

Supporting Agents

An Interview with Hall F. Willkie, President, and Bess Freedman, Executive Vice President, Managing Director of Sales & Business Development, Brown Harris Stevens

EDITORS' NOTE Hall Willkie oversees Brown Harris Stevens Residential Sales, LLC, managing more than 450 sales agents in New York City with sales in excess of \$4.2 billion in New York City alone. He works closely with his colleagues who manage Brown Harris Stevens sales offices in The Hamptons, Palm Beach, and Miami.

Formerly a Senior Managing Director of the Corcoran Group's East Side headquarters, Bess Freedman was appointed in 2013

by Brown Harris Stevens President Hall F. Willkie to foster business development for both the agents and the firm. Prior to her promotion to Senior Managing Director at Corcoran, Freedman attained great success at their Carnegie Hill office as an agent. She achieved repeated membership in their Multi-Million-Dollar Club due to her exemplary customer service, knowledge of the market, and results. She earned her undergraduate degree from Ithaca College and her law degree from The University of the District of Columbia, David A. Clarke School of Law, in Washington, D.C. Prior to entering real estate, Freedman practiced law as an Assistant State's Attorney in Montgomery County, Maryland, and also worked at Legal Aid as an attorney. She is a member of the Florida, Washington, D.C., and Maryland Bar, and worked in New York pro hac vice.

COMPANY BRIEF Established in 1873, privately held New York-based Brown Harris Stevens (BHSUSA.com) is a premier provider of real estate services. One of the oldest and largest real estate firms in the country, the company operates offices in New York City, the Hamptons, Palm Beach, and Miami. Its operating divisions include residential sales, residential management, new development marketing and sales, relocation, appraisal and consulting, commercial sales, healthcare real estate, and insurance services. Recently, the firm opened a new downtown flagship and expanded its presence in both the Palm Beach and Miami markets.

Over the past year, where has the growth come from for Brown Harris Stevens?

Willkie: We've never been about being the biggest brokerage. We grow only when it makes sense. Opportunities have generally presented themselves in New York-centric markets.



Bess Freedman and Hall F. Willkie

Freedman: Miami was a natural step building on our strong market share in Palm Beach. We wanted to have a presence there because so many of our clients have homes in Florida.

Is the growth in those markets primarily through acquisition?

Willkie: To start from scratch is harder than to acquire something.

Freedman: We opened new offices in Palm Beach and West Palm Beach, while in Miami merging acquisitions together.

During an acquisition, is culture at the forefront?

Willkie: The cultures can't be too similar because the nature of real estate in Miami is so different than that in New York, but we're all one brand. Our brand is so valuable and we must protect it.

Freedman: Company culture is very important to us, so Hall and I spend as much time as we can in Palm Beach and Miami, because we want to inspire and support those other regions as part of our brand.

How valuable is it to have a parent like Terra Holdings with its financial strength?

Willkie: It's great because they are real estate people and they're privately owned with no debt.

Freedman: It makes it easy when we need to get something accomplished.

Where do you see the high-end of the market today and are you concerned with oversupply?

Willkie: It's tighter than it has been. There is greater uncertainty in the world and for higher end sales, the more discretionary it is. However, if places are priced in a justifiable manner, they're selling.

The only real oversupply on the high end is in the new condo market. There is not a lot of inventory of high-end co-ops.

Will you discuss the impact of areas like Midtown West and the Financial District?

Willkie: The new condo market is positioned more Downtown now. Many neighborhoods have gentrified, and people have many more choices today.

The majority of the high-end inventory on the Upper East Side and Upper West Side are co-ops, so there is little vacant land to build on. The condos have all been built in Midtown and Downtown.

How critical has your investment in technology been for the firm?

Willkie: We're an information and service business, so we have to stay up to date on new systems and provide information to our agents and the public; it's a major part of what we do.

Freedman: A few years ago, ownership invested in a new listing system and initiatives like Instant Value and Analytics. These and other proprietary platforms all help agents do their jobs more efficiently.

Is market research a differentiator for Brown Harris Stevens?

Willkie: We're the only firm that I'm aware of that has a chief economist and, because we've been here since 1873, we have tremendous records and a true appreciation for the history of information, so research is an important part of our business.

Is the real estate office still as important as it was in the past?

Willkie: Over the past 10 years, in our industry, offices have become more important, and our offices have frankly never been nicer.

Our industry is a relationship business, and there is still a lot of face-to-face with clients and with each other. I cannot be as effective if I'm not in the office.

Are there certain traits needed to be a successful broker?

Freedman: It's the commitment to knowing the inventory and the market, and they have to spend time with their clients. This job can't be done part-time and be done well. One has to be focused on it. They have to be available all the time, and they have to be up to date in order to inform their clients of what's going on in the market.

Is it well understood that Brown Harris Stevens does a lot of business at the lower price points?

Willkie: Many members of the industry do know that. Most consumers probably would not believe that one-third of our business in New York City is under \$1 million. We do however continue to dominate the over \$3-million market.

How does the dynamic between the two of you work so well?

Willkie: One of the luckiest days in my business life was meeting Bess. She has become a friend and is a partner in running the business. We work so well together.

Freedman: There is no other leader like Hall in New York City. He's a quality human being and I'm honored to be part of this partnership and the firm. ●