

Hospitality

Connected to Community



An Interview with
Jonathan Plutzik, Owner, The Betsy-South Beach

The Betsy-South Beach lobby bar (left); exterior at dusk (above)

EDITORS' NOTE As co-owners of *The Betsy-South Beach*, Jonathan Plutzik and his wife Lesley Goldwasser have established a climate of luxury lodging within a creative paradise. With their vision, *The Betsy* champions the power of community through its PACE (Philanthropy, Arts, Culture, Education) program. From its *Writer's Room* to cultural workshops and festivals including *TransArt*, *Escribe Aqui*, *A Cappella*, and *Yiddish Speakers* series, among countless others, *The Betsy* has been a resource for the community since opening in 2009. Prior to acquiring *The Betsy*, Plutzik was with *Credit Suisse* for 24 years, retiring as Vice Chairman in 2002.



Jonathan Plutzik

PROPERTY BRIEF *The Betsy-South Beach* (thebetsyhotel.com) is a distinguished landmark providing a personalized boutique experience in the heart of South Beach. *The Betsy's* relaxed tropical interiors and 130 rooms create an aura that is passionately low-key. Exquisite amenities, ocean views, world-class cuisine, and a presence for art and culture coalesce for an unparalleled experience. Resting regally on Ocean Drive, *The Betsy* is within walking distance to shopping and nightlife, yet offers a serene experience in one of the world's great beach destinations. *The Betsy's* latest expansion merged the existing Ocean Drive hotel with the (former) historic Carlton Hotel, and debuted an Art Deco wing with new rooms and suites, a rooftop pool complex, a restaurant, and event space to scale the PACE program.

How did everything evolve for you within the hospitality industry and how did *The Betsy* come about?

In 2002, I felt there was an opportunity to move on from *Credit Suisse* and explore other interests. A friend invited us to Miami Beach and, while there, we saw the *Betsy Ross*, a historic property – unique in architecture and Colonial in style. I've always been struck by how many of the great hotels of the world are Colonial in architecture, and I saw an opportunity to celebrate that. We purchased the hotel for restoration and re-named it *The Betsy-South Beach*.

The Betsy has an open and welcoming arrival space with big windows facing the ocean and the park. We wanted to create something different from a design and operational viewpoint.

Generally, South Beach is viewed as a sparkly place with incredible sun and sand, but that only describes half of what makes it special. It has become a culturally rich place with many diverse and interesting people.

We set out to create a five-star hotel that supported its local community, and by weaving PACE into the guest experience, we believe we've done just that. We look forward to more opportunities with the expansion.

Since 2009, we have had more than 450 writers in residence, ranging from Poet Laureates to those who haven't yet published their first book. We invite them to stay and celebrate their work and, in turn, ask for their participation in one community-facing event, as we want their presence in South Beach to be felt by a larger audience. We're fortunate to collaborate with local universities, colleges, and even Miami public schools – Miami is an educationally enriched town with hundreds of thousands of students contributing to the character of our diverse community. We're proud to be a platform for their interests.

How hard is it to convey the philanthropic piece as a part of what you do?

In addition to providing a luxury experience, our halls are filled with art; there is live music in the lobby; and we play host to a series of programs with national reach – which all touch on our PACE pillars.

South Beach has evolved into one of America's great cultural centers, due in part to the work of new residents and, even more critically, because of the contributions local arts patrons have made to build and support important new cultural institutions. We're now one of the most important destinations in the world and on the map with major art circuits like New York and Los Angeles. It's a place where creatives are regularly circling through or come to spend a meaningful portion of their time.

We have to deliver a luxury product, but we also have to deliver a stimulating experience. This can be something thoughtful, cultivated, and planned, but even at our *Betsy*, part of it is to surprise people with a sense of cultural discovery that enhances their stay.

In bringing in new associates, are you looking for hospitality skills or personality?

It's tremendously important to attract and retain the right team. Our associates at all levels

make important contributions to the guest experience. We ultimately realized that given our vision, we needed to manage the hotel ourselves. We were fortunate to find the right person with deep hospitality roots to lead our team on property.

Similarly, to successfully focus on PACE, I felt we should keep it in the family and convinced my sister, Deborah Briggs, who has a Ph.D. in Arts and Education, to manage the program as our VP of Philanthropy. All of our PACE-related work is about partnership with people in the community who are already doing important things; whether they are with a large institution or a small start-up, we are always exploring ways to make our joint efforts more impactful.

Was the need to give back instilled in you early on?

I attribute much of it to family. Having money was never the goal. What was important was what we did with it and what we did with our lives.

I've had the opportunity to interact with people who have inspired me to do more. My wife, Lesley Goldwasser, is deeply supportive of our efforts. She was born and raised in Africa, and we were married there in 1986. Over the past three decades, we've learned a great deal about our good fortune through family experiences there, which has inspired us to explore more active ways to give back to community.

Having spent the past 40 years in New York City, I've also been able to devote energy to the UJA Federation of New York in leadership positions. I've been inspired by the organization, which has been a force for philanthropy in the local Jewish community.

While many interests stem from moments of inspiration during my time in New York City and Miami, the commitment to community is entirely consistent with the mind-set instilled in me while growing up.

Do you enjoy the process and take moments to reflect on what you've done or are you always looking ahead?

Both. It's important we offer more than a luxury product. We consistently recommit to the challenge of engaging with community and allowing guests to participate as part of their hospitality experience. Equally important is keeping our doors open through complimentary PACE events for those who cannot otherwise afford to stay with us. We believe deeply in our responsibility to find ways to connect with all elements of our community. ●