



Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg, Valerie Ann Wilson, and Kimberly Wilson Wetty

Luxury Travel Advisers

An Interview with

**Valerie Ann Wilson, Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer;
Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg, Co-President and Co-Owner; and
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 in New York City. In 2001, Valerie became a published author with 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 at 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, as well as the meetings and events side from sales to operations, and oversees the IT and technology functions of VWT. Her passion is new business development for the company. Jennifer serves on the ASTA Board of Directors, is incoming Chair of the CAC and Co-Chair of the ASTA PAC, and was honored with the ISTA/ASTA Barbara O'Hara Advocacy Award in 2010. She firmly believes in the importance of speaking in one unified voice for the industry. 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 as a family travel specialist for the "A-List" by Travel + Leisure consecutively since 2009. She is a member of the Young 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. (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 16 offices nationwide, 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 315 Travel Advisers 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 33rd largest in the United States.

This organization has been a leader in the industry for many years. How are you using your expertise and relationships to position Valerie Wilson Travel for the next 35 years?

Valerie: The first thing that comes to mind when I think about the future is our people. I'm so proud of them, and we have specifically continued to mentor young people and help them realize this is a wonderful industry to be involved in.

How well does the next generation understand the critical role the travel professional still plays today?

Kimberly: The millennials, in particular, are very relationship driven and loyal. They see the value of a travel adviser, but they see the efficiencies of technology as well, so we continue to adopt technology more into the way we do business. Committed to developing new talent, we launched a new 18-month associate agent and adviser training program where they are matched up with an adviser. We can never take away the value of what a true relationship means, especially in today's world when one wants a true travel advocate.

Technology allows you to do more with fewer associates. How do you achieve the right balance and are offices still relevant today?

Jennifer: Our Power of Access tool chest is an internal training program for all employees and associates, whether they have been here for two weeks or 30 years. We re-remind them of the tools we have, which tie directly in with people and the relevance of the buyers and vendors. This is showcased by the fact that in this Power of Access tool chest, VWT, its management team, executive team, and some associates are represented on over 50 advisory boards or committees in hospitality. It is not just about me, Kimberly, or Valerie. We are continuing to expand our scope and VWT's footprint.

We have 16 offices. We do not have any international offices but we are a long standing and proud member of Virtuoso® and recently joined GSM, which has 45 international all-privately owned travel companies, as their U.S. member.

We still enjoy visiting our offices where we have advisers. However, we also have many people working remotely and we can be in touch with them in other ways. There is a real opportunity to keep that focus on people even when everyone is not in the same location.

You created your Suite Access™ program in 2015. Has it progressed as you envisioned?

Jennifer: It's been a resounding success. Our sales year-to-date are over \$2.6 million and we are well within reach of \$3-plus million in sales for 2016. The desire of properties to sell suites at full rate is on the top of each of their radars and this program perfectly aligns with that.

One of the biggest surprises for us is that there are 26 to 30 other preferred hotel

programs in the industry that we are a member of and, honestly, we almost created our own. It was much like creating a start-up within a well-known brand and institution.

It has been phenomenal to have the support, but it requires constant education. We have to continually train our advisers and clients on what Suite Access is.

Kimberly: With this program, we were not looking to discount. We were selling at the highest premium rate with the clients, but offering value. It is a win-win for both the supplier and us. We all still have to focus on education because as more advisers work remotely, the traditional sales call no longer exists in many cases. There is a shift in terms of what the sales call is and how the supplier is going to make their product relevant to the adviser. There needs to be further partnership in selling those preferred partners that we really want to promote.

Our 35th anniversary is this year and, in addition to the great celebration we will have in December, we have created a two-day travel Academy where we are inviting all of our advisers from our 16 offices to New York City. This will be the first time that everybody will be together for training.

We are showing our focus on education and professional development, which many suppliers have gotten excited about.

Jennifer: Through this academy, we will also be able to properly showcase some of our most preferred partners who will have access not only to account managers but also to senior executives.

Has the market been heavily impacted by things like daily travel alerts? Can you continue to thrive in this new landscape?

Valerie: I refer to it as the fear factor, which has three prongs: the fear of terrorism at any-time, anywhere; the fear of a mosquito; and the fear of the current state of the U.S.

Good travel advisers are saying that they feel this is the perfect time to consider a new destination instead of returning to somewhere the client may feel is no longer safe.

It is a matter of being a true consultant. If the phones are not ringing, we must pick up

the phone and talk to the client about their travel fears. This is an opportunity for people to explore.

We have always been a consulting firm but we are consultants now more than ever because clients get confused by the array of choices available online when they search. Firsthand information from an adviser is still the best they can get.

Jennifer: We were the first to put out information about the STEP program, where clients register with the State Department while traveling, on the bottom of our digital itinerary. If something were to go wrong, the U.S. government will know where they are. This is another safety net needed for the world in which we live.

Another element of this net is the updates we receive from our suppliers when something goes wrong. We are literally receiving information within an hour of an occurrence so we can be in touch with our clients and act as an advocate for them.

Valerie, you give advice to GMs and managing directors and are always trying to promote the value of the industry. Is it about more than the client relationship for you?

Valerie: I still consider myself a frustrated hotelier. I love forming a relationship with the general manager, owner of a small property, or anyone in sales. I treat the relationship with a hotel company or cruise line with utmost respect as if the company was mine. As a result of these relationships, each and every one of our guests are greeted upon arrival, making them feel valued and special.

Many hoteliers talk about financial pressures, but you always start with the human touch. How is hospitality at the root of that role?

Valerie: There is pressure on the role. There are some properties around the world that have forgotten, or have not had the time, or are not making the time, to do the personal greeting. Even if it is just a printed note left in a room, it still creates the feeling that someone cares that the guest is visiting.

It is a continuing process to make sure we do not forget the personal connection because,

otherwise, we become impersonal and people will go elsewhere.

Kimberly: Technology is only an enabler. We cannot create an experience if people are not involved. There are trends where properties have, for instance, pulled away from human connections to allow guests to order room service or check-in through an iPad, but it is still about what each customer prefers. We will continue to see more personalization for the individual traveler.

We have to lead by example with where we are willing to travel and to be committed to promoting travel. It really does unite people and, through travel, there will be a greater sense of understanding and peace.

It makes me sad to think what the world might become if people become paralyzed by fear and are unwilling to travel.

Jennifer: On the leisure side, Valerie Wilson Travel has a real privilege in handling second- and third-generation clients. We are often asked if we would personally go on certain trips that clients are considering. We are always honest. However, people also have to make their own choices. We are excited to have those conversations and to hear when the client returns home that they were thrilled by the decision to go and that we were able to execute one of their great experiences.

Kimberly: The luxury travel adviser will always play an important role as the uncertainty of the world we live in is the new norm.

Jennifer: It is about how we can arrange for our customers to be greeted at a property and ensure that they are getting exactly what they want through customization, while also having the proper safety precautions in place.

Each of you are focused on continuing to evolve and transform VWT. Do you take time to reflect and appreciate what you have built?

Valerie: I am incredibly proud of what we have become and just as proud and grateful to think that the legacy will continue on because Jennifer and Kimberly joined me some time ago. This company would not be the success it is today if they had not come onboard.

The future is even bigger and brighter. We are a large family that cares deeply about its people, suppliers, and customers. Our people and relationships help to create freedom around the world by traveling and sharing experiences.

Kimberly: Because we live in an incredibly fast-paced world, it is sometimes hard to stop and acknowledge where we have been while thinking about where we want to go.

If everyone recognizes the impact we are making, that is a success in and of itself. However, we are always looking for the next thing, while also watching for the next curve ball.

Jennifer: I always tend to look at what is next. We are not a family that reflects on the past too well. For that reason, we have a monthly internal newsletter to share news and recognize special occasions.

However, we do believe that what we do makes a difference. Over the past 35 years, so much has changed for the better and it is worth celebrating. ●

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