



JOE BURBANK/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Gov. Charlie Crist greets bell captain Hector Diaz (left) and valet supervisor Youness Tamine at the new Waldorf.

## New level of luxury

**Opening of  
the first  
Waldorf  
outside  
New York is  
considered  
a big step  
up for  
Orlando  
hospitality**

**By Sara K. Clarke**  
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Here is to history in Orlando.

That toast, at Thursday's opening of the Waldorf Astoria Orlando, reflected an underlying hope of those gathered in the Bonnet Creek hotel: that the world's second Waldorf will become a historic icon just like its namesake on Park Avenue in New York City.

"The list of world leaders who will come through this hotel will never be known," said Tom Ackert, director of the Orange County Convention Center. "There's a lot to be said about this brand."

Corks popped throughout the hotel's rotunda lobby as a host of local and state dignitaries, from Gov. Charlie Crist to former U.S. Sen. Paula Hawkins, were on hand for the ribbon cutting formally opening the 497-room Waldorf and its next-door neighbor, a 1,000-room Hilton.

Crist hailed the more than 700 jobs the hotel complex has created. "What better place than right here in Central Florida?" he said. "We need it. This is the time for it."

When developers started working on the Bonnet Creek resort a decade ago, there were challenges. The property, carved into the eastern boundary of Walt Disney World, with large swaths of woods and wet-

### Photo op

See more pictures from Thursday's opening ceremony at [OrlandoSentinel.com/political/pulse](http://OrlandoSentinel.com/political/pulse)

lands, is "a perfect piece of property," said Paul Brown, president of global brands and commercial services for the two hotels' corporate parent, Hilton Worldwide.

But because it is surrounded on three sides by Disney World and on the fourth by Interstate 4, the property was essentially landlocked until Disney agreed to an access road linking the resort to the highway via Epcot Center Drive and Buena Vista Drive.

"People did wonder, could we do this? Could this really happen?" said Sibille Pritchard, the Brooksville Development Corp. senior vice president credited with negotiating with Disney and Orange County administrators to get the complex built. "There had to be trust that this project would get completed," she said.

As part of the Waldorf's opening, Pritchard helped select a cadre of Central Florida women who were honored as being "first" in their fields. She also helped choose the two hotels' first guests: Sgt. Joshua Cope, who received two Purple Hearts while serving in Iraq, was chosen to stay in the Waldorf, while Lalita Booth, a homeless-woman-turned-Harvard-graduate-student, was picked to be the Hilton's first guest.

"I wanted it to be a community celebration, and that's what it was," Pritchard said. "This is a very new kind of property for Orlando. . . . It's another level of luxury."

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