can always count on her.” He notes Tanya redesigned the night audit checklist to make the task flow more practical and prepare the morning staff for the new day.

This career in hospitality was a direct result of her time in Project SEARCH a school-to-work transition program for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Participants gain transferable work skills and receive supports for gaining competitive, integrated employment upon completion of their internship.

Tanya’s year at the Embassy Suites included stints in sales, banquets, the kitchen, and the front desk. “I learned so much about the hospitality industry and how everything correlates to one another,” she recalls. After Tanya’s Project SEARCH internship was over, Embassy Suites hired her as a banquet server. She was hired by the Sheraton about two years ago.

Vitela has an intellectual developmental disability and is deaf in her left ear. She overcame her challenges through speech therapy and learning to lip read. The hotel has not had to make any accommodations for her that they don’t do for every new associate, according to Kompanowski. He says regular guests love when Tanya’s there. “She makes them feel really welcome when they come in.”

Her workplace success led to Tanya being asked to share her experience at the 2024 national Project SEARCH conference, held in Albuquerque. Although nervous speaking to more than 800 attendees, she did just fine with a message that “despite our disabilities, we can do anything we put our mind to. We’re so determined.”

Vitela recounts an incident when a guest couldn’t breathe. She remained calm, called 911, and retrieved oxygen and a defibrillator from the lobby. The guest’s family sent a letter of appreciation to the vice president of the hotel corporation, letting them know of Tanya’s life-saving actions.

“When Tanya came to work for us, she was timid and shy,” says Kompanowski, adding she has learned to take charge. “We love seeing her continuing to grow in her job.”

Project SEARCH in New Mexico is an interagency collaboration between the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, The Department of Health’s Developmental Disabilities Supports Division, and the UNM Center for Development and Disability-Partners for Employment.

There are eight Project SEARCH sites in New Mexico, with another set to launch in fall 2025. For more information, contact your nearest NMDVR office. There are two dozen locations across the state: dvr.state.nm.us/locations/.

The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps individuals with disabilities find suitable employment. Vocational rehabilitation is a voluntary program supporting people who want to work. With a long history of success and proven methodology for making the best fits, NMDVR is committed to helping participants thrive in their communities. For more information, visit dvr.state.nm.us or call 505-954-8500.

The Vocational Rehabilitation program receives 78.7% of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2024, the total awarded is \$24,698,300. The remaining 21.3% is funded by state appropriations and transfers from the Commission for the Blind and Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

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