



More than 800 hospitality professionals, students, and their families from across California's Coachella Valley gathered on November 25 to celebrate the spirit of Greater Palm Springs tourism at the annual Champions of Hospitality Gala presented by Visit Greater Palm Springs. The event was held at the JW Marriott Desert Springs Resort & Spa. Left to right: Scott White, President & CEO, Visit Greater Palm Springs; Oasis Award for Sustainability recipients Nicole Tadros and Mark Tadros, The Packhouse at Aziz Farms; and Lauren Bruggemans, Director of Sustainability and Community Engagement, Visit Greater Palm Springs.

## A Night to Remember in Birmingham *Honoring the Legacy of Four Little Girls*

By **Todd McElwee**

A church—specifically the location of the murder of four girls—typically isn't the backdrop to a conference's opening evening event.

The 16th Street Baptist Church (which has the tagline "Where Jesus Christ is the main attraction!") is part of the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument. Even empty, it's a powerful place. One Sunday morning on September 15, 1963, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the church and killed four girls: 14-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson, and 11-year-old Cynthia Wesley. As the National Park Service said, "This murderous act shocked the nation and galvanized the civil rights movement."

On a rainy November night, I sat down in a back pew of the packed church as the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals' (NCBMP) 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference commenced. The Miles College Choir, under the direction of Valerie Harris, was already singing. Roughly 90 minutes later, as the aesthetically pleasing but far from ornate or cavernous sanctuary emptied out, I knew the service had been

one of the most powerful experiences of my nearly 13 years at USAE.

I'm embarrassed (particularly as a history major) to confess that NCBMP introduced me on its conference's website to the tragic event in 1963 that occurred at the church. Thankfully, the program was enlightening, immersive and thought provoking, sharing the details of the fateful evening in addition to insights on the civil rights movement across the city, state and nation.

Two moments vividly stand out in my mind. Early in the session, the exact location of where the bomb detonated was shared. Four girls enjoying a fall Sunday in church died less than 50 feet from where I was sitting.

That's when the internal questions arrived: What did the explosion sound, look and feel like, and—perhaps a bit narcissistically—how would have the blast affected me in this pew? Would I have been injured? If not, how would I have reacted? The uncertainty and fear is something that will stick with me for a long time.

The other moment I hope will remain with me forever is standing near an exhibit at the Birmingham Civil

Rights Institute (BRICI) and speaking with Lisa McNair, sister of Denise McNair, who was killed in the bombing. Lisa, born a year after the attack, has shared her and her family's story in *Dear Denise: Letters to a Sister I Never Knew*. Our conversation was brief but engaging, and for me, inspiring and informative. For her, discussing her sister's death is a regular occurrence, but I cannot imagine that doing so mere steps from where her life was violently cut short is ever easy.

The poignant moments didn't last long, and the ensuing optimism and positivity will stick with me. Roughly 30 minutes after recapping an unspeakable tragedy, Lisa, at least from my perspective, was buoyant and hopeful. Death, hate, and loss were not going to stop her light from shining.

For me, the conversation with McNair encapsulates the evening's message: triumph and perseverance over evil and tragedy. Through faith and personal experience, it's something I truly believe, with NCBMP's opening evening amplifying my conviction. McNair and all those who spoke (the entire speaking lineup is listed at the conclusion of the piece) shared varia-

tions of the theme; I cannot remember of word of hate uttered from the pulpit.

Cheers and thank you, NCBMP and the Greater Birmingham CVB, for your thoughtfulness. The opening evening not only shared a message I believe

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# HOTS

*HOTS Bah, Humbug... Police in the England town of Shrewsbury are on the hunt for a vandal that destroyed the headstone of Ebenezer Scrooge, the Associated Press reports. The grave was built as a movie prop for the 1984 adaptation of Charles Dickens' classic tale, A Christmas Carol, starring George C. Scott as Ebenezer. The town of Shrewsbury, where the movie was filmed, kept the headstone up as it was "hugely popular" with residents and visitors alike, Town Clerk Helen Ball told the AP. Typically, the town organizes tours*

*of locations used as sets in the movie between November and December. Many within the town are disgruntled about the destruction of the headstone, which was smashed into pieces sometime between November 21 and November 25, according to the West Mercia Police, who are in charge of the investigation. So far, no leads have been revealed. "If the ghosts of past, present and future would like to visit [the vandals] in the middle of the night and drop them and break them in pieces, I think that would be perfect punishment,"*

*Ball said. Remind HOTS not to mess with anything beloved or revered by the townsfolk of Shrewsbury.*

✧ ✧ ✧ ✧ ✧

*HOTS An Elephant of an Announcement... The Saint Louis Zoo announced the birth of a male Asian elephant calf on November 24. The elephant calf, named Jet by the Zoo's elephant care team, was born to Jade, a 17-year-old Asian elephant. Jet is the first Asian elephant calf to be born through artificial insemination at the Saint Louis Zoo. "We're*

*thrilled to welcome this calf, which starts the fourth generation of our Asian elephant family at the Zoo," said Tim Thier, Director of the Saint Louis WildCare Institute Center for Asian Elephant Conservation. "Jade and baby are doing well and bonding." Baby Jet is not viewable by the public just yet, however, due to his young age and the cold temperatures of the Asian elephant outdoor exhibit, the Zoo said. HOTS is sending a trunk full of congratulations to the Saint Louis Zoo!*

WEEKLY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS, CVB'S AND HOTELS

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## AHLA Applauds H-2B Visa Expansions for 2025

By Jordan Bradley

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced on November 15 that it will increase the number of H-2B temporary nonagricultural worker visas it will issue in fiscal year 2025 by an additional 64,716 visas.

Annually, the DOH issues 66,000 of the visas. The department said the increase will "help address the need for seasonal workers and reduce irregular migration" in the hospitality and tourism, construction, landscaping, seafood processing and other industries throughout the United States.

"The Department of Homeland Security is committed to further growing our nation's strong economy," said Alejandro N. Mayorkas, Secretary of Homeland Security. "By maximizing the use of the H-2B visa program, the Department of Homeland Security is helping to ensure the labor needs of

American businesses are met, keeping prices down for consumers while strengthening worker protections and deterring irregular migration to the United States."

The American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA) released a statement in support of the additional visas, noting that it will benefit the hotel industry.

"AHLA applauds DHS for announcing this important, sizeable increase in the number of H-2B visas, which will make it easier for small business hoteliers to access the seasonal workers they need," said Rosanna Maietta, AHLA's President and CEO.

The AHLA said the visas are "vital" for helping independent and small hotel owners fill seasonal roles during busy periods, but the number of visas distributed annually are "arbitrarily capped."

"As chair of the H-2B Workforce

Coalition, we welcome this decision, while urging Congress to step in and create a more predictable system based on the need for workers instead of the arbitrary, outdated H-2B visa caps in place today," Maietta added. "We look forward to working with members of Congress to achieve just that."

In September, the U.S. Travel Association noted that the September job report from the U.S. Labor of Statistics highlighted more than a million jobs openings in the leisure and hospitality sectors.

The report highlighted job growth in travel, and the expansion of "the H-2B visa program should be a priority to support the small and seasonal businesses that depend on temporary workers to meet the strong demand for travel," according to Geoff Freeman, President of the U.S. Travel Association.

## ASAE Moving from Headquarters of 44 Years

By Todd McElwee

ASAE is relocating its headquarters from 1575 I Street, NW, to what it called the "dynamic and modern" 1101 K Street, NW, in downtown Washington, DC. ASAE's move will likely take place in March 2026.

ASAE has called I Street home since 1980. Due to its commitment to a hybrid work environment, it will occupy less space than in its current building, resulting in annual cost savings.

"ASAE's upcoming move to 1101 K Street, NW, represents not just a change in address but a bold investment in ASAE's future," said ASAE President & CEO Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE. "With our current lease set to expire in 2026, we have seized the opportunity to

reimagine ASAE's headquarters to reflect our role as the global home for association professionals. This new space not only meets the needs of today but also sets the stage for the future of ASAE, providing an exceptional environment for our staff, members and partners to thrive together."

The ASAE Board has approved a long-term lease for ASAE to occupy space on the 5th floor of 1101 K Street, NW. The building includes floor-to-ceiling glass, a convertible conference center with flexible space for hosting up to 185 people, and a collaborative tenant lounge with a variety of spaces perfect for informal meetings.

The association said this move marks a pivotal step in its evolution, following a thorough real estate evaluation process with CBRE that

began in 2022.

In 2015, ASAE sold a limited partnership interest in its former building. Naming rights for the J.W. Marriott, Jr. –ASAE Conference Center on I street and the conference space situation at the new building will be determined in the future.

"The newly secured space reflects ASAE's vision to adapt to the changing needs of its members, staff, volunteer leaders, partners and stakeholders," the organization said. "Designed to inspire collaboration and innovation, the state-of-the-art workspace will feature cutting-edge conference and event facilities, furthering ASAE's mission of empowering and connecting the global association community."

# NEWS

## Service Workers Stage One-Day Strike at Charlotte Airport

By Jonathan Trager

Just one day after initiating a strike action during the busy holiday travel week to demand higher wages, service workers at Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina were back on the job.

Employees of ABM and Prospect, two contractors with American Airlines, began the strike at 5 a.m. on November 25. These employ-

ees provide services such as trash removal, cabin cleanup, and wheelchair escorts.

The service workers earn between \$12.50 and \$19 an hour, according to Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The union said about 40% of contracted airport workers reported being cost-burdened, meaning they pay more than 30% of their income toward housing.

"They don't want to strike," said Ti-

anna Jenkins, an organizer with SEIU, the *Charlotte Observer* reported. "They feel like they have no choice. It's the holiday season for them as well and some of them won't have a home for the holiday."

Workers stood across from the airport holding picket signs and chanting slogans like "Poverty wages don't fly," according to the *Observer*. They also held a "Strikesgiving" meal at 1 p.m. at a nearby Residence Inn.

Jenkins said to the union's knowledge, workers haven't been contacted regarding their demands for high-

er pay. Nevertheless, they'd resumed their normal tasks on November 26.

Airport officials said the service workers' strike didn't impact travel. However, there were still 188 delays on that day during the busy holiday rush, according to flight tracking website FlightAware.

A little more than 1 million passengers are expected to depart from the Charlotte airport during Thanksgiving week, the airport stated. American Airlines has one of its biggest hubs there, accounting for nearly 90% of passenger service.

## Rio Hotel & Casino Completes First Phase of Renovation

By Jordan Bradley

The Rio Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas completed the first phase of an extensive, \$340 million multi-phase property renovation on November 21.

The first phase of the renovation included a "full redesign and modernization" of the Rio's Ipanema Tower. The tower's 1,500 guest rooms were completely renovated, with a new design inspired by the "vibrant spirit of Rio de Janeiro: bold, colorful, and unapologetically radiant," according to the hotel.

In addition to the Ipanema Tower's renovation, the Rio has opened two new food and beverage options: the Lapa Lounge, a new cocktail bar inspired by Rio de Janeiro's Lapa neighborhood, and the Luckley Tavern & Grill, a casual dining option offering all-American cuisine.

"Rio's Destination by Hyatt brand affiliation marks an exciting new chapter for our resort through our progressive evolution," said Patrick Miller, President and CEO of Rio Hotel and Casino. "We've not only reenergized the resort's design and experience, but we've proudly honored its legacy as a quintessential Las Vegas icon,

providing World of Hyatt members and global travelers with even more ways to immerse themselves in our destination's fun, energetic and eclectic atmosphere."

The second phase of the property's renovation will see public spaces and guest rooms in the Rio's Masquerade Tower renovated and redesigned.

The completion of the renovation coincided with the Rio joining the Destination by Hyatt portfolio of hotels and Hyatt's World of Hyatt loyalty program. Members of Hyatt's loyalty program are able to earn and redeem points for stays at the casino resort.

"We are proud to welcome the new Rio Hotel & Casino to our Destination by Hyatt brand portfolio, celebrating Hyatt's commitment to delivering one-of-a-kind experiences in key markets that matter most to our World of Hyatt members and guests," said Mike Waddell, Sr. Vice President of Global Franchise Operations for Hyatt. "Rio is an icon reborn, and its legacy and unique character live on. We are excited for our members and guests to discover the experiences that make Rio Las Vegas a standout destination for global travelers."

## Birmingham

*continued from page 1*

should be heard and heard again, but it also truly gave those from out of town a sense of what Birmingham stands for as well as its history and sense of community. I hope more event organizers and DMOs can incorporate locations, and most importantly individuals, who can shed light on a destination's truly significant moments—whatever they may be.

Just inside the front cover of my copy of her book, McNair inscribed "remember her" directly above her sister's name. I will, Lisa, and thanks to you, NCBMP and the Greater Birmingham CVB, I'll never forget that night at the 16th Street Baptist Church as well.

*Speakers: Art Franklin, Master of Ceremonies, CEO/Managing Partner, Interactive Professional Media Group; Reverend Arthur Price Jr., Pastor, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church; Cornell Wesley, Director of Innovation and Economic Opportunity, City of Birmingham; Nicolas Wiggins, Chairman, National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals; Mike Gunn, Vice President Greater Birmingham CVB; John Oros, President, Greater Birmingham CVB; Kristin Williams, Complex Director of Sales & Marketing, Sheraton/Westin Complex; Vince Bunoncore, Complex General Manager, Sheraton/Westin Complex; and Lisa McNair, sister of Denise McNair, who was killed in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.*

## Caesars Entertainment Embarking on Wellness Roadshow in 2025

By Todd McElwee

Caesars Entertainment is setting off early next year, crisscrossing the nation with its eclectic menu of wellness items and programs.

The Wellness Roadshow kicks off in February in Atlanta, with the seven-destination tour venturing from sea to sea shining over more than a month. All qualified meeting planners are invited to register.

"Do you WOW with Wellness at your events?" the company said. "Indulge and experience the wellness offerings available for conferences in a city near you. Come and join us as we tour the nation to educate meeting professionals about our curated wellness menus meant to drive engagement and foster community at live events big and small."

When asked why she would recommend attending a tour stop, Kelly Gleeson Smith, Vice President of Sales, Caesars Entertainment National Meetings & Events, told *USAE*: "Anyone who is looking for new and exciting activations to incorporate into

their event agendas will benefit from attending the roadshow. By weaving wellness into your event, you create a space where ideas thrive, and people flourish. After all, when attendees feel physically and mentally balanced, they are more engaged, focused, and open to new ideas."

The Wellness Roadshow will hit Atlanta and Chicago in February; Phoenix/Scottsdale and Seattle in March; and Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and Columbus in April."

"An attendee can expect to experience a taste of what we offer our clients through our new wellness menus," said Gleeson Smith. "Our team has taken the guesswork out of incorporating wellness by creating a menu with a variety of opportunities to choose from—a unique, wellness-inspired environment, speakers, activations, workshops and F&B all geared toward wellness. For anyone who heard about or attended our inaugural wellness event this past June, it will be mini version of that great event."

### Stay Connected



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# USAE*Exchange*

## Conversation with Artesha Moore, President & CEO, Association Forum



its strong reputation in the association community to better welcome a wider audience and meet our community's diverse learning needs. Built on the foundation of a meeting planners and DMO event, Holiday Showcase is now for them and everyone else in the association industry and beyond. It's all about quality over quantity, and by adding more time, we give attendees the chance to truly dive into the topics that matter most plus explore an exhibit floor that is buzzing with energy like no other. It has also allowed for more in-depth networking, where the magic happens. The transition was not just about logistics; it was about enhancing the experience and raising the

bar to create an even more impactful event for years to come.

**USAE:** What are you excited about this year?

**Moore:** I am absolutely buzzing for what's coming this year. We're taking it up a notch with next-gen programming. We are excited about the seriously bold ideas and topics that speakers will bring to life at Holiday Showcase 2024. The vibe is going to be electric! We're expecting even more top-tier suppliers and professionals from across the country, making this year's event not just a showcase, but an experience that will leave you feeling inspired and recharged for the year ahead.

**USAE:** How do you balance keeping the show a Chicagoland event while still making it appealing to the national meetings industry?

**Moore:** Chicago is *the* heartbeat of

Holiday Showcase, and we love highlighting our city's incredible venues, talent, and local innovations, as well as celebrating the strong association industry in this major U.S. city. But we also know that to stay relevant on a national scale, we need to keep things fresh and forward-thinking. It's about curating content that speaks to the latest trends while celebrating Chicago's iconic vibe. We're all about that mix of local expertise with a global lens. The ultimate goal is for every attendee to feel the energy of Chicago, while also gaining insights that they can take back to their own markets and make waves wherever they're from.

**USAE:** Traditionally occurring in December (and sometimes in late November), do you believe Holiday Showcase puts a period on industry business for the year?

**Moore:** Absolutely. Holiday Showcase is like the final crescendo of the year for many in the meetings space. It is that last big opportunity to wrap up the year on a high note, spark some fresh ideas, and make those final connections that set the stage

for what's next. It's also a time to celebrate, reflect, recharge, and plan ahead—because we all know the next year's calendar fills up fast. So, while it's a wrap on this year's business, it's also the starting point for an exciting new chapter in the industry.

**USAE:** For someone who has never attended, why would you recommend coming to Chicago for the conference?

**Moore:** If you've never been to Holiday Showcase, you must attend next year! It is an event where you get to meet the industry's brightest minds, discover game-changing trends, and connect with people who are shaping the future of meetings and events. Plus, Chicago's food scene, architecture, and culture will make you want to stay long after the event ends. Think of it as your perfect mix of learning, networking, and experiencing a city that is as innovative as our industry. It's a can't-miss event for anyone looking to level up their game. Plus, it's incredible value. Both time and money well spent on an experience that will catapult all attendees into a bright new year.

When Chicago lights its Christmas Tree in Millennium Park, Holiday Showcase cannot be far around the corner. Briefly stepping away from preparing for her organization's signature event, Artesha Moore, FASAE, CAE, shared insights on the show's expansion, balancing local and national interests, where Holiday Showcase fits into the industry calendar, and more. Holiday Showcase will take place December 4–5 at the Hyatt Regency Chicago.

**USAE:** Holiday Showcase celebrated its 35th anniversary in 2023 by expanding to two full days. What did you learn transitioning from what had been a one-day affair for its entire history?

**Moore:** Expanding Holiday Showcase to two full days in 2023 was a game-changer. We were excited to expand this event, leveraging

## Annette Pitts Named Head of Visit Casper

By Jonathan Trager

Annette Pitts has been tapped as the new CEO of Visit Casper in Wyoming, the Natrona County Travel and Tourism Board announced on November 25.

As CEO of Visit Casper, Pitts will lead the organization and work to enhance the economic base of the county through tourism. Pitts will start at Visit Casper on January 6 succeeding Tyler Daugherty, who's stepping down at the end of December due to family reasons.

"Casper is an incredible destination with world-class tourism assets," said Pitts. "I look forward to planting roots in Natrona County and strategically growing its travel economy while prioritizing Natrona County resident quality of life."

Pitts brings more than 13 years of travel and tourism industry experience to Visit Casper, including marketing, sports, film, meetings and sales, group travel and destination development. Prior to joining Visit Casper, Pitts served as the CEO of Experience Olympia & Beyond and the executive director for the Cascade Loop National Scenic Byway.

Pitts has a BA in Business Administration and has earned her Certified Destination Management Executive



Annette Pitts

(CDME) credential from Destinations International.

"We are delighted to have Annette at the helm of Visit Casper," said Cole Montgomery, Chair for the Natrona County Travel & Tourism Council Board of Directors. "As we were going through the candidate search process, Annette was the standout person for this position. We look forward to having Visit Casper continue to be a must-visit destination under her purview."

Casper is the second-most populous city in the state after Cheyenne, with the population a population of about 59,000 as of the 2020 census.

## Visit Lauderdale, Wheel the World Unveil Blind Travel Video

By Jonathan Trager

Visit Lauderdale in collaboration with Wheel the World, an online platform dedicated to accessible travel, announced on November 22 the release of a captivating short video featuring a blind influencer and professional surfer.

In "Seguimos III: A Blind Traveler's Experience," Henry Martinez, a Costa Rica native living in Brazil, embarks on a journey through Greater Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where he navi-

gates and enjoys a variety of sensory experiences.

This video is the final installment in the acclaimed series *Seguimos*, which translates to "keep going" in Spanish, celebrating movement, exploration, and inclusivity.

"Greater Fort Lauderdale is committed to being a welcoming and accessible destination for all, and we're proud to showcase our ongoing partnership with Wheel the World," said Stacy Ritter, President & CEO of Visit

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## Women Leading the Way

### GMBHA's Wendy Kallergis Sees Influx of Women in Hospitality

By Jordan Bradley

Wendy Kallergis, President and CEO of the Greater Miami and the Beaches Hotel Association, is enjoying her last month in the role following an early-November announcement that she will be stepping down at the end of this month.

"I have told so many people that I'm retiring from my position [with GMBHA]," said Kallergis, who then added that she intends to remain active in the industry. "I just love it."

Kallergis has been in hospitality since her first job working in the kitchen of her family restaurant in Maine, before moving to Washington, D.C., to pursue her bachelor's degree in French language at the George Washington University. This education led Kallergis to France, where she attended the University of Paris; the Cordon Bleu L'Ecole de Cuisine, also in Paris; and the Modern Gourmet Cooking School in Annency, France.

When she returned to the United States, Kallergis worked as a caterer in Washington, D.C., working with several hotels, including the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, Florida, and the Mayfair House Hotel and Garden,

Delano South Beach, and Grand Bay Hotel, all in Miami. Kallergis also acted as the General Manager of the Miami City Football Club from 2002–2008, and the President of the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce from 2005–2009.

In January 2010, Kallergis joined the GMBHA, the trade association overseeing more than 180 hotels in the Greater Miami area as well as 250 allied businesses throughout Miami-Dade County. This December will be her last in the role.

One of the biggest changes Kallergis has witnessed in the hospitality industry throughout her career is the increase in women in leadership roles.

"It's so great now, because we have so many women that are general managers," Kallergis said, noting that she knows several women she met prior to her time as head of the GMBHA who had started in housekeeping or culinary and are now leading hotels as general managers.

As a member of the Executive Advisory Board for the Chaplin School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Kallergis also has a unique perspective on the incoming class of hospitality workers and future leaders.

"I think they have many more women [enrolled] than guys, so that's exciting," Kallergis said.

Throughout her time in hospitality, Kallergis has also seen an increase in respect for hourly workers within the industry.

"Everybody respects hourly employees [now]," Kallergis recalled. "But before, when I was starting, it was kind of rough."

This is something Kallergis is glad to see, she told *USAE*. A big takeaway from her career that she has gladly shared with up-and-coming hospitality students is the importance of starting in hourly roles, like kitchen prep or housekeeping.

"I tell students at the Academy of Hospitality and Tourism that you have to intern, you have to work in the hotel," Kallergis said.

When *USAE* asked Kallergis what her proudest achievement was throughout her career, she excitedly popped up out of her chair and retrieved a stack of framed photos: one of Kallergis with Margaret Thatcher and another shaking Hilary Clinton's hand, a framed dinner menu from her time as the Director of Catering and Conference Services at the Biltmore when the iconic



Wendy Kallergis

property hosted the first Summit of the Americas in 1994, and a signed letter of recognition as a Champion of Change from former president Barack Obama for spearheading GMBHA's partnership with the National Immigration Forum's New American Workforce, established in 2015.

Given that she has not decided to slow down in the least, *USAE* asked Kallergis what **would** she like to do after her chapter as head of GMBHA comes to a close?

"You know, it's funny," Kallergis said. "I want to go back. I want to work in a hotel again."

## — OBITUARY —

### Harris Rosen, Founder of Rosen Hotels and Philanthropist, Dies

By Jordan Bradley

Harris Rosen, Founder, President & COO of Rosen Hotels & Resorts, died on November 25. He was 85.

In a statement on Rosen Hotels' social media channels, Frank Santos, Vice President of Rosen Hotels, announced Rosen's passing. Santos noted that Rosen had died "surrounded by family and loved ones."

"A beloved father, grandfather, and a pillar of our community,



Harris Rosen

his boundless generosity and love touched countless lives through his unwavering commitment to helping underserved communities, promoting education, advancing the fight against cancer, and supporting health and wellness initiatives," said Santos.

Rosen was born in New York City. He frequently claimed that he could trace the beginning of his hospitality career back to his first job helping his father deliver banquet place cards at the Waldorf Astoria. There, Rosen met Marilyn Monroe in the elevator on a delivery run.

"That sealed it for me. I thought if I could meet all of these incredible people in an elevator, this really was a business that I might enjoy," Rosen told a reporter at the *Pegasus*, the student magazine of the University of Central Florida, in a summer 2012 edition.

After high school, Rosen attended Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, earning a bachelor's degree in hotel/motel administration and management. Rosen opened his first hotel in 1974, purchasing a 256-room Quality Inn on International Drive in Orlando, according to the *Orlando Sentinel*. This

hotel was the beginning of the Rosen Hotels and Resorts brand, according to the company's official website.

Today, Rosen Hotels and Resorts consists of three convention hotels and four leisure hotels totaling more than 6,300 guest rooms throughout the Orlando and Central Florida area.

Members of the hospitality community have shared remembrances of Rosen. The Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA) shared a statement regarding Rosen's passing, noting that he was a "steadfast" supporter of the association and organizations like it.

"Harris Rosen was not only a trailblazer in hospitality but also a tremendous supporter of AAHOA and our members," said Miraj S. Patel, Chairman of AAHOA. "During our preparations for AAHOACON24 in Orlando, Harris personally joined us for a site visit. I had the privilege of pinning him as an AAHOA Honorary Member in recognition of his industry contributions and support for our association."

"Harris Rosen's leadership and generosity have left a lasting impact on AAHOA and the hospitality indus-

try as a whole, and we extend our prayers and thoughts to his family, colleagues, and all who knew him," said Laura Lee Blake, President and CEO of AAHOA.

Rosanna Maietta, President and CEO of the American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA), called Rosen "an inspirational figure and a shining example of the passion and drive that hoteliers need to succeed." "His love for the industry made him the largest independent hotelier in Florida, but he showed us the true meaning of hospitality through his philanthropic work," said Maietta.

Rosen was renowned for his philanthropy, supporting hospitality and Central Florida communities alike. Some of his endeavors include the Tangelo Park Program, established in 1993 as part of the Rosen Gives Back nonprofit, which gives every preschool aged child in Tangelo Park tuition for pre-kindergarten education, full college or vocational school scholarships for every high school senior from the Tangelo Park area, and provides counseling and other resources to parents in Tan-

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## THE FINAL WORD

# Jack Daniel's New Year's Eve Live: Nashville's Big Bash

by Deana Ivey, President & CEO,  
Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp.

Nashville is a city renowned for hosting major events, and for the last two decades, the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp. (NCVC) has played a pivotal role in creating and producing annual festivals that enjoy both national and international acclaim. Historically, New Year's Eve was a quieter time for business—until 2009, when local hotels encouraged the NCVC to elevate the holiday experience in the same way we successfully transformed July 4th into a bustling celebration with live music and the largest fireworks show in the nation.

What began as a modest gathering on a small stage on Lower Broadway has blossomed into a spectacular event that draws more than 200,000 attendees, fills more than 29,000 hotel rooms, and features a five-hour live broadcast on CBS, generating an impressive \$300 million in advertising equivalency. Nashville's celebration with the famed red Music Note Drop is the only city showcased by a major network during the Central time zone

**Nashville's celebration with the famed red Music Note Drop is the only city showcased by a major network during the Central time zone on New Year's Eve.**

on New Year's Eve.

Like any significant meeting or trade show, the journey to this success was not without its challenges and small victories. One might assume that organizing the same event annually at the same venue would simplify production, but the reality is often more complex. When planning an outdoor event in an urban setting, flexibility is crucial. We must continually adapt to factors such as ongoing construction, feedback from local businesses, and, of course, the ever-unpredictable weather—always the weather.

One particularly memorable year was 2016. We featured two headliners—Kings of Leon and Chris Stapleton—which resulted in an unprecedented attendance of 350,000 people. This surge brought its own set of challenges, as the city's fire marshal mandated a relocation due to crowd safety concerns. We knew the move would potentially reduce the crowd size, but that was a change we actually welcomed.

The move from Lower Broadway to Bicentennial Capitol Mall State

earned several awards and recognitions of note, including Central Floridian of the Year in 2011 from the Orlando Sentinel, an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Central Florida for a lifetime of service earlier this year, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association of Fundraising Professionals in 2023.

Orange County Mayor Jerry L. Demings said: "[Rosen] was a true pillar of Central Florida and a beloved philanthropist whose contributions have left an indelible mark on our region. Harris Rosen was more than a business leader; he was a compassionate visionary who dedicated his life to improving the lives of others. His commitment to our community went beyond his work as a hotelier. Through the Rosen Foundation, Harris invested millions into local schools, healthcare, and vital programs for underprivileged families, uplifting countless people in the process."

As of press deadline, Rosen's family had not released an obituary, details about services or where to donate in lieu of flowers.

However, Santos noted that the Rosen family will hold a private celebration of life "and kindly asks for privacy during this difficult time."

Park gave us the opportunity to produce more of a festival-like atmosphere for the attendees. In addition to the free concert, the new location offers expanded space for food trucks, heated tents for attendees to find comfort, sponsor activations, merchandise trailers, and the adjacent Nashville's Farmers' Market, which hosts the exclusive VIP Gold Circle Party.

Our aspiration was always to not only fill hotel rooms but also to create our own television special. This goal required time and perseverance. In the early years, our event received sporadic features on ABC, followed by several years of collaboration with NBC, where we appeared multiple times during their specials. Each partnership brought new learning experiences as we navigated the nuances of working with different television producers and crews while hosting a very large live audience. Ultimately, our efforts culminated in a dedicated Nashville special with CBS working with local producers with whom we have developed a strong rapport.

In the realm of event planning,



Deana Ivey

patience and adaptability are key. The highlight of my career has been producing events like these, alongside hundreds of smaller gatherings. Yet, no event has ever unfolded exactly as planned. Comprehensive planning can only go so far; the true measure of success lies in our ability to respond to unforeseen circumstances and make the best of each situation.

## Rosen Obit

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gelo Park through a Family Resource Center, according to the Rosen Gives Back official webpage.

Rosen was also a supporter of the University of Central Florida, donating 20 acres of land and \$10 million to help develop the school's Rosen College of Hospitality Management, which opened in 2004, according to the University of Central Florida.

"Harris left an indelible mark on this industry and its people that will be felt for generations," Maietta said. "We will miss him."

The Orange County Convention Center (OCCC) shared a statement on LinkedIn, noting that Rosen was "a visionary leader whose contributions have left a lasting impact on our community."

The OCCC continued: "His dedication to hospitality and philanthropy was truly inspiring, and our team is grateful for the unwavering partnership we have shared over the years. Our heartfelt condolences go out to the Rosen family and staff during this difficult time."

Throughout his career, Rosen

## Visit Lauderdale

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Lauderdale. "Accessibility is a priority for us, and we're continually working to enhance our experiences to ensure everyone can enjoy the diversity and warmth of our community."

The video "captures Henry's unique experiences as he makes new friends, explores parks and nature, and feels the Greater Fort Lauderdale vibe with locals," according to Visit Lauderdale. It also features the area's popular LGBT+ scene.

"We are committed to being a destination that truly sees you for who you are," said Richard Gray, Sr. Vice President of Inclusion and Accessibility at Visit Lauderdale. "Genuine hospitality embraces diversity and ensures everyone feels welcome. Our focus on accessibility and acceptance allows each visitor to create unforgettable memories and feel at home in Greater Fort Lauderdale."

Wheel the World has also worked with Visit Lauderdale to map out

accessible hotels, attractions, and experiences within the destination to make travel easier for people with disabilities, including those with mobility, hearing, vision, or cognitive disabilities. According to data provided by the TravelAbility Foundation, there are currently 12.7 million disabled travelers in the world.

"Partnering with Visit Lauderdale to create the first blind destination video in North America has been an inspiring journey," said Alvaro Silberstein, CEO of Wheel the World. "This collaboration underscores our shared commitment to innovation in travel and accessibility, ensuring that the beauty and unique experiences of Greater Fort Lauderdale are within reach for everyone. By breaking visual barriers, we're opening new avenues for exploration and showing the world that travel knows no limits."

The video will also be formatted for blind and low-vision viewers, featuring extended scene descriptions and subtitles. For more information, visit [visitlauderdale.com/accessibility](https://visitlauderdale.com/accessibility).

# Houston

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# NEWS

## In Buffalo, the Past Meets the Future in 2025

Buffalo is gearing up for its most exciting year yet in 2025. A series of new developments rooted in the city's rich history will attract internationally renowned conventions to the destination and provide meeting planners with new and exciting options for venues, networking receptions, and experiences beyond the conference room.



The 180-year-old Michigan Street Baptist Church. Photo by Stephen Gabris

In early 2025, Buffalo will celebrate the reopening of two historic attractions inside the city's Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor following multiyear restorations. The 180-year-old **Michigan Street Baptist Church**, which has long been a favorite meeting place for religious groups, was once a stop on the Underground Railroad and attracted luminaries like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. Around the corner, music will soon flow again from the nearly century old **Colored Musicians Club** following an extensive reimagining and expansion. The club is one of the last venues of its kind left in America and once hosted the likes of

Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie. An interactive museum with refreshed exhibits highlighting the venue's musical heritage will reopen alongside the club.

Later next year, the city will mark the bicentennial of the Erie Canal, America's first great transportation route that ended there and led to Buffalo's meteoric growth. **Waterway of Change**, a new interactive exhibit about the canal, will open on its waterfront this summer. And the Seneca Chief, a replica canal boat constructed by the Buffalo Maritime Center, will launch on a commemorative journey between Buffalo and New York City in September before returning to its home there as a permanent floating museum.

Buffalo will celebrate each of these milestones with the arrival of the African American Travel Conference from May 21-23, and the World Canals Conference taking place in the city from September 21-25. The conferences build off Buffalo's other recent



Colored Musicians Club. Photo by Onion Studio

successes as a meetings destination, including its hosting of the American Cheese Society, Retail Confectioners International and the National Association of Black Storytellers in 2024.

When convention attendees from around the world gather to meet in

Buffalo in 2025, they'll discover a city that's building its future by fully embracing its rich past. Head to [visitbuffaloniagara.com](http://visitbuffaloniagara.com) to learn more about how Buffalo can be the perfect host for your next convention.



Waterway of Change. Photo by Tom Burns

## U.S. Travel Tackles Industry Concerns During Travel Mobility Conference

By Todd McElwee

U.S. Travel Association's Fall Engagement Week touched down in Washington, D.C., late last month, bringing scores of the nation's most prominent industry executives to the capital. Headlining the event was the fourth annual Future of Travel Mobility conference at Union Station.

The conference brought together travel industry executives, government officials, business leaders and public policy experts for discussions on the future of

travel and transportation as the United States embarks on a mega decade of sports, thrusting our nation into the spotlight on a global stage. Discussions at Union Station focused on the need to create a frictionless travel experience by improving security to be more efficient and, ultimately, improve customer experience.

"It's the opportunity right in front of us, a decade of sport-

ing events that will make the U.S. the most sought-after destination," said

**"It's more important than ever for our systems and processes to keep pace with demand and to do that, we don't just need ideas, we need urgency and action."**

Geoff Freeman, President & CEO, U.S. Travel Association. "It's more important than ever for our systems and processes to keep pace with demand and to do that, we don't just need ideas, we need urgency and action."

U.S. Travel's Commission on Seamless and Secure Travel teased their up-

coming report of recommendations to transform the future of travel. Attendees also engaged with emerging travel technologies at the Future of Travel Mobility Innovation Hub.

A dinner during which William D. "Bill" Talbert III, former president & CEO of the Greater Miami CVB, and Christopher L. Thompson, former president & CEO of Brand USA, were inducted into the U.S. Travel Association Hall of Leaders and board meetings were also staged.

# NEWS

## Boston Sports Venues Set the Stage for Unforgettable Events

Boston's status as a preeminent sports city is simply unparalleled – especially with our recent raising of Banner 18 for the NBA Champion Boston Celtics. With iconic sports franchises and a sports calendar that features global events such as the Boston Marathon, the Head of the Charles Regatta and FIFA World Cup 2026™, Boston is in the pantheon of sports excellence and the passion of Boston fans knows no bounds.

No matter where attendees come from (or what their sports allegiances are), they cannot help but feel they are a part of Boston's vibrant sports culture. For event planners, it is easy to tap into this passion as part of your event in Boston.

Meeting planners seeking creative off-site locations for events can look to Boston's variety of sports venues. Fenway Park and TD Garden are not only incredible venues to watch a game, but each also provide private spaces for custom events to host

programming on game days or outside of game days. TD Garden is also home to The Sports Museum featuring a half mile of exhibits celebrating the history and character of Boston sports.

An impressive diversity of hotel inventory exists near the stadiums as well, with Back Bay a quick walk to Fenway and TD Garden surrounded by dozens of hotels in the West End, downtown, and waterfront neighborhoods.

In the western section of the city, the TRACK at New Balance, a state-of-the-art, multi-purpose complex that can host volleyball, basketball, and soccer games, plus lacrosse, field hockey and more, offers a unique environment for planners looking to add a bespoke and experiential element to their next event.

Formula 1 opened its first F1® Arcade in the United States in Boston's Seaport District earlier this year creating an opportunity for additional experiential activities. New venues like



Fenway Park offers a variety of dynamic event spaces. Photo Credit: Fenway Park Events

this – with 69 full-tilt F1 simulators, plus a pulsating atmosphere replete with delicious food and drink menus – offer additional creative sporting activities to keep every attendee engaged and entertained.

Large and small groups all want

a space with just the right vibe and plenty of stuff to do. With those factors in mind, the [Meet Boston](#) team is the perfect resource to help guide planners to the perfect venue for their needs. Whether it is a sports venue or one of the city's many traditional or contemporary event spaces, the destination offers countless choices to create something unforgettable and impactful for attendees.

Allow the Meet Boston sales team, together with its hotel and venue partners, to collaborate on your meeting or event. Ask about the Meet Smart in Boston Incentive which offers clients 10% Off the Master Account for meetings taking place in Q1 2024-2027. [Click here](#) to learn more about this program. To get directly in touch with the Meet Boston Sales team, please email [sales@meetboston.com](mailto:sales@meetboston.com)



The 521 Overlook offers flexible space for a variety of meeting and event experiences.

## Around Associations

By Todd McElwee

**Association Forum Issues Call for Board Nominations...** Nominations are now open for Association Forum's Board of Directors. The group is seeking submissions for secretary-treasurer, two association professional seats and one supporting member seat.

"At Association Forum, we are committed to building a Welcoming Environment" the Forum said. "This includes building a board with individuals with diverse work, life, social, and educational backgrounds. This diversity ensures that decisions made by the board reflect the perspectives of our entire membership. We aim for genuine inclusivity in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, industry, location, and professional roles."

All Association Professional Members and Supporting Members are eligible to apply. The deadline to apply

is December 16.

"We invite dynamic, forward-thinking changemakers to apply for a Board of Directors position," the Forum said. "Your unique skills and vision can play a crucial role in shaping the future of the Forum, its members, and the broader association community."

Find more information at [associationforum.org](http://associationforum.org).

**NBAA Welcomes Nomination of Sean Duffy as DOT Secretary...** National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) President & CEO Ed Bolen has issued a statement regarding President-Elect Donald Trump's nomination of former Rep. Sean Duffy (R-WI) as Department of Transportation (DOT) secretary.

"Sean Duffy's experience in Congress demonstrates his ability to work with lawmakers in navigating complex legislative processes, including the advancement of infrastructure and

transportation policies," Bolen said. "Equally important, his representation of a predominantly rural congressional district gives him firsthand insight into the critical role of general aviation in towns with little or no airline service. We congratulate him on his nomination and look forward to his confirmation by the Senate."

Duffy served in the House for nearly nine years before leaving Congress in 2019. During his tenure, Duffy supported infrastructure policies including the 2018 FAA reauthorization bill.

**Michele Saegesser, Viking River Cruise Executive, Wins the 2024 President's Award from the American Society of Travel Advisors...** Michele Saegesser, Vice President of Sales and National Accounts, Viking River Cruises, was awarded the American Society of Travel Advisors' (ASTA) President's Award. It was presented by ASTA President & CEO, Zane Kerby,

at the Signature Conference held last month in Las Vegas.

"This is certainly one of the biggest honors of my life. I can't thank ASTA enough for all you do for the advisor community and our wonderful industry," said Saegesser.

The ASTA President's Award is among the Society's highest honors, awarded to individuals who demonstrate a profound dedication to furthering the role of travel advisors and strengthening the travel industry. Saegesser's impact as a leader and advocate during her 45 years in tourism exemplifies the principles that ASTA values and promotes.

"Michele Saegesser embodies the spirit and dedication that define the best of our profession," said Kerby. "We are honored to celebrate her achievements and grateful for her ongoing commitment to travel advisors and our community as a whole."