



On September 2, President Donald Trump met with a collection of travel industry CEOs at the White House. The group set a goal of attracting 100 million international visitors by 2030. Credit: The White House

Travel Leaders Meet with President at White House

Target 100 Million International Visitors in 2030

By Todd McElwee

President Donald Trump met with Geoff Freeman President & CEO, U.S. Travel Association, and a collection of travel industry CEOs in the Oval Office on September 2. The group set a goal of attracting 100 million international visitors by 2030.

"We had a productive meeting

with President Trump about the opportunity ahead for the U.S. travel economy," Freeman said. "President Trump already holds the record for international visitation to the United States—nearly 80 million visitors in 2018. Now we have an opportunity to build on the momentum from a successful World Cup—and go much bigger. "The World Cup, America250

and a strong summer of travel showed what's possible when we get travel right. The next goal should be 100 million international visitors a year by 2030—striving to make the United States the most visited country in the world."

U.S. Travel provided *USAE* a roster of the travel CEOs who attended: Bill

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Choice Appoints Dominic Dragisich as President & CEO

By Jordan Bradley

Choice Hotels International appointed interim-CEO Dominic Dragisich to the role of President and CEO effective August 31.

Dragisich follows Patrick Pacious, who stepped down from his position as President and CEO this May. Pacious had been in role since 2017.

Dragisich has been with Choice for almost a decade. Throughout his tenure, he has held roles with increasing responsibility throughout the company, Choice said, including CFO between 2017 and 2023 before he moved into the role of EVP of Operations and Global Brand Officer. Dragisich had just moved into the role of Chief Growth and Strategy Officer this March before becoming the interim-CEO.

While with Choice, Dragisich has "played a pivotal role" in growing Choice, the company said, "helping lead major acquisitions and advancing key strategic initiatives that have expanded the Company's portfolio, reinforced its competitive position, and created long-term value for franchisees and shareholders."

"Dom has been a proven, exceptional leader for nearly a decade at Choice Hotels. Since stepping into the role of

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Grand Canyon Hotels Close to Overnight Guests Following Flash Floods

By Jordan Bradley

Following an August 29 flash flood on the floor of the Grand Canyon, hotels along the canyon's South Rim have been shut down to overnight guests.

The restrictions went into effect on August 31, with guests being relocated to hotels in nearby towns bordering the national park, according to Jim Stellmack, Regional Director of Marketing and Sales for Xanterra Travel

Collection, the company that operates five hotels along the canyon's south rim.

All other hotels and lodges along the rim have also been closed to overnight guests under the Stage 4 water restrictions, according to National Park Service (NPS) officials.

The flood resulted in at least two deaths and rescues of around 80 hikers caught in the flash flooding, according to officials.

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9/11 Attacks Had Lasting Impact on NEMA Conference Policies

Attendees in 2001 Recall

Cooperation & Professionalism

By Jordan Bradley & Todd McElwee

On September 11, 2001, government and industry emergency specialists, including Joe Allbaugh, then-director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—gathered at the Big Sky Resort in Big Sky, Montana, for the annual meeting of the Na-

tional Emergency Managers Association (NEMA).

Soon after breakfast, attendees' pagers began beeping, alerting conference attendees to the news of a terrorist attack in New York City, according to *Raven Rock* author Garrett M. Graff. When the circumstances became clear, staff at the resort quickly assembled an

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NEWS

Monica Parrish Trent Named Executive Director of the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation

By Todd McElwee

Dr. Monica Parrish Trent, PhD, has been announced as Executive Director of the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation. Enjoying more than 25 years of experience across higher education, workforce development, and nonprofit leadership, she most recently served as Chief Program and Network Officer at Achieving the Dream (ATD).

“The restaurant and hospitality industry creates opportunities for millions of people, and its workforce growth depends on ensuring they have clear pathways to develop the skills, credentials, and experience employers need,” said Trent. “I have spent my career bringing educators, employers, and communities together to strengthen career pathways and help people move from learning to meaningful careers. I’m excited to bring that experience to the Foundation and help more people turn the skills they gain and credentials they earn into greater possibilities for advancement. Having

worked in restaurants while I was a student, I saw firsthand how the industry opens doors for people from a wide spectrum of life experiences and how a job can grow into a lifelong career that supports a family and strengthens a community.”

Trent spent six years at ATD, including leading national program and workforce strategy across a network of more than 300 community colleges. Her LinkedIn notes time as provost and vice president of academic and student affairs at Delaware County Community College in Media, Pennsylvania, and 18 years at Montgomery College in Maryland, including as instructional dean. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), Higher Education Administration/Community College Leadership, from Old Dominion University.

“Monica is an exceptional leader who cares deeply about the power and opportunity in getting people into the right job,” said Michelle Korsmo, CEO of the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation. “Her ability



to tell a powerful story around an organization’s mission and developing partnerships and programs to bring it to life will benefit the Foundation as it

provides experienced career exploration and workforce readiness in the restaurant industry to young people seeking these workplace entry roles.”

Travel Leaders

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Hornbuckle, CEO & President, MGM Resorts International and National Board Chair, U.S. Travel Association; Omer Acar, CEO, Raffles & Fairmont; Anthony Capuano, President & CEO, Marriott International; Robert Isom, CEO, American Airlines Inc.; Elie Maalouf, CEO, IHG Hotels & Resorts; Chris Nassetta, President & CEO, Hilton; Josh Weinstein, CEO, Carnival Corporation; Geoff Freeman, President & CEO, U.S. Travel Association; Tom Reeg, CEO, Caesars Entertainment;

James F. Allen, Chairman, Hard Rock International and Hard Rock Gaming; Glenn Fogel, CEO & President, Bookings Holdings; and Patrick Nichols, President & CEO, Venetian.

The National Travel and Tourism Office’s (NTTO) International Forecast showed more than 68 million international arrivals came to the United States in 2025. NTTO is predicting more than 70 million arrivals this year and north of 74 million next.

France is the world’s most visited nation, attracting a record 102 million foreign tourists in 2025, including 5 million Americans, which was up 17%

over 2025, Reuters said.

U.S. tourism got a boost from this summer’s FIFA World Cup. Travel spending rose 6.2% year over year in June to \$122.1 billion, its strongest monthly reading in a year, Reuters said. A U.S. Travel study found 81% of Americans say seeing international visitors enjoy the nation gives them a sense of pride and 70% believe the U.S. should pursue more major international events.

Freeman said: “The World Cup, America250 and a strong summer of travel showed what’s possible when we get travel right. The next goal should be

100 million international visitors a year by 2030—striving to make the United States the most visited country in the world. Getting to 100 million would result in \$81 billion in additional spending, more than 400,000 American jobs and millions more people coming here, experiencing America for themselves and telling their friends and family that they should do the same. The American people are the best ambassadors we have. Let’s give them the opportunity to show our great country off. Our industry is ready to work with the president and his administration to build on today’s momentum.”

West Palm Beach Approves Hotel Near Convention Center

By Jonathan Trager

West Palm Beach commissioners unanimously approved an 18-story, 400-room hotel that local officials say will help the Palm Beach County Convention Center compete for larger conventions and conferences.

The August 31 vote gives developer Related Ross final city approval to build the Curio Collection by Hilton hotel on a 1.8-acre surface parking lot at 900 S. Rosemary Ave., across from the convention center and the existing Hilton West Palm Beach.

The project would rise about 204 feet and include a 7,400-square-foot restaurant and two floors of meeting and event space.

The hotel is part of the county’s broader plans to expand the convention center and increase the number of rooms available to convention groups.

“We are already in design on the next phase of the convention center, doubling the size,” Palm Beach County Chief Deputy Administrator Patrick Rutter told city commissioners at a meeting on August 5.

Rutter called the second hotel “one

of the final steps in truly activating the convention-center area.”

The new hotel would join the 400-room Hilton West Palm Beach, which Related developed next to the convention center and opened in 2016.

The project has faced opposition from some nearby residents, particularly over traffic, pedestrian safety, lighting, and noise from the hotel’s outdoor spaces.

Related Ross agreed to several conditions intended to address those concerns, including traffic-calming measures and a raised crosswalk on Rosemary Avenue. Outdoor speakers

will have to be directed away from nearby homes, and outdoor lighting will have to be contained in fixtures designed to limit its impact on the surrounding neighborhood.

At an earlier meeting with residents, Planning Board Chairman Steve Mayans acknowledged the concerns but said the developer had made changes to accommodate them.

The next issue is whether Palm Beach County will approve a proposed \$26 million land sale and long-term lease arrangement to allow the project to move forward.

HOTS

HOTS Stylin’ Suits... Researchers in Santiago, Chile, have found a stylish new accessory to help injured penguins—animals who are already overdressed for almost every occasion—recover more quickly: bright red vests woven with copper and zinc. According to the Associated Press, veterinarians have previously been able to help treat injured dogs and cats using similar vests, and veterinarians at the Buin Zoo are applying the solution to Humboldt penguins. The species of

flightless bird is most concentrated in Chile and is currently considered a vulnerable species. “For years, vests with microfibers containing elements like copper and zinc have been tested on pets, particularly dogs and cats, and have greatly helped in the recover of skin wounds,” Ignacio Idalsoaga, director of the zoo, told AP. “We began to wonder—why can’t this be used on penguins?” Researchers have found in recent years a significant drop in the country’s Humboldt penguin population due to injuries caused by entanglement in fishing nets and plastic pollution, disease outbreaks, and competition for food with nearby fisheries. HOTS hope these penguins can waddle their way into recovery with extra style.

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HOTS Shot at Breaking a Record... Nearly 2,000 people gathered to partake in a round of shots of a locally-made liqueur, setting a new Guinness World Record. Jeppson’s Malört is an iconic local spirit made in Chicago that UPI reports is “locally beloved and widely reviled.” On August 30, Chicago bar Recess hosted 1,969 people who simultaneously took a



M Social Hotel New York Times Square held a two-day program celebrating the US Open on August 26-27. The program gathered Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) players, wellness leaders, sustainability partners, media and the local community. Pictured at an event held at the hotel’s rooftop restaurant, Beast and Butterflies, from left to right: Vikram Sardana, VP of Operations, New York, and General Manager of M Social Hotel New York Times Square; ATP Player Yannick Hanfmann; Tatjana Stanovic, Hotel Manager of M Social Hotel New York Times Square; Carolyn Wishnowski, VP of Global Branding, Marketing & Loyalty at Millennium Hotels & Resorts; ATP Player Hamad Medjedovic; and Glaxxon Geevarghese, Area Director of Sales & Marketing at Highgate.

shot of the liqueur, to both break the world record for the number of individuals to simultaneously take a shot of liqueur and to raise funds for local org, Ravenswood Community Services. According to UPI, Malört is a wormwood-based Swedish schnapp that “is famously a drink purchased by

Chicagoans to haze visitors from out of town.” A participant in the event told the outlet: “Drinking Malört is socially acceptable masochism. Having other people drink Malört is socially accepted sadism. Drinking Malört together is trauma bonding.” HOTS thinks that’s one way to meet people.

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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

MARKETING & CIRCULATION DIRECTOR
Christy Pumphrey
christy@usaenews.com

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Dragisich

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Interim CEO, Dom has advanced strategic priorities and fostered a performance-driven culture across the company. He brings an innovative mindset, a deep appreciation for attracting and developing great talent, and a clear vision for the future of the business,” said Stewart Bainum Jr., Chairman of Choice’s Board of Directors. Prior to joining Choice, Dragisich held senior roles in finance at XO Communication, ending his tenure there as Chief Financial Officer, and Marriott International, NII Holdings, and Deloitte Consulting. Bainum said that throughout the CEO candidate search, Choice “evaluated a strong slate of internal and

external candidates” before concluding that Dragisich was the right choice “to build on Choice Hotels’ recent momentum, execute our strategy, and drive long-term value for our franchisees and shareholders.” “I am honored by the Board’s confidence and grateful for the opportunity to continue leading Choice Hotels,” Dragisich said in the August 31 announcement. “With a talented team, a higher-quality portfolio, a more accretive and diverse pipeline, and significant opportunities ahead, we are entering this next chapter from a position of strength. We remain focused on disciplined execution, accelerating growth, and strengthening our brands capitalizing on our commercial investments. I am excited to continue advancing our

Dominic Dragisich

strategy and helping our franchisees succeed while delivering exceptional experiences for our guests.”

Visit Reno Tahoe Turns Upcoming Concert into Support for Wildfire Recovery

By Jonathan Trager

As Northern Nevada begins the road to recovery from the recent fires, Visit Reno Tahoe is turning an upcoming night of entertainment into an opportunity for the community to come together and support neighbors impacted by the wildfires. All of the net proceeds from new tickets purchased for the Ashanti and

Trey Songz concert on September 24 at the Reno Events Center are being donated to the American Red Cross of Northern Nevada to support those impacted by the recent fires in Northern Nevada, Visit Reno Tahoe announced on September 3. As the community moves from emergency response toward recovery, Visit Reno Tahoe is now leveraging the Reno Events Center to help generate

financial support for those impacted while recognizing the first responders who have worked tirelessly throughout the fires. “Our venues are places where people come together, and right now there is no better reason to come together than to support our neighbors,” said Mike Larragueta, President & CEO of Visit Reno Tahoe. “Northern Nevada Please turn to page 5

NEWS

HSMAI Announces Recipients of Mike Dimond Student Scholarship

By Jordan Bradley

The Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI) announced the recipients of the 2026 Mike Dimond Student Career Success Grant: Otabek Akromov, Nicole Gutierrez, Théa Jüllich, and Ana Maria Alfonso Ruiz.

The scholarship is distributed annually to students demonstrating strong leadership capabilities and an interest in pursuing careers in hospitality sales, marketing, revenue management, and commercial strategy.

Each of the four scholarship recipients receive \$2,000 to support their academic pursuits, a complimentary registration to an HSMAI conference in their region, and pairing with a mentor.

According to HSMAI, the grant is “designed to help students build meaningful connections, gain exposure to the hospitality industry and prepare for careers across sales, marketing, revenue management, distribution and commercial strategy.”

“The future of hospitality’s commercial discipline depends on identifying and supporting talented individuals early in their careers,” said Brian Hicks, President and CEO of HSMAI.

Grant recipient Akromov is currently a hospitality management student at the University of Nevada - Las Vegas (UNLV). He has completed two internships with Hilton Grand Vacations, a revenue management and CRM internship at the Venetian Resort Las

Vegas, and is in the process of reestablishing an HSMAI Student Chapter at UNLV. Akromov plans to pursue his CRMA certification, build a career in hospitality commercial leadership, and eventually own and operate hospitality assets, HSMAI said.

Gutierrez is currently pursuing her bachelor’s degree in hospitality management and a master’s degree in mega events at Florida International University. She expects to graduate next year. Currently, Gutierrez works as the catering coordinator for the Biltmore Hotel.

Jüllich “has always been passionate about hospitality,” and is currently part of the ESSEC Business School’s MSC in Hospitality Management (IMHI) program, HSMAI said. Through her studies, Jüllich has spent time working the front office of the InterContinental Bora Bora Resort & Thalasso Spa, and has completed an internship at BNP Paribas.

Before moving from Bogotá to the United States to pursue her bachelor’s degree in hospitality management at the University of North Texas, Alfonso Ruiz “built a professional foundation in hotel sales at DoubleTree by Hilton,” HSMAI said. There, Alfonso Ruiz gained experience managing corporate accounts and contributing to commercial strategy.

“These scholarship recipients have already demonstrated an impressive commitment to the industry and a clear passion for its commercial side,”



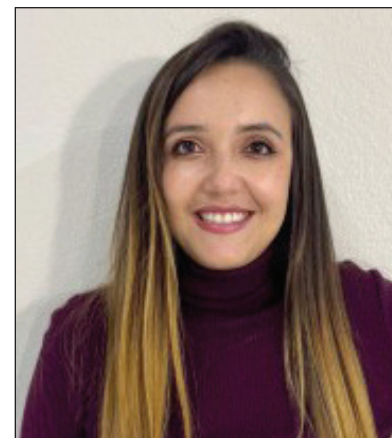
Otabek Akromov



Nicole Gutierrez



Théa Jüllich



Ana Maria Alfonso Ruiz

Hicks said. “We are proud to support their continued education and professional development as they take the next steps toward becoming the hospitality leaders of tomorrow.”

The Mike Dimond scholarship was named after “one of the hospitality industry’s most respected marketing executives,” HSMAI said.

Flash Floods

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While none of the hotel properties themselves were damaged during flooding, the impact is still felt, as the systems that provide water from the Colorado River at the bottom of the canyon to the hotels and attractions at the top of the canyon have been damaged, significantly disrupting the water supply.

According to NPS officials, “the flooding caused extensive damage to infrastructure in the inner canyon, including the Transcanyon Waterline, which supplies water from the canyon for use in the park. The waterline is currently not operational, leaving the park with limited water reserves and requiring significant water conservation measures to ensure available supplies can be maintained.”

For Xanterra-operated hotels—which include El Tovar Hotel, the Kachina Lodge, the Thunderbird Lodge, the Bright Angel Lodge and the Maswick Lodge—the focus now shifts to operating their respective

food and beverage and retail outlets on site, as the national park is still operational during the day, according to Stellmack.

Stellmack told *USAE*: “At the end of the day, everybody’s goal is to deliver a great guest experience, and in this situation, you deliver the best guest experience you can under the circumstances that you’re provided, and the circumstances in this case is no overnight. So your focus then becomes the day visitation and how do we ensure that their visitation is still a quality time with the F&B, the retail, the tours and the other things that we are still able to offer.”

For the team at Xanterra’s properties, having to pivot to adapt under such strict water restrictions is not an entirely new scenario.

“Unfortunately, this isn’t the first time we’ve ever done this,” Stellmack said, adding the Xanterra hotels and lodges will respond and pivot as necessary, “just like other hotels when you are hit with a situation.”

Hotels along the rim of the Grand Canyon are owned by NPS, and man-

aged by hospitality businesses. Operating a hospitality outlet in a national park such as Xanterra’s collection of properties brings awareness to one truth: “Mother Nature always wins,” Stellmack said.

Still, team members also tend to have a bigger than average appreciation for the great outdoors, and they are ready to respond to unexpected situations.

“Employees of national parks—doesn’t matter which National Park

you work in—it’s a very hardy and resilient group,” Stellmack said. “In situations like this, they usually come together, find a way to adapt and adjust.”

At press deadline, NPS officials had not yet identified a date when hotels will be able to return to their full operations, and search and rescue operations were still ongoing for a missing hiker. Officials were still assessing the extent of the damage, NPS said.

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Industry Movers



Paul Ziemnisky has been named President & CEO of the International Dairy Deli Bakery Association (IDDBA), effective September 8. He comes to IDDBA after five years as the Group EVP Wellness, Innovation and Business Development at Dairy Management (DMI). Ziemnisky has more than 30 years' experience as a senior business executive and brand marketing leader. He has worked with Kraft Natural Cheese, Velveeta, Tombstone, and DiGiorno.



Joshua Moore has been promoted to Director of Food & Beverage at the Oklahoma City Convention Center. Legends Global joined the venue in making the announcement. Moore has served as the complex's executive chef. He was part of the opening team at the Oklahoma City Convention Center, contributing to its very first event and helping shape the venue's culinary identity. He has experience as a sous chef.



Jennifer Briggs, CAE, IOM, has been appointed Executive Director of the American College of Trust and Estate Counsel (ACTEC), effective September 9. Past posts include executive vice president & CEO of the Texas Society of Architects and president & CEO of the Indiana CPA Society. Briggs succeeds Deborah (Deb) O. McKinnon, who is retiring after 17 years. McKinnon will serve as Executive Director Emeritus through next month.



Shannon Schwier is now the Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado Santa Fe's General Manager. She was the opening resort manager at Naples Beach Club, A Four Seasons Resort in Florida. Schwier began her career with Four Seasons in 2013 at Four Seasons Hotel Los Angeles at Beverly Hills. She has also worked at the Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach and Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown.

[See more Industry Movers](#)

9/11

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impromptu command center, moving extra TVs and phones into the conference center for the 350 attendees to coordinate responses and arrange transportation home.

According to a report from the **New York Times** published the day after the 9/11 attacks, roads were closed to the Big Sky Resort, and many attendees were needed elsewhere—most significantly Allbaugh and Ed Jacoby, the chief of the New York State Emergency Management Office.

Karen Langdon, NEMA Marketing and Events Director, was present at the conference, she told **USAE** via email, along with NEMA Executive Director Trina Sheets.

When asked what she remembered of the day, Langdon said the group's act of coming together and their collective professionalism under the circumstances stood out to her.

Representatives from Big Sky Montana Resort were unable to accommodate an interview request from **USAE** by press deadline. However, the resort played a pivotal role in the response to the 9/11 attacks, hosting the impromptu command center in the property's ballroom.

"The group immediately went to work establishing an emergency operations center-type setup in the hotel ballroom to provide visibility and awareness about the event with attendees, share information, and help coordinate the national response," she added.

Langdon recalled representatives from FEMA and the U.S. Department of Transportation helping to "coordi-

nate travel home for State Emergency Management Directors. They arranged for the New York State Emergency Management Director to fly back on a fighter jet. A C-130 plane was arranged to transport all of the Directors whose states were responding as well as those in nearby regions. Some governors sent National Guard planes to pick up their directors."

Reflecting on the day 25 years later, Langdon and Sheets said the group's cooperation extended beyond the initial day and into attendees' travel homeward.

"It was a deeply shocking and emotional event for everyone, but the group came together to support one another and ensure everyone had a plan to get home," they said. "We even implemented a phone buddy system in which people driving cross-country would check in with each other and report back on their progress homeward."

While 9/11 reshaped American culture at large, it also influenced the way NEMA held conferences going forward. In the wake of the 2001 conference, the association created emergency protocols and a scalable plan that is regularly reviewed and updated ahead of each meeting, Langdon said. Because NEMA members are the first to respond to a disaster of any origin around the country, Langdon added, portions of the emergency protocols and response plans have been implemented in part over the years.

"Since disasters can occur at any time and in any region of the country, we have implemented portions of the plan at subsequent meetings, but not to the extent needed for the 2001 Annual Forum in Big Sky," she said.

Reno Concert

continued from page 3

has always been a community that shows up for one another. We saw that throughout the response to these fires, and we want this concert to be another opportunity to turn that spirit into meaningful support for the people who need it."

Funds donated to the American Red Cross of Northern Nevada will help support disaster relief and recovery efforts for the communities in the region impacted by the recent wildfires. Red Cross disaster assistance includes health and emotional support, recovery planning, and financial assistance to help individuals and families ad-

dress disaster-related needs.

The concert initiative builds on Visit Reno Tahoe's ongoing response to the wildfires. When the American Red Cross of Northern Nevada requested assistance with evacuation needs, Visit Reno Tahoe immediately made space available at the Reno-Sparks Convention Center and remained prepared to expand that space as requested by emergency officials.

Visit Reno Tahoe will also offer 1,500 complimentary Ashanti & Trey Songz or Lynyrd Skynyrd concert tickets to firefighters and first responders who have worked to protect Northern Nevada communities during the fires.

Find available tickets [here](#).



Eric Vaughn, Executive Director of Culinary Operations Banquets Las Vegas for Caesars Entertainment, with the more than 2,800 cakes which were prepared for Caesars Palace 60th Anniversary Gala Dinner at the property's Octavius Ballroom. **Buddy Valastro** created the recipe with Vaughn's team preparing the deserts. Credit: Caesars Entertainment.

Women Leading the Way

Anjylla Foster Puts Relationships Front and Center

By Jordan Bradley

For Anjylla Foster, Ph.D, Executive Director of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, leading her organization is a full circle moment and a bit of a family affair.

Not only have many of her family members joined the sorority, but her mother, grandmother and aunt have also all served the organization in various capacities throughout the years (her mother was a past president, her grandmother was a past regional director, and her aunt is a current licensed vendor), Foster said, and her dad is a member of its brother organization, Phi Beta Sigma.

With this level of involvement, Foster has a unique dynamic with the org—one that few could replicate. She grew up attending annual gatherings and conferences with her mother, and would often help her aunt sell Zeta merchandise.

“I’ve only missed one of our international biennial conferences in my lifetime,” Foster told *USAE*. “So I say that people have known me since I was in my mother’s stomach in 1990 in St. Louis.”

For Foster, growing up and watching her family members lead and interact with other Zeta members taught her the intrinsic value of relationship-building in membership organizations.

While helping her aunt at events, Foster recalled “seeing the people who would come up to her—they may not even want to buy anything, they just wanted to give her a hug and say hello because they were so excited to see her.”

As an undergrad at the University of Cincinnati in her home state of Ohio, Foster joined Zeta while pursuing a bachelor’s degree in marketing and international business. After working in retail management, Foster returned to her alma mater and received her master’s degree in communications, during which time she “really found an appreciation for research, qualitative data and analyzing things,” she said.

After earning her master’s degree, Foster worked in hospitality “which I absolutely love, but the hours can be awful,” and eventually found a role with Cincinnati-based 3CDC, a nonprofit real estate developer working to revitalize the city’s downtown.

“That’s when I started to fall in love with operations, nonprofit management and what I call cultural institutions, so like parks, museums—tourism [spaces] in a sense,” Foster said.

Next, she moved to Chicago and provided direct support at a local nonprofit “and realized that wasn’t my jam,” Foster said. “It’s very hard to provide social services and maintain your well-being.”

At her next role in the guest experiences department at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, Foster “once again fell in love with civic spaces, cultural institutions and guest experiences.”

The role “was the perfect mixture of both worlds. I got hospitality, I had operations, I had people management and human resources,” Foster said. “I loved that job so much.”

But then the pandemic happened, and much about the role changed. Simultaneously, Foster was pursuing her PhD in organization development through Benedictine University. When the role of executive director at Zeta opened in 2024, Foster was thrilled because the job “encompasses absolutely everything that I love in my hodgepodge of a career,” including hospitality, customer service, event management and engagement and operations.

Zeta is “a little different” from other sororities and fraternities, she told *USAE*, in that 90% of its membership demographic is comprised of alumni members, and recruitment initiatives are focused on all ages, not just college-age. Recruitment efforts begin as young as 4 years old, and Zeta is unique in that the membership goal of the org is a lifelong commitment from members. Women who have already graduated college are welcome to join Zeta’s graduate chapters.

“Our goal is, ‘yes, please join in college,’” Foster said. “Our organization was founded by collegiate women. We love, love, love our undergraduate members; they keep us feeling young and vivacious and they’re

the vitality of the organization. But at the same time, my goal is if you do come through college, that we retain you so that you go into what’s called [a] graduate chapter.”

At its core, Zeta is about civic engagement and relationship fostering. As the sorority’s executive director,



her role most closely resembles that of the head of an association: she works with new chapter, board, and organizational leadership every two to four years, so relationship fostering is key, and understanding the way stakeholders and individual contributors work is paramount to success, she said.

“I would not be able to do what I do if I didn’t understand who people are and how they work—and it’s beyond communication styles,” Foster said, adding that knowing a colleague’s work schedule and availability allows her “to reset my expectations and meet people where they are.”

Through the recent transition of board members, Foster has been diligent in “making sure I really understand who I’m working with and how I can best support them to achieve the objectives that they’re looking to achieve,” she said.

She continued: “Relationships are number one, but I call myself the organizational influencer—and I love doing that. There are some decisions I have to make on the operation side, but really my job is to bring good partners to the table, have meaningful conversations, look at the risks and assess those, see where are the

spots that we can’t see in our peripheral, and making sure that whatever we do will align with their objectives and advance our mission.”

As executive director, Foster is also responsible for creating operational guidelines and procedures as needed. The sorority is also a property manager, hosts sizable annual events, and distributes scholarship funds.

Looking forward, Foster is excited to have more conversations about shifting the way Zeta approaches events from not just a tool to gather, but a central component of the sorority’s business.

“We have great businesses, and maintaining and recruiting membership is a part of that business, but we bring in more money when we do our biennial conference,” Foster said. “So how do we really make sure that our business model for doing and executing that [side of the] business is documented... it can be replicated fairly easily; [it] has low risk [and] the right partners with us. So I’m really excited to be working through [and] really documenting what does it look like for us to say we’re in the business of event management and execution.”

NEWS

Christian Mengel Named Head of St. Joseph CVB

By Jonathan Trager

Christian Mengel will take over Missouri's St. Joseph CVB as Executive Director, succeeding Marci Bennett after her 33-year tenure at the organization.

The Buchanan County Tourism Board selected Mengel, the bureau's director of communications and marketing, following a nationwide search. He'll begin his new position on October 1.

"Working alongside our staff, board, visitor industry partners, and community leaders as director of communications and marketing has been one of the great joys in my life," Mengel said. "I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to continue and expand that experience as executive director."

Mengel joined the CVB in 2022 after working in marketing and advertising for the *News-Press & Gazette* and at FOX4 in Kansas City. He's a lifelong resident of northwest and north-central Missouri and graduated from Missouri Western State University with a degree in convergent media.

During his tenure, Mengel has secured more than \$800,000 in marketing grants, expanded the Show Me St. Jo! Experience, and received the 2025 Film Industry Champion award from the Missouri Division of Tourism, according to the organization. He serves on the boards of the Pony Express Historical Association and Main Street St. Joseph.

"Tourism is an economic tool that directly influences quality of life and how we feel about our community," Mengel said. "The things we enjoy the most as residents are often the things we tell friends and family about when they visit, and that can make all the difference in the world on what direction a city moves."

Bennett will remain executive director through September as she prepares to retire. Mengel said working alongside Bennett has shown him the importance of stewardship and identifying opportunities to strengthen St. Joseph as a destination.

As he prepares to take over, Mengel said he sees an opportunity to build on the bureau's work while helping St. Joseph capitalize on growing interest in the community.

"I think that's the reason they haven't left," Mengel said of the community. "Everybody's feeling like we're right on the verge of something special."



PCMA's European Advisory Board. The group will come together for the first time in Lisbon ahead of Convening EMEA, September 13-15. Find the complete roster [here](#).

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