



# Photo-Ready for Success

*Deborah Yager Fleming, a Weston resident and CEO of Acqualina Resort & Residences on The Beach, explains the importance of curiosity and community*

By Alona Abbady Martinez / Photo by Lauren Rodriguez

It's easy to understand why Acqualina Resort & Residences on The Beach keeps winning awards. After all, the stunning, Mediterranean-style property on Sunny Isles Beach combines seamless service in a luxury setting so impeccable that it has won the *Forbes Travel Guide* Five-Star Award for eight consecutive years.

Other recognitions include *U.S. News & World Report's* rating as the No. 1 Best Resort in the Continental U.S. and TripAdvisor's coveted No. 1 Beachfront Resort in the Continental U.S., considered the people's choice award. While Deborah Yager Fleming, the property's dynamic CEO, will be the first to say it's a team effort, it is irrefutable to note that her leadership forges the property's position as one of the world's best hotels.

Fleming came about her career choice serendipitously, when she attended a reception for hotel management trainee candidates with a friend, and executives were so impressed by her that she was offered a position, veering her away from her intended path in journalism. From there, it was a rapid rise in the ranks with renowned companies like Leading Hotels of the World, where she served as director of strategic marketing and sales. The daughter of Peruvian immigrants, she attributes her accomplishments to a combination of hard work and an innate sense of curiosity.

"What does curiosity ultimately do? It challenges the status quo. It allows us to keep improving," she says.

She joined Acqualina in 2004 as part of an advance team (it opened in 2006) and in 2011 became a partner in the hotel. Since day one, she has successfully spearheaded a culture of excellence associated with the ultra-luxury brand.

"I have a phrase here that I use with our team members, which is 'photo-ready,' she says. "Everything needs to be photo-ready. It's important to look at it as if we were looking through the camera lens."

Yet Yager encourages her team to strive for improvement, believing that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of strength. "In order to stay relevant, we have to continuously keep improving," she says.

Take technology, for example. The property recently added iPads in each room, allowing patrons to request room service or housekeeping services. There's also an app launching later

this year that will offer opportunities to order services from the pool or beach. Last year, Yager helped launch an app called Together, which serves Acqualina's 400 team members, providing a centralized form of communication which encourages peer-to-peer recognition with features allowing employees to share images and messages similar to Facebook and Instagram.

"The amount of pride that is seen through this app is so fantastic," she says. "We have housekeepers that are taking a photo of their turndown and posting it, or a cook in the kitchen that just created a dish and wants to share it with everybody."

In fact, the property recently started a photo contest because of the overwhelming number of images being shared. Yager takes great pride in the sense of community felt among employees.

"This family culture is something that is very near and dear and special to me. Team members that deliver amazing 'wow' stories and wonderful service at the end of the day translates to repeat business, which represents 50 percent of our business—that's unusual for a property, and that's really great success."

Yager chuckles when asked what a typical workday is, saying "no two days are alike." Each day involves strategizing with her team, greeting customers and speaking with the residential leaders (along with its hotel, Acqualina has residential properties as well as the Mansions at Acqualina.) She spends time with human resources team members regularly as well, emphasizing the importance of employees understanding and practicing the company's brand. In her spare time, Yager is involved with Acqualina's I Have a Dream Foundation. The organization, which aids children from low-income homes in reaching their educational and career goals, was founded by one of her partners, Stephanie Trump.

Yager lives in Weston, where she's owned a home for over 17 years. She loves her neighborhood for all its greenery and sense of family, noting that most everyone on her cul de sac has been there from day one.

"It's a very special lifestyle, because it's not only an easy lifestyle, it's one where you feel cared for by your neighbors and by your community."