



U.S. Travel Association's Destination Capitol Hill was held on April 14–15 in Washington, D.C. Approximately 400 industry advocates participated in the annual event. See story on page 3

Plan Introduced for Meadowlands Convention Center in N.J.

By Jonathan Trager

A long-discussed plan to build a major convention center in the Meadowlands in New Jersey moved forward last week, as project leaders unveiled new details for a multibillion-dollar development they say could reshape the local tourism economy.

The proposal, led by the Meadowlands Chamber, calls for a roughly

\$3 billion complex at the site of the former arena within the Meadowlands Sports Complex, near MetLife Stadium and the American Dream mall.

Plans include a 300,000-square-foot convention center, a 1,000-room hotel, a flexible arena seating up to 6,000 people, and expanded transportation and pedestrian access throughout the complex.

The project's advocates said the

development is designed to operate year-round and attract hundreds of events annually, positioning the region as a popular destination for large-scale meetings and trade shows.

"This is no longer a conceptual conversation," said Jim Kirkos, President & CEO of the Meadowlands Chamber. "The design is complete, the market demand is clear, and the remaining analysis will be finalized this spring."

Supporters argue the project addresses a shortage of convention space in the New York metropolitan area and could complement existing venues rather than compete with them.

State Sen. Paul Sarlo, a key backer of the proposal, said the plan represents a significant opportunity for growth in the region.

Please turn to page 4

AAHOA Hosts Competitions and Sessions at Annual Conference

By Jordan Bradley

The Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA) held its annual conference, AAHOACON26, gathering members from across the country to discuss hospitality at the Philadelphia Convention Center on April 8–10.

During the conference, AAHOA held two sepa-

rate competitions: the Hotel Turnaround Collegiate Championship, and the Tech Pitch Competition.

The Tech Pitch Competition saw eight finalists "try to out-smart, and out-pitch each other" in front of a panel of judges and moderators, "and a crowd of industry power players," AAHOA said. The winning tech was Sadie, a voice AI for

Please turn to page 5

Inside

Page 3
Fire Ignites at Orange County Convention Center

Page 4
Mandarin Oriental, Miami Demolished to Build New Hotel & Residences

Page 5
Industry Movers

Page 6
USAEats: Talking BBQ with Carey Bringle, Owner, Peg Leg Porker

Page 8
Gary Edwards Takes Helm of Sedalia CVB

IGLTA Convention Headed to Greater Miami and Miami Beach in 2027

By Todd McElwee

For the first time, the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) Global Convention is coming to Greater Miami and Miami Beach.

Set for September 27–30, 2027, the event will take place at the Miami Beach Convention Center.

"Greater Miami and Miami Beach are honored to welcome the IGLTA Global

Convention in 2027," said David Whitaker, President & CEO, Greater Miami CVB (GMCVB). "Our community has long been a place where people from all walks of life come to feel welcomed, inspired, and comfortable. Hosting this global gathering reinforces our ongoing commitment to ensuring every visitor feels a true sense of belonging when they are here."

Please turn to page 7

Caesars Means Flavor

Because every great meeting
deserves a taste of greatness.

La Strada - Eldorado
Reno, Nevada



CAESARS
ENTERTAINMENT.

caesarsmeansbusiness.com

HOTS

HOTS Minnesota Meat Raffles... Throughout bars, restaurants and American Legion posts in Minnesota, a charitable gambling event has been supporting local communities since World War II, the Associated Press reports. Service organizations run the events out of a bar or restaurants, raffling off packs of meat in order to use the proceeds from the event to pay for local services and events. The state of Minnesota sets a cap of \$70 per-event prizes, but with meat prices soaring, the Minnesota legislature is considering increasing the cap to

\$200, AP reports. The legislation is a bipartisan effort. "This is probably the best feel-good bill that we have going on in the Legislature right now," said Republican Rep. Jim Nash, lead author of the legislation, in an interview with AP. Nash is expecting a vote in Minnesota's House of Representatives this week and approval from the state Senate soon after. "It's an opportunity for bipartisanship," Nash said. "It's an opportunity to do good things." According to Joe Gifford, commander of American Legion Post 150 in Waconia, Minnesota: "Every dollar we raise here, after we pay our bills, actually goes right back into all those different services for community, veterans, and

active duty military. And the meat raffle is a part of that. It's one of the instruments where we actually draw crowds in on a Friday." HOTS thinks these raffles are a cut above the rest.

✧ ✧ ✧ ✧

HOTS Project Hail Mary... Sony announced on April 16 that its recently released Project Hail Mary starring Ryan Gosling earned a Guinness World Records title for the Highest Altitude IMAX Film Trailer after the company—in partnership with space agency Sent Into Space—broadcast the film's trailer in space on March 14. The trailer was screened on an IMAX screen 101,896 feet above Earth, according to UPI. To complete the feat, Sent Into Space

built a carbon-fiber launch vehicle to get the screen—which was built to operate at sub-zero temperatures—into position for the stunt. Then the company remotely activated the screen to air the Project Hail Mary trailer. "After a lovely spot of sunbathing at the launch site, we completed our pre-flight checks and sent the craft on its merry way into the far reaches of the upper stratosphere," Sent Into Space said. "Here, we remotely activated the IMAX movie screen and aired the Project Hail Mary trailer against the blackness of space the curvature of the Earth and the thin blue line of its atmosphere!" HOTS thinks the film's marketing firm deserves a bonus for this one.

WEEKLY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS CVBs AND HOTELS

USAE

PUBLISHER & EXECUTIVE EDITOR 1982 – 2021
Anne Daly Heller

PUBLISHER-EMERITUS
Ross E. Heller
ross@usaenews.com

PUBLISHER
James Heller
james@usaenews.com

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER
Todd McElwee
todd@usaenews.com

MANAGING EDITOR
Jonathan Trager
jon@usaenews.com

HOTEL EDITOR
Jordan Bradley
jordan@usaenews.com

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Diane Nichols
dkn@usaenews.com

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
Danielle Erbe

MARKETING & CIRCULATION DIRECTOR
Christy Pumphrey
christy@usaenews.com

Fire Ignites at Orange County Convention Center

By Jonathan Trager

A small fire broke out at a booth inside the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Florida, ahead of a major beauty event, prompting a response from fire crews but causing no reported injuries.

The fire was reported around 3 a.m. on April 15 on the exhibition floor, where preparations were underway for Ulta Beauty World, a large consumer expo expected to draw about 3,000 attendees. Officials said the blaze originated in a single booth and was quickly contained.

Sprinklers activated during the in-

cident helped extinguish the flames, limiting the fire damage to one booth, though nearby exhibits sustained water damage, according to authorities.

"Overnight, a small isolated fire impacted a limited number of booths at Ulta Beauty World," Ulta Beauty said in a statement. "We're grateful to share that everyone is safe and no injuries have been reported." Fire rescue crews responded to the scene and contained the fire to its area of origin, officials said. The cause remains under investigation.

Despite the incident, the event proceeded as scheduled on April 16. Organizers and convention center

staff worked to assess damage and prepare the exhibit hall in time for attendees.

Ulta Beauty World features more than 200 brand booths, along with demonstrations and panel discussions, making it one of the company's largest consumer-facing events.

Convention center officials said the quick response from first responders and the building's fire suppression systems helped prevent more significant damage and disruption.

"The OCCC team is working with its clients to assess the damage and restore the exhibit hall," a convention center spokesperson said.

U.S. Travel Welcomes 400 to D.C. for Destination Capitol Hill

By Todd McElwee

The travel industry called on Congress April 14–15 during U.S. Travel Association's Destination Capitol Hill.

Nearly 400 association members and industry advocates representing 49 states met with members of Congress to advocate for policy changes the host said will shape the future of the industry.

Travel advocates made three specific requests to Congress:

- Cosponsor and pass legislation to ensure air traffic controllers and TSA officers are paid during funding lapses to prevent disruptions to the economy and the air travel system.
- Halt proposed changes to the ESTA application and delay or limit the proposed Visa Integrity Fee.
- Cosponsor S. 3220 / H.R. 6128, the VISIT USA Act, which would transfer \$160 million in surplus Travel Promotion Funds to Brand USA to increase visitation to the U.S. for major upcoming events and restore our lost share



Geoff Freeman, President & CEO, U.S. Travel Association (left), with Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy, recipient of the Travel Champion Award, during U.S. Travel Association's Destination Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

of international visitors.

Sen. John Barasso (R-WY), Sen. Katie Britt (R-AL), Sen. Catherine Cortez

Masto (D-NV), Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-NV), Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-AK) and Sen.

Please turn to page 4

To ensure publication, all Letters to the Editor must include a telephone number and mailing address in order to verify authenticity. Complete copies of USAE are available for all paid subscribers online. Log onto <https://usaenews.com> and locate the log-in and password boxes. Specific log-in and password information is provided to subscribers via e-mail. To receive another copy, please contact our circulation dept. at christy@usaenews.com.

USAE is published weekly except the week of Christmas Day by USAE, Inc. Subscription rate is \$80/year; add \$65 in Canada and Mexico. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to USAE, PO Box 15009, Chevy Chase, MD 20825.

usaenews.com

USAE, Inc.
PO Box 15009, Chevy Chase, MD 20825
703.898.3528 • ©2026 by USAE, Inc.

NEWS

Mandarin Oriental, Miami Demolished to Build New Hotel & Residences

By Jordan Bradley

The 23-story Mandarin Oriental, Miami hotel on Miami's Brickell Key was demolished in a controlled implosion on April 12.

The demolition itself lasted less than 20 seconds and included an adjacent six-story parking structure.

The destruction of the Mandarin hotel will make way for the forthcoming new-build The Residences at Mandarin Oriental, Miami, "an ultra-luxury development comprising private residences and a new hotel," owner Swire Properties said.

The demolition was "part of a carefully orchestrated demolition process that required nearly two years of planning and coordination among specialized experts," Swire said, including the BG Group LLC, Controlled Demolition Inc., Moss Construction, and the City of Miami.

A crowd of spectators gathered a safe distance away to watch the 8:30 a.m. demolition, taking videos on their phone and cheering, the *Associated*

Press reported.

The Mandarin Oriental, Miami hotel first opened in November 2000, hosting a grand opening ceremony on March 31, 2001, according to local history blog miamihistory.com.

The new Mandarin Oriental, Miami property will be comprised of two towers: the South Tower will feature 228 private residences, and the North Tower will feature 70 private residences, 28 "turnkey hotel collection residences"

and 121 hotel guest rooms, Swire said.

"Mandarin Oriental has been a defining part of Brickell Key for more than two decades, and the brand's legacy will live on with the development of two towers set to transform residential living and hospitality in Miami," said Dave Martin, President of Swire Properties. "With demolition now behind us, our team is eager to get going with vertical construction as we entertain buyers from across the U.S.

and around the world."

According to Swire, the next step in the process is removing the debris from the hotel's demolition, which the company anticipates will take up to six months. Once debris removal is completed, Swire Properties will hold a groundbreaking ceremony later this year.

The forthcoming The Residences at the Mandarin Oriental, Miami is expected to open in 2030.



The Mandarin Oriental, Miami first opened in late 2000.



The Mandarin Oriental, Miami was demolished on April 12. Photo courtesy of Alain Martinez

Nonprofits Exempted from Washington Sales Tax on Live Presentations

By Todd McElwee

Washington State has passed a nonprofit exemption from its retail sales tax on live presentations, which goes into effect on July 1.

Contracts entered into prior to October 1, 2025, are exempt from the new retail sales tax through June 30.

In October, the Apple State extended its retail sales tax to cover most live presentations, including conferences, lectures, workshops, and courses delivered in person or virtually. Concerned with the policy, ASAE sent a

letter to legislative leaders urging them to pass a nonprofit exemption.

"As nonprofit organizations, associations reinvest any revenues raised from live events directly back into their missions," Mary Kate Cunningham, CAE, Chief Public Policy and Governance Officer, ASAE, said in an Advocacy Alert. "A sales tax on live presentations diverts revenue away from the education, workforce development, and community service activities associations lead on."

The exemption was included in the final version of SB 6346 that

was signed by Gov. Bob Ferguson on March 30.

Visit Seattle noted temporary staffing is not subject to retail sales tax if performed by an independent contractor, and effective January 1, 2029, retail sales tax imposed on all live presentations is scheduled to be repealed.

Both Visit Seattle and ASAE said the broader legislation may be subject to potential lawsuits or challenges that could influence implementation of SB 6346. There is language in the law protecting the retail sales tax exemption for live presentations given by nonprofit organizations from being impacted.

Washington State's Department of Revenue previously said: "Starting Oct. 1, 2025, advertising services are subject to Washington retail sales tax. If you sell 'live presentations'

in Washington, you must collect and submit sales tax. Live presentations include, but are not limited to, lectures, seminars, workshops, or courses where participants attend either in person or via the Internet or telecommunications equipment that allows audience members and the presenter or instructor to give, receive, and discuss information with each other in real time."

"Associations rely on live presentations and events to deliver professional development, continuing education, and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange that members cannot get elsewhere," Cunningham wrote. "The nonprofit exemption ensures that associations can continue to invest in their members and the communities they serve without the added burden of a sales tax on their core educational activities."

US Travel

continued from page 3

John Thune (R-SD) were amongst the legislators fly-in participants met with.

U.S. Travel recognized Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Rep. Mark Amodei (R-NV) with Travel Champion Awards for their contributions to the growth of America's travel industry.

The annual honor is presented to members of Congress and Executive Branch officials for their outstanding leadership and service and invaluable contributions to America's travel industry.

"America saw that travel is much more than just getting from point A to point B during the government shut-downs, and we'll see it again with the

impact America 250, the World Cup and the Olympics will bring to every corner of our country," said Geoff Freeman, President & CEO, U.S. Travel. "But we still have work to do to capture these opportunities. Sec. Duffy, Sen. Klobuchar, and Rep. Amodei are leading the way, ensuring that we modernize our travel infrastructure, strengthen aviation security and improve the traveler experience to keep the U.S. globally competitive."

The Travel Hero Awards are awarded in recognition of the steadfast dedication, service and resilience of frontline workers who exemplify the highest standards of public service. Air Traffic Controllers and TSA officers were recognized for their work while not being paid federal funding lapses.

Find more information here.

Meadowlands

continued from page 1

"The Meadowlands has always been a cornerstone of New Jersey's economy," Sarlo said. "This plan shows what's possible when we invest in smart planning and create a clear path forward."

The proposal is expected to be reviewed by state officials in the coming months as planners finalize

traffic studies, financial models, and construction strategies.

Separately, legislation introduced in New Jersey would require the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority to conduct a feasibility study and report its findings to lawmakers within a year, adding another step in the review process.

Developers have said construction could begin as early as 2026, with the facility potentially opening later in the decade.

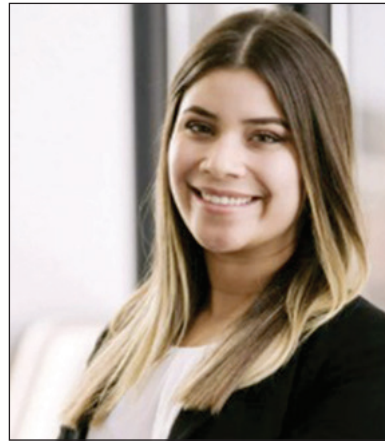
Industry Movers



Travis Lunn is now Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Tampa's President. He oversees brand execution, financial matters and administration and direction. Lunn brings more than 25 years of gaming and hospitality leadership experience to this role. Most recently, for MGM Resorts International, he served as president & COO of Mandalay Bay, The W, Luxor and Four Seasons. His career includes leadership roles at The Borgata Casino.



Geoff Young is now Managing Director of Noelle in Nashville. He joins the property after serving as managing director at The Sanderling Resort in the Outer Banks. Young spent over a decade with Benchmark, a hospitality company, where he held managing director roles at several properties, including Lake Arrowhead Resort & Spa in California and Snow King Resort in Wyoming. Outside of work, he enjoys 1970s rock.



Tierra Hubbard is joining the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) as Sr. Manager for State Government Affairs. Hubbard will support state-based advocacy for the eastern half of the United States. Hubbard worked in Minnesota's advocacy circles, serving on behalf of nonprofits, local governments and Fortune 500 companies. She recently served as a lobbyist for public affairs firm Goff Public and coordinated intelligence gathering for law firm Gibson Dunn.



Firas Ghorab is now General Manager of The Bellevue Hotel, part of The Unbound Collection by Hyatt. The 120-year-old hotel is in Philadelphia. He has roughly two decades of hospitality experience. Ghorab joins The Bellevue following his role as general manager of The Sanderling Resort & Spa in the Outer Banks. Prior to that, he served as corporate director of operations of EOS Hospitality, overseeing 11 properties.

[See More Industry Movers](#)

AAHOA

continued from page 1

the hospitality world. For hotels, Sadie offers solutions for streamlining front desk operations, by handling "routine inquiries and repetitive tasks" over the phone, according to the tech's official website, helps make reservations, acts as a 24/7 concierge for guests, and provides multi-language support.

The companies Al Lead for Hospitality, Sami Hilal, drove the pitch and took home the award: a commemorative plaque and a free booth at AAHOACON27.

The collegiate championship was an industry-first competition, AAHOA said, and challenged university students to take on the role of hotel owner, "making real-world operational and investment decisions to turn around underperforming assets."

Twelve teams of two college students participated in the first year of the competition. Teams were from Cornell University, Florida International University, two teams participated from Grand Valley State University, Kennesaw State University, Northwestern State University, Oklahoma State University, Temple University, University of Houston, University of South Carolina, and Virginia Tech.

Over the course of the competition, teams were assigned "financially identical" hotels that operated in the same

market "with matching key performance indicators," AAHOA said. Then, using HOTELsim, a simulation platform powered by Russell Partnership Technology, "students implemented ownership strategies designed to enhance valuation, performance, and long-term profitability."

The team from University of South Carolina was awarded the People's Choice Award, and the two teams from Grand Valley State University were awarded the Judges' Championship Trophy.

"The future of hospitality depends on preparing the next generation to think and lead like owners," said Rahul Patel, AAHOA Chairman.

"The future of hospitality depends on preparing the next generation to think and lead like owners," said Rahul Patel, AAHOA Chairman. "This competition pushes students to make strategic, data-driven decisions while understanding the real responsibilities that come with ownership. Their creativity, engagement, and business acumen are inspiring, and AAHOA is proud to support their journey into our industry."

Over the course of the annual conference AAHOA made time to gather women and young professionals at the HerOwnership and the Helping Young Professionals Evolve (HYPE) luncheons, respectively; and announced newly elected board members, including Secretary Dhiren Masters and Chairman Rahul Patel.

The association also distributed awards for hospitality excellence



The Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA) held its annual convention, AAHOACON26, at the Philadelphia Convention Center on April 8-10. The association's Board of Directors held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to open the trade show floor on April 10. Pictured from left: Laura Lee Blake, President and CEO, AAHOA; Pinal S. Patel, Vice Chairman, AAHOA; Kamalesh (KP) Patel, Immediate Past Chair, AAHOA; Rahul Patel, Chairman, AAHOA; and Vimal (Ricky) Patel, Treasurer, AAHOA.

among its members, recognizing six outstanding member hoteliers:

AAHOA Award of Excellence: Vijay Patel, President, A-1 Hospitality Group, Kennewick, Washington

Cecil B. Day Community Service Award: Rishan Patel, CEO & Co-Founder, Alley-Oop Kids, Menlo Park, California

AAHOA Charitable Foundation Outreach Award: Past AAHOA Chairman (1991-92) Hasmukh P. (HP) Rama, Chairman, Auro Hotels, Greenville, South Carolina

Outstanding HerOwnership Award of Excellence: Helen Zaver, Executive Vice President, Principal, Colliers, Atlanta, Georgia

Outstanding HYPE Award of Excellence: Aaryan Patel, Private Equity Associate, Blue Chip Hotels, Wells, Maine

IAHA Independent Hotel of the Year Award: Rest & Relax Inn & Suites, Pensacola, Florida, represented by Mitesh (Tish) Patel, President, Pinnacle Management & Investments, Cantonment, Florida

USAEats

Talking BBQ with Carey Bringle, Owner, Peg Leg Porker



Carey Bringle

Last September, while on a trip with the Nashville CVC, USAE Associate Publisher Todd McElwee enjoyed the sizeable and delicious combo platter and a chat with Bringle during lunch at Peg Leg Porker. They reconnected in the spring to discuss BBQ, Music City and mistakes.

McElwee: What do you hope is the first thing someone notices when entering Peg Leg Porker?

Bringle: I want people to notice the vibe. It is decidedly different from the rest of the BBQ places in Nashville. It is a blues and soul feel that should make you feel at home.

McElwee: Describe your love of BBQ.

Bringle: I started cooking BBQ when I was 12 with my uncle and my grandfather. They were both very influential in my life and my family deeply respected the art of smoking. BBQ is about family and friends gathering together to spend time with each other.

McElwee: What has Nashville meant to you and your company's success?

Bringle: I was born and raised here, so Nashville is deeply personal to me. I have watched the growth and been lucky to help develop blighted areas of

the city and transform those neighborhoods. It is a deeply personal thing for me.

McElwee: What is the most common mistake individuals make when preparing BBQ?

Bringle: People get impatient or fall behind with BBQ. You need time. It is not rocket science but it involves time, temperature, and patience.

McElwee: What do you hope is the primary feeling someone has when leaving Peg Leg Porker?

Bringle: I hope that the feeling someone has when they leave Peg Leg Porker is one of a great overall experience. It's not just about a great meal; it is about every aspect of the customer's time in our restaurant.



Peg Leg Porker's Story

By Todd McElwee

Carey Bringle is a Nashvillian, restauranter, award-winning pitmaster and cancer survivor.

Opened in 2013, Peg Leg Porker's is owned by Carey and Delaniah Bringle. The restaurant is named after Carey, who had his right leg amputated at 17 after battling Osteogenic Sarcoma, a bone cancer.

Peg Leg Porker is known for its juicy, smoked-to-perfection pork ribs drenched with a spicy dry seasoning, after, being smoked. Made

from scratch, playfully made sides include Kool-Aid pickles and pork rind nachos.

"Upon opening its doors in the heart of Nashville, Peg Leg Porker was quickly named one of the hottest BBQ joints in the country by numerous media outlets, including Food Network, The Travel Channel, BBC, Southern Living Magazine, Texas Monthly, GQ, Garden and Gun Magazine, and many more," the organization said.

Find more information [here](#).

See Peg Leg Porker's Pork Rind BBQ Nachos recipe on page 7

"Carey has had a tremendous impact on Nashville's thriving culinary scene," said Deana Ivey President & CEO of Nashville CVC. "His authenticity and welcoming spirit have helped build a restaurant brand that offers not only exceptional barbecue, but also a genuine atmosphere where both locals and visitors feel right at home. Beyond his undeniable talent as a pitmaster, Carey's creativity and dedication to collaborating with and uplifting fellow local culinary talent embody the very best of Nashville's warm and friendly spirit."



NEWS

Boutique and Luxury Lodging Association Announces Conference Programming

By Jordan Bradley

The Boutique and Luxury Lodging Association (BLLA) on April 14 shared more details about the programming for its 2026 Boutique Hotel Investment Conference, including the theme of “The Third Space Renaissance.”

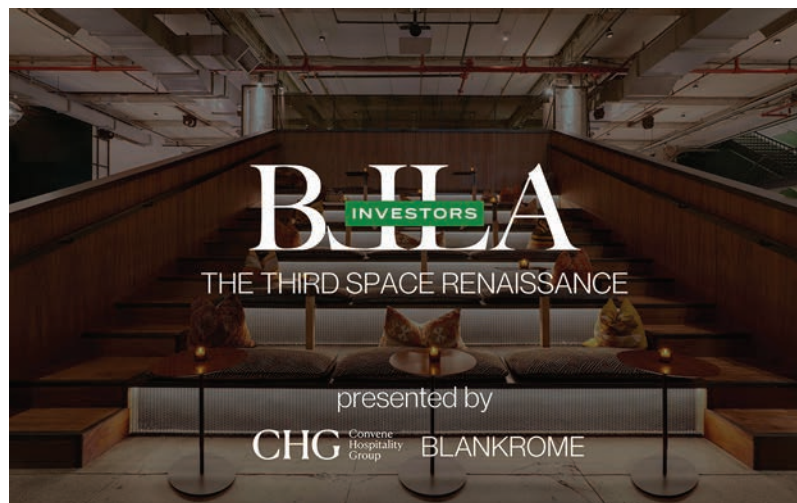
The 2026 conference is scheduled for June 3 at Convene 237 Park Avenue in New York City.

“This year’s theme reflects a broader cultural and capital shift that BLLA has tracked for nearly a decade: the emergence of third spaces as the defining frontier of hospitality investment,” the association said. “Members’ clubs, wellness studios, immersive activations, and community-driven environments are no longer fringe concepts. They are where the most sophisticated operators and investors are placing their attention and their capital.”

BLLA founder and CEO Fran Kiradjian told *USAE* that the annual conference’s theme is “so apropos for right now” because “boutique and luxury hotels are having their day in the sun.”

Third spaces are public spaces for gathering, including churches, cafes, bars, clubs, libraries, gyms, bookstores, parks, theaters, etc. Social media trends and news outlets recently have discussed the need for third spaces in community building, and BLLA’s 2026 conference theme brings that to the forefront in the boutique and luxury hospitality market.

The investment conference’s 2026 programming includes discussions and panels on a wide range of topics, including the intersection of fashion and hospitality “and why that intersection is now one of the most consequential places in the industry to be paying attention to,” the currently-evolving world of branded



residences, the intersection of workspace and hospitality culture, cultural programming and more.

Boutique and luxury hotels have “done a really good job in assessing every square inch of their hotel and being able to do different things, make spaces, make retail,” Kiradjian said.

Guest speakers and panelists at the 2026 conference include professionals from Printemps New York, a French luxury department store that made its debut last March; Mandarin Oriental and Montage hotel brands; Convene Hospitality Group; Park Avenue Artists, a recording studio based in New York; and more.

For Kiradjian and BLLA, the guest speakers at the investment conference make sense—even if they may not

appear aligned on paper.

“Back in 2016–2017 at our conferences, we had [the owners and founders] on our stages that were in fashion, retail food and beverage—you know, craft coffee companies, [as an example]—and everybody was questioning [it],” Kiradjian told *USAE*. “Well, why do you have them here?” Because this is what defines a boutique hotel.”

Kiradjian added: Not only that, but when you partner with these kind of companies, you already do share the same customer. When somebody goes to stay at a boutique hotel, they expect to really feel differently, and so this is what we call the third space renaissance.”

Find more information [here](#) or register to attend [here](#).

IGLTA

continued from page 1

IGLTA said Greater Miami and Miami Beach have been a cornerstone of LGBTQ+ travel for decades. It added that GMCVB is a valued IGLTA Global Partner.

“Greater Miami and Miami Beach have stood with the LGBTQ+ community long before it was popular to do so,” said Meg Ten Eyck, IGLTA Board Chair & CEO of EveryQueer. “There are

very real challenges around the world, but the answer isn’t to step back, it’s to show up. IGLTA is proud to partner with the GMCVB to bring this global gathering to Miami in 2027.”

The 2026 Global Convention is taking place November 17–21 in Seville, Spain. In October, the association reported the 2025 edition in Palm Springs was the largest yet, with approximately 750 delegates and 465 businesses representing 30 countries and territories on hand.

Peg Leg Porker’s Pork Rind BBQ Nachos

Serves Two

Ingredients:

- One 3-ounce bag BBQ Pork Rinds
- 1 cup queso, warmed
- 8 ounces pulled pork, warmed
- ¼ cup Peg Leg Porker (PLP) original sauce, plus more as needed
- ¼ cup thinly sliced pickled jalapeños
- PLP rub, diced tomatoes and sour cream, for garnish (optional)

Instructions:

On a large platter, spread the pork rinds in an even layer. Drizzle with the warm queso and then top with the pulled pork. Drizzle with BBQ sauce and then garnish with the pickled jalapeños. If desired, sprinkle with PLP rub and garnish with diced tomatoes and dollops of sour cream. Serve right away.



NEWS

Gary Edwards Takes Helm of Sedalia CVB

By Jonathan Trager

Gary Edwards has been named the next Executive Director of the Sedalia CVB in Missouri, bringing a long-standing connection to the community into a new role promoting tourism.

Edwards officially began the position April 15 and will work alongside current bureau chief Carolyn Crooker during a transition period ahead of her retirement on July 1.

Edwards said the role allows him to remain active in a community where he has deep personal and professional ties.

"I don't anticipate ever fully retiring," he said. "Staying actively involved in the community has always been

important to me, and I'm excited to bring my experience and passion to the Sedalia CVB."

Holding a Master's of Public Administration from Missouri State University, Edwards served as city administrator in Sedalia from 2011–2017. He also served as city manager in Aransas Pass, Texas, where he helped guide recovery efforts after Hurricane Harvey.

Edwards' career also includes work in media and public relations. He's an award-winning broadcast news director and a former owner of a company that produced political radio advertising across Missouri.

Edwards' connection to Sedalia dates back to his early career as a local radio news director. He has remained

involved in the community through various roles, including producing local history documentaries with his wife.

"Gary's experience, leadership, and deep connection to Sedalia make him an outstanding choice to lead the CVB into the future," CVB President Kyle Herrick said.

In addition to municipal leadership, Edwards has worked on Capitol Hill as a chief of staff and communications director and held roles at the state level.

Crooker said she's confident in the transition in leadership.

"I look forward to working with him during this transition and am confident the organization will continue to thrive under his leadership," she said.



Gary Edwards

The Amelia Earhart of Baseball Touches on Family and Innovation

Audio Books Narrated by AI Voice of Author's Late Son

By Todd McElwee

What's the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about baseball? Chances are neither family nor innovation pop up, yet both are central to the game. Think about it: home is the most important spot on the field, and analytics and rule changes—such as the pitch clock—have reshaped America's pastime as much as anything during its 150-plus years of its existence.

Family and innovation are two of the central themes featured in Robert E. Ingram's *The Amelia Earhart of Baseball*. The new novel is the sequel to *The Genius Who Saved Baseball*, published in 2021, which finds protagonist Charlie Collier as not only baseball's commissioner, but also as the father of Charlotte, a pitcher who becomes the first woman to play in the major leagues. Her middle name is Amelia, and she was drafted by the Seattle Mariners.

Continuing to bring his innovative

and imaginative approach to the game,

Charlie demolishes the longstanding pay structure by eliminating guaranteed contracts and implementing a pay-for-production compensation model.

"Charlie's strategic moves reflect my belief that baseball really is the greatest game of all but can be improved by focusing on creating a more broadly interesting game, improving accessibility and lowering ticket prices with eliminating excessive guaranteed contracts," Ingram told *USAE*. "Pay for production is superior to pay for expectations and reputation."

Family and innovation are most prominently represented with the introduction of a new character: Taylor, who is based on the son of Robert and his wife, Cara Tobias Ingram (formerly of Travel Portland). An actor and voiceover artist, Taylor passed away last year at just 35 years old. His presence is also emblematic of another theme

Robert mentioned when connecting with *USAE*: belief in a higher power.

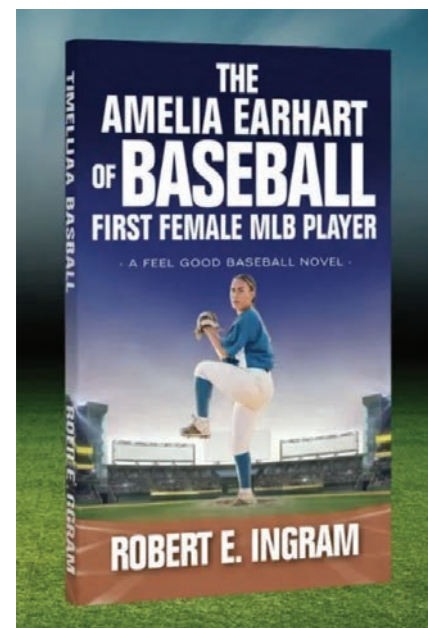
"The character of Taylor is important to me because he is based on our real son, a large presence in any room, humorous, a natural encourager with an infectious smile, always seeking to promote and protect his family and friends," Robert said. "It's tragically bittersweet that Taylor's actual dreams only played out in fiction, my special surprise that he didn't live long enough to read or manifest. We lost our beautiful bright light at age 35 last May. That belief in a higher power is much more than a theme to weave in a novel."

In addition to joining Charlie and Amelia on the page, Taylor will now tell their stories as the

voice of the Charlie Collier series, which will include a third book. Audio versions of both current offerings are in the beginning stages of production, with Taylor reading a few chapters of the first book before his passing. Now, with the assistance of AI, he will bring to life the series.

"Cara and I felt compelled to learn if Taylor's voiceover talent could translate into an AI legacy project," Robert said. "This led me to an engineer living in Qatar, interested in voice-over AI cloning. We sent him several cherished samples of Taylor's voice which he has successfully cloned. We expect the first project will take a few months to complete."

He added: "The third and final book in the Charlie Collier series is underway. Not only am I hearing the voices of the characters I'm creating, now I'm not writing alone, I hear Taylor's voice reading each page. I'm super-excited to honor my talented son's life by



finishing what he started in his acting and voiceover work in L.A. It will be amazing to hear Taylor "reading" my books cover to cover. We were proud of each other. I'm sure tears will flow."

Asked what he wants his readers to walk away with, Robert said:

"I want my readers to chuckle a bit, imagine they are in the scenes. I hope they find the characters likeable, enjoy the short chapters and playful dialogue. I hope they love the action at the ballpark and walk away with a sense of encouragement and a positive attitude about challenges. Also, in the epilogue, my nine life lessons for the nine-inning game are based on events in the stories and are, I'm told, pretty great takeaways. Bottom line: I want readers to have a few hours of entertainment, feel uplifted, inspired by a believable story and want to go see a game!"

Find more information [here](#).



Scene At AAHOACON26



NEWS

Hotel Monroe Embodies Southern Hospitality with Gluten-Free Menu

By Jordan Bradley

The owners of the Hotel Monroe in Monroe, Louisiana, have written a love letter to gluten-free guests through the menu of the property's restaurant, Heirloom.

The hotel, a member of Hilton's Tapestry Collection, was certified 100% Gluten-Free by the Gluten-Free Food Program (GFFP) in September last year, a certification endorsed by the National Celiac Association. It is the only full-service hotel in the United States to receive such a certification, and national publications have been taking a renewed interest in this aspect of the hotel this month, with outlets like *Newsweek*, *Yahoo* and *Travel + Leisure* shouting out the designation.

However, Christie Echols—who owns the hotel alongside her husband, Michael—didn't design Heirloom's menu to be a loud advertisement of gluten-free dishes. Instead, their intention had been to simply provide an outstanding culinary experience that also happens to be gluten free.

"We really don't overemphasize the gluten-free aspect, because that's not our standard," Echols told *USAE*. "We don't want people to perceive

us as just a health nut kind of place. Locally, we really discuss more that we're fine dining, that it's a culinary experience. Of course, it's very easy to figure out that we're entirely gluten free, but we don't want there to be any difference. We want it to be a seamless experience."

The Hotel Monroe's Heirloom menu is inherently southern, featuring local ingredients and classic menu items such as fried green tomatoes, beignets, alligator, and andouille sausage. To make it such with gluten-free ingredients is no easy feat, according to the hotel's executive chef Karen Bennett, who says they are "very stringent with what comes into the hotel."

Echols told *USAE* that the process to receive the certification took several weeks and was marked by a lot of vendor- and item-vetting and communication with the GFFP. Bennett and her staff are regularly auditing their shelves and processes to ensure consistency.

Bennett joined the Hotel Monroe last December, bringing with her unique experiences with alternative diets and menu-building.

Prior to her current role, Bennett was the executive chef with Aramark



Hospitality at Louisiana Tech University for almost a decade, where the athletic department's performance coach required athletes to adhere to gluten-free diets. Before even that, Bennett was diving into alternative diets, she said. At one point, she took a plant-based nutrition course at Cornell University "and even went vegan afterwards, just to see what it was like to eat [and] be affected by an allergy or even religious beliefs."

Echols told *USAE* that her path to a gluten-free lifestyle began about eight years ago, when her father had been hospitalized for gastrointestinal issues that were discovered to be celiac disease. The family gathers frequently, Echols said, with everyone taking turns hosting meals, and so "the whole family" rallied to be able to accommodate Echols' father's new dietary needs.

"I got a whole new set of pots and pans so I could safely cook for my dad," Echols said, and she emptied her pantry of anything that could have contained gluten. "I'm one of four siblings, and they all did the same thing."

Through the course of supporting her father's needs, Echols and other family members found that whenever she ate someplace other than in her own home, she was getting sick because of the gluten in the meals they'd eat, she told *USAE*.

From her personal experiences and those of her father, Echols approached Heirloom's menu with intention.

"It's really driven from the experience of being celiac and having a family of celiacs trying to travel, or trying to go out and move in the world, and then moving in the community as well," Echols said. "And so we wanted to create a place that just made that seamless and perfect."

For people with celiac disease—a chronic autoimmune condition where the immune system attacks the small intestine when gluten is consumed—or gluten sensitivities, eating at restaurants is a challenging experience, at best. Because of the nature of

restaurants, with such a high volume of ingredients coming and going constantly, it's almost guaranteed that a diner will be exposed to gluten, unless the restaurant is exceptionally meticulous.

"When the kitchen is not entirely gluten free, it is difficult," Bennett said. "I'll use the fryer as an example: if I drop some fish in a fryer that has flat, regular flour on it—gosh, I'm using fried fish as an example, how much more southern can I get? But if you do that, and then you come behind that and you drop something for someone that's gluten free or celiac? You can't do that. You have to dedicate an area, you have to dedicate specific utensils. You have to be so sensitive and alert to all of those things."

What's more, Bennett said, "gluten is a booger, because it hides in so many things," including natural flavorings and spices. Food processing and manufacturing plants often handle ingredients with gluten—wheat, barley and soy—in the same facilities where gluten-free items are being processed, which leads to cross-contamination.

Echols is an architect and new to the hotel industry, but having grown up in Louisiana and the American south she is no stranger to hospitality. She told *USAE* that she enjoys hosting, and she knows the challenge of having to host a gluten-free individual from first-hand experience.

"Being a celiac, personally, I get these wonderful invitations from people who are like, 'Oh, I'll make it gluten free,' but it's such a complex thing to do," Echols said.

Both Bennett and Echols have received feedback from celiac or gluten-free guests of Hotel Monroe who are overwhelmed by the availability of choice and the lack of hassle at Heirloom, they told *USAE*.

"They don't have to think about it," Bennett said. "They can just come in and eat. That, to me as a hotel, is a great service to be able to provide for people."

Brickell Arch, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Miami Debuts

By Jonathan Trager

A landmark in Miami's financial district is entering a new chapter this week as Brickell Arch officially reopens as a luxury hotel, marking a significant addition to the city's rapidly evolving hospitality scene.

The newly rebranded Brickell Arch, now part of Marriott's Luxury Collection, debuted on April 14 following an extensive transformation of the mixed-use skyscraper along Brickell Avenue.

Overlooking Biscayne Bay, the property aims to position itself as both a high-end destination for international travelers and a hub for business activity in one of the nation's fastest-growing financial districts.

"Brickell Arch, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Miami reflects the new essence of the city—globally connected, culturally layered and endlessly dynamic," said Russ Urban, CEO and managing partner of the hotel.

Originally completed in 2004 as an office tower known for its distinctive curved façade, the 36-story building has long been a recogniz-

able feature of the Miami skyline.

The hotel includes more than 200 guest rooms and suites, along with meeting and event spaces designed to attract corporate gatherings and international clientele. Officials say the redesign blends modern luxury with cultural influences reflective of Miami's role as a gateway to Latin America.

The hotel "represents the kind of landmark luxury experience that defines our portfolio—distinctive, design-forward and deeply connected to its destination," said Anthony Rutledge, CEO of HEI Hotels & Resorts, which operates the property,

Dining and amenities are also central to the relaunch. The property features a Mediterranean-inspired restaurant led by Michelin-starred chef David Myers, as well as a rooftop pool terrace and spa facilities intended to appeal to both leisure and business travelers.

Located steps from shopping, waterfront parks, and financial institutions, the hotel is positioned to serve a mix of global professionals and tourists seeking proximity to Miami's urban core.

Straight to the soul: The Power of Magic at MPI's WEC



Dek: Jon Dorenbos, a keynote speaker at MPI's 2026 World Education Congress in San Antonio, uses magic to show you how you can change your life's direction.

By Jason Hensel

Pick a card, any card, is the start of almost any magic trick involving, well, cards. Magic tricks—or illusions, some would argue—can make for great icebreakers and entertaining shows that boggle the mind. Jon Dorenbos uses them to help deliver a message.

“A magic trick does something a slide deck can't: It bypasses the brain and goes straight to the soul,” he says. “For a split second, adults feel like kids again. Their logic shuts off, their curiosity turns on and their defenses disappear. In that moment—that tiny

window of wonder—you can deliver a message that actually sticks. Magic isn't the point—it never was. It's the doorway.”

Magic found Dorenbos at the exact moment he needed something to believe in. After his mom died, he was a kid trying to make sense of a world that didn't make sense.

“A neighbor showed me a cool magic trick, and suddenly I had this little universe where the rules were different,” he says. “Magic gave me control when everything felt out of

control. It gave me a place to escape, to heal, to create. And most importantly, it gave me a way to connect with people without having to explain the pain I was carrying.”

IT'S ABOUT TRANSFORMATION

Dorenbos is an author, speaker, magician and former National Football League (NFL) player. He'll be a keynote speaker (sponsored by Discover Puerto Rico in partnership with The Keynote Curators) at MPI's 2026 World Education Congress (WEC) in San Antonio, June 2-4. There, he'll pull from his book, “Life is Magic,” to help attendees discover a road map to shutting down self-doubt and choosing happiness in every situation.

“Business audiences are sharp. They've heard every buzzword, every

‘rah-rah’ speech. So I don't try to inspire them—I try to relate to them,” Dorenbos says. “I take my story—which is personal—and translate it into their world: Pressure. Change. Competition. Uncertainty. Then I show them the tools I used: reframing, gratitude, process, perspective. And when you mix that with a little magic, suddenly the guard comes down. They're not being ‘motivated.’ They're being moved. I endeavor to do this by inspiring, engaging and entertaining them in a different way.”

Dorenbos' unique way of connecting with audiences may come from the fact that he's had what looks like three distinct life experiences: NFL player, “America's Got Talent” finalist and worldwide, in-demand speaker. But it took him a long time to realize that he wasn't living three different lives. He was living one story with three chapters.

The NFL, he says, taught him discipline and teamwork. Magic taught him wonder, reinvention and problem solving. And keynote speaking taught him purpose.

“One day, I'm onstage at “America's Got Talent,” after getting the golden buzzer to the finals, and I thought to myself, ‘Man...this is the same kid who used magic to survive trauma, the same guy who walked into an NFL locker room terrified but determined, the same guy who's now telling that story to help someone else,’” Dorenbos says. “That's when it clicked. It was never about the titles—it was

about the transformation.”

REDIRECT YOUR LIFE

Making the most of a difficult situation is a big part of his message to audiences, and it's something he experienced during his Pro-Bowl career in the NFL. In 2017, a doctor told him he had an aortic aneurysm that required immediate heart surgery.

“When the doctors told me I had a ticking time bomb in my chest, everything stopped,” Dorenbos says. “Facing your own mortality strips away the noise. You stop asking, ‘What do I want to achieve?’ and start asking, ‘Who do I want to be?’”

He realized his purpose wasn't playing football. It was catching moments with his wife, daughter and friends. Moments on stage and moments where someone in the audience says, “I needed that today.”

“The heart condition didn't end my story,” he says. “It redirected it, and keynote speaking has given me a tremendous platform to help others. I'm grateful every single time I step on stage.”

CHANGE THE OUTCOME

Dorenbos says that if he had to boil everything down to one mindset shift, it's this: You can't always control what happens, but you can always control the story you tell yourself about it.

“Self-talk is the narrator. Adversity is the plot twist. Change is the next chapter,” he says. “Teamwork is who you choose to bring along. Change the story, change the outcome. My keynote touches on all these topics in a unique way.”

His keynote also touches on forgiveness, but he never presents it as a big, poetic concept. Instead, he frames it as a skill that you can practice, that it's a choice you make for yourself and not the person who hurt you.

“I tell audiences: Forgiveness doesn't change the past—it changes your *relationship* with the past,” Dorenbos says. “And when you change that, you free up energy to build a future you actually want to live in professionally and personally.”

For attendees who experience his keynote address, Dorenbos has just one request for Monday morning (June 3).

“Call someone [you've] been meaning to call. Forgive someone [you've] been holding a grudge against. Start the project [you've] been afraid to start,” he says. “Shift one habit, one thought, one behavior. Because a lifetime isn't changed in a weekend. It's changed in the next decision.”





BUSINESS IN THE FRONT. BLUE CHEESE ON YOUR TIE.

In Buffalo, you spend less time coordinating and more time connecting. Our downtown is compact, safe and easy to navigate. And Buffalo makes budgets go further without cutting corners. So you can enjoy polished venues, stylish hotels and meals worth remembering without worrying about the numbers.

LEARN MORE AT VISITBUFFALO.COM

Buffalo