

Q&A

Off the Cuff: A Q&A with Brown Harris Stevens' Bess Freedman

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Bess Freedman became CEO of Brown Harris Stevens in 2018. Image courtesy of Brown Harris Stevens

By AMIRAH KEATON

Introducing "Off the Cuff," a new Q&A series from Luxury Daily exploring the career paths, current projects and next steps of those shaping the world's best luxury brands.

The interviews feature a Proust-style twist, allowing readers to get to know industry leaders on a personal level. The third edition features Bess Freedman, CEO of American luxury real estate firm [Brown Harris Stevens](#).

In this Q&A, Ms. Freedman discusses the impact of early life lessons, the enduring value of a people-first work culture and more. Here is the dialogue:

What was your first job ever? What did it teach you?

Cleaning houses in my upstate New York neighborhood when I was nine years old. It taught me that hard work feels good!

Which skills have been critical to your success? Did you gain these skills within or outside of the workplace?

I have always had a strong constitution and felt determined.

As they say, we are the sum total of our experiences and having so many jobs at an early age, combined with being raised by parents with off-the-charts emotional intelligence, built this little monster.

Confidence was instilled in me from very early on. Some was earned, and some came from my family, who always believed in me.

What is the best piece of advice you've ever received?

The best piece of advice I ever received was from my mom who told me to "never rely on anyone but yourself. Be independent."

I think this is one of the reasons I was never boy-crazy or looking for satisfaction outside of myself. I knew at an early age it was always up to me.

No one or any material thing was going to give me purpose.

How has your field changed since you started out in luxury, and what do you think your industry will look like in a decade?

So much has changed. The real estate business used to have much less intensity toward recruiting, and fundamentally people

built brokerages based on a business model that made it profitable.

Today, the margins have been greatly depleted because brokerage companies offered agents supersized deals that actually made no economic sense. Somehow, Brown Harris Stevens has been able to maintain its relational culture, retain our agents and hire for quality versus quantity.



Upleveled lifestyle amenities such as this Southampton, New York listing’s heated saltwater pool continue to attract luxury buyers. Image credit: Brown Harris Stevens

It is hard to say what the industry will look like in a decade, but my guess is that good agents will stand the test of time. I always say we are a luxury real estate firm, not because we cater to the wealthy or sell expensive homes but because of the luxury service we offer to everyone who seeks our help.

We take care of our agents and clients, whether we’re representing a rental or a massive penthouse.

What recent projects have ignited your passion for working in luxury?

The penthouse at 520 Park Avenue. The Zeckendorfs, who are coowners of our parent company Terra Holdings, redid portions of the penthouse and it is perhaps one of the most stunning pieces of real estate you will ever see. Views galore.

Modern, classic and elegant! It’s inspiring.

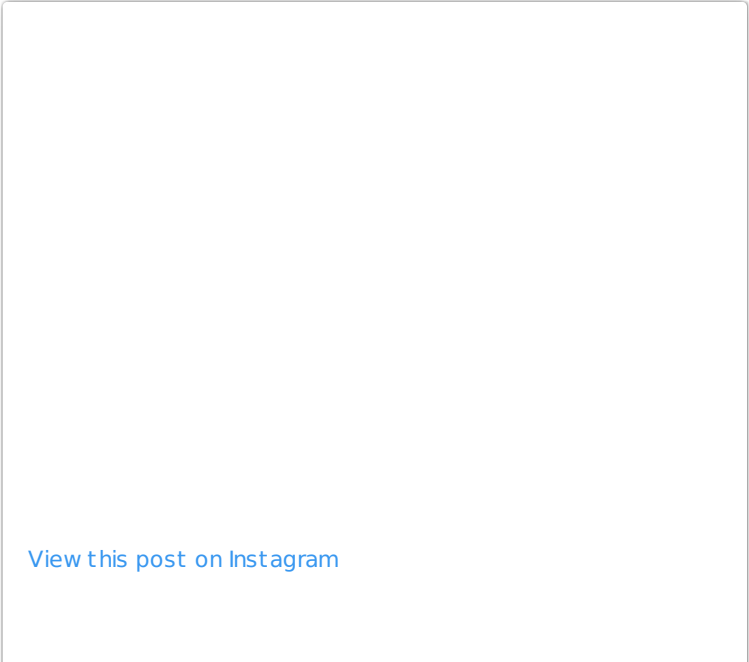
Who, in any industry or sphere, would you most like to share a long lunch with and where would you take them?

I would like to invite Scott Galloway he’s absolutely brilliant and would bring him to Le Bilboquet [in Manhattan] because I love their french fries, service and overall vibe. It’s my home away from home.

How do you get into the right mindset before a big meeting or presentation?

I must work out, ideally with a boxing session. And I need a good night’s sleep people underestimate the value of proper rest.

You can’t be 100 percent without it.



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On your days off, what can you be found doing to relax or have some fun?

Jigsaw puzzles, mahjong, reading or walking around New York City. I like to nourish my mind and body in order to reset.

What does luxury mean to you?

I think luxury is one of the most overused words. Luxury is meant to be out of the ordinary something aspirational.

For me, great service is luxury. Presentation, treatment, thoughtfulness, going the extra mile that creates a feeling that sticks with you long after the product or event.

Brown Harris Stevens prides itself on this luxury service standard, and it's the reason we've been leading the industry for 150+ years.

Whether a product or service, what is your favorite luxury indulgence?

Fancy hotels. I am an addict.

I'd rather spend one night in heaven than a week in mediocrity.

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