

WAG

BY MARY SHUSTACK JUNE 2017MAY 30, 2017

MICHAEL BRUNO'S ROAD TO SUCCESS



In a manner perfectly befitting this issue's theme, WAG recently hit the road with Michael Bruno.

Moments after meeting the self-proclaimed “serial entrepreneur” — and Larchmont native — in his Orange County office, we settle into his BMW for a whirlwind overview of his latest project.

“We’re going to go for a little tour,” Bruno, a study in casual cool in jeans and aviators, says. “It’s more fun that way.”

And he wasn’t wrong. It’s a quick stop for coffee — to go, of course — then it’s all about Bruno and his Tuxedo Hudson Co., an outgrowth of his moving to Tuxedo Park, one of the nation’s oldest (1880s) gated communities, some five years ago.

Have we ever been beyond the gates? Sadly, no, but they’ve captured our imagination for years.

With that, Bruno treats us to a quick spin through the village, accompanied by his knowing commentary. He’ll point out the Tiffany stained-glass windows of St. Mary’s-in-Tuxedo Episcopal Church and explain why the historic enclave is filled with Gilded Age mansions of such diverse architectural styles, from English manor to French chateau.

“Everyone came back from different parts of Europe. ‘I want one of these. I want one of those.’”

Our tour touches not only on these historic gems but also on the sheer natural beauty. We’ll hear about the storied Tuxedo Club nestled along one of three lakes, zoom past Bruno’s stately 1901 Georgian-style brick mansion and even one of his other properties, the Loomis Lab, a stone castle with a history tied to World War II scientists.

It’s all part of the allure of Tuxedo Park, one that had Bruno relocating from Manhattan when all he was planning to do back then was move within the city to be closer to his job.

“Instead of being walking distance to work, I live an hour to work,” he says with a laugh.

Winding our way back into the town of Tuxedo on Route 17 — a road that ties Rockland and Orange counties in this Hudson Valley region — Bruno says he quickly realized something once he moved in.

“The stretch between Sloatsburg and Tuxedo, not much has happened there since... well, since the Thruway opened,” he says of the decades since the 1950s.

He quickly realized for all that Tuxedo Park provided within its community, there was a dire need for “more amenities” nearby — and not just for locals.

“After about four years of thinking, I realized no one was going to do anything,” he says. The idea was born to create a regional destination, a “gateway to the Hudson Valley” and home base of sorts for the surrounding 70,000 acres of parkland.

First, Bruno, who also heads up Tuxedo Hudson Realty, purchased a building that housed a poorly run bodega.

“I said ‘Well, if I’m going to buy that, I might as well have that one, too,’” he says with a laugh.

And he was off, eventually purchasing some two dozen properties in the area — more than a dozen within that corridor — with a master plan to redevelop the commercial stretch.

THE ROAD TO TUXEDO

Bruno, it seems, always had his eye on what was next.

He was a pre-teen when his family relocated to LaJolla, California, but says, “I’ve always felt Larchmont was home,” and eventually returned to the metro area.

In California, he studied business at San Diego State University before moving to San Francisco to work in luxury real estate. In 2001, he moved to Paris to start a new internet venture.

“Everyone thought it was counterintuitive to move from San Francisco to Paris,” he laughs.

But walking through a Parisian flea market proved the pivotal spark that would find him creating 1stdibs.com, the famed online marketplace for luxury goods, including antiques, furniture, jewelry and fine art. A worldwide success, Bruno would eventually come back to America. The internet and real estate entrepreneur would go on to launch the Housepad app, a communications tool for households, and most recently, Art-Design-Carta, a private marketplace for design and art professionals.

A SINGULAR VISION

Bruno, a longtime preservationist who’s been an admirer and restorer of many historic properties, was captivated by the raw materials he found in the Tuxedo area.

“To me, one of the greatest things about it was that... mostly, nothing had been done,” he says of the buildings. “They don’t have to ‘fake’ history.”

As we pull off the road, Bruno points out some buildings in the near distance, part of 12 acres dotted with structures, one of which, he notes, “has 25-foot vaulted ceilings.”

“This is going to become the art and antiques center,” he says. “This is a year away.”

Our tour next heads to 7 Lakes Inn, which Bruno assures will open by July 1. This showpiece complex is fronted by a series of Victorian homes being transformed into a unified bed-and-breakfast. Behind, as Bruno explains, “It’s all about creating a village green.”

It already has the feel of what’s to come, as we wander through the courtyard and surrounding buildings. Mature trees, he says, are soon to be planted. Throughout, the goal is to create an atmosphere that’s “very modern, fresh, bright, clean.”

“Watch it. These roses will get you,” he says, leading the way past a thorny bush to further explore the plans that embrace design, the arts, recreation, farm-to-table living and more.

Within the complex will be a bike shop, gym, coffeehouse, juice bar and garden grill. Blue Barn, an organic market, made its debut last summer, the first step in the long-term project that will include a hotel and other locally oriented shops and services.

From the rear access road, visitors can easily walk to both the train station or, as envisioned, bike right onto Seven Lakes Drive and into Harriman State Park. With this phase geared toward cyclists — and

another proposed to cater to hikers visiting Sterling Forest State Park — it's all about creating not only excitement but also awareness.

"It really became about access points," he says.

Bruno says he feels his project has already helped spark renewed enthusiasm for the area. He points to the new Warby Parker Optical Lab that opened in Sloatsburg in January and a new taproom on Route 17. The New York State Department of Transportation's \$4 million road project in the area plus his Tuxedo Hudson Co. securing a \$750,000 grant for economic development from New York state are all clear signs, he says, of the area's economic viability.

As we zip through the scenic vistas of Harriman State Park, Bruno pointing out attractions and sharing further details, we think back to an earlier question we had posed.

Was the ambitious project based on something he saw in his travels? No, he said.

"This is a place I've never seen before. It doesn't exist."

Yet.

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