

Q&A WITH RINO ARMENI

# Hospitality honcho: 'There's no room to be timid'

BY REBECCA CLIFFORD-CRUZ | STAFF WRITER

Rino Armeni, chairman of Armeni Enterprises and founder of the Las Vegas Business Academy, brought robotic bartenders to Las Vegas this summer with the opening of Tippy Robot at the Miracle Mile Shops. "Customers are excited to engage with the technology," he said. "They ask lots of questions and almost never leave without taking a picture or video to share online."

## Do you have any recent news you'd like to share?

The nonprofit organization I founded in 2011, the Las Vegas Business Academy, recently announced its first UNLV Howard R. Hughes College of Engineering fellowship recipient, Zachary Laney. He is a wonderful young man who was a cryptologist in the U.S. Navy and will use what he learns during his fellowship to improve Las Vegas' cybersecurity systems.

## How was the Tippy Robot concept conceived?

One of my business partners found robotic bartenders on the internet, where they debuted on a major cruise liner. We approached the manufacturing company (Makr Shakr) about bringing the robots to Las Vegas. We worked with them to modify and improve the guest experience.

Guests can order one of 18 special robotic cocktails, or create their own concoctions, by using one of our tablets. The tablets send the customer's drink(s) to the robots, which mix, stir, shake and dance.

## Have you had any obstacles or challenges with the robots?

The evolution of the technology is an ongoing process. It took us about 30 days to perfect the technology prior to opening. Before that, we spent six months planning it all. The hardest part was integrating the communication between the tablets and the robots. But it was all worth it.

## What would say has been your greatest professional achievement?

Opening Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa. I had people from around the world asking me how we did it. The answer? A lot of sleepless nights. I was the resort's food and beverage manager at the time and helped create the concept and menu for Victoria and Albert's, which is still one of the nation's premier dining experiences.

My career has been full of wonder-



► Rino Armeni toasts his robotic bartenders at Tippy Robot in the Miracle Mile Shops at Planet Hollywood. (STEVE MARCUS/STAFF)

ful twists and turns and highlights, but even at the time, I knew the Grand Floridian would be a unique experience.

## What is the best business advice you've received?

My manager at Piccadilly International Hotel in London used to always tell me, "Don't do tomorrow what you can do today." It was 1975. More than 40 years later, it's a phrase I live by because tomorrow isn't promised.

## What is your involvement in the Las Vegas Business Academy?

As with all of my business and charitable endeavors, I am heavily involved in the day-to-day operations. I founded the academy with the sole intent to find the brightest minds UNLV's graduate schools had to offer, and give them the tools necessary to become our city's greatest leaders and innovators.

Las Vegas Business Academy students represent a diverse group of individuals across a variety of industries. Our alumni work in hospitality, law and business, and are ambassadors for our current crop of students.

## What is the selection process for LVBA candidates, and what

## advice can you offer potential candidates?

The selection process is quite rigorous. We are looking for bright students who have an inclination for leadership. They have to be smart and willing to go through a difficult training program. The most important thing is our mentorship program. Every month, students work with a mentor from a different industry, so that when they graduate, they will be multidimensional.

Potential candidates must have integrity, honesty and never be afraid to share their thoughts. Through the mentorship program, our students are able to see these traits up close and personal. The Las Vegas business community has opened its doors to the LVBA students.

I would encourage potential candidates to be authentic and not be afraid to challenge the status quo. There is no room to be timid in the business world.

## What's the biggest issue facing Southern Nevada?

Las Vegas' economy thrives on tourism. Since I moved here in 1989, the city has grown mostly in the hospitality space. I'd like to see more high-tech, commercial, industrial

and transportation industries help elevate the status of our city. Las Vegas has the potential to one day become a world-renowned city of industry, like New York or Los Angeles.

## What's your favorite place to have fun in Las Vegas?

I enjoy watching the Golden Knights and going to hard rock concerts. I recently saw Deep Purple, and they put on an incredible show.

I have a lot of fun at work. I am a workaholic and always have been. I often get to the office by 5 or 6 a.m. I am fortunate to love what I do. I have fun interacting with customers and staff at Tippy Robot and meeting with the Las Vegas Business Academy's board of directors to discuss future initiatives.

When you love what you do, it's work in name only.

## If you could live anywhere else in the world, where would it be?

I've lived in London, Paris, Milan, Washington, D.C., New York City, Vienna, Düsseldorf (Germany), St. Louis, Orlando (Fla.) and Las Vegas. But I was born and raised in Italy, and my roots there run deep.

So if I could pack up and move tomorrow, I'd go to Rome. It has thousands of years of history, great food and *la dolce vita* (the sweet life). I have family in Rome, and I visit them two or three times a year. Every time I leave, I wish I could've stayed longer.

## Whom do you admire?

Abraham Lincoln is my hero. His leadership is legendary. The way he handled the emancipation and the Civil War is a masterpiece of leadership and compassion that everybody should possess.

## What is something that people might not know about you?

People are surprised that I love hard rock and heavy metal. Being Italian, people assume I like opera. But even to this day, there is nothing I like more than going to a great concert.