

**GENEVIEVE GERST** > GENERAL MANAGERCINEMARK CENTURY REGENCY 6
SAN RAFAEL, CA

Nominated by Bob Harrison, regional leader, Cinemark

A personal touch

Big fish, bigger pond

Once upon a time, Genevieve Gerst was a big fish in a little pond. She needed more room to grow and swam for open sea—and was shocked at how quickly she grew in proportion to her environment. Fortunately, the sea is a very big place.

A native of Marin County, Gerst's film industry career began at age 17 when her best pal suggested she apply for a job at Mill Valley's two-screen arthouse, Cineart's Sequoia Theatre. "I was just out of high school and I hadn't been working for long," recalls Gerst. "Honestly, when I first got the job I thought, 'I'm just going to do this job for two weeks, get one solid paycheck out of it and then go get a job somewhere else where I don't have to wear a bow tie and a vest.'"

Though Gerst anticipated a hasty retreat, her new manager's passion and work ethic was infectious. "David Guastavino," she remembers. "I call him the Godfather of my career. He taught me everything I know about managing a movie theater. It's hard to find somebody that you really want to work for and I just figured, 'Well, I'll deal with wearing the vest and the bow tie for a little bit.'"

In sticking to the job at the Sequoia, Gerst had set foot on the path to her career. She

drew from Guastavino's leadership and inspiration. "He'd been managing theaters for over 30 years and he was a workaholic," says Gerst. "But he never expected more from his staff than he was willing to do himself. You could trust his judgment. It's hard to find a boss who makes you want to work for them, to want to push yourself and do the best you possibly can."

By 2007, Gerst had been promoted to senior assistant manager of the little Cinemark subsidiary arthouse and, she admits, eventually began chafing against the walls of her little pond. She knew it was time to swim for deeper waters. "I applied for a general management position at the Regency when I heard of the opening. Theaters in Marin County don't open up management positions very frequently and I didn't expect to get that theater because it was such a big step from the Sequoia."

Bob Harrison, Regional Leader for Cinemark, thought otherwise. "I noticed a certain drive and intensity in what she wanted to accomplish," says Harrison. "We interviewed a number of people and I just had a feeling that, though she had never run a theater, she was going to be the best candidate."

Harrison's intuition was apt and he soon saw in action the rare insight and unique perspective Gerst had gained from her years at the Sequoia. "It was a much more intimate and less sort of corporate movie theater," says Harrison. "There's a certain feeling of commonality among the customers, that it's *their* local movie theater." Gerst had become used to building that intimacy with her customers. "She has a level of connection with the customers that she's taken to a much larger theater where it's usually difficult to have that kind of direct contact," says Harrison.

Gerst's efforts are small in scope but leave a resounding, lasting effect. "During periods of heavy business I go into the theater right before the movies start and thank the customers for coming," says Gerst. "I remind

them to turn off their cell phones and please not text message or have distracting conversations during the show and then I just *really* thank them for coming to this theater." More times than not, Gerst exits the auditorium to applause. Audiences (including frequent audience member and *Boxoffice* Publisher Peter Cane) love what she's doing and they love her efforts to reach out to them and let them know just how important they are to her theater.

"I'm concerned about the culture of theater exhibition because of its competitive influences," says Gerst. "DVD sales, home theater systems—and just the fact that people can watch a movie on just about any medium now." To Gerst, the culture of film exhibition is now more than ever reliant on its theater staff to succeed. "Everybody from the usher to the general manager needs to focus on making it worthwhile for the customers to come here," says Gerst. "It means we have to create a unique experience—that's the only way that this business will survive."

Gerst's efforts to give the audience a unique experience starts with a very simple thing: saying "thank you," a tactic where less is most definitely more. Her methods have resonated all the way up the Cinemark corporate ladder. "As a general rule, every time we have any meetings with our management people the subject of customer service will always come up," says Harrison. "I had Genevieve get up and make her announcement. I explained to them that this is something that has been working at this theater. A number of them really liked the idea and they started doing this also."

Now that Gerst has made a home in the open sea, she's making some sizable waves. "It's just been a real pleasure for me watching her evolve as a person," says Harrison. "This is the first theater she's run as a manager, and she has really inspired *me* and taught me what is possible."

—Cole Hornaday

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