

# Adapt and Evolve

An Interview with Bess Freedman, Chief Executive Officer, Brown Harris Stevens (BHS)

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Bess Freedman is the first CEO of luxury real estate firm Brown Harris Stevens. Freedman, previously the firm's Co-President, joined Brown Harris Stevens when its President, Hall Willkie, appointed her in 2013 to foster business development for the agents and the firm. Prior to joining BHS, Freedman served as Senior Managing Director at Corcoran where, as an agent, she attained great success at their Carnegie Hill office. She earned her undergraduate degree from Ithaca College and her law degree from the University of the District of Columbia, David A. Clarke School of Law, in Washington, D.C. Before entering real estate, she practiced law as an Assistant State's Attorney in Montgomery County, Maryland, and also worked at Legal Aid as an attorney. Freedman is a member of the Florida, Washington, D.C. and Maryland Bar, and worked in New York pro hac vice.*



Bess Freedman

**Will you highlight Brown Harris Stevens' history and heritage and what have been the keys to the firm's growth and success?**

Brown Harris Stevens has been a leader in the real estate industry since 1873 because of our ability to adapt, evolve and look to the future. We are the largest privately held real estate brokerage on the East Coast with 2,500 accomplished agents in New York City, the Hamptons, Hudson Valley, Connecticut, New Jersey, Miami and Palm Beach.

This year we launched some incredible services including Curate, our amazing pre-market home renovation program; Bridge Loans, which help our clients finance their future home while in the process of selling their current home; BHS Now, our new and improved content-driven blog developed by our homegrown newsroom; and The Lead, a comprehensive monthly company-wide webcast featuring interviews with politicians, entrepreneurs, and publishers.

**How do you define the Brown Harris Stevens difference and what sets the firm apart in the industry?**

We are a legacy firm with a history that no one can match, but it's our level of service and integrity that sets us apart. While we have set many price records over the years, much of our business comes from sales of \$1 million and under. For us, luxury is much more than just price; it's about our phenomenal service that you will not find anywhere else. Even with all of the advances in technology and marketing, the

most important thing is how you treat someone. This will never change.

**How did Brown Harris Stevens adapt its business to address the challenges caused by the pandemic and how proud are you to see the way your team showed resilience during this unprecedented time?**

The real estate market slowed to a trickle at the height of the pandemic. Agents were not allowed to physically show properties in New York City, and there were numerous restrictions in many of our other markets as well. Moreover, we were all forced to work remotely for several months. My team was absolutely incredible – we adapted so quickly that it was easy to miss that a seismic shift was taking place. Our marketing team developed a virtual showing tool kit for our agents and their clients so they could actually partner to get properties shown to prospective buyers. We held numerous Zoom conferences and webcasts to keep our agents motivated which eventually inspired our monthly show called The Lead which is now in place. These virtual forums, while not intended to replace the human element, keep the company informed and offer a sense of togetherness even when we are all working from different places. Not to mention, while many businesses closed or reduced their footprint during the pandemic, Brown Harris Stevens more than doubled our agent count. So far in 2021, we have already far surpassed the business that we did in 2020 because many markets like Palm Beach, the Hamptons, and Fairfield County actually saw a tremendous boom due to COVID last year. We're already on track to blow past our own records.

**“So far in 2021, we have already far surpassed the business that we did in 2020 because many markets like Palm Beach, the Hamptons, and Fairfield County actually saw a tremendous boom due to COVID last year. We're already on track to blow past our own records.”**

**“We are a legacy firm with a history that no one can match, but it’s our level of service and integrity that sets us apart.”**

---

**What is the state of the New York real estate market coming out of the pandemic?**

We are in a remarkably good place considering everything the city went through the past 18 months. Our Q2 Manhattan market report showed that apartment closings surged in the second quarter, with activity returning to – and in some cases surpassing – pre-COVID-19 levels. The explosion of luxury closings brought the average resale price up 21 percent from just the prior quarter to its second-highest level ever. Plus, a record number of contracts were signed during this time, so the strong market is expected to continue. As long as people stay vigilant and get vaccinated against COVID-19, I believe we will thrive.

**How critical is it for Brown Harris Stevens to build a diverse and inclusive workforce and will you discuss the firm’s efforts in this regard?**

It is incredibly important to build a company that includes diverse people, perspectives, experiences and strengths. As real estate professionals, it is part of our ethical duty to offer equal opportunity and access to our services and that doesn’t start and stop with our clients. This past election day in November, I gave employees the day off so that they could get to the polls and cast their votes without feeling like they had to choose between coming to work and exercising their rights. BHS proudly joined the Human Rights Campaign’s Business Coalition for the Equality Act, a group of 300+ leading U.S. employers supporting bipartisan legislation to provide

the same basic protections to LGBTQ+ people as are provided to other protected groups under federal law. Before New York declared Juneteenth a statewide holiday, I offered the day off to employees as a way to honor and reflect upon the many enslaved people who were not freed until long after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed into law in this country. I believe very much in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Without diversity of thought and experiences, creativity and growth are stifled. I never want to stop growing and learning and I lead my company with this in mind. Always strive to be better than you were the day before.

**What do you see as Brown Harris Stevens’ responsibility to the communities it serves and to being a force for good in society?**

Brown Harris Stevens established the Helping Hands program, a philanthropic foundation designed to give back and better the daily lives of those in need through action-based support for local not-for-profits in each market. The foundation has collected more than 25,000 coats for those in need, raised tens of thousands of dollars for men’s health, and participated in Operation Backpack, school revitalization programs, and blood drives. Our agents and staff are very supportive of these initiatives and it’s a way for us as a company to give back to the communities which have given so much to us. I believe companies and people who hold positions of influence ought to use those positions to give back and help whenever possible.

**What are the keys to New York’s recovery and rebuilding from the pandemic?**

I am very optimistic about the next Mayoral administration in New York City. We are in need of a change, and I believe the next Mayor should be actively working with police to stamp out crime while enforcing accountability. We need sound tax policy rooted in economics and not politics; demonizing the wealthy and chasing them to lower tax states like Florida is not a good strategy for our long-term growth. Vaccinations need to continue so we can protect against COVID-19, especially for the sake of the most vulnerable and our children.

**What advice do you offer young people interested in a career in real estate?**

First of all, don’t believe everything you see on TV. While real estate reality shows are entertaining, they are not realistic. You probably won’t start out making millions of dollars a year selling glamorous penthouses. Real estate is as tough as it is rewarding. I encourage anyone new to think about joining a team with an experienced agent at the helm; they will be a mentor and offer practical advice while you earn part of the commission. Also, lean into your management support. They are there to help you take your business to the next level. Take advantage of all the training and classes offered by your brokerage or realtor association. Most importantly, don’t give up. Some days are really tough, but the beauty of real estate is that your luck can change with just one deal. ●

---

**“It is incredibly important to build a company that includes diverse people, perspectives, experiences and strengths. As real estate professionals, it is part of our ethical duty to offer equal opportunity and access to our services and that doesn’t start and stop with our clients.”**