

A Venue Like No Other: Five Years of State Farm Arena

**An Interview with Brett Stefansson, Executive Vice President and General Manager;
Sofi Armenakian, Head of Sustainability; and Camye Mackey, Executive Vice President and
Chief People, Diversity and Inclusion Officer, State Farm Arena**

EDITORS' NOTE Brett Stefansson currently serves the Atlanta Hawks Basketball Club as the Executive Vice President and General Manager of State Farm Arena. He has more than 20 years of experience in the sports industry in professional (NBA, WNBA and NHL) and minor league sports (IHL, indoor soccer and arena football). In his career, Stefansson has worked more than 5,000 events. Prior to joining the Hawks, he served as Vice President and General Manager of the AT&T Center (San Antonio, Texas) which is home to the San Antonio Spurs (NBA), San Antonio Rampage (AHL), San Antonio Stars (WNBA), and San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo. His experience concluded with a \$110-million-dollar renovation to the AT&T Center. During his leadership, he also oversaw other facilities including the Spurs practice facility (now known as Medistar Training Facility Ltd.) and Toyota Field, (now known as the home of San Antonio FC of the USL). Earlier in his career, he served as the General Manager of BB&T Center located in Sunrise, Florida. The 19,000-seat arena earned consistent top-15 rankings in Pollstar throughout his tenure. Stefansson spent a combined 15 years of his career at this venue in South Florida. He started his career in sports as the Event Coordinator at The Summit (then, the home of the Rockets (NBA), Comets (WNBA), Aeros (AHL) and Thunderbears (AFL)) in Houston, Texas. Stefansson received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Eastern Illinois University.



Brett Stefansson

a variety of different sporting events. State Farm Arena went through a \$200 million transformation in 2018 which at the time was the second largest NBA renovation in history. As a community asset, we pride ourselves on bringing a variety of diverse content not just to the city of Atlanta, but to the Southeast United States.

Will you highlight State Farm Arena's strength in offering leading concerts and events?

I believe we have a variety of strengths that make State Farm Arena a must-play building:

1. Location – Atlanta is one of the largest cities in the Southeast United States, as well as home to the busiest airport in the world.

2. World-class guest experience – Southern hospitality is part of our DNA. Not only do we strive to treat our guests like family, but we do the same for all traveling concerts and shows back of house as well. Our goal is to continue to create memorable experiences for everyone who walks through our doors.

3. An arena like no other – State Farm Arena is a reflection of the city in which it's located, to include our partnership with Killer Mike and the SWAG Shop (Shave Wash And

Groom), an industry leading food and beverage program that includes a variety of local food and beverage partners, a partnership with local country music artist Zac Brown in Zac Brown Social, "HAWK BAR" and the first of its kind in the NBA "Feet on the Floor" Club, and a commitment to the community around sustainability in becoming the World's first TRUE Certified Zero Waste sports and entertainment facility.

4. Team Members – Our team is dedicated to the success of every event we host. I am blessed to be surrounded by good-hearted people who operate with integrity and set the highest standard for excellence.

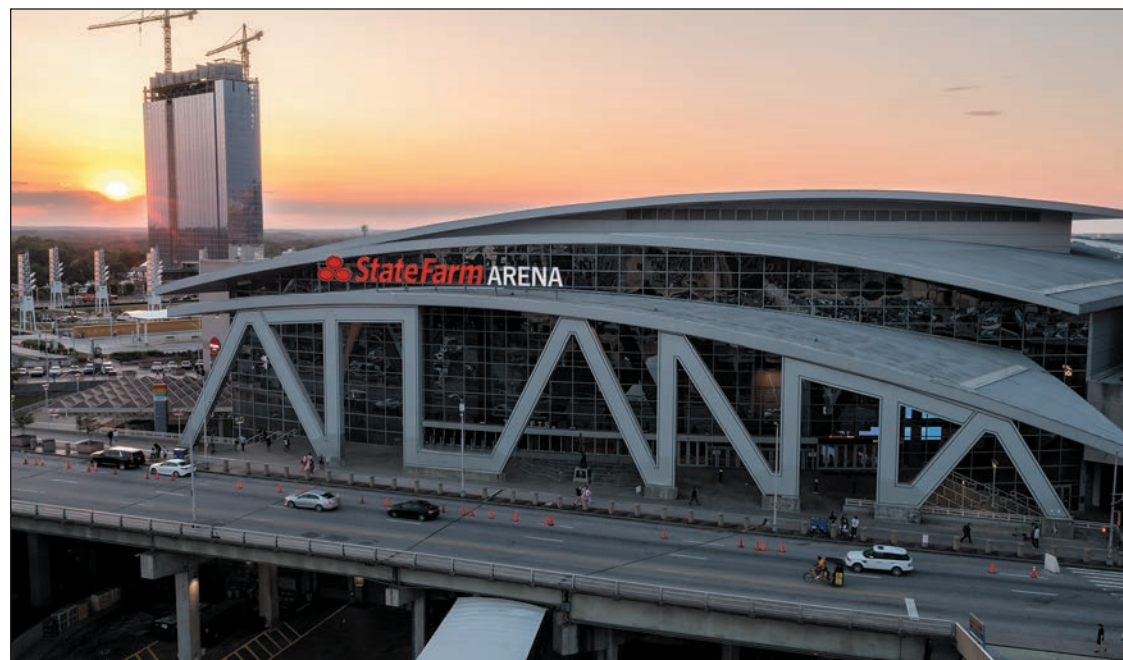
How has State Farm Arena approached its food and beverage offerings?

So much of our social experiences revolve around food and drink, whether that's going out with friends to a restaurant or hosting people in your home. We knew that through the renovation in 2018, it was important to elevate the food and beverage experience. We focused on connecting our food program to the community through local restaurant partners, upgrading technology to increase speed of service, hiring top quality culinary and management talent, locally sourcing and preparing fresh (not frozen) food, and listening to fan feedback on what they expected. We also understand the need to continuously improve,

ARENA BRIEF Located in the heart of downtown Atlanta's Centennial Park District, State Farm Arena (statefarmarena.com) is surrounded by an array of world-class attractions, restaurants, parks, hotels and lounges. State Farm Arena was named Pollstar's 2021 Best New Concert Venue and is home to the Atlanta Hawks. The arena is celebrating its fifth anniversary as State Farm Arena, having reopened with that name on August 29, 2018 after an extensive renovation.

Will you provide an overview of State Farm Arena?

State Farm Arena is a multi-purpose arena located in Atlanta. We are home to the NBA's Atlanta Hawks and currently host over 150 events annually to include concerts, family shows, and



State Farm Arena in Atlanta (above and following pages)

evaluating each year opportunities to make improvements to quality and service.

Will you discuss State Farm Arena's investment in technology and how this has enhanced the guest experience?

From start to finish, almost every aspect of the fan journey is impacted by technology in some way. While we have made significant investments in this space over the years (ie. in-arena Wi-Fi, mobile ticketing, cashless payments etc.), we continue to evaluate areas of opportunity each year with our focus being on not just the guest experience, but improving operational efficiency, generating revenue, and enhancing the employee experience.

How is State Farm Arena leading in sustainability, and will you highlight the Arena's sustainability initiatives?

We became the world's first TRUE Zero Waste Certified sports and entertainment facility back in 2022 and this year we just received our re-certification. It took hard work and perseverance from our staff to reach this milestone and I am so proud of what they have accomplished. Our sustainability program was an employee-led initiative that has now taken root and become an integral part of our organization. We recently launched GOAL (Green Operations and Advance Leadership) partnering with Oak View Group and Fenway Sports to help support other sports and entertainment organizations with their sustainability journey. Sustainability really doesn't have an end – it's a path we will be on forever and we are always looking for ways to improve and support others along their journey.

How important is it for State Farm Arena to build a diverse and inclusive workforce?

It's a priority for us. A diverse and inclusive workforce leads to innovation, stronger employee engagement, better decision-making, and ultimately, better service for our fans.

What do you see as State Farm Arena's responsibility to be engaged in the Atlanta community?

The belief that we are a community asset starts at the top with owners Tony Ressler and Jami Gertz. The way we engage in the community comes in many different forms. Some of our biggest ways of being an active and productive member of the Atlanta community are our charitable initiatives, such as our annual Million Meal Pack event, which has seen 5,000 volunteers each year pack one million meals for Atlantans in need at State Farm Arena. Our sustainable initiatives also play a huge role in our community engagement, as we diverted over 2.5 million pounds of fan-generated waste from landfills in 2022 alone. Additionally, the profits generated by State Farm Arena help to support our Hawks Basketball Academy and various Hawks Foundation grants and scholarships. Through all of the arena's operations, we take pride in our ability to remain grounded and active in Atlanta.

As State Farm Arena celebrates its five-year anniversary, how important is it for the State Farm Arena team to take moments to reflect and celebrate what has been accomplished over the last five years?



Celebrating achievements along the journey is always important. We reflect and celebrate as much as possible throughout the year as we work towards our goals. Looking back at the last five years, I am so proud of what our team members have accomplished. Our success has been due to the hard work and dedication of everyone in the organization. From our part-time staff all the way up to our great ownership, it's really taken the collective effort of everyone to move us forward.

What are your priorities for State Farm Arena as you look to the future?

1. Support the organization the best we can as we work towards winning an NBA Championship.
2. Grow the number of quality events we do each year.
3. Continuously improve our fan experience.
4. Provide best-in-class employee experience.

EDITORS' NOTE *Sofi Armenakian joined the Hawks and State Farm Arena in 2020 and currently is the Head of Sustainability. In October 2022, Armenakian was recognized by industry publication Sports Business Journal as one of 10 Executives to Watch in Sports Sustainability and was in the class of the 2022 All-Stars through VenuesNow. Prior to joining the Hawks, she worked as the Conversion and Sustainability Manager for Mercedes-Benz Stadium as part of AMB Sports & Entertainment.*



Sofi Armenakian

Before transitioning into sports and entertainment, she worked for ESSEX Consulting Group Inc. as a business development and marketing director, focusing on data-driven sustainability solutions. Prior to energy consulting, she worked in retail as a general manager, district trainer and recruiter. She is a board member at CHaRM (Center for Hard to Recycle Materials) and regularly volunteers with CHaRM and Trees Atlanta. Born in Armenia, Armenakian is trilingual and speaks English, German, and Armenian. She is a graduate of Georgia State University.

How is State Farm Arena leading in sustainability, and will you highlight the Arena's sustainability initiatives?

We're leading the industry in sustainability with the way we intentionally handle our waste. Operating more sustainably is a priority across our entire organization, top-down. We are able to lead in this space because we are truly allocating resources to do the work and achieve a first in the world milestone for being the world's first TRUE Zero Waste Platinum-certified venue. This achievement has set a standard that other teams, leagues and industries are now pursuing.

What does it mean to be TRUE Zero Waste-certified?

Zero Waste certification means that every single event we host - games, concerts or ancillary – we ensure that at least 90 percent of our waste is being diverted from the landfill. We divert over 90 percent consistently by looking

at ways to redesign processes, reduce unnecessary waste, reuse and donate when applicable, and recycle and compost the remainder. By operating with a zero waste midframe, we intentionally reduce our environmental impact and operate as sustainably as possible.

Once the Zero Waste benchmark was hit, what are the next steps in the journey towards greater sustainability?

Sustainability is about innovation, and we are on a forever journey to operate more sustainably. The next steps are ideas we are piloting as well as a solution that may not exist yet. That could be automation to do what we've created the blueprint for, but more efficiently, or continuing to engage with our fans and guests in a fun way without taking away from the experience that they're here to have, while encouraging in them behaviors that can be taken back to their own communities. We know that there is much more work to be done and continuing to collaborate with everyone on this journey will enable us to achieve our goals.

How have you gotten employees at all levels of the organization to buy into the goal of becoming more sustainable?

That's exactly why we've been so successful, by including everyone on our journey to zero waste. It's all about collaboration, internally and externally. It is imperative to include everyone on what we are working towards, as we all are part of the solution and impact the outcomes. It required us to really have a different mindset when thinking about waste and trash and understanding that some items are commodities and resources. And now, some of the best ideas are coming from other departments. Sustainability is part of who we are and what we do. It is also important that when introducing an innovative way of approaching a solution, to ensure it is easy to understand and accessible to accomplish. We work very closely with departments to include sustainability related topics in onboarding, training, coaching, and huddle materials for events. Feedback is essential when operating more sustainably – we conduct audits and share our findings in biweekly meetings as we continue to identify areas of opportunities and celebrate successes. We have learned that most people want to do the right thing, but we just don't know what we don't know. Therefore, it's about continuing to collaborate, educate and make sustainable solutions more accessible.

As State Farm Arena celebrates its five-year anniversary, how important is it for the State Farm Arena team to take moments to reflect and celebrate what has been accomplished in its sustainability efforts over the last five years?

So important - what we've done in such a short period of time has never been done before. When we reflect and think about how, since the beginning of the program, we have diverted over five million pounds from the landfill, it just goes to show how far our vision can go when we are intentional about collaboration and have clear communication. It's also nice to know that, even in this space,



Atlanta continues to influence everything. We're talking about the Southeast where what we are doing requires true initiative and is not a result of a mandate.

What are your goals for State Farm Arena's sustainability as you look to the future?

Automation, engagement and innovation. All of this impacts how we can continue being more sustainable on our forever journey. It's really important to not be intimidated by the things that we haven't figured out yet. We are comfortable to say, "I don't know yet" and look to learn from anyone else who's done it. There's no need to reinvent a concept if we can look at something that has worked and learn from those solutions. We



Camye Mackey

are grateful to be industry leaders, and also transparent about being followers. We are all part of the solution.

EDITORS' NOTE Camye Mackey is currently the Executive Vice President and Chief People, Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the Atlanta Hawks and State Farm Arena. Under her leadership, the Hawks won the Most Effective Recruitment Strategy award in the 2019 HR Excellence Awards presented by Atlanta Business Chronicle. Prior to joining the Hawks, Mackey established a proven track record of leadership experience within diverse companies and industries that included positions

with MGM Resorts International, Walt Disney World, Special Olympics International, and B. F. Saul Hospitality Group. In addition, she owned and operated a full-service HR consulting firm that serviced notable clients such as the American Red Cross, Walt Disney World, George Mason University, Health Central Hospital, and Special Olympics Florida. She has spoken at several human resource conferences and served on the board of directors at Virginia Tech's Department of Hospitality & Tourism Management, Special Olympics Florida, and currently resides on the Atlanta CHRO Governing Body and is a SHRM-Atlanta Board Member. Mackey holds a BBA in business management from Howard University and an MA degree in organizational management from the University of Phoenix.

How important is it for State Farm Arena to build a diverse and inclusive workforce?

It's so important for us to have a diverse and inclusive workforce for a couple of





reasons. One, when we look at the Atlanta community, it's a diverse community and we want our organization to reflect that diversity. So, we intentionally work to build talent pipelines that will bring in not only ethnic diversity, but also diversity in experiences, knowledge, and capabilities. Another reason is that we found that when our population and our workforce is diverse and inclusive and we include all of those thoughts and experiences in our decisions, we have better business outcomes. Those diversities, different thoughts and perspectives make us a stronger, better organization at the end of the day.

How are you being intentional in your diversity and inclusion efforts?

One of the strategies that we use in being intentional with our recruitment and talent acquisition efforts is identifying where our gaps are. First, we look at data to determine where those gaps are, and then we work to fill those gaps. We're very fortunate being in Atlanta, as we have a number of universities here. We partner with a number of our HBCUs in particular, and we create internship programs where they can come and learn and get placed in different departments, such as marketing, social media, content, finance, revenue, diversity, HR – areas where they can learn and grow. Our hope is that one day they'll come back and be a full-time team member with us. We also partner with different veteran organizations so that we can hire and provide opportunities for those who are veterans, as well as individuals with disabilities. So, we intentionally go out and we seek individuals to come and work with us who reflect our community.

What do you see as State Farm Arena's responsibility to be engaged in the Atlanta community?

I go back to our ownership group led by Tony Ressler and Jami Gertz. They've always told us that we will be a civic asset to our Atlanta community. So, there's a huge commitment for us to engage with our community, to make sure our arena and all the assets within our arena reflect Atlanta – we are true to Atlanta. So, you'll see, from food to entertainment, even to the artwork that's within the arena space, we carry that into our workforce. We currently have what's called a Courageous Conversation series called "This is Atlanta." We teach our team members about the history of Atlanta – how did the city grow historically? Who were the key leaders? What were some of those key milestones that took place to help



drive the economics and the different industries that are in Atlanta and how are they thriving today? We educate ourselves; we look at data to make sure that we are true to Atlanta, and this is reflected in all aspects of our business.

As State Farm Arena celebrates its five-year anniversary, are you able to take moments to reflect on what has been accomplished over the last five years?

That's the exciting part. First of all, five years has gone by so quickly. We've been busy. We've been having a great time and we've had a lot of wins and successes. We also had some challenges such as going through a pandemic during that five-year period. But I think it's always important to take a moment to reflect on where we've come from, because that helps us to appreciate what we've done and inspires us to continue to go forward. It just fuels us with additional innovative ideas on what we need to do in the future. We have a project looking at our future fan, looking at the future fan experience, the future team member experience – so having time to reflect is so important. I think it's energizing and will help us to continue to do great things in the future.

What are your priorities for State Farm Arena as you look to the future?

One of the big things is the experience. We're going to have different types of fans and guests that come to our arena and they're going to all come with different expectations. It's going to be really important for us to understand what those expectations are so we can hire, train, and develop the right workforce to support those needs. I think the experience that we create for our team members will then dovetail into the experience that our fans and guests have, and that is going to be critical to our future. ●