

Hospitality

Setting the Standard

An Interview with Valerie Ann Wilson, Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer; Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg, Co-President and Co-Owner; Kimberly Wilson Wetty, Co-President and Co-Owner, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Valerie Ann Wilson initially moved to New York City to pursue a fashion career. Within two years, she was hired as Vice President to start the ladies division of Gant. Beginning in 1967, she spent the next 13 years serving on numerous committees and boards of directors, and played a part in a multitude of fundraising efforts with not-for-profit organizations in Westchester County, New York City, and London. In 1977, the Wilson family moved to London where Valerie became a founding member of the Junior League of London. Her three years in London fostered much of her passion for travel and on September 8, 1981, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc. (VWT) was born, opening in the Pan Am building, New York City. In 2001, Valerie became a published author with the publication of Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts. Ten years later and as a part of the 30th anniversary milestone, she wrote the second edition. On February 2, 2012, the book, Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts, Second Edition and the 30th anniversary campaign were unveiled in the Astor Library at The St. Regis New York with industry leaders and high profile travel, business, and lifestyle media.

Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg joined Valerie Wilson Travel in February 1991. She manages the corporate division from sales to operations, as well as oversees the IT and technology functions of VWT. Her passion is new business development for the company. Jennifer serves on the ASTA CAAC Board and was honored with the ISTA/ASTA Barbara O'Hara Advocacy Award in 2010. Jennifer graduated from Haverford College with a B.A. in History and a minor in Political Science and received her Executive M.B.A. from the Owner/President Management (OPM) Program at Harvard Business School in 2004. Jennifer began her career as a Corporate Sales Manager of the Westbury Hotel in New York.

Kimberly Wilson Wetty joined Valerie Wilson Travel in February 1995 and has been instrumental in developing the company's cruise division. Three years in she took on the management of all leisure business. In addition, she is responsible for all branding and marketing as well as overseeing VWT's membership in Virtuoso. Kimberly was selected for the "A-List" by Travel + Leisure for 2009, 2010, and 2011 as a family travel specialist. She is a member of the Young



Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg; Valerie Ann Wilson; Kimberly Wilson Wetty

Presidents' Organization (YPO). A graduate of Bucknell University with a B.A. in Sociology, Kimberly began her career as a store manager for Ann Taylor in New York City. She left retail to join the travel industry as marketing coordinator for the Americas for CIGA Hotels.

COMPANY BRIEF With high regard for personal attention to detail and customer service, Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc. (www.valeriewilsontravel.com) is one of today's largest private, women owned, debt free, and family managed travel consulting firms in the United States. Headquartered in New York City with a diverse client base, there are currently 15 offices in the Northeast and Southeast, stretching from Maine to Florida, in the Midwest, and on the West Coast. VWT's team consists of a highly specialized and knowledgeable network of 230 Travel Consultants and Associate Agents. Valerie Wilson Travel handles the travel management needs for companies and organizations in industries as diverse as fashion, publishing, finance, new media, pharmaceuticals, and not-for-profits. All of the Valerie Wilson Travel locations are proud members of Virtuoso®. VWT's Power of Access™ guarantees clients exclusive rates and amenities, VIP treatment, and exceptional service with preferred partners. Every year since 1998, the agency has been counted among Travel Weekly's "Top 50 Travel Agencies" and most recently as the 29th largest in the United States.

When you started the firm, what had you seen in the market that made you feel you could fill a void?

Valerie: We were living in London and I could not find a travel agent there or in New York, so I started doing research on my own. When we came back from Europe in 1980, I knew I wanted to go back to work. Some good friends asked me to book their trips for them, which planted the seed to start a small travel company dealing in the luxury, international, leisure market – little did I know they would also want me to handle their corporate travel.

Has your target market remained consistent?

Valerie: It has, although most of my clients are now retired, but they were CEOs, chairmen, and presidents of major international Fortune 500 companies. For many, I handled their individual leisure travel and their corporate travel.

Today, we continue to focus on those customized travel services rather than using just an online booking tool. No two clients are alike, so we need to get to know an individual or corporation in order to determine if VWT is the right fit.

Jennifer: The key characteristics of those who Val started to serve when she first opened VWT remain consistent. However, at that time, the focus was more on the leisure side, and senior executives' business travel or board of directors' meetings.

After joining VWT, we decided to significantly expand our corporate travel department. Thirty years ago, there hadn't been consolidation in the corporate travel marketplace, so corporations had a wide choice of travel agencies.

Many of the companies we work with today have different needs and requirements. However, our leisure clients continue to expect exceptional service and memorable travel experiences.

In the early days, was it challenging to differentiate?

Valerie: I was not afraid to give my opinions about what I enjoyed. I knew parts of Europe particularly well, but many of the first corporate accounts were going to South America in 1981. I didn't know that area firsthand but I did research and talked to experienced and knowledgeable contacts and travelers. Thus, I could share various viewpoints and opinions.

I've also always been willing to call general managers and ask for help, particularly when a hotel is sold out, to see if they will accommodate our client. I was not intimidated by asking questions because it helped develop my relationships with hotels around the world. In those days, the most effective way to do that was to pick up the phone. Today, more is handled via e-mail, but nothing compares to a friendly phone conversation.

Has personal interaction been lost with technology?

Kimberly: The success of this business is due to Valerie's personality; it's her ability to make people feel comfortable. She instantly connected with the general managers and sales managers, and built incredible relationships with our suppliers, which has continued for 30 years, as has her relationship with our customer base. We don't lose sight of the value of a person talking directly to another person; it's what makes us unique.

Jennifer: Technology has changed business routines. An e-mail is still conveying the same VWT message and tone. So technology has only enhanced those relationships.

How did the Power of Access™ concept arise?

Kimberly: Four years ago, we were figuring out how to redo our Web site and hone in on our brand. What we deliver is insider access. So we came up with the phrase Power of Access™, which touches on our connections and relationships, and our ability to create unique experiences from the time you start planning your travel to the time you return – that's how we deliver the Power of Access™. We want to give the best to every experience. So we've done a lot of training with our associates and advisors on what that means and talked to our suppliers about what they can provide that is unique, like opening the doors to a museum that's closed or getting a table for dinner when a special restaurant is full, which resonates with our customers.

Valerie: One of the simplest forms of the Power of Access™ is that we can ask a general manager to personally greet our guests because they're part of our group of friends.

Kimberly: Our customers don't take this for granted and offer plenty of feedback. They are well versed in Virtuoso amenities and come back to us with punch lists, just as we do when we travel. We then have a list of friendly suggestions to take back to the property or cruise line. Our customers understand that we can help make changes if they give us their feedback and that makes them feel more a part of the VWT community.

Do your offerings run the gamut from hotels to cruises?

Valerie: We're a big supplier for all of them: hotels, tour operators, and cruise lines. We hope we have elevated the integrity of the industry. If you're not honest with your customers, you won't be honest with anyone, including your colleagues. That philosophy of honesty has created loyalty for us.

Kimberly: We're true consultants. "Travel agent" is not on anybody's business card. We are advisers because travel is something you should seek advice for in order to make it seamless and enjoyable.

Has the word luxury lost some of its meaning?

Valerie: The word luxury is overused, but it has a different definition for every person and you have to look at it based on where you are in the world. In India, for example, there was very little luxury until 15 years ago when Mr. Oberoi opened the Vilas properties, such as Udaivilas; now Taj Hotels has decided to redo their palace properties. Before then, it wasn't luxurious but was perceived as a luxury trip because you'd have a car and an English speaking driver. Today, the demand for luxury is being driven by the customers' requests.

Kimberly: Luxury in travel is about what the customer is looking for, whether it's time to relax, to see a place before it changes, to see the capitals of the world or to share time with someone special. It's all about how you best want to spend that luxury of time.

Valerie: It used to be that an air-conditioned hotel was considered luxury; today, we would not use a hotel without that. Today, a property has to have a spa, state-of-the-art gym, and a great restaurant, but number one is genuine, personalized service.

Is it more challenging today for a hotelier to focus on hospitality with all the other responsibilities?

Valerie: It's tougher on a general manager because asset management has been a major part of every successful company in recent years. But she still needs to have the desire and drive to personally host and greet clients.

Kimberly: It's also critical that a general manager be a well-rounded individual who has a financial, food and beverage, and operations background and is a people person. A big part of the role is true hospitality.

At day's end, the hotels need a high average rate and great occupancy, but they also need the right customers there at the right time. They need to recognize that many of the customers they're looking to have in their properties and on their tours and cruises come from a certain group of top travel management companies. So when we make requests, they're rarely turned down because they recognize we bring in the high caliber of guests their staff is trained to serve.

The younger customer may want a faster check-in process. But if you streamline it with technology like an express check-in, the hotel has no way to make a human connection with the guest staying at their property and that's a disservice. They need to find a way to make it faster but still personal.

The family culture of this firm hasn't been lost, despite so much growth. How have you maintained that?

Valerie: It's tough to maintain it but we work together as a large family and we don't interfere with how our associates do business.

Kimberly: With all of our offices, we make sure there is consistency in the delivery of the VWT message. We have monthly conference calls called Insider Access where we invite senior level management from our preferred suppliers to participate, so everybody can ask questions. All of us also take turns visiting the offices. It's the power of one-to-one.

All of our offices are the same peach color; there is a consistency in branding, of letterhead

and envelopes, and of e-mail footers regardless of the location. We have maintained the uniqueness from our early days and have incorporated it into new technology.

Do you ever look back and appreciate what you have accomplished or are you always looking ahead?

Valerie: We are typically looking ahead, but we need to celebrate life. And travel is an important part of life.

Jennifer: As a partnership, we look to bounce ideas off of outside resources. Travel will look different 30 years from now, so we have to adapt and be innovative. Part of that comes from our training as well as the open-mindedness of our preferred partners, but we have to continue pursuing it. We never want to lose that face-to-face approach, but for some customers, we'll need to recognize how they want to be served in the future.

Kimberly: I constantly look for new ways to remain relevant because the needs of suppliers and customers change.

How valuable is giving back to your culture?

Jennifer: I am on the board of directors of the Make-A-Wish Foundation® of Metro New York and Western New York. The world has changed and over 70 percent of all wishes involve travel. So we are trying to bring travel partners together to contribute airline, hotel, American Express Rewards miles, points, certificates, and tickets. Then the goal is to educate companies and their employees on how to give "in kind" because technology has opened the world to wish kids and their expansive dreams. There is no typical wish. Disney is still the number one wish destination, but now many kids want to go to the Olympics or Hawaii. I am helping our chapters look at the overall travel buying power much like a small corporation would in terms of having a set of preferred partners and suppliers. Lastly, with rising wish costs and increasing travel wish requests received by the Make-A-Wish Foundation® of Metro New York and Western New York, we have taken a new, more proactive approach and created the first "Travel Wish Bank" to accommodate these changes.

Valerie: I spent 15 years being a non-paid professional fundraiser for volunteer organizations. In November 2001, I had a heart attack and needed to have bypass surgery. But I survived it because two years prior, I had gone to the American Heart Association Go Red for Women® luncheon and learned that women have different symptoms for heart attacks, such as severe nausea. So I've spent 10 years making sure women know it's the number one killer for women – it outnumbers all cancers combined.

Kimberly: Valerie has instilled the need to give back in Jennifer and me. It's incredibly rewarding and an obligation we take personally. But the travel community in general also has an obligation. In experiencing other destinations and cultures, tourism must be aware of its global footprint and create opportunities for sustainable travel. With that in mind, we each chose a charity for our 30th anniversary. We gave \$10,000 each to the American Heart Association's initiative – Go Red For Women®, the Make-A-Wish Foundation® of Metro New York and Western New York, and Stand Up To Cancer as a commitment of our strong support. ●