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Roger Saunders: A life lived in the hotel business - by Ken MacKenzie

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“We try harder” was Roger Saunders’ answer to the question why he was able to succeed at Boston’s Park Plaza hotel (f/k/a the Statler Hilton) where Hilton had failed. Roger did not just try hard. He succeeded. And in spectacular fashion. Many of the elements of our current hospitality industry which we now take for granted were innovated by Roger. While much has been written about Roger both before and since his passing, there remain many anecdotes, observations and reminiscences which are as yet unpublished. On a quiet afternoon this March a little over a month after Roger’s passing, the contributors to this article, Gary Saunders (chair and CEO of Saunders Hotel Group), Dan Donahue (president of SHG and general manager of the Lenox Hotel) and Susan DaSilva (VP administration) gathered to share stories and memories of Roger.

At the start of Roger’s career in hotels, he learned to do and did every job in his father Irving’s hotel. This gave him an appreciation of the challenges facing those who would eventually become Roger’s employees. The common touch, the kind word, and the sincere interest in the welfare of those he depended upon for his family’s livelihood made Roger a revered figure. This is perhaps why, for so many years, Boston’s other hoteliers would rely on Roger to take the lead in negotiations with Boston’s hotel employees union. Once Roger had negotiated a fair deal, the rest could simply say “me too.” When asked what she would say to Roger if she could talk to him now for a few minutes, Susan said “I would tell him what a great mentor he was. He created a loyalty in me that is hard to capture in words. There were many times I could have moved on to do other things, and I did for two brief periods, but I always came back because I couldn’t imagine my life anywhere else.” Susan will soon be celebrating her 42nd year with Saunders Hotel Group.

During most of the twentieth century, hotels were owned and operated either by one of the brands, such as Hilton and Marriott, or self-operated by an owner unaffiliated with a brand. Acknowledging the advantage the brands had over the independents arising from the brand reservation systems, and in an effort to level the playing field, Roger started a company called “INRES” with Diners’ Club as a sponsoring partner. Independent hotels could elect to join the INRES network and thereby provide guest access to a single 800 number to make a room reservation at any participating hotel. Much as is now the case with OTAs, member hotels would consign a portion of their room inventory to INRES and INRES would arrange for the booking and confirmation of such rooms. Roger also created what is believed to be one of the first third-party management companies and offered his company’s services to independent owners. One of the most notable early third-party engagements Roger obtained was that of managing the Lenox Hotel.

Gary shared the tale of how his family came to own the Lenox. A long time ago, the Lenox was owned by Theodore Berenson, another titan of Boston real estate. The Saunders family owned the Copley Square Hotel very near the Lenox on Essex St. At that time, the Lenox was a sleepy residential hotel, without a robust transient business. Roger decided to curry business for the Copley from the tourism kiosks along the interstate highways serving Boston. He would do that by personally taking the brochures that would be distributed to each highway kiosk and would staple a little card at the back. The card would identify the referring person at the kiosk Roger would compensate if a guest appeared at the hotel with the brochure and the card. All of that effort

culminated in Berenson's seeing the Copley entertaining numerous transient customers. He wanted that for the Lenox. Before long, Berenson offered Roger a one third interest in the Lenox at cost, with an annually renewable hotel management contract. That contract was renewed annually for more than 30 years, at which point the partners decided that it would be best for the Saunders family to own the hotel outright.

Roger is remembered as a dapper gent, a perennially well-dressed bon vivant. He and his wife shared a favorite Hungarian restaurant in the Longwood Medical area in Brookline. The restaurant was run by Edith Ban, a refugee from the 1956 Hungarian revolution and a certified character. Edith grew close to Roger and his wife over the span of their many trips to dine in her restaurant and they developed a friendship which enabled Edith to confide in Roger that her restaurant was to be demolished to make way for an expansion of the neighborhood's medical facilities. At that time, Roger owned the Copley Square Hotel, which had a vacant space at its rear in the basement. Roger was aghast that he was about to lose one of his favorite dining locations, but hatched the thought that he could solve his problem and Edith's with the simple expedient of offering her the basement space at the hotel to run her restaurant. Edith demurred, saying that she could not go through another eviction. Roger responded by giving her a lifetime lease. Such was his authority and he relished it. Bostonians of a certain age, the author included, will remember Café Budapest at the Copley Square as the ultimate date night destination and will never forget the tall Hungarian woman, clad all in white, greeting her diners while she smoked a cigarette held at the very end of a long, lacquered holder. For the record, this transaction stands as the first time a Boston hotelier leased its restaurant operation to a third party.

Despite Roger's adroit handling of his friend's problem to their mutual advantage, he often acted the absent-minded professor. Umbrellas, hats, coats, and other small items would frequently be left on cabs and airplanes. Enter Susan. That said, some details never escaped him. Hotels often have ornate chandeliers with many bulbs. Roger had a pet peeve that involved extinguished bulbs or those of differing wattage in those chandeliers. His field of vision would always pick up the same and he left answering machine messages to those responsible. Into his 80s, Roger was still inspecting rooms at the Lenox, the family's flagship. He once told Susan, "Don't clear off your desk at night. People will think you don't have enough to do." Yet, withal, he trusted her to act in the best interests of the business unsupervised by him, deferring to her the disposition of copier contracts that at the time cost several thousands of dollars. That did not prevent him, however, from observing on the very next day that an envelope in Susan's outbox bore too much postage.

Roger reveled in the many opportunities his job allowed for him to meet interesting people who stayed at his hotels. Just after visiting his new granddaughter Amanda at the hospital, Roger returned to the Park Plaza to find President Clinton in the lobby. The two struck up a conversation. When the President found out about the new arrival, he asked Roger for his omnipresent pocket calendar and wrote on it "To Amanda...Welcome to the World, Bill Clinton." Dan Donahue summed up his thoughts on Roger in very simple fashion. "The man was unfailingly kind, exceptionally generous with both his time and his money, and a bold strategic thinker who had an eagle's eye for the fine details that made his beloved Lenox the superb property it now remains."

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Formerly MacKenzie was the co-leader of the hospitality and recreation group at Goulston & Storrs. MacKenzie represents institutional investors, private equity funds, investment managers, pension funds, university endowments, REITs, major lending institutions and developers in the acquisition, financing and disposition of all classes of real estate assets both nationally and internationally.

MacKenzie specializes in transactions involving hospitality assets and has significant experience in large-scale joint-ventured deals, often involving non-profit institutions such as universities or hospitals. He frequently assists clients in structuring their responses to RFPs for complex mixed-use projects.

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