

Reshaping the Future of Travel

An Interview with Valerie Ann Wilson, Founder, CEO, Chairman, & Owner; Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg and Kimberly Wilson Wetty, Co-Presidents & Owners; and Brian J. Buttigieg, Chief Financial Officer & Owner, Valerie Wilson Travel

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, she became a published author with Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts. Ten years later, she authored the second edition and on February 2, 2012, Valerie Wilson's World: The Top Hotels & Resorts, Second Edition and the VWT 30th anniversary campaign were both 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. Her consistent success with both sales and business development has kept Valerie Wilson Travel in the spotlight as she provides oversight and leadership to the company's corporate travel, meetings, incentives, and fulfillment divisions, its business development and its strategic initiatives. She is actively involved with the American Society of Travel Advisors (ASTA) as Co-Chair of the Government & Political Affairs Committee and was former Chair of the ASTA Corporate Advisory Council. Her efforts have earned her a number of honors, including the 2018 Paul Ruden Industry Ambassador Award, Luxury Travel Advisor Award of Excellence, the Top Humanitarian Award, and the ISTA /ASTA Barbara O'Hara Advocacy Award. She graduated from Haverford College with a BA in history and a minor in political science and received her Executive MBA from the Owner/President Management (OPM) Program at Harvard Business School. She 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 and launching the company's first



Left to right: Kimberly Wilson Wetty; Valerie Ann Wilson; Brian J. Buttigieg; Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg

website. Today, she is responsible for managing the leisure division, VWT's membership in Virtuoso®, as well as human resources. She is also responsible for all the brand and marketing strategy for VWT. Renowned for her extensive travel expertise, she has been awarded many honors in the industry, including Family Travel Specialist on the Travel+Leisure A-List and is a member of Travel+Leisure's Travel Advisory Board. In 2015, she won the Most Innovative Advisor award from Virtuoso®. She is also a member of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO). A graduate of Bucknell University with a BA in sociology, she is the President of their Alumni Board of Directors. She began her career as a Store Manager for Ann Taylor in New York City and left retail to join the travel industry as Marketing Coordinator for the Americas at CIGA Hotels.

Brian J. Buttigieg is responsible for Valerie Wilson Travel's financial matters and provides leadership guidance for the company's technology and administrative operations. Having

started his career as a lawyer, he built an impressive resume prior to joining VWT in 2007, serving as a senior executive with broad functional experience in operations, finance/M&A, legal and business strategy. Having begun his career as an associate in the corporate department at the New York office of Chadbourne & Parke LLP (now Norton Rose Fulbright), he later served as in-house counsel to a major consumer products company and as general counsel to, and an operations officer at, a number of e-commerce businesses. He serves on the Board of Directors of Healthcare Chaplaincy Network and on the consistory of the Reformed Church in Bronxville. He received his BA in economics from Haverford College in Pennsylvania and a law degree magna cum laude from Brooklyn Law School. He is married to Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg, Co-President & Owner of Valerie Wilson Travel.

COMPANY BRIEF With high regard for attention to detail and customer service, Valerie Wilson Travel (ValerieWilsonTravel.com) is one of today's largest women-owned and family-managed travel consulting firms in the United States. Headquartered in New York City, VWT has a diverse client base and offices nationwide, stretching across the Eastern seaboard, the Midwest, and the West Coast. VWT's team consists of a highly specialized and knowledgeable network of 315+ Travel Advisors and Associates. Valerie Wilson Travel handles the travel management needs of companies and organizations in industries as diverse as fashion, publishing, finance, new media, pharmaceuticals and not-for-profits. All Valerie Wilson Travel locations are proud members of Virtuoso®. VWT's Power of Access® guarantees clients VIP treatment, exceptional service, as well as exclusive rates and amenities with preferred partners. Every year since 1998, the company has been counted among Travel Weekly's Top 50 Travel Agencies.

The world is fighting a public health crisis that is impacting all countries and their citizens. The pandemic is being fought on the front lines by healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies and meals, transportation workers, and all other essential workers. What do you say to these true leaders and heroes that are risking their lives to protect others?

Most importantly, we want to say thank you. It is humbling to see our front line workers work so selflessly and with such dedication to protect others. We are so grateful for the essential workers who continue to provide services throughout this pandemic. As such, VWT raised money for the Meals4Heroes charity which supported New York City restaurants who prepared meals to be delivered to hospital staff, nurses, and doctors. This provided, in our small way, an opportunity to say, "Thank You."

VWT is a purpose-driven firm with a long history of supporting its employees, clients and communities. How has VWT adapted its business and the way it works during this unprecedented time to continue to effectively support its employees, clients, and communities?

Valerie Wilson Travel's role remains critically important during this pandemic. Our priority is to our Associates, Advisors and Employees and their health and safety. We changed our operations to a seamless virtual work environment as of March 13th. Since then, we gradually reopened some locations, when appropriate, with new health and safety protocols in place.

Second, we needed to take care of our clients. Instead of future planning, once borders started closing, VWT worked tirelessly to get people home. We then switched to securing refunds for the millions of dollars' worth of travel that had to be postponed or cancelled. As we look to the future, we are investing energy into our VWT communities with outreach programs to just "check-in" and deliver daily inspirational marketing to bring a smile or share a "virtual hug."

Third, VWT plays an active role in supporting ASTA (American Society of Travel Advisors), our trade association, and its PAC with leadership roles to influence productive change in D.C. on behalf of all of the travel and hospitality industry.

We do not know when travel will rebound and what that rebound will look like, however VWT remains certain luxury travel will lead the way and we will be ready to service our clients and enable our Associates, Advisors and Employees to thrive.

VWT was built with an entrepreneurial spirit and an ability to be nimble and adapt. How is the company addressing its business during this time in order to succeed in this challenging environment?

VWT prides itself on being a family, not only internally with our Associates, Advisors and Employees, but also with our clients, preferred travel partners and overall industry. 2020 has truly tested the entire global travel ecosystem and our business in so many ways.

When the pandemic began in Asia, we saw 7 percent of our business start to halt, followed quickly by the Italy shutdown and quarantine. We had to pivot. Knowing that we needed to be prepared to run the business with continued fiscal responsibility, we made those heart-wrenching decisions and implemented RIF's, pay cuts and furloughs. Quickly and efficiently, we launched the "VWT Promise" with

a focus on Communication, Connection and Community. To better plan, we contacted our landlords, looked at receivables and ran financial modeling scenarios through Q2 2021. We rewrote our strategic plan and moved from a two-year plan to a 90-day plan, something we just revisited again. Never wanting to waste an opportunity, we continue to use this time to improve our technology, relook at back office procedures, launch a new website, facilitate five new strategic partnerships and create new virtual client events with our hotel, air and cruise partners.

VWT's core values and guiding light for almost 40 years remains stronger than ever: service excellence, integrity, collaboration and innovation. Over these last several months, these guiding principles have been more meaningful than ever and we are so proud of what we have achieved.

How have VWT's employees changed the way they work in order to be effective with the changes that have been necessary for all businesses to make and how proud are you to see the resilience of your team?

VWT is so proud of its Advisors, Associates and Employees and how they have adapted to a fully remote landscape. Like many businesses, we learned that while we missed being in the office together, seeing each other, clients and suppliers, working remotely was 100 percent possible. Our team embraced the new setup and even started communicating more and with greater honesty, empathy, creativity, collaboration and supportiveness.

To build on our desire to increase the connection of our team, VWT started hosting weekly Town Hall Zoom calls to update the VWT team on what was going on and trends, as well as to allow for open dialogue. The individual outreach, as well as our marketing initiatives, that we have seen from our Associates and Advisors to clients through e-mails, phone calls, surveys, marketing and client events is something we are so proud of during this time. Suppliers communication has been consistent, helping both VWT and our partners through this challenging time.

One of the biggest challenges for our Advisors, Associates and Employees is staying abreast of all the changes (what countries/states are open, do you need to be tested or quarantine, what are new cancellation terms and conditions, etc.) so we created tools to streamline this information, as well as technology to track future credits. VWT remains our client's travel advocate and making sure our advisors are as informed as possible is one way we demonstrate our value every day.

There is a great deal of discussion about businesses reopening in a "new normal." What is your outlook for what this new normal may look like and how is VWT preparing for the next stage in this crisis?

As we think about the "new normal" of the world, but also the "new normal" of travel, we all need to reflect and reevaluate what is important and considered essential. Travel

Advisors are essential, especially in the "new normal" of travel. Travel is not impossible - it will just be different.

Each segment of travel from corporate, to leisure, to meeting and incentive must be looked at individually as the concerns and expectations for return are different. We are helping to reshape the future of travel as suppliers lean on our expertise to guide them in their new terms and conditions, guest experiences, itineraries/routes, etc. We believe we will see more "touchless" experiences, greater flexibility with terms and conditions, and more unique and personalized experiences.

VWT is headquartered in New York City. What are the keys to New York City's recovery and how critical is it for there to be a strong public/private partnership to ensure a safe and effective reopening of New York City?

VWT is so proud to be headquartered in New York City, one of the greatest cities in the world, since 1981. New York City is strong and resilient. We have seen that time and again and this pandemic will be no different. We rely on State leadership to provide guidelines for safety and health as our employees return to our New York City office and commute in and out of Manhattan. As more people return to work and tourists come back to visit, the energy and vibrance will return to this magical city.

What do you see as the role that business can play as a force for good in society by bringing its talent, expertise and resources to help address global crises?

Businesses absolutely play a role as a force for good in society. Travel and tourism are so incredibly critical globally. While there was a growing concern about over-tourism, ironically we are now in the reverse position so understanding the role travel, and the travel advisor, plays in the world's global footprint and sustainability is critical. Tourism is the number one employer globally and we must get back to traveling for both work and pleasure. Millions of people depend on it for their livelihoods. Using the skills of a knowledgeable and well-resourced Travel Advisor is an informed and smart way to begin.

During this difficult and uncertain time, what are you telling your people and what would you say to young people across the country who are deeply concerned and uncertain about the future?

One thing in life that you can guarantee is that change is constant. Every generation brings about major changes, sometimes more than one, so embrace it and learn from it. Most times it makes us better and stronger. Maintaining positivity when everything seems so uncertain is not easy, but it is essential. Recognize what you can control and what you can't. When you let go of the worry about things you can't control, it frees you to focus on what you can control – your choices, your attitude, your drive, your family, your faith, your passion and your commitment to something better. Be that change you want to see. ●