

Dream Maker Culture

An Interview with Deborah Yager Fleming, Chief Executive Officer & Partner, Acqualina Resort & Residences on the Beach



Acqualina Resort & Residences is the only resort and residential community in Florida completely open to the sea

EDITORS' NOTE Deborah Yager Fleming joined Acqualina Resort & Residences on the Beach in March 2004 after having served as Vice President, Sales & Marketing, at Island Outpost where she managed marketing campaigns for 12 boutique hotels. She also garnered valuable experience in New York at Leading Hotels of the World where she held senior management positions and implemented the design of worldwide sales strategies and innovative marketing programs.



Deborah Yager Fleming

PROPERTY BRIEF With a lushly landscaped 4.5-acres of seaside bliss, world-class restaurants, curated amenities and spacious rooms and suites, all with balconies and water views, Acqualina Resort & Residences on the Beach (acqualinaresort.com) is at the center of Miami's Sunny Isles Beach providing an exclusive experience and an ultra-luxurious beach lifestyle. The property is the recipient of the coveted Forbes Five Star Award and the AAA Five Diamond Award. Acqualina was recognized by the Global Biorisk Advisory Council, a division of ISSA – The Worldwide Cleaning Industry Association – as a confirmed GBAC Star accredited facility acknowledging Acqualina's increasing best practices and protocols for sanitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Acqualina is Sharecare Health Security VERIFIED™ with Forbes Travel Guide.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

It is essential to recognize the team you lead and inspire, and create engagement through



Costa Grill is one of Miami's most sought-after dining destinations

gratitude and appreciation. I like to celebrate the small wins, not just the big ones. Creating a culture of recognition encourages everyone on the team to perform and be their best self. While I feel what gets measured gets done, celebrating the work and efforts are integral to effective leadership. Leadership is about technical skills. However, being vulnerable is important to have the connections needed to succeed.

It is also important to surround yourself with people that genuinely believe in the company's values and

mission and care about what they do and how they do it. This gives them purpose. In return, it provides great value to the organization. When individuals feel a sense of belonging, it allows the company to create a strong community of unlimited potential.

While leaders set strategy, it is paramount to have empathy and be accessible to the team you lead. Leadership is also about encouragement, trust, and empowerment, leading to innovation and accomplishments. A highly motivated team will result in many rewards.

I am a firm believer in diversity and equality across the organization. Having different strengths and points of view will help further differentiate your brand. Respecting each other's talents and contributions will create harmony and even greater success. Additionally, I strongly believe in looking inside the organization for those that can become future leaders and giving them the platform to achieve their aspirations. As I look to grow the Acqualina brand, I also bring in new talent that can provide a fresh approach to reaching objectives.

What has made Acqualina Resort an industry leader and how do you describe the Acqualina experience?

Our Dream Maker Culture. The success of Acqualina is due to our happy, dedicated team members who deliver exceptional experiences while constantly striving to do better. This is our mission. Our successful business model is the creation of world-class amenities and service by passionate and engaged service professionals.

Acqualina offers a great living experience and delivers the world's finest residences based on trust and value. Acqualina is an ultra-luxury lifestyle, and our iconic buildings are recognized for elegance and five-star service. We are the only hotel and residential community completely

open to the sea in Florida. We have expansive amenities offered for all ages. Our Dream Maker Culture empowers team members to recognize hotel guests' preferences and create memorable moments that we call "WOW" Stories.

Acqualina Resort is committed to continuous improvement and raising the bar. Will you provide an overview of the property today and what guests can expect to see at Acqualina in the future?

Acqualina is located on 4.5 beachfront acres in pristine Sunny Isles Beach. We are known for our great outdoors and lush grounds that feature red lounge seating on Seashore Paspalum grass with signature red umbrellas. The resort has 98 guest rooms and suites and 188 residences, with breathtaking views of the Atlantic Ocean. We offer world-class dining, including Il Mulino New York and Ke-uH Japanese restaurant. Our alfresco Costa Grill offers front-row seats to the ocean with a delectable menu of Floridian cuisine and Mediterranean influences. We have oceanfront swimming pools, spacious meeting rooms, and an innovative marine biology-based children's program. Our interior and exterior venues provide an ideal background for intimate weddings and memorable events. Our award-winning Spa provides guests with an exquisite 20,000-square-foot, two-story tranquil sanctuary of relaxation and an extensive treatment menu with new facial treatments designed to target recovery and results.

We just launched a new adult pool experience. This tranquility area for adults only has been outfitted with modern chaise lounges, love seats, and eight custom day beds, all featuring Acqualina's Signature Red cushions. Our Pool Butler is available to attend to any need and provide exclusive complimentary hourly amenities. The four poolside cabanas are styled with two chaise lounges, a sectional sofa and tables, an umbrella, a refrigerator, an outdoor portable fan, a TV with mainstream channels, and curtains for privacy.

We asked STA Architectural Group to provide a new design concept inspired by the classic European style for all the bathrooms in our rooms and suites. Our goal was to design a modern bathroom with traditional elements making the experience timeless. We selected white Vena Oro marble for the vanity top and bathtub decks providing a light and fresh look that brightens the entire bathroom space. The polished edge profile and backsplash

complement the under-mount double Kohler sinks and Purist faucets. There is a custom modern wall-to-wall edge-lit Silver Mirror above each vanity. The scones on each side of the mirror are from Italy. In addition, our ocean-front suites feature a wall-to-wall Molteni vanity in an Ivory gloss lacquer finish and decorative stainless steel trim. Guests will be able to experience our new bathrooms this summer.

Our newly transformed gallery lobby, also designed by STA Architectural Group, will be unveiled in August. We have been working on the final touches to offer refreshed luxury and contemporary grandeur using the rarest, most refined materials sourced throughout the world. The fresh color palette influenced by the emerald green waters of the Atlantic Ocean brings to life the architectural features that were enhanced and highlighted with varying shades of whites. Additional striking details feature Luxury Living furniture, bespoke rugs, highlights of smoke glass and warm metallic accents, and a marble archway sourced in Italy. The lobby's eight arched windows have translucent linen drapes accented with a contrasting modern tieback. The grand chandeliers were refinished in white with silver leaf accents.

At Acqualina, we always aim to elevate our customer experience by introducing new services for guests to have an exceptional beachfront getaway.

Later this year, we are delighted to welcome a new restaurant Avra Miami Estiatorio located at The Estates at Acqualina. Guests and Acqualina residents will be able to access Avra Miami through a bridge that connects the two properties. The magnificent shoreline setting influenced the 10,000 square-foot Greek estiatorio restaurant design. The airy space has a distinctly sophisticated yet warm character and features floor-to-ceiling windows, high ceilings, and a glamorous aesthetic. Diners will be able to hear the sounds of the waves crashing while they eat outside and savor ocean-front views. The first impression of entering the classic tri-arched portico is of a grand scale. On the other side of the revolving door is the host station, where guests will receive a warm welcome and be directed to the lobby bar, pergola lounge,

or the main dining hall or terrace. The lobby bar has a four-sided island bar with a large terracotta potted olive tree suspended over the center of the bar's fine spirits display.

How do you define a true luxury hotel experience and what are the keys to exceeding guests' expectations?

The luxury hotel experience is giving people access to a lifestyle choice that makes them feel extraordinary. It is an emotional connection to the aesthetics and the service encountered that brings utmost happiness and joy. It begins with knowing the guests' preferences and delights that can make a difference. Then, using active listening in a conversation to gain insight helps to be well informed on what action may be taken to make the guest feel extra special. The secret to going above and beyond is when you can provide a gesture that is unexpected and creates a "WOW" moment.

Will you discuss Acqualina's investment in its workforce and focus on providing training and growth opportunities for its people?

We are committed to investing in our team members to develop a happy and prosperous future. One-third of the workforce has been at Acqualina for more than 5 years. The resort's Together App serves Acqualina's almost 500 team members, providing a centralized form of communication that encourages peer-to-peer recognition with features allowing employees to share images and messages. Additionally, the App offers another vehicle for Acqualina to recognize talents, traits, and exceptional service. We organize a series of employee acknowledgments and appreciation events and provide EQ training, educational tips, and wellness fairs. We also award AcquaDollars that are redeemable for cash and prizes. We recognize team members in every department; not everyone comes in contact with a guest, but it takes all of us to deliver exceptional service daily. We have Wellness Checks, and Open Forums to check in on employees, listen, learn, and find ways to improve and take action – a voice for all team members where they can be heard and supported.

Acqualina offers many career development opportunities, including a mentorship program and ACQ Master Series to raise professional skills via intimate workshops. We want our team members to feel prepared and inspired to be Dream Makers. Acqualina's Dream Maker Culture© is Inspired Team Members (symbolized by



Acqualina provides a luxurious, five-star stay with exquisite rooms and suites

a HEART), Striving To Do Better (illustrated by a LIGHT BULB) and Delivering Customer's Dreams (represented by a STAR).

What are the characteristics that you look for when hiring talent for the property and how important is cultural fit in the hiring process?

We look for people who are willing to learn and share ideas and insights. Collaboration and the energy of a person are critical, and the ability to have an open mind and work with others to achieve a collective goal. There are two overarching factors we consider when hiring new talent. First, what are the skills, knowledge, and experiences the person will bring to the team. The second component is assessed through culture fit – considering a candidate's attitude, motivation, and values and whether they are aligned with our culture. This assessment measures the candidate's abstract intelligence or personality characteristics such as dominance, extraversion, patience, and formality. These characteristics help us place individuals in the right positions based on innate personality characteristics.

Did you always know that you were interested in a career in hospitality and what has made the industry so special for you?

I wanted to be a broadcast journalist. I felt that I would enjoy conducting interviews and traveling to places to report the news. I think storytelling and travel have always been in my DNA. When I was in college, I was offered a management trainee opportunity in a hotel. I was intrigued by the offer and decided to pursue it. I loved the way the different departments worked together to welcome guests. After completing a yearly program, I was hooked on the industry, and that is how I began my career in hospitality. Having worked in every hotel department has given me an appreciation for what each person does every day to make a hotel stay possible. I am very passionate about creating new experiences and grateful for the ability to meet and work with people from all over the world. I am humbled and so thankful to work in an industry with the most generous people who are willing to do all possible to make others feel special. ●



The newly designed bathroom in the Classic Suites