



Denise LeFrak Calicchio

**EDITORS' NOTE** Denise LeFrak Calicchio began working professionally in real estate in 1986. She worked in the family business, the LeFrak Organization, for several years before joining Sothebys as a specialist in Manhattan real estate in 1991. Calicchio was a Trustee of Marymount College for 15 years and has served on a variety of committees and boards including the Women's Bank Advisory Board, The Metropolitan Museum's Chairman's Council, the Executive Board of The Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the board of the Cancer Research and Treatment Fund, and Long Island University. She travels extensively with the Guggenheim Museum and she has been the Co-Chair of the Patron's Circle of the Guggenheim since 2000. Calicchio is also on the Contemporary Art Council at the Museum of Modern Art and serves on its nominating committee selecting future members. She has written two books, *High Rise*, *Low Down and Rooftop Gardens*, each offering a look at iconic New York City real estate from an insider's perspective.

**You're involved in many efforts. How do you decide where to focus your time and energy?**

I grew up in real estate – it's in my DNA. My exposure to these opportunities came together because my family was very involved. My books are about real estate, and my parents were all about giving back, so it gave them great joy to help people who were less fortunate and do things that would benefit the greater good.

**When you got into real estate, one would imagine the expectations would be high with the LeFrak name. Did you feel added pressure and did you enjoy it?**

I did. The first place I worked was an open space, so you would hear other people talking, and they would hear me negotiate deals. The manager would come over to me and ask who taught me how to do this. I told him I had spent my whole life hearing

my father making real estate deals, so it came naturally to me. Everything about the real estate business excites me.

**From there, you went to Sothebys?**

Yes. I was there for a long time and now I have a daughter who is a senior person at Sothebys, and she does very well.

**Do you think your father could have imagined the popularity of certain areas of the city today?**

My father could have imagined it because he was a major visionary. When he went to New Jersey to build Newport, he told my brother that he had a dream to redevelop dilapidated railroad tracks. My brother looked at him and said, I think you had a nightmare.

When we had the groundbreaking for Lincoln Center and President Eisenhower was there, my father took his children out of school and said, this is history in the making – this is more important than going to school today, and he was so right.

So we were brought up in a forward-thinking home.

**How did you come to write your two books?**

After my dad passed away and my mom was sick, it was too much for me to be in a 24/7 business like real estate. I sat on the sidelines for a while but I realized I couldn't come back, because I could not give enough time to it.

I tried to figure out another way to be involved in the real estate business, and the idea of the first book came along. The publisher told me that no one would talk to us again because the book was gossipy, but in a friendly way. The truth was, everybody talked to us – it was no big deal. The book doesn't say anything that would hurt people.

**What was the focus of the second book?**

My agent, who is a dear friend, came to me with the desire for me to write another book. I was trying to figure out what would appeal to people and would be something I could do, and I thought I could write about the private terraces in New York City. When you walk through the streets and look up, you can see them, but you don't know what is up there.

My best friend who had helped me with the first book also helped me with this one. I sold the book to Rizzoli and it mushroomed.

# Giving Back

## An Interview with Denise LeFrak Calicchio, Author/Philanthropist

**How do you decide what to focus on with your philanthropic work?**

My family has foundation meetings where we each put forth ideas. This has been going on for years – we were brought up to give back. Before she died, my mother built a school at the Lighthouse for blind children.

The last big thing we did was build the two skating rinks in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. I could see my mother looking down and saying, this is wonderful that all these children are having a great time. And my dad would say, this is great; there is another building named after me.

**What was it like to grow up in this family?**

My parents were very hard-working people. They believed in education. My father's motto was "Hard Work Conquers All." Everybody had to go to work. Nobody was sitting around. It's why we can all multitask.

**You also say that family is the core of your success.**

Yes. I was brought up in a family where everybody lived for time together with the family. It was very cohesive and now that I have my own children, I'm also very close to both of them.

**Do you find time to appreciate the impact you're making with your philanthropic efforts?**

I love the idea of giving back and helping people. A huge focus for me is drug and alcohol rehabilitation. What interests me about it is that if you want to get better, you can work the program and it works. Unlike many other illnesses, this is one you can recover from.

**What makes New York real estate so resilient during market highs and lows?**

There is limited space so everything is only going to become more valuable over time. The energy level here is unlike any other place. Also, in New York, there is something for everyone. This is what makes it so exciting.

**Will a large majority of people be priced out of Manhattan?**

That's scary. I don't like what is going on. I don't want the middle class to go away. My father was all about the middle class – the masses not the classes. So I'm worried about that. Everything is so expensive here that people trying to earn a living may have to hold a second job – it's hard to make it here. ●