



PHILADELPHIA MAGAZINE'S

*Trailblazer Award*

# Meryl Levitz

Visit Philadelphia's president and CEO, Meryl Levitz, has spent the last few decades giving Philadelphia an image. She's made a career of shifting negative attitudes, knowing that no trailblazer does it alone.

WRITTEN BY Margaret McNamara

PHOTO BY Nell Hoving

**IN 1971, LONG BEFORE GPS OR GOOGLE MAPS,** Meryl Levitz and her husband packed up their home and drove to their new city of Philadelphia. Not knowing what to expect, Levitz, a Chicago native, thought they would head east and just look for the tall buildings.

"We drove all around the place," she says, noting there was no skyline, no place to eat, no place to shop, no Rocky statue. "There were no tall buildings except for the one that had a man on top of it and the other one with PSFS on top. We later found out that it was City Hall with William Penn on top, and the PSFS stood for Philadelphia Savings Fund Society."

When she first moved into her new home, she admits she broke down crying. "I

**MERYL LEVITZ**, the 2018 *Philadelphia* magazine Trailblazer Award recipient for her work with Visit Philadelphia.

didn't know anybody and the city at that time. It was at a low point," she says.

Flash forward more than 40 years later, and Levitz has become a key player in growing Philadelphia into a top tourist destination. "I guess I'm a rallying point maybe, but this took a village. It took 10 villages. It took 10,000 villages."

Still, there have been plenty of hurdles along the way. In 1971, there was no vision of what Philadelphia should look like and, because of that, no press or promotion. The city desperately needed an image change. "It wasn't even that the image of the place was negative—it just had none," she says. "You would have to dig deep to find its charm, and we did dig deep."

That began to change in 1996, when then Mayor Ed Rendell, Pew Charitable Trust president & CEO Rebecca Rimel and former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge launched the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation (GPTMC). Levitz, who was serving as the VP of Tourism for the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau at the time, was selected to be a founding president & CEO of this new tourism initiative.

GPTMC, later renamed Visit Philadelphia, was established as a three-year experiment. Recognizing that it was impossible to turn the perception of the city around in such a short time, Levitz faced a daunting challenge of finding a dedicated funding source to keep the project running after the trial period. The group brought in leaders and experts who not only believed in the project, but were influential enough to move it forward.

In the beginning, she received push back from other local organizations. People were fearful there would be fewer resources for institutions that were already in need of them. They were also afraid there would be confusion in the marketplace about what this new tourism organization was. "It was a little bit of a surprise to me. I had thought we were all on the same team, Team Philadelphia," she says. "Change tends to make some people uneasy because change causes more change."





Then there was also this deep-seated feeling that Philadelphia might be incapable of attracting visitors on a continuous basis. A lot of naysayers told Levitz that Philadelphia would never be a tourist destination, even an entertainment destination, and that she was wasting her time. “I came from Chicago where we all grew up, from the moment we could talk, talking about how great Chicago was. So I moved here, and people weren’t talking about their city that way at all.”

The challenge became changing this attitude around Philadelphia. “You have to remember, this was not a fairytale thing,” she says. “A city really needs a cheerleader. Someone to say, ‘hey look, we have beautiful gardens, we have unique architecture, we’ve preserved our past.’” Levitz says it was Mayor Rendell who first filled that role.

And when the city began to look different, people started to feel different. When Bill Rouse broke the city’s height-limit agreement and built One Liberty Place in 1987, it was a sign. “Philadelphia could change, and the sun would still come up the next morning. Things could be beautiful and better,” she says. “Nothing changes the mental like the physical.”

Over the years, she has learned the importance of being in it for the long haul, producing something authentic and keeping your supporters in the loop. Her advice? “Don’t do anything that isn’t true to you and don’t blindside anyone with something that could be controversial,” she says.

For example, in 2003 Levitz and her team launched the LGBT marketing campaign “Get Your History Straight and Your Nightlife Gay.” She felt it was a theme that rang true in the City of Brotherly Love, so she gathered support for the campaign from the LGBTQ community, then Governor Rendell, then Mayor John Street and other influential leaders. The campaign marked Philadelphia as the first tourism destination to launch an LGBTQ television commercial, and the city still holds a



**MERYL LEVITZ** stands with President and CEO of the Independence Visitor Center Corporation, James J. Cuorato, Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park Service, Cynthia MacLeod, and Historic Philadelphia, Inc. reenactors at the summer 2015 launch of VISIT PHILADELPHIA's #visitphilly Photo Spots. Photo by M. Fischetti for VISIT PHILADELPHIA.

solid standing among top LGBTQ-friendly destinations.

Despite the industry’s success rate, convincing the state government to invest in tourism marketing is still extremely difficult, Levitz says. Often, it’s not until a disaster like 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina strikes that people realize how vital tourism is to a local economy. “The value of tourism as an industry is strongest when times are tough. Then you get past the disaster, and it’s completely forgotten,” which, Levitz says, “is what makes funding complicated.”

Levitz also faced a more personal obstacle during her tenure in the tourism industry. She says contrary to popular belief, it’s not an easy industry for women. Throughout her career, Levitz has often been the only woman at the table. People who are at the top levels have historically been men. She aims to change that.

“You need to balance the books here,” she says. “By inviting more women and diversity in general to the table, you’re going to get a richer exchange of ideas, you’re going to get a richer number of networks around the table. Each person can bring a variety of resources. You’re going to get a richer product.”

Despite the challenges she has faced, Levitz has come out strong on the other end. “What gives me the most satisfaction is, of course, the rise in the number of people who are coming to Philadelphia for fun and seeing Philadelphians being openly proud of their city,” she says. “I love seeing the women and men who have had a part in developing Philadelphia do what they never thought they could ever do. I love that.”



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