

HOTELS: NEWS

Betsy owner Plutzik aims for top of pyramid

The Betsy-South Beach in Miami Beach, Florida, is known for its cultural programming, deep-rooted community engagement, artist in residence program, nine art galleries, and libraries in every guest room. So, I guess it shouldn't come as much of a surprise when a HOTELS interview with co-owner Jonathan Plutzik turned somewhat philosophical as he talked about re-opening the property on December 18 with its soulful environment and artistic culture in tact, while remaining safe for visitors, his team and neighbors.

Yes, the Betsy is a family business. Plutzik works along his co-owner and wife, Lesley Goldwasser-Plutzik, who curates the art and music for the hotel while also working as a managing partner of GreensLedge, a New York City-based investment banking firm. Their son, Zachary, is a co-owner and managing director of the property who used to work for Google engaging content creators worldwide for YouTube.

Jonathan's sister Debra, who has a PhD in arts and education, does much of the arts and cultural programming and has even been creating virtual arts programs through the pandemic. Yes, this cozy and happy arrangement makes Plutzik even more prone to tell stories about relationships he has with his family and team, as well as frequent guests and neighbors in the incredibly diverse South Beach community known for its artistic bent. (To read Part 2 of this interview with Jonathan Plutzik, [click here](#).)



“With COVID, how do we treat them expectations-related, give me my space-related, leave me alone-related, no pool parties-related? All those things – it’s just different. But, I think people are figuring it out.” – Jonathan Plutzik

But you can also see the worry and a bit of pensiveness on Plutzik’s face as the 130-room Betsy prepares for its re-opening, tomorrow, after being closed since March when the pandemic hit the shores of the United States.

Not that his preoccupations stopped the 66-year-old from slowly thinking through his answers and meandering into stories about life lessons, cultural explorations and even some off-the-record political conversations. After all, his father was a three-time Pulitzer Prize finalist in poetry. Discourse seems to come quite naturally.

“We grew up in a world where money bad, creativity good,” reflected Plutzik, the retired vice chairman of Credit Suisse who remains chairman of Fannie Mae’s board of directors. “So, in our life pyramid, the more creative you are, the higher on the pyramid you are.”

To that end, in 2015, Plutzik was honored at the White House as a Champion of Change, celebrating The Betsy Hotel as the first American corporation to partner with the National Immigration Forum’s New American Workforce citizen-readiness program. In 2016, he was named the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year and in 2017 he was given a key to the City of Miami Beach by the mayor for his civic contributions. Also that year, The Betsy was recognized by Americans for the Arts as one of 10 businesses in America doing pacesetting work building community in and through the arts. I could go on with his further involvement with the arts and philanthropic endeavors, but I think you get the picture.

Right now, figuring out the best way to welcome back guests, many who are regulars and some with celebrity status, is a moving target for Plutzik, just as is the impact of COVID-19 has been. With a hotel motto that states "expect no more, this is happiness," how do you accommodate live music, allow the locals to come in and view newly hung pieces in the galleries across the property? How do you let artists in residence give weekly talks? How do you serve food and drink in multiple F&B outlets, and create that unique atmosphere in what is traditionally a very social environment?

The good news is that The Betsy has a lot of outdoor space and happens to be right across the street from the Atlantic Ocean and its perpetual breezes. The 130 rooms are spread across two four-story buildings spanning a full city block. There are terraces, a rooftop pool deck and nooks and crannies to get lost in and find solitude.

For now, there will be no pool parties, Plutzik said, and guest rooms are being stripped of many of their books, tchotchkes, decorative pillows and throws that traditionally provide so much hominess and inspiration.

But frankly, Plutzik said, it’s hard to complain a lot. “There’s a lot of suffering around of all kinds. You won’t find me complaining at all.” Those were the first words from Plutzik as the interview began.

It’s just different

While doing some cosmetic work on the property during the closure, the focus at The Betsy has turned to welcoming back guests.

“What are people going to value? How are you going to treat them – both the same because they’re coming back to be treated somewhat the same, and how are you going to treat them differently? With COVID, how do we treat them expectations-related, give me my space-related, leave me alone-related, no pool parties-related? All those things – it’s just different. But, I think people are figuring it out.”



The Betsy has two canine executive officers, who come out at 5 p.m. each day to greet guests.

The good news is The Besty team has to figure out all of these operational details because guests will be coming back. Miami remains a preferred destination and forward bookings are looking pretty good, according to Plutzik, who added how astonished everyone would be if they knew how many celebrities come to Miami and live in the area.

“It’s an extraordinary place for lots of reasons, not the least of which is that it attracts really interesting people from all over the world.” Plutzik calls Miami and its beaches one the world’s most international destinations. “And oh, by the way, we’re the sixth borough of New York,” he joked.

Even in the middle of a pandemic, Plutzik was quick to point out how Bulgari just announced it will build a hotel just a few blocks away from The Betsy. “The Delano was acquired by a very important investment group... Aman announced a new hotel next door to the Faena, which is going to be a major project. There are two new hotels on Washington Avenue, one involving Pharrell [Williams] called the Goodtime. Another Moxy is coming on Washington. Even though we’re in the middle of a pandemic, there’s a lot of condominium development going on, too. Then everybody’s showing up, and hopefully being careful.”

Plutzik added that a lot of affluent Miami Beach regulars left in April and March and went to New York’s Hamptons or to Martha’s Vineyard or Nantucket to be more secluded. Now they are ready to come back.

“People have reoriented their travel paths in both temporary and permanent ways, which has benefited and will benefit Miami Beach in lots of ways,” he added.

No complacency allowed

As Plutzik awaits the reopening, he works with his team and reiterates that everyone needs to stay on their toes about safety and avoid any COVID-induced fatigue, which can lead to operational complacency.



Jonathan Plutzik co-owns The Betsy with his wife, Lesley Goldwasser-Plutzik, who curates the hotel's art and music

When asked about how COVID has changed him and his team, Plutzik said, “You have to reevaluate everything and hopefully it’s not permanent.”

He referred to a bellman on property who traditionally escorts guests to their room, telling them great stories about the neighborhood and the hotel. He would tell Plutzik the more he can tell the guests and the happier they are, the bigger his tip would be. “And I say, ‘That’s, win-win-win. I’m delighted, they’re delighted and you’re getting more.’ Now, all of that’s kind of torn apart. It will be different. In that context, even tipping will be different. I mean, think about it... We have to think through how to compensate for that because we value those people so greatly.”

The Betsy also has two house dogs – Betsy and Rosa, the CEOs – canine executive officers – who come out at 5 p.m. to greet guests and provide some unconditional love at cocktail time. In fact, the hotel’s in-house beer is named after the dogs, Betsy Rosa beer. “Can we have our CEO hour?” Plutzik asked. “Is it OK in a COVID world to have people sequentially pet the dogs?”

In addition, he said the team is working through all the do’s and don’ts about service and operations.

“It’s all a mystery and one size doesn’t fit all,” Plutzik said. “So, I think, one it’s a lot about creativity – just being open about what works. You have to rethink what it really takes to deliver what’s most important. So, can you, with 30% fewer people, deliver 90% of what’s important? Really thinking through that stuff is hugely important. I also think it’s a moment in time to really communicate your humanity with the people that work with you because they have a lot at stake.”