Like many of his colleagues, Hickman’s journey to Disney began as a child. “I was that kid who was fortunate enough to go on several trips to Disney World while growing up,” said Hickman. “I just always thought it would be an amazing place to work.”

While his career goal was set early on, Hickman said that it wasn’t until his junior year at Rowan University that the path to his dream began to take shape. “I was sitting in the university administration office flipping through an alumni magazine when I found a story about a recruitment manager at Disney named Dottie,” he explained. “I reached out to her, and for several years she provided me with career advice and guidance.”

After graduating from Rowan with his bachelor’s degree in 1996, Hickman took a job with the Disney Store in May’s Landing, N.J., as an assistant store manager. “There aren’t many opportunities to work for Disney in New Jersey!” Hickman joked. “But it turned out to be a great experience, and I gained the leadership training I was seeking.”

While working at the Disney Store, Hickman was accepted into the newly launched School of Tourism and Hospitality Management master’s program at Temple University. “I had no experience coming out of undergraduate school and knew that I needed to gain some leadership skills if I wanted to get to Disney,” he shared. “I chose Temple not only for its great reputation but because it offered the unique experience of being in the heart of Philadelphia. It’s situated on a large campus and offers great cultural diversity. My experience here opened the world up to me in many ways.”

It was during his time at Temple that Hickman got his big break. “I was invited to interview for a leadership position at Walt Disney World in the spring of 2000,” said Hickman. “The interview—which was largely facilitated by my contact, Dottie—ultimately led to my first job, as a retail guest service manager in World of Disney, one of the shops in the Downtown Disney Marketplace.”

Hickman’s dream was finally a reality. For nearly three years, he served as one of 20 managers overseeing the 400 “cast members” (Disney’s term for employees) who work in the bustling marketplace. Hickman fondly refers to World of Disney as “50,000 square feet of shopping bliss,” and it was there that he learned and refined Disney’s core principles—enjoy what you do, enhance the guest experience and drive business.