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## COME STAY AWHILE

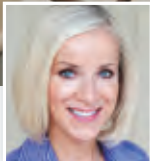
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Meryl Levitz  
President and CEO  
Visit Philadelphia

Philly wasn't always a  
destination town, but  
Visit Philadelphia  
set out to change that



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Meryl Levitz  
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Visit Philadelphia

# COME STAY AWHILE

*Philly wasn't always a destination town,  
but Visit Philadelphia has sparked an  
unprecedented surge in civic pride,  
tourism and international recognition*

By Samantha Drake  
Photography by Mitro Hood  
and courtesy of Visit Philadelphia

## The year was 1971.

Meryl Levitz and her husband, Len, hitched a U-Haul to their Volvo and drove from Chicago to Philadelphia with everything they owned so Len could start working as a behavioral psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania. The newlywed couple drove the U-Haul through one neighborhood after another as they struggled to find their way around.

“There was no place to shop and there was no place to eat. There was no skyline and I didn’t know anybody,” Levitz recalls.

Forty-five years later, Philadelphia is a very different place, in both geography and spirit, thanks in large part to Levitz and Visit Philadelphia.

“We thought we’d stay for a couple years but like many other people, we fell in love with the city,” says Levitz. “Philadelphia gets its hooks in you. It’s a tough town, but you can make a place for yourself here. You can

**Steeped in history:** Meryl Levitz at Reading Terminal Market, which opened in 1892 and is home to more than 75 independent small businesses.

find other people like you who appreciate the toughness and the tough love. You can do your dream here.”

Philadelphia isn’t just having a moment — it’s been having a string of moments that add up to unprecedented momentum in civic pride, burgeoning tourism and international recognition.

Here are a few recent highlights: In February, travel guide *Lonely Planet* ranked Philadelphia No. 1 on its list of the 10 best places to visit in the U.S. in 2016, ahead of Natchez, MS, and Yellowstone National Park. In November 2015,



Philadelphia became the first World Heritage City in the U.S., joining other World Heritage cities like Paris, Rome, Cairo and Tel-Aviv. All eyes were on the city in September 2015 when Pope Francis made his first visit to the U.S. for the 8th World Meeting of Families. *The New York Times* in January 2015 listed Philadelphia third on its list of “52 Places to Go in 2015,” just behind Milan, Italy and Cuba.

As the president and CEO of Visit Philadelphia, Levitz’s job is to let the world know Philadelphia is much more than Rocky and cheesesteaks (not that there’s anything wrong with Rocky and cheesesteaks). She and her team are behind the development of Visit Philadelphia’s growing online presence, creating memorable and effective marketing campaigns, and launching myriad mutually beneficial partnerships.

Edward G. Rendell, the city's mayor from 1992 to 2000, noted that when he took office, "We had virtually no tourism. No one came to Philadelphia." But that would soon start to change.

Levitz joined the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau and oversaw the Great Plaza at Penn's Landing. She also developed annual celebrations, such as Yo! Philadelphia and the Jambalaya Jam, among others, to bring people to the city's waterfront. Rendell also tapped Levitz to help produce the first Welcome America! celebration in 1993. The Philadelphia Convention Center opened as part of that celebration.

In 1995, the Pew Charitable Trusts released a study to evaluate the state of Philadelphia's tourism efforts. It wasn't a pretty picture. Among its findings, the study showed that Philly was so focused on conventions that it was missing out on a significant revenue generator — people who visit the city simply for pleasure. "For almost a decade, Philadelphia has concentrated on marketing to the convention business and has, with the exception of a few token efforts, neglected marketing geared to attracting extended-stay vacationers," it concluded.

## EARLY DAYS

"I really wish I could tell you that I'd had a five-year plan, but I never did and I don't have one now," Levitz says. But Levitz, a business leader, innovator and tireless community builder, clearly knows how to make the most of an opportunity when she sees it.



MERYL LOVES PHILADELPHIA LIKE SHE WAS DESCENDED FROM WILLIAM PENN."

Levitz earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Illinois, and taught English and social studies for several years before and after moving east. Around the time she was co-running a nursery school on Penn's campus, Levitz recognized the need for an organization for owner-operated Center City businesses and co-founded the Center City Proprietors Association in 1978. The association still exists today.

The study called for the creation of an organization dedicated strictly to building the image of the five-county region and bringing in leisure visitors. The city, the state of Pennsylvania and Pew founded the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation (GPTMC) in 1996. Initially intended to be a three-year experiment, the organization was designated the region's official marketing agency in 1998, and its name changed to the pithier Visit Philadelphia in 2013. Levitz has been president and CEO of the organization since its inception.

"Meryl loves Philadelphia like she was descended from William Penn," says Rendell. As he stated in a letter to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* earlier this year, "Meryl Levitz is a civic treasure. Her leadership of Visit Philadelphia has produced a staff so capable and so dedicated that the city has made incredible progress."



## GREAT MOMENTS IN PHILADELPHIA HISTORY

1996

The Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation, now known as Visit Philadelphia, is founded.

1997

Gophila.com (now visitphilly.com), the official visitor website, is launched.

1998

The Comcast First Union Center, now called the Wells Fargo Center, opens as the new home of the Flyers and the 76ers.

1999

The new Cruise Ship Terminal at Pier 1 opens at the Navy Yard.

## PHILLY TOURISM

### BY THE NUMBERS

#### Why does tourism matter?

The hospitality industry, catering to travelers connected to the leisure, business and convention sectors, contributes significantly to the area's economy by creating jobs, supporting local businesses and generating tax revenue.

In 2014:

**39.7 million**

people visited the Greater Philadelphia area

**\$10 billion**

was generated by tourism, a major output industry in the Greater Philadelphia area

**92,000**

full-time jobs for Greater Philadelphia residents were supported by visitor spending

Tourism also nets big bucks in tax revenue. In 2014, tourists in the Philadelphia area generated \$655 million in state and local taxes.

Source: Visit Philadelphia

“

I REALLY THRIVE ON WORK. I'VE

WORKED SINCE I WAS 16 AND I

REALLY ENJOY IT.”

#### A NEW ATTITUDE

Ironically, before re-introducing the world to Philadelphia, Levitz first had to show Philadelphians what their own city had to offer.

After being surrounded by Chicago residents' pride in “Chicagoland,” Philadelphians' very different outlook — characterized by some as “defensive” or “neurotic” — was a culture shock. Levitz noticed that the ethnic festivals at Penn's Landing, despite being open to everyone, drew very specific crowds. “If it was a German festival, German people came and if it was the Italian festival, Italian people came,” she says. Levitz quickly learned to emphasize that everyone was welcome to such events. “You just have to let people know that they're invited because they may not feel that,” she says.

Her strategy of inclusiveness put Philadelphia on the LGBT map with its groundbreaking “Get Your History Straight and Your Nightlife Gay” marketing campaign. Levitz says Philadelphia was the first city to create a

television commercial promoting itself as a destination for LGBT travelers. The city, now one of the most LGBT-friendly cities in the country, also revived the use of its full colonial nickname “the City of

Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection” to underscore the message.

Naturally, the business of marketing an entire city faces numerous challenges, including bad weather, labor and

transportation strikes, and increasing competition from other destinations. Consumers also have more control over pricing and planning. “Because of technology, the customer is changing so fast and the customer controls much more than they used to,” Levitz points out.

Visit Philadelphia also grapples with Philly-specific issues, such as the inevitable bad press that comes from sports fans behaving badly or the city's crime rate and racial tensions. Incidents involving tourists certainly don't help, such as the 2010 accident in which a barge hit a “duck boat” on the Delaware River, killing two Hungarian students.



2000

The city hosts the NCAA Women's Final Four and the Republican National Convention.

2001

The Independence Visitor Center and the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts open.

2002

The Kimmel Center launches its first summer season with the Summer Solstice celebration.

2003

The National Constitution Center, the Liberty Bell Center, and Lincoln Financial Field, the new home of the Eagles, open.

The Center City District Restaurant Week debuts.

2004

World Cafe Live, a dining and concert venue, and Citizens Bank Park, the new home of the Phillies, open.

2005

Philadelphia serves as the North American host city for global concert series Live 8.



Every city has its share of bad press, says Levitz, but Visit Philadelphia's strategy is to continually feed its marketing pipeline with positive stories that focus on what there is to love about Philly. "We constantly put out little hooks and major stories to keep people focused on what Philadelphia is," she adds.

Marketing can't be turned on and off like a faucet, agrees Paula Butler, vice president of communications at Visit Philadelphia. "All we do is marketing. We do it every day, all year long, and Meryl realizes that you have to have consistency," she says. When something

negative happens, it doesn't ruin everything that's been built up because Visit Philadelphia has been producing good stories all year long, Butler explains.

Good press helps the public "see Philadelphia as a fun place that's worth more than four hours," Levitz says.

## PACKAGES AND PARTNERSHIPS

Four hours was the average length of time a visitor stayed in Philadelphia back in 1996 when GPTMC/Visit Philadelphia launched. Now, the average stay is 2.5 nights, Levitz says, thanks largely to another memorable marketing campaign.

Visit Philadelphia created the "Philly's More Fun When You Sleep Over" campaign and the two-night "Philly Overnight Hotel Package" back in 2001 following the Sept. 11 attacks, which decimated tourism in the U.S. for a time. "It was a warm, reassuring and fun way of saying you can travel again and you can be safe and happy here," Levitz says.

Smith Travel Research touted the marketing effort as "the most successful hospitality recovery in the country." As Levitz notes, "The hotel package was so successful that it continues to be offered to this day."

The hotel package also boosted Philadelphia ahead of nearby cities in weekend hotel occupancy, a key indicator of a destination city's ability to draw leisure visitors.

According to Smith Travel Research, Philadelphia had a hotel occupancy rate of 89 percent for Saturday nights in 2015, beating Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, Baltimore and Washington, DC.

Visit Philadelphia currently has some 100 partnerships with small and large corporations, from American Airlines to Zipcar, including hometown consumer brands like Tastykake, Victory Brewing Co. and Saxbys; and with 65 organizations, including city cultural groups and attractions as well as universities and other entities.

The challenging part of partnerships is that each one is unique and has to be created from scratch, says Colleen Wyse, vice president of strategic initiatives. A good partnership helps both parties achieve their goals. For example, in the partnership with Comcast, the cable giant gets content to show young, tech-savvy potential employees that the city is an attractive place to relocate, while Visit Philadelphia gets a new audience for its content, Wyse explains.

Levitz draws on many people's ideas to find the right ones for Philly. "Meryl has a vision and she never loses it," says Wyse.

Partnerships are a big part of Visit Philadelphia's strategy because they convey a consistent message, says Levitz. Partnerships are also a service to the community because they get people invested and encourage the feeling that everyone is working together for the city, she adds.



## 2006

Philadelphia Park Casino and Racetrack, the region's first slot parlor, opens in Bucks County.

## 2007

Hotel revenue in the five-county Philadelphia region hits \$1 billion for the first time.

## 2008

The Phillies win the World Series.

The city's first Philly Beer Week and Roots Picnic commence.

The Comcast Center opens and debuts the Comcast Holiday Spectacular on its 2,000-square-foot LED screen.

## 2009

The African American Museum in Philadelphia opens its new core exhibition, "Audacious Freedom."

## 2010

Philadelphia International Airport's Terminal E expansion is completed.

## 2011

The Philadelphia Science Festival and Philly Tech Week debut.

## 2012

The Barnes Foundation opens, relocating from Merion, PA. Jay Z hosts the first Made in America Festival.

## 2013

Merion Golf Club hosts the U.S. Open. The Blue Cross RiverRink Winterfest opens, featuring an open-air ice rink, food and shopping.

## 2014

The Schuylkill Banks Boardwalk opens and Dilworth Plaza is transformed into Dilworth Park, a public space with a café, performance space and ice rink in the winter.

## 2015

Pope Francis makes his first visit to the U.S. for the World Meeting of Families in the city. The One Liberty Observation Deck opens.

## 2016

The city hosts the Democratic National Convention.

Source: Visit Philadelphia

## OVERCOMING ADVERSITY:

### VISIT PHILADELPHIA'S FORMER CFO CHARGED WITH EMBEZZLEMENT

It hasn't all been smooth sailing for Visit Philadelphia. In May, the organization's former CFO Joyce Levitt pleaded guilty to embezzling \$200,000 between 2005 and 2012. She has been placed under probation for three years.

"Levitt admitted her actions to Visit Philadelphia after they were discovered in an audit in 2012. But rather than report the misuse to authorities, the organization allowed her to pay restitution and quietly resign her \$120,000-a-year job," according to Philly.com.

However, Visit Philadelphia believed that recovering the misappropriated funds should be the organization's top priority, says president and CEO Meryl Levitz.

After discovering the embezzlement in the 2012 audit, Visit Philadelphia "immediately took action, engaging local counsel and experienced forensic auditors," she says.

"Through her attorney, Joyce Levitt offered full restitution, with interest. Given the legal options, Visit Philadelphia's counsel and board of directors agreed that recovering the money was the company's first responsibility."

Levitz adds that the misappropriation was fully disclosed on Visit Philadelphia's tax filings.



## WHAT'S NEXT?

Visit Philadelphia always has something coming up next.

The popular "With Love, Philadelphia XOXO" campaign is still going strong and continues to evolve and expand since its introduction in 2009 with open love letters and a travel deal to potential visitors. It's been estimated that every \$1 spent on the campaign generates \$100 in direct visitor spending. Coming up in 2017 and beyond will be the new Museum of the American Revolution; the Comcast Innovation and Technology Center, including restaurants and a hotel; the re-opening of the renovated Love Park, and the new outlet shopping center in the former Gallery at Market East location.

In May, Visit Philadelphia partnered with local organizations to launch the "Historic Philadelphia" campaign to highlight and redefine the original city. For Levitz and her team, Philadelphia will always be a new experience for a new crop of visitors. "It's such an old city, but yet people are still discovering us," Levitz says. "We're really happy about that." **CEO**

Samantha Drake is a freelance writer based in Lansdowne, PA. Contact us at [editorial@smartceo.com](mailto:editorial@smartceo.com).

## CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Levitz has helped change perceptions about Philadelphia from the inside out, says Manuel N. Stamatakis, chairman of the board of Visit Philadelphia, and founder and CEO of Capital Management Enterprises. "Once you encourage people to come visit, the residents realize what they have," he notes.

Levitz's gift for communicating has been essential to rebranding the city, says Stamatakis. "Meryl recognized early on how significant social media would be," he says, pointing out that Visit Philadelphia's website is now one of the top websites for the region.

Levitz has also been instrumental in recruiting and training the growing Visit Philadelphia staff to carry out her vision for the city and its future. "She's built an organization that's very worthy," says Stamatakis. "Meryl really understands what needs to be done."

What's more, Levitz leads her organization with infectious energy. "I really thrive on work. I've worked since I was 16 and I really enjoy it, and I get fueled by the people around me," she says. "The most frustrating days for me are the days that I'm not in the office enough to connect with my team." But she makes herself available to staff and board members as much as possible. "If somebody needs to see me at 7:30 in the morning or whenever, I can do that," Levitz says. "I'm up at 5:00 a.m. every day."