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Casting Call (Smile!) for a New Hotel in Harlem

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The scene was 125th Street, but a very different sort of “Showtime at the Apollo” played out on Wednesday morning.

Harlem is about to get its first new hotel in decades, and 75 or so applicants hoping to land a job there mingled on a soundstage at the Apollo Theater wearing brightly colored leis, sang along to Michael Jackson videos and introduced themselves with nicknames like Amazing Ashton and Phenomenal Patti.

Billed as a job fair to fill about 25 positions at the Aloft, which is set to open in August with 124 hotel rooms at 124th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, the event was intended to feel more like an audition than a traditional interview.

The hotel — part of a fast-growing, youth-oriented chain run by the people behind the W hotels — has a sassy attitude, said Aleks Truglio, the hotel’s sales and marketing director. It also has its own lingo, referring to its employees as “talent.”

“We’re looking for people who are sassy, savvy, outgoing — the people who love working with other people and who embrace human contact,” Ms. Truglio

said, adding that the hotel’s check-in desk, where guests will be greeted with “aloha” rather than “hello,” was round, so as to feel welcoming from all angles.

The 12-story building, which is still under construction and will eventually have 44 condo apartments on its upper six floors, is expected to provide an economic boost to Harlem, where redevelopment efforts, including new housing and upscale restaurants, appear to be accelerating again after a recessionary lull. This month, a group of investors led by the former N.F.L. star Emmitt Smith was approved for tax-exempt financing for a project that could bring a Hyatt hotel and a Whole Foods store to 125th Street.

“There’s a great deal of interest,” said Kenneth J. Knuckles, the chief executive of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone. “We believe that there’s a market here for a hotel, hopefully two.”

Mr. Knuckles praised Aloft, which plans to open a second New York hotel in Downtown Brooklyn in the fall, for working with the **Workforce1 Career Center** in Harlem to help screen job candidates from the neighborhood. The center, overseen by the city’s **Department of Small Business Services**, winnowed a pool of about 500 applicants down to the group invited to the Apollo for an interview process that was part freshman mixer, part reality show and part speed dating.

As the candidates entered the room, managers began watching whether they lingered awkwardly at the edges of the group or engaged enthusiastically, then handed

out color-coded leis — pink, you are in; blue, you are out (though the candidates did not know this at the time). There were dance and rap performances by local youth groups, then the candidates separated into teams of blue and pink, with the blues leaving and the 41 pinks sitting for two-minute interviews.

Daniel Fevre, the hotel's general manager, said he came up with this approach because he wanted an atmosphere in which he could easily see which candidates had the personality and the verve he was casting for — whether for work as a concierge or as a chambermaid. "I can teach you how to make a bed," Mr. Fevre said. "I cannot teach you to smile and be friendly and take care of my guests."

Judging by body language, not everyone felt comfortable with the process, but most candidates appeared to enjoy it.

"It's awesome," Rise Shuler said as she waited for her interview, nearly jumping up and down. "I'm so excited, I'm so excited, I'm so excited." An executive assistant at a construction company, Ms. Shuler said she was hoping for a management position.

"I love my job; we have fun, but there's no room for growth," she said. The hiring event was great, she said, because it gave her a taste of the company's culture. "If you're a high-energy person and you like to smile a lot" — she explained that her name was a version of the Spanish word for smile — "then you're a good fit."