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City native returns to teach casino work

Born and raised in Holyoke, Angel Rivera moved with his family to the Atlantic City area when he was 18. He needed a job and knew that the casinos in the area employed a lot of people, so he gambled on himself.

"I didn't play cards that often as a kid and I had never been in a casino before, but I had a feeling there was an opportunity for me," he said.

He watched and learned and went to a dealer class. He impressed his instructors and later, his employers. He was hired and worked in New Jersey for 15 years before being recruited and moving on to Mohegan Sun casino in Connecticut, where he worked for 11 more. He enjoyed it, but he kept his eye on Western Mass.

"Everyone in our industry knew about the possibility of a casino in this area," Rivera said. "No one knew which company would be selected, when and where it would be built, but I knew I was going to take a close look at it."

When the Springfield casino was getting ready to open, MGM offered Rivera a position and he gladly accept-

ed. In fact, Rivera was working for MGM Springfield well before it opened. He was one of the first instructors hired by MCCTI, the Massachusetts Casino Career Training Institute, at a new school designed to teach locals how to be casino dealers.

MCCTI is a partnership between Holyoke Community College, Springfield Technical Community College and MGM.

"Western Mass. didn't have many casino dealers, so we had to grow our own," said Jeffrey Hayden, HCC vice president of business and community service, who leads the college's workforce development programs. "Casino dealing is a skill that requires training. MGM worked with us to identify good instructors and then train and then hire our students. They still are. We have classes running regularly."

Rivera started teaching dealer school students several months before



Angel Rivera

the casino's opening.

"I always wanted to teach casino dealing, and I was given a chance here with MGM and MCCTI, and I love it," Rivera said. "I'm in the classroom with nice people looking to learn a skill to find a job. They are just like I was. In a short time, we become co-workers."

MGM is always in the market for qualified dealers, so MCCTI is looking for new students.

To expand the search, MCCTI is working with groups that teach people English. Starting in February, classes will be offered that will smooth the transition from ESOL training to dealer training.

"We have so many people in our community that want to learn English so they can find their first job or a better job," said Peshia Black, HCC's director of English for Speakers of Other Languages programs at the Ludlow Area and Springfield Adult Learning centers. "They know they need English skills to

do that. We believe that by overlapping our ESOL lessons with job training, we can help people move quickly into the workforce."

Rivera, who speaks Spanish, was quick to support outreach to the ESOL community.

"I started as a dealer, came to Springfield as a supervisor and am now a pit manager," he said. "Being bilingual definitely helps me professionally. I can communicate with guests, not just at the tables, but talk about other things like restaurants, directions, movies — whatever it is."

MCCTI has two blackjack and carnival game dealer training sessions coming up. Both start Jan. 13 and run through April 15. One session runs 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and the other 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. The ESOL-focused classes start in February.

Scholarships are available for Massachusetts residents. To make it easier on students with children, classes will not meet during school vacation weeks.

For more information on the dealer school, visit www.mccti.org.