

Jonathan Hirsch

NEVER BEFORE has the success of a summer season in Cape May been so uncertain as this year. In the wake of shutdowns and global concerns in the hospitality industry triggered by the Coronavirus pandemic, 35-year old Jonathan Hirsch forges through the storm with an unflagging optimism that seems to go with the legacy of his family.

He and his wife Allyson are parents to two-year-old Addie and four-year-old Emme. Jonathan is a third-generation leader in the hospitality entity known as The Hirsch Group, founded by his grandfather Harry, his father Larry, and his uncle, Joseph. Among the company's many landmark holdings are the Montreal Beach Resort, Harry's Ocean Bar & Grille and most recently, The Boarding House.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEKSEY MORYAKOV

You're very much a local, and yet you're not exactly. I'll start out by having you explain this.

I'm a local shoobie. I was born here in Cape May and attended Cape May Elementary. When I was in the second grade, my parents moved to Linwood in Atlantic County but maintained our businesses here. I've been living there ever since.

In the family business of The Hirsch Group, what is your title?

Food and Beverage Director is my title, but with any family business, a title doesn't really matter! Right

now, my primary responsibility is overseeing the restaurant, the liquor store, and The Boarding House on Lafayette Street.

Let's talk about The Boarding House. Your family took a tired roadside motel and transformed it into a guest accommodation unlike anything Cape May had seen. Can you explain your style choices in the renovation?

It used to be the old Cape Winds Motel. Before that it was the Planter Motel. When we purchased it in 2017, we were in the middle of

what is called a 1031 Exchange, in which we had to purchase a building after we sold another property. At first, we thought about using it as housing for staff. But after a trip I had taken to Montauk, I saw a lot of similarities to Cape May. It was like a sleepy surf town that people began to reinvest in. There were a lot of small mom-and-pop style motels that were renovated, and each with a very exciting lifestyle brand that seem to be gaining a lot of popularity and recognition. That was something I had never seen in Cape May. I mean the B&Bs here are all

great, but there was nothing here that really seemed to attract a more contemporary design. So that was our focus.

Would you call it a boutique hotel?

I hate the term boutique hotel. I feel it's a term that is so bastardized in the industry. Our goal is to be a surf-inspired Cape May lodging. Our focus is the true Cape May experience, which is going to the beach, going surfing, going out to dinner and having some drinks.

You might have answered my next question, which is about the name for such a beautiful place. For a couple years now, I've been wondering if the name

gave potential clients the wrong impression.

It wasn't easy to settle on that name. I always loved that name but there were certainly mixed reviews about it. But it needed that name. It needed to stand out and be different. Some people had the connotation that it would not be a very well-maintained property with transient people going in and out. There were some negative comments about it on social media like, "How could Cape May allow for a boarding house to open?" But for us it was about pushing a surf and beach lifestyle that everyone wants to be a part of. Once we started the renovations and had the logo designed, people really

started to understand just what we were going for.

Were you concerned that a beach themed lodging might not work on the farthest street from the beach?

I was nervous about that. It seemed like it might be a challenge, but it's wonderful because Lafayette gets so much traffic and visibility. It's a great location in the center of town and everyone sees that.

Back to the Montreal: Kate Chadwick told me that she went to your annual Opening Day party at Harry's a few years ago and ordered a non-alcoholic beer. She said what she got was her least favorite N/A, so you asked what kind she liked. She

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THE ISLANDER

Jonathan Hirsch

said St. Pauli Girl and you've been carrying that ever since.

Well, that's what it's all about, isn't it? At the time I was three years out of college and trying to develop a good local following and I really wanted to know what people liked and what they had to say. The feedback I get from locals and from guests is most important to me.

Any memorable moments from your teenage years in Cape May?

My buddy from Maryland had his driver's license at 15 and I still had my permit. So, we decided that we'd have a test of me driving with my permit. I don't think I got a thousand feet away when I got pulled over by Detective Dekon Fashaw, who's still on the police

force here in Cape May. He asked me for my license and of course I didn't even have one. He asked me for my learner's permit, and I didn't have it on me. Let's just say at this point I got into some big trouble! My dad ended up going to City Hall to speak with the police chief and it was decided that I would have to clean two Cape May fire trucks from top to bottom. So a few days later, I reported to the firehouse where the fire chief had me spend my day cleaning two fire trucks. The firemen who were there were having a good laugh that day. It certainly wasn't my life's finest hour, but I gained a great respect that day for both the police and fire department. And I certainly have never been able to live it down. Whenever I see Detective Fashaw,

we give each other a wink or a nod, and he still gives me a gentle ribbing about it.

So you never faced any other charges from that incident.

Let's just say the police chief knew my dad well enough to know that what I'd get from him was worse than anything else.

How old will your daughters be before they hear that story?

(laughing) I'm determined to be that dad that tells them not to do all the things I did. That's how my dad was. He never told me about the crazy stuff he did until I got older.

How were you groomed for the family business?

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Back in those days, you could get your eight-year-old kid to clean up trash, which doesn't seem to be the case today. I can't imagine my two daughters doing the things that my dad had me do, or that he and my uncle had to do when they were kids. As a kid, I had to sweep up, fill the vending and soda machines. My father and grandfather and uncle always made sure we knew what it was all about. My birthday is September 4th, so I always had a Labor Day party and it was always at the hotel or the restaurant and of course the pool. In addition to family and friends attending, we had guests who attended because they were always there during that week. So, the business has always been a part of me.

Your family seems to have instilled a good work ethic in you.

My grandfather was a Holocaust survivor; so one thing I was taught to reiterate to myself was that there is no bad day we could have that could be as bad as anything my grandfather went through. We could have reservations canceled, deliveries not arriving on time and plans fall through, but it's just a business and nothing more than that. We're a family business, not a business within our family.

Can you share with me what it was like growing up with such a direct connection to the Holocaust?

When I grew up, everything I learned about the Holocaust was learned in school. My grandfather didn't talk about it much. My father and uncle knew stories that were expressed to them through other family members. It was something we always knew because he was our grandfather, and also because we

could see the numbers on his arm. About two years before he died, my brother, who worked with CBS-3 in Philadelphia, started to push him to tell his story because we didn't want it to be lost. My brother was able to get a really good news segment made with one of the reporters and got him to tell some incredible stories. They weren't able to air the entire hour of the interview, but we have a full copy of his stories. They have definitely shaped me.

What will you do to see that your daughters grow up knowing about the Holocaust?

When you hear about Holocaust remembrance, the thing that keeps resonating is that you can never forget. My daughters are only four and two, and for a while will have a limited understanding of it. But they are already learning the importance of being Jewish and learning the legacy that my grandparents were able to create for all of us. I will explain that more and more as they get older, but the important thing is to never forget.

It's wonderful that your grandfather lived long enough to see you enjoy the legacy he created.

Toward the end, I was lucky to spend a lot of time with him. I took him to doctor appointments, and we got to talk a lot. Also, his face is our logo, so I still get to see him every day. Fortunately, I'll never be able to forget him or his story.

Applying your family's optimistic perspective on so-called bad days, what are your thoughts on how the shutdowns from COVID-19 will change the way business is done in Cape May?

We're not unlike anyone else; we're trying to navigate the waters as best we can. We're still learning. We've been lucky that most of the challenges this presented happened at a time when the restaurant would not normally be open. Right now, we are preparing for whatever comes our way. We're even prepared if we have to accommodate people at 50% capacity if it is enforced. We do know that the pandemic will have a ripple effect that will be felt all summer long. How that will play out, we just don't know right now.

I know from the live performances you book at Harry's that you and your dad share a love for music.

My dad is huge into music. Because my mom didn't want to see all the concerts he wanted to see, I got to be that guy who went with him. I got to see a lot of great concerts. I've seen Bruce Springsteen a bunch of times, Paul McCartney, Elton John, The Who. I'm a huge Grateful Dead fan, even though my father is not. I never went to my first Eagles game until I was in my late teens because I was too busy going to concerts with my dad. We both love music and really try to promote live music at Harry's as well.

I noticed from your Facebook profile that you and your family travel quite a bit in the off-season.

In hospitality, you really have to see what everyone else is doing—that's how you see the trends and know what your customers want. That's what we try to maintain: offering Cape May something that is new and different and can still be attractive to all types of guests. ■