



Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser spoke about her administration's workforce development priorities and partnering with D.C.-area associations at ASAE's inaugural Public Policy Forum on March 23 at the Mayflower Hotel. Pictured here (left to right): Jason Oxman, CAE, APR, President and CEO, Information Technology Industry Council (Moderator); Mayor Bowser; ASAE Chair Jay Karen, CAE, CEO, National Golf Course Owners Association; and ASAE President and CEO Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP.

Accor Denies Trafficking Allegations, Opens Investigation

By Jordan Bradley

French luxury hospitality company Accor is denying accusations of child trafficking and exploitation by data analysis firm Grizzly Research.

The firm is alleging that though Accor "promotes itself as an industry leader in the fight against human trafficking and sexual exploitation," undercover investigators at Grizzly Research found that around 40 Accor hotels were willing to accommodate reservation requests that included red flags for possible human trafficking.

In a March 19 statement, Accor said: "Following the publication of a report questioning the Group's human rights practices, Accor wishes to provide the following answers and clarifications: The Group firmly denies involvement in the alleged systemic exploitation of human or child trafficking."

Through its undercover investigation, Grizzly Research said in February and March of this year it inquired about reservations "for groups of 'models' aged 14 to 17." The requests explicitly asked for reservations to be

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ASAE Releases First-Ever 'State of Associations' Report

By Todd McElwee

ASAE has released the inaugural *State of Associations* report, which provides "the most comprehensive, data-driven snapshot to date of the association sector's current condition and future trajectory."

"Associations are foundational to how industries function, how pro-

fessionals advance, and how society progresses," said Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO, ASAE. "This report reinforces both the resilience of our sector and the urgency of adapting to a rapidly changing environment. It also underscores the opportunity for associations to lead—with greater clarity of purpose, stronger data, and expanded impact."

ASAE said the free report draws on a series of pulse polls conducted over the past year and examines financial performance, meetings trends, workforce dynamics, advocacy shifts, and the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI). The association added it highlights a sector at an inflection point—facing ongoing disruption while

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Philly Hotels Remain Optimistic Following FIFA Cancellations

By Jordan Bradley

In the wake of FIFA canceling about 2,000 hotel rooms in 2026 World Cup host city Philadelphia, the Greater Philadelphia Hotel Association (GPHA) says local hotels remain optimistic about 2026.

"Despite these reductions in Philadelphia, we remain optimistic," said Ed Grose, President and CEO of GPHA. "We are hopeful that any released rooms will be absorbed by strong demand,

as fans from across the globe travel to Philadelphia for the 2026 FIFA World Cup."

Local, sports and national news outlets have been generating headlines surrounding the cancellations in Philadelphia, and Grose said he has had an influx of interview requests.

In an interview with *USAE*, Grose declined to speculate on the reasoning behind the cancellations. FIFA has not given an explanation for

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Global Meetings Industry Day 2026 Coming May 6

By Todd McElwee

Global Meetings Industry Day (GMID) 2026 is set for May 6.

On March 24, the Events Industry Council (EIC) shared the date for the worldwide celebration as well as this year's theme, Business Events and Exhibitions: The Human Catalyst for Global Growth, which it believes underscores the essential role of face-to-face engagement in unlocking opportunity, fostering collaboration and advancing global progress.

GMID will feature the release of the 2026 *Global Economic Significance of Business Events Study*.

"Global Meetings Industry Day and the Advocacy resources aggregated provide a powerful focus and foundation to ensure that business events are recognized for their true purpose and impact as catalysts for connection, innovation and progress," said Amy Calvert, President & CEO, EIC. "At a time of increasing complexity and fragmentation, our industry plays a vital

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NEWS

Destination DC Hosts Annual Sustainability Summit

By Jonathan Trager

Destination DC (DDC) on March 25 hosted its annual Sustainability Summit, which explores how “ongoing and intentional placemaking strengthens sustainable development and enhances the well-being of residents, visitors, and local businesses.”

Held in partnership with the District Department of Energy & Environment (DOEE) at the historic Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C., the event convened leaders from tourism, hospitality, government and community organizations.

“Sustainability is about ensuring Washington, D.C., continues to thrive for everyone who depends on it—our residents, the businesses that power our economy and visitors from around the world,” said Elliott L. Ferguson II, President & CEO of DDC. “It’s not only the right thing to do for our planet; it’s also essential to the future of our industry.”

The summit’s 2026 theme, placemaking, highlights how the culture, creativity and communities of Washington, D.C. contribute to a more resilient and sustainable visitor economy. By showcasing local leaders and organizations that shape the city’s neighborhoods, the event reinforces how collaboration across sectors supports long-term social, environmental, and economic progress, according to Destination DC.

“We know that people come to—and stay in—Washington, D.C. to change the world,” said D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser.

“This summit is an opportunity to celebrate the many people and teams that are working in industries across D.C. to make sure we stay the best city in the world for generations to come.”

The program featured speakers such as Richard Jackson, Director of the DC Department of Energy and Environment, and Chip Ellis, CEO of the Howard Theatre. DOEE also presented the 2026 District Sustainability Awards, recognizing businesses, organizations, and individuals whose work contributes to a greener, healthier, and more resilient Washington, D.C.

Sustainability efforts in the nation’s capital that support both residents and the visitor economy include maintaining the #1 parks system in the nation for five consecutive years, reinforcing access to green space across all eight wards; deploying updated heat maps to target cooling strategies and reduce the impacts of extreme summer temperatures; launching a hyperlocal air quality monitoring system to provide precise, neighborhood-level data; and expanding access to convenient electric vehicle charging infrastructure across the city.

Also during the Summit, Destination DC unveiled updates on the Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index), an international benchmarking program that measures sustainability performance among tourism destinations. According to GDS-Index, D.C. rose four positions among North American destinations, now ranking 5th regionally, and maintains the top spot among U.S. cities for



On March 2, Destination DC hosted its annual Sustainability Summit at the Howard Theatre. Pictured here (left to right): Robin McLain, Destination DC; Richard Jackson, Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE); Mayor Muriel Bowser, and recipients of the District Sustainability Awards. Credit: Uncharted Media

the fifth consecutive year. “These results reflect the values and contributions of [the city’s] more than 700,000 residents,” said Shelby Luzzi, Sr. Manager for Sustainability at DDC. “As our city continues to grow

as a global destination for meetings and tourism, sustainability will remain central to how we support long-term economic growth while protecting the communities and places that make D.C. unique.”

Philly Hotels

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the cancellations, and did not reply to *USAE* request for comment by press deadline.

Grose said the cancellations were made before the 120-day mark, which was the deadline to cancel without incurring a penalty per the booking contract, “and I think we’re closer to 80 or 90 days out.”

Some reports are claiming FIFA booked about 10,000 hotel rooms in Philadelphia.

“I don’t know how that number got out there,” Grose said. “I don’t know how many total [rooms] they did book,” but he confirmed that the organization did cancel around 2,000 Philadelphia hotel bookings.

Grose noted that hotel room cancellations have been made by FIFA in all 16 host cities throughout Canada, the United States, and Mexico. CBS News confirms, citing an article from *Mexico News Daily* that claims FIFA canceled 40% of its bookings in Mexico City.

In an interview with ESPN, Alberto Albarrán Leyva, Director General of the Mexico City Hotel Association, said: “FIFA booked 2,000 rooms months ago to prevent [running short] and guarantee its operation. Over time, it canceled some reservations because it realized that it was no longer going to use them. There is no other reason or other type of context.”

Philadelphia will host six World

Cup matches at Philadelphia’s Lincoln Financial Field stadium: five matches in June, and one match on July 4.

Grose said Philadelphia’s local FIFA affiliates have had more than 500 million requests for tickets to the FIFA World Cup games.

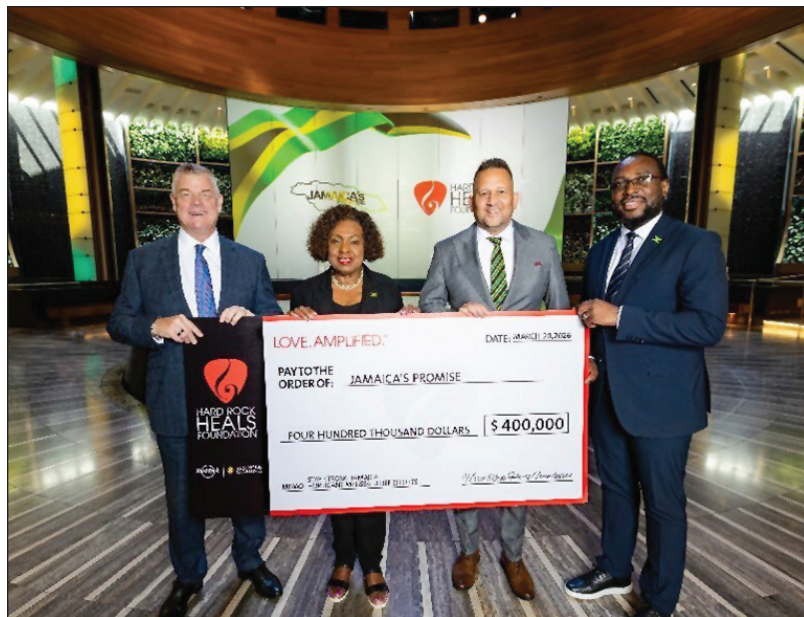
“That leaves me with a lot of optimism,” Grose said. “Some of those are requests so they can resell [the tickets,] but the fact that there’s 500 million requests for FIFA World Cup tickets tells me that people are coming. They may be waiting to book, but there will be people here.”

And the city’s hotels are prepared to host them.

“Philadelphia’s hotels stand ready to deliver an exceptional experience for all visitors, and we look forward to showcasing our city on the global stage,” Grose said.

Philadelphia is also set to host two citywide conventions in June alone—the annual conventions for the Drug Information Association and the National Athletic Trainers’ Association—GPHA said, and several other throughout 2026.

“We have 26 large events and citywide conventions coming in 2026, so it’s still going to be a banner year for us. We just finished the NCAA basketball tournament, we have the PGA Championship coming,” Grose told *USAE*. “We have the MLB All Star Game. We have the events surrounding the 250th anniversary [of the United States.] So there’s still a lot of things happening in Philadelphia.”



David Hoenemeyer, COO, Seminole Gaming (far left); the honorable Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport Olivia Grange (second from left); and Jamaica’s Consul General to Miami Oliver Mair (second from right), present a ceremonial check on behalf of the Hard Rock Heals Foundation to Chris Benjamin, Board Member and Director of Jamaica’s Promise (far right). The donation from Hard Rock Heals was made to Jamaica’s Promise to support recovery efforts on the island in the aftermath of Hurricane Melissa, which made landfall in October last year.

HOTS

HOTS Robot Thunderdome... The robot revolution has begun—sort of. UPI reports that two delivery robots smashed into two bus stop shelters in two separate instances in Chicago. The shelters were, frankly, absolutely destroyed, according to surveillance footage of the events. According to UPI, the first incident occurred on March 22, when a delivery robot owned by Serve Robotics collided with a Chicago Transit Authority Grand and Racine bus shelter, shattering the glass enclosure. To the robot's credit, it did stop and wait for the authorities

after the incident. In a statement to local news outlet WLS-TV, a Serve Robots representative said: "We're aware of the incident involving one of our robots in Chicago. No injuries were reported, our team responded quickly to clean up, and we're reviewing what happened to make improvements. We have also been in contact with local stakeholders and are committed to addressing any concerns directly. We take this matter very seriously." A second glass-smashing incident involving a robot owned by Coco Robotics occurred a few days later on March 24. HOTS wonders if the people waiting on their items to be delivered ever got their orders?



HOTS Bad Habits... If you are in need of some motivation to quit nicotine, please look no further, for a gray squirrel in London was caught vaping. The incident was caught on camera, UPI reports, and has wildlife experts concerned about the impacts of human addictions on local wildlife. This isn't the first incident caught on camera, the outlet said, with other photos and videos posted on social



The Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI) held its annual Mike Leven Leadership Conference from March 17–18 in Los Angeles, bringing HSMAI chapter leaders together. Pictured here are the 2026 Frank W. Berkman Best of the Best award recipients. For more information about the conference, click [here](#).

media catching squirrels of all shapes and sizes "handling, chewing on and even [burying] discarded vape devices in the United States and Britain." A red squirrel expert at Bangor University, Craig Shuttleworth, said the myriad flavors of vapes is likely what first caught the squirrel's attention. "It would be reasonable to assume that a vape would be more attractive than

a normal tobacco product that's not fruity," he said. "You don't want animals ingesting nicotine. They don't encounter nicotine in the wild, so like many chemicals, it's something you don't want them exposed to." On behalf of the squirrel population, HOTS hopes all you vape users are disposing of the electric nicotine sticks properly—in the trash.

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Historic Hotels of America Collects 'Little Gems' of Women's History

By Jordan Bradley

When it comes to the longstanding history of hotels, women's history is often buried, or relegated to one or two sentences.

At Historic Hotels of America, a project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the vetting process for member hotels is thorough, said Katherine Orr, the organization's Director of Marketing Strategy and Communication, and there is some fleshing out of a hotel's history that is done by the Historic Hotels team before it goes up on their website.

Women's history at these hotels, Orr told *USAE*, is "typically not on the surface. It's typically not in the lede."

During the onboarding process, hotels provide details about their history—notable figures that have been guests, significant events or achievements—and Historic Hotels of America (HHA) web editors and content creators load that information into the website. Then, Orr starts to dig.

"I'll read the whole history of the hotel," Orr said, "and sometimes I'll say, 'oh, that's interesting.' It'll be this little gem tucked into the third paragraph. And then I'll dig. I'll go down a rabbit hole with it."

On the expedition down the rabbit hole, Orr is looking for a story that could be lifted out of obscurity and

held up as an interesting facet to help market the hotel.

"That's part of what we offer hotels: that eye for history and that eye for patterns and themes," Orr said. "And looking for parts of the hotel's history that they might not think is important, but we—as people working in this industry who are very familiar with what the public likes to learn about historic places—we bring that eye to their history. We're able to pull those things out that they might have left in there thinking that it wasn't that important, but [that they] wanted to

mention it. We look at it and we see more possibility with it."

Historic Hotels has been collecting and vetting the history at hotels inducted into its collection since the organization's inception in 1989. As of January, Historic Hotels of America (HHA) has approximately 300 member hotels, inns and resorts—each with their own unique past, milestones and histories of note.

The organization's Where Women Made History Campaign has been highlighting women's histories at

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Florence Molloy (left) and Mabel MacLeay (right) ran a successful taxi business out of the Hotel Boulderado in Boulder, Colorado. Photo courtesy of the Hotel Boulderado

USAEExchange

Conversation with Gregory Heidrich, CEO of the Society of Actuaries (SOA)



On June 25 at The Old Post Office in Chicago, Gregory Heidrich, NACD-DC, will be presented with the Samuel B. Shapiro Award for Chief Staff Executive Achievement—powered by Atlanta CVB, which is Association Forum’s highest honor. Heidrich, who is retiring in the near future, connected with USAE to discuss the honor, his plans for his final few months at the SOA and his plans for exploring the

waters of Minnesota.

USAE: The obvious question: What does being honored with the Samuel B. Shapiro Award for Chief Staff Executive Achievement mean to you?

Heidrich: It is a great privilege to be recognized with the Association Forum’s highest honor. I’ve led a talented staff of 170 professionals and thousands of volunteers with the Society of Actuaries for nearly two decades. I am very grateful for the opportunity I’ve had to help lead the actuarial profession, partnering with the SOA Board, staff and volunteers on many important initiatives that will have a lasting impact on members of the

profession, students seeking to join it, and the public who benefits from their work.

Also, I’ve greatly valued my service as past board member and Board Chair of the Association Forum. It has meant the world to me to be able to be involved in the Forum in this way. The Forum is a truly special community, and it’s been one of the highlights of my career to work with the Forum staff and other volunteers. Giving

back through volunteer leadership is essential to keep the association management industry and profession relevant to our stakeholders and everyone who’s in it. It’s a tremendous honor to receive this award, the highest honor of my volunteer career, and I greatly appreciate it as well as all the support and encouragement I received along the way.

USAE: You announced your retirement this past September. Has your primary focus or mission these past few months at SOA changed, and if so, how?

Heidrich: Both the organization’s mission and my areas of focus have remained steadfast, driven by our strategic plan. My focus since September has been on ensuring we execute on the strategic plan and on carrying out a smooth and effective transition to new leadership. I’m proud of what we’ve accomplished in this regard, and I think we’ve positioned the organization and its staff for great continued success in the future.

Regarding the CEO transition, the SOA conducted a comprehensive global search process for its next CEO and we’re very excited to welcome Clar Rosso to this role beginning in early May. My focus in my remaining time at the organization is to support her onboarding in every way I can, make a very smooth handoff, and ensure we have continued organizational momentum under Clar’s leadership.

USAE: As someone who has made

a career in associations how can the sector market itself as a fruitful and attractive career path for those entering the workforce?

Heidrich: Great associations are driven by their sense of purpose and mission. That purpose is your guiding light and can inspire staff, volunteers, and everyone who comes in contact with the association. I’ve been inspired by the mission of the SOA, and my work here has been my vocation. It’s where I’ve found purpose for my life, and it’s allowed me to serve others in many ways. This has been enormously satisfying for me, and I think it can be as well for anyone else entering the association field. I think everyone needs to find a purpose beyond themselves in their life. Meaningful work is a critical part of that, and associations can provide very meaningful work.

I encourage everyone entering the association field—and anyone entering any other meaningful line of work—to take every opportunity you can to interact and engage with others in your field. You’ll meet people who will help and guide you along the way and, even more important, you’ll gain opportunities to be of service to them as well, giving you a sense of purpose for your life and career. It’s also very important to give back through volunteering, such as with the Association Forum. I’ve made many friends and critical business

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PCMA Introduces Business Events Summit

By Todd McElwee

PCMA has said goodbye to edUcon and hello to the Business Events Summit.

As part of the association’s brand refresh, edUcon has evolved into the Business Events Summit, with PCMA saying the move clearly reflects what today’s leaders need from education: depth, rigor, and real world application.

Seeking to create a more focused environment for peer exchange across the business events community, this is the first time the event is open exclusively to PCMA members. Fajardo, Puerto Rico’s El Conquistador Resort is hosting from June 21–24.

“The PCMA Business Events Summit is an advanced, members-only education experience—an immersive, skills based summit for business events professionals ready to sharpen their expertise, solve real world challenges, and elevate their impact. Formerly edUcon, the Summit has been reimagined as a pinnacle learning environment with longer sessions, hands on ap-

plication, and peer driven problem solving,” PCMA said.

The Summit curriculum is built around three pillars: refine, design and align.

Refine is meant to develop leadership capabilities to help attendees communicate with confidence, build and sustain high performing teams, and navigate complex decisions with clarity.

PCMA said design focuses on designing and delivering experiences that truly engage stakeholders, elevate brand presence, and produce measurable impact.

“Events are expected to prove strategic value and organizational impact,” PCMA said about align. “This pillar equips leaders with the frameworks, tools, and approaches needed to align events with business goals, drive innovation, and demonstrate meaningful results.”

A full slate of social experiences including Do Good Feel Good sessions, receptions, PCMA Foundation Pickleball Tournament & Learn to Play, sound bath sessions and puppy yoga is on the agenda.

Find more information [here](#).

ASAE Report

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actively evolving to meet it.

Key findings include the following:

- Financial Headwinds Persist—The sector’s financial outlook remains challenging, with nearly 39% of CEOs reporting declining situations versus 10% reporting improvement. Professional societies face the greatest pressure, while trade associations show modest gains, reinforcing the need to demonstrate clear impact and value.

- Meetings Under Pressure, Strategies Evolving—Meetings remain the most affected revenue stream, driven by declining attendance, including reduced international participation. Associations are adapting via hybrid models, pricing adjustments, partnerships, and technological investments to enhance accessibility and experience.

- Partnerships and New Business Models on the Rise—Responding to financial pressure, nearly two-thirds of associations are pursuing partner-

ships and more than 60% are diversifying revenue. More than half are launching new offerings, while dues increases have more than doubled year over year.

- AI Adoption Accelerates, But Readiness Gaps Remain—AI use is widespread—87.5% employ for content and 44.3% for data—but readiness lags, with most organizations citing limited expertise and data privacy concerns.

- Membership Challenges Persist—Retention and engagement remain the top challenge, cited by nearly one-third of respondents. Associations are increasing investment in membership and marketing while rethinking how to deliver and demonstrate member value.

“As the professional home for the association community, ASAE is uniquely positioned to bring these insights forward,” Mason said. “The State of Associations report is designed not only to inform, but to equip leaders with the clarity and confidence needed to navigate what comes next.”

Find more information [here](#).

Industry Movers



Peter J. O'Neil, FASAE, CAE, has been selected as CEO of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), effective March 30. O'Neil was the chief executive or executive advisor at professional membership organizations, including ASIS International, the association for global security professionals; AIHA, the association for scientists and professionals committed to preserving and ensuring occupational and environmental health and safety; and the American Academy of Anesthesiology Assistants.



Alex Zimdars has been promoted to Sr. Performance Marketing and Analytics Manager at Visit Milwaukee. She was previously performance marketing manager. As the in-house leisure media buyer, Zimdars spearheaded the City of Festivals campaign, which received a silver HSMIA Adrian Award in the 2026 awards program. Her work advances Visit Milwaukee's data-informed marketing strategy, ensuring campaigns are strategic, measurable and aligned with the evolving needs of stakeholders.



Richard Wiggins is now Executive Chef of the Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort & Spa in Paradise Valley, Arizona. He brings more than two decades of culinary leadership across hotels, resorts, and restaurant concepts. Most recently he served as executive chef of the Arizona Biltmore, a Waldorf Astoria Resort. His experience also includes leadership roles across Starwood Hotels & Resorts and Marriott International, where he drove concept development.



Leigh Anne Staden has been named General Manager of The Ann Savannah. She has more than 20 years of experience in full service and select service hotels. Staden most recently served as general manager of the Courtyard by Marriott Hilton Head Island. Throughout her career with groups including LBA Hospitality, Schulte Hospitality, and Buffalo Lodging Associates, she has overseen multi property operations and managed complex revenue strategies.

[See More Industry Movers](#)

Informa's Connect Meetings Expands Strategic Partnership with MatchPoint

By **Todd McElwee**

Joining with a company it says is "transforming how events deliver measurable ROI," Connect Meetings, a division of Informa, is amplifying its partnership with MatchPoint, an AI-powered networking platform.

MatchPoint spent the past year as the networking partner across multiple Connect Meetings events. Integration

will continue via the Partnership Program across participating events, bringing extended visibility, qualified leads, and ongoing revenue opportunities to exhibitors.

"Connect Meetings is committed to delivering real value for our partners and audiences," said Matt Johnson, Managing Director of Connect Meetings. "Our expanded relationship with MatchPoint strengthens our ability to

provide meaningful connections that drive business outcomes."

Johnson added: "What makes MatchPoint particularly compelling is its ability to capture real-time behavioral data around how professionals connect and do business at events. As event ecosystems evolve, platforms that can translate networking activity into actionable intelligence will become increasingly important."

Through the MatchPoint Vendor Marketplace, sponsors gain access to AI-powered lead matching connecting them with prospects based on goals, behavior, and interests—not random badge scans. Company profiles remain live year-round, enabling 24/7 visibility and continuous lead flow long after events conclude.

"Exhibitors invest heavily in live events, and too often the ROI window is limited to two or three days," said Scott Lebowitz, Co-Founder of MatchPoint. "Our expanded partnership with Informa changes that equation. We're giving exhibitors a system that continues working for them before, during, and long after the show ends."

"This isn't about collecting more names," said Bill McGlade, Co-Founder

of MatchPoint. "It's about creating meaningful business conversations. By expanding with Connect Meetings through our Partnership Program, we're helping exhibitors turn event participation into an always-on growth engine."

Through the expanded Partnership Program, exhibitors participating in select Connect Meetings events now have:

- AI-powered lead matching tailored to buyer intent
- Year-round company visibility within the MatchPoint Vendor Marketplace
- Built-in, compliant messaging tools
- Data-driven insights to guide follow-up
- New digital sponsorship and visibility opportunities

"The integration of MatchPoint's Vendor Marketplace into participating Connect Meetings events represents the kind of innovation exhibitors are looking for, solutions that extend value and create real business impact," said Michela Giovannotto, Vice President of BizBash, a Connect Meetings Brand.

Gregory Heidrich

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connections through volunteer opportunities and networking, and I think every professional should do it.

USAE: You're a member of the Man In: The Men's Leadership Experience Advisory Group. What are you expecting from this September's debut edition of the conference?

Heidrich: I'm proud to be part of this advisory group, which complements the continued work of the Association Forum. Now is an important moment for any of us to take stock of the opportunities to support healthier leadership for all, including for men working in the association sector. I'm happy to help contribute to the planning with my fellow advisory group volunteers to grow the community and forge authentic conversations on leadership.

It's been inspiring to hear the stories of the other men serving on this advisory group and how they're trying to help others—colleagues, friends, and

family members—learn and grow as men in the welcoming and inclusive community so many of us are trying to build. I can't wait for the conference!

USAE: Where will one find you in retirement, and what will you be doing?

Heidrich: I'll be spending more time with my family, especially my wife Alyssa, who has been by my side supporting me through every step of my journey at the SOA and throughout our 40-plus years of marriage.

I'm involved and plan to stay involved in important volunteer work with the Association Forum and ASAE, and I'm looking at some other association projects focusing on my passions of governance, strategy, risk management, and effective executive succession.

I'm a gardener, so I have work to do as spring and summer begin in Chicago. Finally, I have a passion for canoeing in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness of northern Minnesota, so I'm already planning my next trip into the woods!

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NEWS

Samira Siale Tapped to Lead Kauai Visitors Bureau

By Jonathan Trager

Samira Siale will become Island Director of the Hawaii's Kauai Visitors Bureau effective April 16, the Hawaii VCB (HVCB) announced.

A Kauai native, Siale currently serves as Executive Director of the Hawaii Lodging and Tourism Association. She has 10 years of experience in the state's tourism industry.

"Samira brings a strong track record of building alignment across Kauai's visitor industry, and that matters at a time when this work continues to demand deep coordination between community,

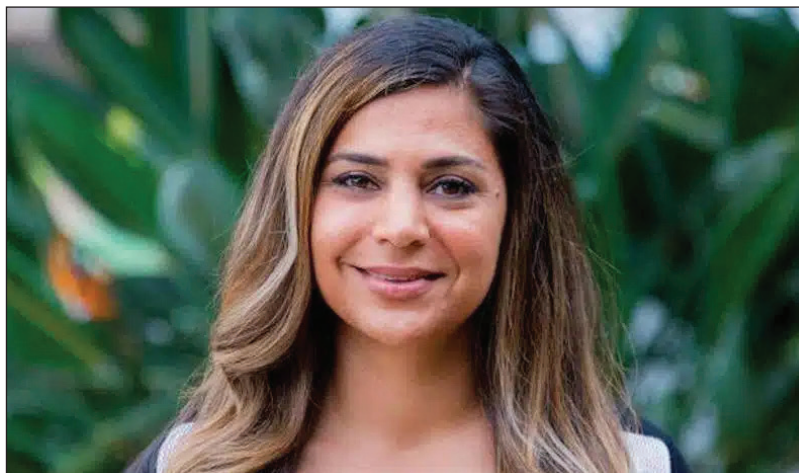
Kanoho "built one of the most enduring records of service in Hawaii's tourism industry," HVCB said.

industry and place," said Dr. Aaron J. Salā, President & CEO of HVCB. "She understands the responsibility that comes with representing Kauai, and I am confident in her ability to lead with excitement, discipline, and care."

Siale's appointment follows the retirement of Sue Kanoho, Managing Director of the Island Chapters and Executive Director of the bureau. Kanoho joined the Kauai Visitors Bureau in 1997 and will retire on April 20.

Kanoho "built one of the most enduring records of service in Hawaii's tourism industry," HVCB said.

"We are deeply grateful to Sue



Samira Siale

Kanoho, whose decades of leadership helped establish a foundation of trust and credibility that will continue

to shape this work for years to come," said Salā.

Accor Trafficking

continued from page 1

broken down into pairs: an underage model and an unrelated adult male in one room. The requests were made at around 250 Accor-branded hotels in more than 20 countries, Grizzly said.

"Of the over 50 Accor hotels that responded, a shocking 80% cooperated by providing quotes, confirming reservations, agreeing to arrange condoms and alcohol, or engaging substantively without raising safeguarding concerns," the report said. "Despite our efforts to raise child and sex trafficking red flags, some hotels even proactively suggested features like a king-sized bed for an underage girl and unrelated adult male or promised to create a romantic vibe environment."

Grizzly said to test the responses and compare findings, the company reached out to hotels not affiliated with Accor in the same regions as requests made of Accor hotels using "the exact same emails," and "found a meaningfully lower overall response rate, and less willingness to accommodate our requests."

The analytics firm said "out of all the Accor hotels we contacted, only a single one, namely Mercure Hurghada, referred to human rights policies and declined our requests appropriately—only after we requested to put condoms in the rooms after an initial confirmation," the Grizzly Research report said.

Grizzly Research said that following reports of forcible deportation of more than 19,500 Ukrainian children to Russia since 2022—an act the report points out is a war crime—the firm adjusted its approach to Accor hotels in Russia.

According to non-government orga-

nizations, one in 10 "rescued orphans faced sexual exploitation, including rape and forced pregnancies to create 'future Russian soldiers'" and that "hotels are being used to offer temporary stay for the kidnapped Ukrainian children," Grizzly said.

Instead of seeking to book rooms for underage models and adult men, Grizzly investigators submitted accommodation requests for 14- to 17-year-old Ukrainian orphan girls who were meant to be adopted by Russians.

"Every Russian Accor location we reached agreed to host Ukrainian children whose origins in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory were communicated to the hotel, whose status as orphans or as children separated from parents in Ukrainian government-controlled areas was understood, and whose placement in Russian adoptive families was the explicit purpose of their stay. Hotel staff accommodated the arrangements anyway," the report said.

Grizzly continued: "When we explicitly inquired, all Russian hotels agreed to keep the arrangement confidential, including from the Accor's head office

in France. We find this especially concerning."

In the report, Grizzly Research also analyzed court rulings, police enforcement, local media, social media and guest reviews describing "sexual exploitation and organized prostitution in Accor's hotels" and found "several concerning reports," Grizzly said.

The company added: "These cases on their own do not necessarily imply systemic wrongdoing by Accor, its subsidiaries and local hotel operators. Frankly, in a company of Accor's size some bad things are bound to happen over the years even with good prevention measures." However, "after our email investigation we are more concerned that the past reported cases could hint at a more systemic risk at the company as opposed to isolated instances."

Accor has opened its own investigation into the claims outlined in the March 19 report from Grizzly, the company said in a statement.

"At this stage, and following the publication of this report, the Group is conducting a detailed internal investigation and has hired an external

firm to verify the cited facts," Accor said. "The conclusions of these verifications will be made public. Should any of these allegations be confirmed, the Group would take all appropriate measures and reserve the right to prosecute parties involved in such practices."

Grizzly Research dedicated a portion of the report to digging into Accor's alleged ties to Jeffrey Epstein, noting that longtime CEO and Chairman of Accor, Sébastien Bazin, was mentioned in an email between Epstein and French conductor, composer and pianist Frédéric Chaslin wherein Bazin allegedly told Chaslin he knew Epstein.

Though the emails did not allude to any wrongdoing by Bazin, nor did they prove that Bazin knew Epstein, Grizzly said "the relationship between Accor and Epstein appears to go a lot deeper than this."

In its statement, Accor said "Bazin met Jeffrey Epstein once, over twenty years ago, in a professional context during a meeting that brought together several investors."

To read the full Grizzly Research report, click [here](#). To read Accor's full statement, click [here](#).

GMID

continued from page 1

role in bringing people together to share ideas, build understanding and move the world forward. Our ability to shape communities through positive economic and societal impact is our best story and our people are our best resource."

Developed by EIC in partnership with Oxford Economics, the *Global Economic Significance of Business Events Study* is designed to provide updated, credible data on the industry's global contribution including jobs, business

activity and community impact.

"Together, GMID and the economic significance study create a unified opportunity for our global community to tell a stronger, more consistent story about the value of business events," Calvert added. "This is our moment to demonstrate not only what we do, but why it matters."

EIC invites all sectors of the business events ecosystem to take part in GMID 2026 and help amplify the industry's global impact via campaigns, events, social media postings and more.

"Global Meetings Industry Day be-

longs to every part of our ecosystem—from planners and suppliers to destinations, educators and corporate leaders," said Stephanie Harris, President of the Incentive Research Foundation and 2026 EIC Board Chair. "When we show up together, we demonstrate the true scale and influence of our industry, and we inspire those in our industry—those who can be our best champions."

The GMID initiative began with Canadian Meetings Industry Day, which morphed into North American Meetings Industry Day in 2015 and finally GMID the following year.

Find more information [here](#).

NEWS

National Cherry Blossom Festival Signifies Spring in D.C.

By Todd McElwee

This time of year, Washington, D.C., tosses aside the red and the blue—and all the turbulence that comes with the dreary political climate—for the serenity of spring sunshine and pink blooming trees.

Running from March 20–April 12, the National Cherry Blossom Festival commemorates the 1912 gift of 3,000 cherry trees from Mayor Yukio Ozaki of Tokyo to Washington, D.C. Organized by the National Cherry Blossom Festival, Inc., a 501(c)(3) organization, the annual events draws 1.6 million attendees to the capital.

There are more than 3,700 cherry blossom trees along the National Mall and more than 18,000 on National Park Service property within Washington, D.C., Destination DC said.

Events DC is a 2026 Leadership Circle Sponsor, as is ANA, All Nippon Airways. Destination DC provides promotion, both domestically and internationally, with its Visitor Experience team manning the official phone line for the annual celebration.

“Spring in Washington, D.C. is truly something special, and the National Cherry Blossom Festival captures that energy in a way that resonates around

the world,” said Elliott L. Ferguson II, President & CEO of Destination DC. “While it’s a beautiful celebration of the season, it’s also a powerful economic driver for our city—bringing visitors to DC’s hotels, restaurants and neighborhoods, and supporting the local businesses that make our destination so vibrant.”

“For many visitors, the Festival sets the tone for a spring trip—a chance to experience Washington at its most photogenic and joyful,” said Diana Mayhew, President & CEO of the National Cherry Blossom Festival. “Whether you’re planning a weekend escape or a milestone trip, the month-long event offers moments that feel both

intimate and distinctly D.C. It’s the kind of unique and bucket-list experience travelers plan around.”

A source of civic pride, the festival is celebrated across the District. Activations include the Blossom

Kite Festival at the Washington Monument; Petalpalooza, an arts and music festival at the Navy Yard; and Pink Tie Party at Union Station. The Washington Capitals, Spirit, Nationals, Wizards and D.C. United have all adopted cherry blossom themed uniforms.

On April 11, the National Cherry

Blossom Festival Parade will march down Constitution Avenue. It is presented by Events DC.

“The National Cherry Blossom Festival Parade is the nation’s most beloved springtime parade,” organizers said. “A procession of pink and petals, giant helium balloons, stunning floats, electrifying celebrity performances and more than 3,000 participants from across the country parade down the iconic Constitution Avenue. Marching bands from across the country also bring their drumlines, bass, and dance teams.”

On March 27, 1912, First Lady Helen Herron Taft and Viscountess Iwa Chinda, wife of the Japanese ambassador, planted the first two trees from Japan on the north bank of the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park, National Cherry Blossom Festival said. Children reenacted the initial planting and other activities, holding the first “festival” in 1927. Civic groups helped expand the festivities in 1935. The Festival expanded to two weeks in 1994, Growing again in 2012, the 100-year anniversary was marked with a five-week celebration.

First Ladies Mamie Eisenhower Lady Bird Johnson, Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush and Michelle Obama have all been involved.

In Washington, D.C. it’s time to smell the...well, see the cherry blossoms.

Find more information [here](#).

There are more than 3,700 cherry blossom trees along the National Mall and more than 18,000 on National Park Service property within Washington, D.C., Destination DC said.



NEWS

Springfield Voters to Consider Tax Increase for Convention Center

Second Time Issue Will Appear on Ballot

By Jonathan Trager

Voters in Springfield, Missouri, will soon decide on a hotel tax increase to fund an expansion and renovation of the Springfield Expo Center, the second time in five months the issue will be considered.

The measure on the April 7 ballot would increase Springfield's hotel license tax from 5% to 8%, an increase that sunsets after 35 years. That would make the total lodging tax rate 16.1%, with collections beginning on July 1.

In an interview with *USAE*, Mark Hecquet, President & CEO of Visit Springfield, said the current expo center was never built out properly. The new funding would be used to triple the size of the current facility, he added.

"Frankly, the city haven't invested in it since then," Hecquet said. "As a result, we have a facility that needs major help if it's going to be a major economic driver for the city, as it was intended to be."

Last November, voters narrowly defeated a similar proposal by just 382

votes. However, only 7% of Springfield's voting population cast votes on the measure.

Hecquet noted there was no informational campaign or outreach to residents before the last vote. By contrast, for the past four months the city and Visit Springfield has embarked on an outreach effort and there's now another advocacy campaign driven by private individuals and businesses.

"I think we first want to make sure everyone is informed and will be an informed voter," Hecquet said. "If this is something city residents don't

want, so be it. In my role, tourism is the world I live in and we're charged with it continuing to thrive, and I'd be pretty devastated [if it didn't pass]. The concern here is the cost of doing nothing."

A report from Hunden Partners, a destination development advisory firm, recommends a facility with 125,000 square feet in event space, including a 65,000-square-foot exhibition hall, a 30,000-square-foot ballroom, a 14,000-square-foot junior ballroom, 16,000 square feet of

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Women's History

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historic hotels since 2020. Orr herself has been with HHA for five years, and through her work pulling out women's histories at member hotels, she's found some interesting patterns, she told *USAE*.

"Like any historian, you become familiar with the content, and then you start to see patterns," Orr said. "When I was putting together a press release to talk about women's history and historic hotels, I saw this pattern of a few different kinds of experiences at the hotels."

Orr said women's histories at historic hotels could be broken down into three main categories: women who were using hotels for their public

spaces, to have dinner or rent a room; women who worked in hotels; and upper class women who owned, built or managed a hotel, who were sometimes wives or daughters of wealthy men able to finance a hotel project.

Orr said historically "hotels were both very conservative spaces, but also places where conventionality could be challenged."

Within the histories that HHA highlights, women have been architects, business owners, managers, teachers and instructors, and exceptional guests. There have been many firsts—including California's first licensed female architect, Julia Morgan, who was responsible for reconstructing the Fairmont San Francisco following the devastation of the 1906 earthquake and fire—and interesting innovations

made by women at hotels.

Wentworth by the Sea, in New Castle, New Hampshire, for example, originally opened as The Wentworth Hotel in 1874. The hotel would often enlist renowned experts as instructors for guests. Two of these experts enlisted in the early-20th century were "trailblazing female celebrities" sharpshooter Annie Oakley and Olympic swimmer Helen Wainwright, HHA said.

Oakley taught gun-handling lessons and exhibited her "incredible marksmanship" and horseback riding skills. In 1925, Wainwright taught swimming classes and gave special demonstrations to guests in the property's saltwater pool.

For Orr, one particular pair of women stands out, she told *USAE*.

Florence Molloy and Mabel MacLeay were entrepreneurs in Boulder, Colorado, who ran a successful taxi business from an office at the Hotel Boulderado in the early 20th century.

According to Historic Hotels: "In 1922, two entrepreneurial women began operating their successful taxi business from an office at Hotel Boulderado, which opened in Boulder, Colorado, in 1909. The story of Florence Molloy and Mabel MacLeay can be traced to the 1910s, when the two women met in Syracuse, New York. Both were married previously, and census records state they were either divorced from or widowed by their husbands by the time they moved out west. What is known is that they became good friends in New York and moved to Colorado together by 1918.

"The women were excellent drivers, and to make money, they started a small scenic tour business with a Cadillac 8, showing tourists the beauty of Colorado between Estes Park and Nederland. During the Flu Pandemic of 1918, Molloy and MacLeay saw a need for taxi services and then, as the community rebounded, their work blossomed into a thriving transportation company. By 1922, the

Molloy-MacLeay Taxi Company moved into Hotel Boulderado."

"They took advantage of a period of time that we're familiar with: a pandemic," Orr said. "We think of all the businesses and all the changes and developments that we've seen to the economy since the pandemic, and the evolution there. Well, they were part of the earlier evolution in 1918."

The pair served the community for the next five years, providing rides to guests anywhere within Boulder for \$0.25 per ride. In 1927, they sold their business and opened a dude ranch on Gold Hill in Boulder. It eventually became the Colorado Mountain Ranch and is still in operation today.

Activism has also been alive and well at hotels throughout history, Orr said, and some hotels have been proactive in their uplifting of these histories.

"I like the story of activism," Orr said, pointing to the Skirvin Hilton hotel in Oklahoma City where Civil Rights activist and teacher Clara Luper held a sit-in on the property to protest the hotel's segregation in the 1960s.

"Decades later, the Skirvin Hilton is honoring this history, this anti-segregation activism that Clara Luper did at their hotel," Orr said. "They actually hired an artist to do a sculpture of Clara Luper, and they've been very open [about that history]. I think it's fascinating that hotel is embracing that history; they're not ashamed of it. It's part of American history. They're proud of that. They're proud of what they did to tell that story."

Bringing out these stories of women's history is crucial, said Orr.

"I think it's important to focus on them, and give them that marquee, that banner head positioning—even if it's just one month out of the year—and make sure that they aren't overlooked," Orr said. "That they aren't forgotten. Because these stories are important. They have lessons for us today."

Nashville Convention Center Authority Approves Easement for Underground Tunnel

By Jonathan Trager

The Music City Convention Center Authority has approved a motion allowing Elon Musk's The Boring Company (TBC) access to and use of an easement along the west side of the Music City Center (MCC) property for an underground transit system.

The Authority greenlit the measure regarding the Music City Loop on March 24. Tunneling beneath private property requires written permission from the property owner in the form of an easement.

If constructed, the 9.5-mile connector route would run adjacent to the convention center along 8th Avenue.

"Based on the planned tunnel route, we anticipated this need, but

we also wanted more information," said MCC President & CEO Charles Starks. "Getting our questions answered directly by The Boring Company helped us move forward with this agreement."

The Music City Loop project was officially announced by Gov. Bill Lee and TBC in July 2025. The proposed tunnel network would connect the downtown core to Nashville International Airport (BNA).

The proximity of the tunnel would allow the convention center to have a station along the route, but a separate motion and agreement by the Authority would be required prior to station construction.

"We look forward to having more discussions with them to determine if a tunnel station is the right fit for our facility," said Starks.

NEWS

Caesars Entertainment Opens The Vanderpump Hotel on Las Vegas Strip

By Todd McElwee

There's a new name on the Las Vegas Strip.

A collaboration between television star and entrepreneur Lisa Vanderpump and Caesars Entertainment, The Vanderpump Hotel is now open and accepting reservations for May arrivals. The reimagined boutique property replaces The Cromwell.

The Vanderpump Hotel marks its namesake's first foray into hotels and builds on her expanding Las Vegas footprint. It is home to Soleia, formerly Drai's Beachclub & Nightclub, which serves as both the resort pool and as a dedicated event space offering sweeping views of The Strip.

"Taking the next step from restaurateur to hotelier and partnering once again with Caesars Entertainment on another extraordinary project has been such an exciting chapter for me," said Vanderpump. "Our vision was to create a room that feels like a true retreat, a calming escape just steps from the energy and excitement of the casino floor. The guest rooms are as beautiful as they are serene."

Caesars Entertainment said The Vanderpump Hotel houses a new kind of boutique experience for meetings and events profession-

als—one that blends high design, intimate scale and exclusive VIP programming for groups seeking something distinctly elevated on the Las Vegas Strip and in proximity to CAESARS FORUM.

The property features 188 guest rooms and suites, designed by Vanderpump and her business partner Nick Alain, featuring a mix of moss-green hues and touches of dusty lilac, creating what a release called a "soothing palette with soft textures that encourage relaxation." Caesars Entertainment added that in addition to the guest rooms, Vanderpump will extend her signature aesthetic to the hotel reception and check-in area, common public areas, and all-new lounge.

In Las Vegas, Vanderpump's collection of venues includes Vanderpump Cocktail Garden at Caesars Palace, Vanderpump à Paris at Paris Las Vegas, and the recently opened Pinky's by Vanderpump at Flamingo Las Vegas, located just steps from The Vanderpump Hotel.

"We are beyond excited to welcome The Vanderpump Hotel into our Las Vegas portfolio. Its unique design and elevated hospitality will deliver a completely new experience that is unmistakably Lisa Vanderpump—an exceptional entrepreneur and visionary restaurateur," said Kelly Gleeson Smith, Sr. Vice President of Sales at Caesars Entertainment. "With Soleia set atop this new boutique hotel, our clients gain even more opportunities to wow their attendees and create lasting impressions. This is exactly why our signature one contract, one contact approach is so effective—it empowers planners to be creative across our entire Las Vegas portfolio."

Find more information [here](#).



On March 23, Caesars Entertainment announced The Vanderpump Hotel is open and accepting reservations for May arrivals. The reimagined boutique property replaces The Cromwell on the Las Vegas Strip. Shown here is Lisa Vanderpump at the hotel.

Springfield

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meeting space, and an outdoor plaza, according to the *Springfield Citizen*. The report was presented to the Springfield City Council last summer.

The study also calls for a 400-room hotel connected to the building estimated to cost \$209 million, plus an additional 600 hotel rooms within walking distance.

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Sandals to Invest \$200M in Three Jamaica Resorts

Investment Follows Hurricane Melissa Destruction

By Jordan Bradley

Sandals Resorts International announced plans to invest \$200 million in three of its resorts in Jamaica following the aftermath of Hurricane Melissa.

The storm made landfall in October 2025. In the aftermath, Sandals reported that five of its Jamaica properties were able to reopen by December, but the Sandals Montego Bay, Sandals Royal Caribbean, and the Sandals South Coast properties remained closed.

"As restoration efforts have advanced on the three resorts, the company has identified an opportunity to undertake a more comprehensive transformation aligned with its Sandals 2.0 vision," the company said.

Sandals' representatives said the reinvestment in the properties will create reimagined properties and new guest experiences.

"The opportunity to completely reimagine three resorts at this scale, with full focus and without compromising the guest experience, is extraordinarily rare," said Adam Stewart, Executive Chair-

man of Sandals. "With our doors closed, we were given something we almost never have in hospitality, a true blank canvas and having that clarity changed everything. We spent time walking the properties, speaking with our team and thinking about our guests. At a pivotal moment, it became clear: we shouldn't simply restore what was there. We should dream bigger."

Sandals said the extended renovations will "unfold across many aspects of the guest experience," with new accommodation categories, redesigned resort pools, refreshed public spaces, and expanded culinary offerings from new food and beverage concepts.

The resorts are now expected to reopen towards the end of the year, with the Sandals South Coast expected to reopen on November 18. Both the Sandals Montego Bay and Royal Caribbean properties scheduled to reopen on December 18.

"When we welcome our guests back, they'll see the transformation and they'll feel exactly why we chose to use this moment to create something worthy of their loyalty," Stewart said.

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Identity is Defined by Imagination, Belief and Repetition



DEK: “Possibility begins the moment you decide who you are becoming, regardless of where you are standing,” says Magie Cook, a keynote speaker at MPI’s World Education Congress, June 2-4 in San Antonio.

By Blair Potter

Dr. Magie Cook spent the first 18 years of her life behind barbed wire in an orphanage. But mentally, she refused to live there.

“I built a small cave on a mountain canyon near the orphanage. That cave became my sanctuary,” she says. “In that space, I would future cast. I would imagine myself as already successful. I would think and feel as if I was already living in a place without fear.”

Cook, CEO and founder of Magie Cook International and a keynote speaker at MPI’s 2026 World Education Congress (WEC), June 2-4 in San Antonio, says that although she had never lived outside the fence, she rehearsed her future identity daily. Her WEC keynote is sponsored by Monterey Meetings in partnership with The Keynote Curators.

“That experience taught me that identity is not defined by environment,” she says. “It is defined by imagination, belief and repetition. Possibility begins the moment you decide who you are becoming, regardless of where you are standing.”

Cook, a visionary entrepreneur, internationally recognized speaker and expert in business and personal development who will help WEC at-

tendees reframe adversity as a catalyst for strategic advantage, founded All Natural Fresh Salsas & Dips with just \$800 and later sold it alongside Garden Fresh to Campbell’s Soup for \$231 million. She says her purpose and her why at the beginning was fueled by something very personal.

Awareness transforms us

“My father once told me that I would never amount to anything, that I would die in prison and with AIDS. Those were his exact words. I was on fire to prove him wrong,” she says. “But what I later realized is that I was building from fear. Fear can push you, but it can only take you so far. When my father passed away, I had a defining moment. I asked myself, ‘Who am I going to prove wrong now?’ That question changed everything. I understood that my salsa company was not the destination. It was a steppingstone. It was preparing me for something bigger.”

That was also the moment she changed her name from “Maggie” to “Magie.”

“It symbolized identity,” she says. “I was no longer building to prove someone wrong. I was building to become who I was meant to be.”

While Cook believes adversity refines us, rather than diminishes us, she says adversity alone is not transforming.

“Awareness transforms us,” she says. “When most people face a setback, they get stuck in the problem. They replay the pain instead of reframing the meaning. I train myself to ask

powerful questions: ‘What are three assumptions I am making about this setback?’ ‘What if the opposite were true?’ ‘What is one thing I can control right now?’ and ‘Who will I become based on the choice I make next?’”

The difference, according to Cook, is understanding that while we can’t always control what happens to us, we always control who we become because of it.

“Transformation begins the moment we choose identity over circumstance,” she says.

Rise, rebuild and reimagine

Cook developed the 3R Framework—Resourceful, Resilient and Relentless—to “rise, rebuild and reimagine” who she was and who she can be because her entire life has been a practice of those three core behaviors.

“When I looked back at the patterns that led to success in both my personal life and my business, I realized those three qualities were always present,” she says. “Resourcefulness means asking, ‘What do I have right now that I can use?’ Resilience means deciding, ‘This will not define me.’ Relentlessness means committing to move forward even when it is uncomfortable. Anyone can begin applying the 3R Framework immediately. In a challenge, identify one resource you still have, decide who you are choosing to be in this moment and take one relentless action forward, no matter how small. Momentum follows identity.”

So how does one build from a place of identity instead of a place of fear? Cook believes it’s important to understand that your circumstances are temporary, but your identity is powerful.

“Instead of asking, ‘How do I get out of this?’ ask, ‘Who do I need to become to rise above this?’ and step into the role with inspired action,” she says. “Focus on becoming resourceful with what you have, resilient in the face of rejection and relentless in consistent action. You do not need perfect conditions. You need a clear identity and daily disciplined action. Small courageous steps, repeated consistently, compound into transformation.”

Bridging inspiration and action

We’re introducing an exciting new feature to every general session at WEC 2026: an “Inside the Industry” panel

of peers featuring industry commentators live onstage.

“After each keynote or featured speaker, our commentators will ask the kinds of clarifying, practical questions that lead to actionable insights from inside and outside the business event industry,” says Jessie States, vice president of MPI Consulting. “The format is designed to bridge inspiration and action. The commentators’ desk will translate ideas and inspiration into clear next steps, applicable takeaways and realworld context.”

The stage design will feature a dynamic environment that feels more interactive, modern and conversational than in past years.

“The concept supports our aim to exchange passive inspiration with active industry dialogue—and ensure participants leave each general session with deeper clarity, more relevance and tangible actions they can implement right away,” States says.

The time was right to make this general session update based on data that says audiences need something different.

“Last year, we utilized Bishop-McCann’s Joy Index during our general sessions to determine minute-by-minute engagement and sentiment using biometric measurements and facial recognition software,” States says. “The results confirmed what we already believed: Our sessions scored highly, but in order to further deliver sustained engagement, we need to continue to refine the experience. Our ‘Inside the Industry’ commentators will ensure our general sessions are emotionally resonant and immediately actionable.”

Magie Cook looks forward to delivering a message that is both deeply personal and universally applicable at MPI’s 2026 World Education Congress (WEC) in San Antonio, June 2-4, a place that holds special meaning for her because it represents resilience, history and strength.

