

## Rebuilding 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



Jennifer Wilson-Buttigieg, Valerie Ann Wilson, Kimberly Wilson Wetty, Brian J. Buttigieg

**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 she 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 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 hospitality industry has been severely impacted by the global pandemic. What is your outlook for the industry and what are the keys for the industry to rebuild from this crisis?**

*Jennifer:* The pandemic continues to have a significant impact on global tourism and the entire travel ecosystem. We were one of the first industries to be impacted by the effects of the pandemic. In January and February 2020, travel started to slow before an abrupt stop in March. We pivoted from booking extensive travel to getting people home, canceling reservations, postponing trips, securing refunds and being our clients' travel advocate. By summer, specific segments, such as vacation travel, slowly began to restart, but nowhere near the levels it was in 2019. Travel spend is pacing at 1990 levels – 20 years of growth vanished.

*Kimberly:* In terms of rebuilding, Travel Advisors are essential and are the trusted voice of the travel industry. They are advocates for our clients, as well as advocates for the industry. They can sift through travel regulations, industry jargon, and cancellation policies, examining current offerings from preferred partners to identify the best options for each situation and convey those advantageous options to each client. We also believe working closely with our supplier partners is vital. The only way to go forward is together as an industry. At Valerie Wilson Travel, we work with our trusted global connections to bring our clients our Power of Access – reliable and exclusive experiences every time. We believe the work Travel Advisors are doing will rebuild consumer confidence.

**Will you discuss how VWT has adapted its business to address the challenges caused by the pandemic and how proud are you to see the way the VWT team has shown strength and resilience during this challenging and uncertain time?**

*Brian:* Over the last year, this pandemic has taught us resilience, adaptability and flexibility. We are proof that extraordinary people rise in extraordinary circumstances. From our entire team, including those at our New York City headquarters, going remote in under 24 hours to fearlessly guiding our clients through cancellations and rebooking despite lost revenue, we are proud of how our VWT Family responded to this crisis.

*Jennifer:* Additionally, over 70 percent of our corporate and leisure business was international in scope before this pandemic. With most

international flights grounded, ships docked, and changing international travel regulations, we focused immediately towards “staycations” and domestic travel. We created different initiatives to maintain connection with our clients and preferred partners. Our Travel Temptations client series came to fruition in 2020, which features some of our favorite U.S. properties in a fun, easily consumable format. We launched a new website to provide both accurate and up to date information as well as inspiration for “dream travel.” Additionally, our first edition of VWT Suite Access digital magazine was released, a resource for destinations. Our Travel Unites campaign's goal was to offer reassurance to our clients, suppliers and Employees/Associates and express our gratitude and optimism for the future.

Committed to rebuilding travel confidence, we partnered with multiple companies to combat fears, such as GeoSure, to provide updates on travel restrictions, and Omnia for COVID testing.

**VWT has a long history of being committed to its customers, employees, and communities. Will you highlight VWT's commitment to supporting these three stakeholders?**

*Jennifer:* Whenever we make decisions at Valerie Wilson Travel, we always take all our stakeholders into account. Throughout 2020, one of our top priorities was our Associates, Advisors and Employees and their health and safety. We went to a virtual work environment on March 13, 2020 and have not yet returned to our New York City headquarters office. We created a weekly Town Hall Zoom to ensure lines of open and honest communication. At the end of the year, we co-hosted events with American Airlines to boost morale from a Halloween virtual costume parade to a virtual mixology contest and our “peach linings,” where we asked the VWT team to share one photo of a moment that brought them joy in 2020. The 2020 year in review video we created was so emotionally moving. It was amazing to see all the good that happened in a tough year – births, weddings, engagements, puppies, and the magical beauty of nature from sunrises to sunsets to beaches, rivers and mountains.

Of course, our customers are always forefront of our minds as well. At first, we needed to make sure all our clients abroad returned home safely. Next, we began working on rebooking canceled trips, and now we are working to inspire and communicate the ins and outs of this new era of travel with our clients. We hosted a Power of Access client series featuring conversations with travel influencers, from a Delta pilot to the Editor-in-Chief of *Travel+Leisure* magazine to the first female captain of a cruise ship.

*Kimberly:* We also expanded our marketing efforts to help our Advisors communicate our favorite U.S. destinations to clients, give updated information and practical tips, as well as offering “armchair” travel inspiration. We have partnerships with COVID testing firms so that our clients can get tested quickly and easily, which is critical with the new travel guidelines. We also extensively advocate for clients and the travel industry at a government level and in the press.

Giving back to others always has been a core principle at VWT. While 2020 made the financial contributions to our VWT Giving Tree more challenging, we were proud to support a new charity, Meals4Hereos, that partnered with local restaurants to supply meals to frontline workers during COVID.

**How do you define the VWT culture and how critical is culture to the success of the business?**

*Valerie:* First and foremost, we define ourselves as a family. We take immense pride that we are a family-owned business founded on core values of integrity, trust and respect. Our entire VWT community from our Employees and Associates to our clients and suppliers are our family. We are so grateful to have had each person by our side for all of 2020. Last year was, to say the least, a year of unknowns and unexpected events, yet through it all, VWT remained steady and committed to inclusion, gratitude, and hope. We could not have done that without each one of our team members. Looking on to 2021, having our VWT family by our side is critical so we can lean on and support each other. From going remote in under 24 hours to creating new ways for our Advisors and Associates to stay in touch with clients, we are so proud of how we have reacted to the crises we have seen. As we move into a new era of travel, we are confident our team will be at the forefront.

**Will you highlight VWT's commitment to building a diverse and inclusive workforce and how important it is to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table when making business decisions?**

*Kimberly:* Bringing diverse perspectives to the table when making decisions is so important. As a minority-owned business, VWT is certified by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council, which validates that we are majority-owned, controlled, operated, and managed by women. Additionally, we are always looking for the leaders of tomorrow. VWT's Associate Access program empowers and enables entrepreneurs to build a successful travel business. The 12-month program helps new travel professionals receive personalized training, develop marketing skills, and attain travel industry certification through the Virtuoso Certified Travel Advisor and ASTA's Verified Travel Advisor programs. When you graduate from this program, you enter the industry with VWT Advisors & Associates' network by your side. Additionally, over the summer, we distributed a statement about VWT's intolerance for social injustice and our commitment to equality and inclusion for all. We reaffirmed that message after the attack on our Nation's Capitol in January 2021.

**What advice do you offer young people hoping to build a career in the hospitality industry during this unprecedented time?**

*Valerie:* We have seen travel react in the most positive and collaborative ways during this crisis and the industry is incredibly resilient. Remain positive. There will be so much room for growth and opportunity when travel flourishes again. If you have a real passion for hospitality, tourism, and travel, there is definitely a place in the industry for you. ●