

Denihan Hospitality Group's BROOKE DENIHAN BARRETT

A family legacy in hospitality gave the co-CEO, a former housewife, the opportunity to push the successful company to new heights



BY JENA TESSE FOX
@JENAFOX

When Brooke Denihan Barrett was growing up, women were mainly expected to be stay-at-home moms. Following the values of the time, Barrett learned how to sew and type and married young—but after she also divorced young, she needed a job, and sewing and typing wouldn't be enough. Fortunately, family connections and a smart business sense set her on a path to becoming the co-CEO of Denihan Hospitality Group.

A BUSINESS LEGACY

The Denihan family has been in business since the 1920s and opened its first hotel in 1963. “Being that we were a family business and coming from a family of six, there was an expectation that everybody would work in the business—or at least the boys would,” she said. Even in high school, young Brooke Denihan had worked in sales and rentals at the company's properties, so jumping back into the family business was a good solution for her needs. “I really liked people and convincing them that we were the right product to stay in,” she said. “I view that as an opportunity because I probably wouldn't be where I am today had I not gone in early after my divorce.”

Still, her family connections did not merit her any special treatment once she entered the workforce. “When you're in a privately held business, you're expected to work harder than everybody else,” she said. Her father, fam-

ily patriarch Benjamin “Bud” Denihan, would tell his children, “Don't ever ask someone to do something that you wouldn't do.”

Working in New York City's hospitality sector over the decades, including the volatile 1970s and 1980s, taught her a lot about the challenges of doing business in a turbulent market. “When you ebb and flow with a rise in the economy and then something really knocks you off your feet, you learn that not everything is always rosy all the time,” she said. Through those ups and downs, the company built up a portfolio, and then launched the Affinia brand with five hotels in the early 2000s. Mid-decade, the company acquired the James brand of hotels, with its flagship property in Chicago.

In 2006 after 20 years at the helm (Bud Denihan died in 1986), four of Denihan's six owners were ready to “harvest” their investment and sell the business. Barrett and her brother Benjamin “Patrick” Denihan saw an opportunity to take the business to the next level. By the end of the year, they were able to get financing and reach an agreement on the value of the business and its assets, acquiring the management company and its Manhattan properties. “I don't think we could've done that today,” Barrett says of the buy-out, noting the challenges facing the debt markets and fluctuating values of real estate. “We were very fortunate that we could do it in a quick amount of time so that it didn't harm the running of the business or anything else.” Christmas that year was “probably a blur to everybody,” she added, “but we did get it done.”

Not content to rest on laurels, the Denihans are expanding the company's reach and will be opening a James hotel in Washington, D.C., in 2020, and are always considering other options. “I think the James brand and the Affinia brand do well in urban, 24/7 markets,” Barrett said. “A James in L.A. or San Francisco would be a very good complement to the James hotels here in New York for people traveling back and forth.”

WHITE MEN IN DARK SUITS

While she has always had the support of her family, Barrett did face challenges as she defied the “white men in dark suits” stereotype of business professionals. Even deciding what clothes to wear to work could be stressful. “Should I dress like a guy in a suit? Should I not smile?” As she developed her own style of leadership over the years, she learned to take nothing for granted and keep pushing the business forward, finding new opportunities for growth. “One minute, your hotels are at a high and then the next year, you're trying to keep up with all this new supply that has opened up,” she said. Staying afloat, therefore, means constantly adapting. “Don't ever be complacent. Don't look at how you're performing and think that's going to always stay forever. You always have to be looking ahead. How do you improve efficiencies? What's out there on the market?”

As she helped build up the family business, the demands of the job also put pressure on her family life. With more women achieving leadership roles in various industries, Barrett is pleased to see how the work-life balance has become more of a priority for today's business professionals. “Anybody in today's world can leave at 2 in the afternoon and go to a soccer game for their kid, and no one thinks anything bad of them because people have come to realize how important family is,” she said. Not so long ago, however, Barrett had to make sacrifices in her own work-life balance for the sake of the family business. “You did what you had to do in the moment, and as you look back on it, you realize, ‘wow, that was hard.’” Today, Barrett has good relationships with her children and grandchildren, and hopes they appreciate what it took to make the family name into a formidable presence in New York City's hospitality sector. “Sometimes, I look at my grandchildren and think, ‘You have no clue how hard it was to get to where I got.’”

Having watched New York City's hotel scene grow and change for more than half a century, Barrett believes that the heart of real hospitality remains consistent in spite of shifting trends: “It is the guest experience,” she said. And while the purpose of any business is to turn a profit, Barrett believes that hoteliers should regularly ask themselves why they are in the hospitality industry to begin with. “You're really doing this to give an experience to the customer; otherwise, you wouldn't be in business.” **HM**



New York City's The Benjamin was named for Brooke Denihan Barrett's father.

DENIHAN HOSPITALITY GROUP

Headquarters: New York City

Structure: Ownership/management

Portfolio: Seven hotels with 1,740 guestrooms

Website: www.denihan.com

NORA GOMEZ

GENERAL MANAGER,
WESTPORT INN, WESTPORT, CONN.

BY JENA TESSE FOX
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Sometimes, the worst moments can be the ones that change our lives for the better. Not so long ago, Nora Gomez was an unemployed immigrant trying to support her family and improve her life. From there, a random gamble on a new job set her on a career path that brought her to the leadership of the Westport Inn in Westport, Conn., where she has been the general manager since 2014.

GAINING AN EDUCATION

In 2003, Gomez was living in the U.S. after moving from Colombia, studying English and working as a secretary for a construction company when she suddenly lost her job. Seeking any kind of employment, she saw a sign at the Hilton Garden Inn in Norwalk, Conn., operated by New Castle Hotels & Resorts, seeking a front-desk agent. Thanks to her experience in administrative roles, she not only got the job but was quickly promoted to administrative assistant, a position that allowed her to demonstrate how well she could handle increased responsibilities.

“I did all the Hilton trainings and started enjoying this business,” she recalled. After five years in the role, she told her GM that she was ready for the next step in her career. The executive housekeeper at the hotel was leaving, so Gomez stepped in to the role and learned how to lead a department. “I felt the need to manage people and got to see how would it feel to manage a whole department by myself,” she said. As she grew

accustomed to leading a department, she took classes at Norwalk Community College, eventually earning a bachelor’s degree in business administration, securing her green card and becoming a single mom to her two children. “I was able to find the flexibility to be a mom, to go to school and better myself,” she said of the time, noting that not all companies (or industries) are willing to adjust schedules to accommodate both educational and parenting needs.

After seven years, New Castle acquired a Holiday Inn Express in Shelton, Conn., and began converting the property into a Hampton Inn. Needing an assistant general manager, the company leadership tapped Gomez for the role, and she took another step up the ladder. “I was managing housekeeping, front desk, HR, accounting, all the overall operations of the hotel,” she recalled. In the hotel’s first year, it earned a Lighthouse Award, a recognition Hilton bestows on the top 5 percent of Hampton hotels based on high rankings in accommodations, service and quality. The property also reached the top of the city’s TripAdvisor rankings during its first year—a fact that still gives Gomez cause to smile.

SEEKING INDEPENDENCE

From there, New Castle offered Gomez a different kind of opportunity—managing the independent Westport Inn after years of operating under brand standards. “It was very different to come to an independent hotel,” she said. “I had more liberty in terms of what I could do with guests in terms of customer service, more freedom to be better.”

Gomez has been with the hotel for four years, and December will mark her 15-year anniversary with New Castle. She has no plans to leave the hotel or the company any time soon. “New Castle gave me an opportunity to grow,” she said. “They assisted me with my education. They assisted me with my immigration status. They [helped] me to be a working mom. They give me support.” As a GM, Gomez focuses on providing the same support to her team that she has received from her company. “If my team needs me, I’m a phone call away,” she said, noting that she has taken calls at 2 a.m. from her staff. “I consider myself a mentor. I want [my team] to know how great the industry is, and why I fell in love with it. I tell them my story and how I started at the front desk and now I’m a GM.”

Her story still has many more chapters to go, and Gomez is taking steps to write them. A week after talking with Hotel Management, Gomez took the Oath of Allegiance and became an official citizen of the United States. **HM**



ADVICE: Don’t be afraid to hold people accountable. They’re the ones who are working for you, otherwise you have to do the work for them. I was in my 20s when I became an executive housekeeper and I had employees who were twice my age. I learned to be respectful, be fair and be consistent.

Challenge: The Westport Inn is a very challenging property. There are tons of mechanical issues and things that we have to be on top of. You come in to start your day and all of a sudden, the plans go to the end of the list because you have to manage your employees and handle guest complaints.

Solution: If something is presented to me, I take it as an opportunity to show what I can do. I take a second and go handle it, otherwise, it just comes back to haunt me. I cannot be at peace if I’m not handling stuff. I go into solution mode. We can’t cry. We have to solve it.

SECRETS TO SUCCESS

Have your team’s back: Make them feel like they have your support. They’re your team. Take care of them.

Hold your team accountable: If not, you have to do the job for them. If they’re here, they’re here to support you and help you and get the job done. You’re here to support them, but not to do the job for them.

Get things done: Don’t let your plate get too full. It just gets too overwhelming. You have to tackle stuff and get it done. Take care of your guests. They’re the ones that are coming back and recommending you and giving you reviews regarding the experience they had at the property.

WESTPORT INN | Opening year: 1960 | Number of guestrooms: 117 | Owner: 1595 Pre Westport | Management Company: New Castle Hotels & Resorts



ROUNDTABLE SERIES

Education, opportunities help bring new perspectives to the table

Promoting a diverse workforce and diversity of thought remain a major goal for hospitality

BY C. ELLIOTT MEST
@CELMEST

The world of hospitality and travel is sustained by creating connections between people, places and cultures, as well as breaking down the barriers that keep us from seeing and understanding the world. Because of this, the hotel industry is unique in its push for diversity because true hospitality can only come from a culture that promotes unity regardless of ethnicity, nationality or creed. To that end, eight leaders in the field sat down with Hotel Management to discuss diversity within the industry, the challenges facing the space and how hoteliers can work together to promote diversity going forward.

Pictured from left, top row: David Eisen, former editor-in-chief of Hotel Management; Mannie Jackson, director and president of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities; Hisham Sobhy, founder and CEO of Generosus Advisors; Chip Ohlsson, EVP and chief development officer at Wyndham Hotels & Resorts; and Lea MacLaren, GM of the Wingate by Wyndham Sylvania/ Toledo in Sylvania, Ohio. Bottom row: Stefani C. O'Connor, editor-in-chief of Hotel Management; Marian Goodman, SVP of development at Channel Point Hospitality; Jagruti Panwala, vice chairwoman of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association; Samir Parikh, president of Hotel Depot Services; and Patricia Lee, SVP of organizational development and chief corporate social responsibility officer at Wyndham Hotels & Resorts.

ROUNDTABLE SPONSORED BY



Most companies and organizations in the 21st century seek to embrace diversity, but before they can do so the concept of diversity needs to be defined. Marian Goodman, SVP of development at Channel Point Hospitality, said diversity today no longer is restrained to concepts of race or gender, but now includes diversity of thought.

“We are in the hospitality business, but when you’re talking about the workplace and the serving of people that walk into your door—and of all different backgrounds—to have diversity in thought or skill sets certainly, lifestyle, traditional roles, all those things are important now,” Goodman said.

Jagruti Panwala, vice chairwoman

of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association, elaborated on this concept, defining diversity as a difference of opinion and thoughts. She pointed to many second- and third-generation hotel owners who are members of AAHOA that are now becoming hotel owners and developers, and specifically highlighted a higher number of women getting involved in the



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business. In fact, Panwala is on track to be the first female leader of the organization in its 30-year history, a fact she reflected on with satisfaction.

“When I joined the AAHOA board eight years ago, my position was female director at large,” Panwala said. “I’m glad that we still have that position because that actually gave opportunity for the women to come in. And when members made the decision [to elect me], you can tell that they were not just making me a leader because I was the right person, but they really were ready for a woman to be a leader in the organization.”

Furthermore, adding new perspectives through inclusion pays dividends. Lea MacLaren, GM of the Wingate by Wyndham Sylvania/Toledo in Sylvania, Ohio, said the hotel industry in particular benefits from diversity because of the essential goal to anticipate traveler needs.

“How better to anticipate those needs if you can grow and thrive on the experiences of all generations,” MacLaren said. “Some of the new people on the team or if they are new to the industry, they might not understand that second and third or first generation, so trying to mold people and let them know how to anticipate those needs and be the most hospitable they can be is important.”

CHANGE OF IDEAS

Amid the #MeToo movement and other recent social pushes, Mannie Jackson, director and president of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities, said



Over the course of the conversation, the panel came to the conclusion that due to the hotel industry's unique position at the intersection of travel and hospitality, diversity of thought is an important component for fulfilling guest needs and understanding how consumer markets evolve. Furthermore, achieving diversity of thought can have a measurable positive impact on the hotel industry through review scores and international relationships.

that a new perspective is needed in order to positively promote diversity in business and beyond. “I believe very strongly that as long as we think of diversity as a social issue, we won’t make it. If we think of it as an outcome issue, a performance issue, we’ve got a chance,” Jackson said. “I think the companies that quickly rely on the position [that] it’s a lot of outcome and performance, they’re going to succeed and send all the others away.”

Jackson reflected on his previous career with exhibition basketball team the Harlem Globetrotters, and at the time a diversity quota system was in

place in the National Basketball Association. This system was a failure, he said, because it stipulated a certain number of people of color on each team based on what the NBA perceived society was looking for. That wasn’t working out.

“Someone got the wise idea, let’s get the right people, enough that we can win,” he said. “That changed the industry.”

Jackson said that diversity can only be retooled as a performance issue at the hands of leadership, something Patricia Lee, SVP of organizational development and corporate social responsibility at Wyndham Hotels & Resorts,

expanded on by framing in the context of education. Specifically, if hospitality organizations don’t invest in education for current and future employees to help them “follow the money,” it will be the economy that suffers in the end.

“We have to teach our young people about financing, about opportunity, about entrepreneurship,” Lee said. “We can do a... better job investing in those individuals that are perhaps not getting that type of an education, through some of our scholarship programs. These are the ways we have to start fueling and developing not just the

original generation or the second or third generation, but the next generation.”

Samir Parikh, president of Hotel Depot Services, said it is crucial to put power in the hands of the new generation of hoteliers through education because they are inheriting the assets created by the hard work of the preceding generations, and they want to use their unique perspective to improve or modernize them.

“The second and third generation has an amazing job, and I’ve seen that [on the] design side now. When the dad previously didn’t want to spend money to-

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Roundtable

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wards interior design... the second generation, third generation, they want top shelf," Parikh said. "They want to spend money. From our side of the industry, manufacturing is improving and supply is improving. Everybody's getting together and bringing more products on the table."

BUILDING THE STAGE

One cause for concern in the push for diversity is a perceived sense of entitlement that has resulted in pushback in recent years. Hisham Sobhy, founder and CEO of Generosus Advisors, made a case against directionless

additions to a business' staff for diversity's sake, arguing that, as Jackson said, positions should be given based on merit. For this reason, he agreed that education, training and opportunity are the answer because many capable candidates lack the resources to become the professionals they want to be.

"If you want to earn your title, whatever it is, you need proper build-out of knowledge to get you to bid for this title and compete with everybody else," Sobhy said. "I've participated in events where we share the knowledge with various candidates and prospects. I think this would be a very efficient [option] that can really have an impact on the industry."

Chip Ohlsson, EVP and chief development officer at Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, said this is all part of his company's plan.

"Our goal is to create the opportunity, and show everybody exists," he said. "It's everybody else's opportunity to take advantage of that and move to the next level."

EYES FORWARD

Ohlsson said the topic of diversity is something that is important to tackle today because it represents the future, and if the hotel industry—or other industries, for that matter—fail to embrace it, its legacy will be cut short.

"There's such a low employment rate that people now are getting into the opportunity and the businesses that they never could before," Ohlsson said. "So [its] opening peoples' eyes that the way business has been done in the past isn't necessarily the way it's going to be done in the future."

Sobhy reiterated that it is key to provide workers and potential employees with education and access to the skills they can use to succeed in the industry on an equal playing field. However, he continued to caution against coddling under the guise of equality, and listed value, skill and drive as the main characteristics to focus on in the workplace.

"Handouts, if excessive, will have a bad side effect, which will really prohibit people from excelling and exploring their maximum abilities because they



From left: Patricia Lee, Samir Parikh, Marian Goodman and Chip Ohlsson discuss the best ways to promote diversity in hospitality through training, education and promotion.

have an easy, low-hanging fruit to pick," Sobhy said. "So they would never reach higher. And that part we shouldn't lose sight of as people in the space, and in every profession."

Lee and Jackson boiled down their reasoning for improving diversity in business to one idea: In order to win in the future, a diverse mindset, employee base and leadership will be necessary.

Adopting new ideas, finding new perspectives and seeking new answers will become necessities when confronting new challenges, Jackson said, and without diversity of thought it will be all but impossible going forward.

"We want to keep winning," Jackson said. "Quality made us win. Technology made us win. Diversity, I think, will make us win." **HM**



Jagruti Panwala, vice chairwoman of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association.



Samir Parikh, president of Hotel Depot Services, said elevating the next generation of hoteliers is key.



Roundtable participants agreed that for the hotel industry to move forward and succeed, it must include a wealth of diversity in terms of the backgrounds of people employed as well as skills, opinions and beliefs. That doesn't happen by accident—companies must make diversity a priority through education, training and opportunities, according to the executives.



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