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Pictured left to right: Sonya Haffey, Venus Williams and Holly Nixon

V STARR

Owner and president Venus Williams, principal Sonya Haffey, and design director Holly Nixon

The leadership team behind Florida-based V Starr talks in depth to Hospitality Interiors' Can Faik about the amazing projects the studio has completed, and their 20-year anniversary celebration

Founded by Venus Williams in 2002 because of her love of design and business, V Starr is a full-service interior design firm specialising in commercial design, with a focus on hospitality.

What does your current position involve?

Sonya: My position is principal of V Starr, and it involves a little of everything, from day-to-day operations to business development, agreements and client relations, high-level design decisions and space planning, as well as leading some of the more sensitive high-end residential projects we have.

Holly: Being a relatively small team, my role as design director also involves a little bit of everything. I am responsible for managing and leading the interior design department and all our projects from concept to completion. I also work heavily alongside Sonya with business development and marketing strategies, particularly as it relates to the hospitality markets.

Venus: I am the founder of V Starr, and I

have been able to take an ownership role, collaborating with the leadership team on the strategic initiatives of V Starr and relying on my team for the day-to-day operations.

What three words would you use to describe V Starr?

Sonya: Approachable, dynamic, evolving.

Holly: Passionate, multi-faceted, storytellers.

Venus: Boutique, impactful, inspirational.

With so many hospitality designers in the industry, how does V Starr stand out from the crowd?

Sonya: We are a small team of individuals committed to design and doing what is right in general. We are not stuck in our ways, and are always willing to learn new ways of operating and creating spaces.

Holly: Our team is internationally centric, both individually and in regards to our project experience. Our team has worked all over

the globe, from Australia to China, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, and all across the US, and because of this we have a deep understanding of the industry. We address every project on an individual basis, which allows each project to develop its own personality. We don't have a style, so to speak. Being a smaller boutique team, we pride ourselves on the deep relationships we build with each project and client. We are extremely collaborative, and like to consider ourselves problem solvers. We truly believe there is always a solution.

As the studio celebrates its amazing 20-year anniversary this year, may I ask what the standout moments have been for you all?

Sonya: Being with V Starr approaching 13 years now, the 20th year anniversary makes me so proud to be a part of the brand. The transition from being residentially focused to a boutique hospitality-driven firm with the multi-faceted team of designers that we have today has been a wonderful process to be a part of. Our team boasts experience in everything from

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“Public spaces in hotels set the tone. They are pivotal in the success of a hotel” - Sonya Haffey



Town Village Walk - Photography by Ryan Loco Imagery

Water Tower Commons - Photography by Ryan Loco Imagery



Water Tower Commons - Photography by Ryan Loco Imagery

PGA National Resort Spa - Photography by Will Pryce

massive, full-scale international resort casinos to smaller local F&B spaces, and I feel we have now arrived at who we want to be. Being the guest editor of a major hospitality design magazine, having international projects and being part of creating a fabric collection are some of the stellar moments that stand out to me.

Holly: With my background extensively in hospitality design, I joined the company in early 2018, with the goal being to push into that market for V Starr. It has been incredibly exciting to see the rapid speed at which that has happened. The lounge at West Half 1205 Collection in DC was a pinnacle project for the company that really crossed the boundaries of multi-family and hospitality. And the recently completed renovation of the PGA National Spa has been a standout highlight. Not only is it a local project, which gives it extra-special meaning for us, but it also gave us the opportunity to collaborate with an internationally recognised client and be part of the larger resort renovation that was led by three women-owned companies.

Venus: V Starr began as a residential design company, due to my passion and interest in interior design. Twenty years went fast! I never thought when we started the company that we would be where we are today. Our first commercial project in 2010, when Sonya joined the team, bringing along her extensive experience in condo design in the South Florida market, was a major highlight, and signalled our shift into the commercial field. The next major highlight was collaborating with a major brand and a recognised architect on the Midtown Athletic Club Hotel in Chicago, which integrated a fitness/wellness club with a hotel. It was one of the first of its kind and holds a special place in my heart, as I played many rounds of tennis there as a kid. There is no doubt in my mind that the PGA National Resort Spa, which recently opened, is our current standout moment. It integrates all aspects of my life, from my sports- and wellness-related 'day job' alongside my passion for design, and it is the most personal to me as it is in my back yard.

How did your partnership with the PGA National Resort begin, and what can we

expect from the new spa designed by V Starr?

Sonya: A dear friend introduced us to the ownership team of the PGA National Resort. The spa brings in a sophisticated aesthetic to the area while using the basis of the locality to dictate the palette and materials used.

Holly: It really captures the essence of Palm Beach – sand-swept tones, subtle tropical references, and a level of serene elegance that one would expect at an upscale spa resort facility. The renovation includes multiple relaxation lounges, standard and wet treatment rooms, a hair and nail salon complete with men's barbershop, Jacuzzi, steam and sauna areas, three outdoor pools and the addition of two salt therapy rooms.

Turning to the topic of authenticity of experience, how do you approach each project?

Sonya: Each project we bring on begins with an in-depth study of the surroundings and what makes that project or area unique. We pull from history, cultural events or points of interest to create a story around the project.

Stories have been around for a while in the hospitality sector, but we integrate them throughout all our project types.

Holly: Before we put pen to paper we will study the demographics, the locality, and specific history of the site. We like to be authentic for every project we work on, and the goal is to weave together a unique story. This becomes the basis of design and gives every design detail meaning. It is important to us to also have communication with all of the key individuals of the project – not just from ownership, but down to the operations and maintenance teams, in order to address all concerns from the beginning.

How important are public spaces in hotels? Are there ways in which you've used innovative design in these areas to facilitate innovative usage?

Sonya: Public spaces in hotels set the tone. They are pivotal in the success of a hotel. I am not saying that guest rooms are not – because if you ignore those completely, it could be to your detriment – but you want to

include a large portion of your creative juices in the public spaces.

Holly: The key to these spaces is flexibility. How can these spaces be moved around or adjusted to suit different events, times of day, etc? Some people like to be separated more from a larger group, and some people love to be right in the mix. You must design for both. Access to power is so critical also. We are so connected to some form of technology these days. Integral power in the furniture and design is a must.

Do designers think about loyalty when they design a hotel, or is it just an operator's concern?

Sonya: We think about loyalty, but in a different manner. We think loyalty as a guest wanting to return to that same space/hotel repeatedly because of the emotions it evoked. We consider loyalty a guest telling their friends that they must stay at that location.

Holly: Emotional response is what often drives loyalty now. How did the space make you

feel when you walked in? Did it tell a story and make you feel part of it? People want authentic experiences that connect them with the locations they are visiting. It is no longer just the minimum expectations of the brand standards any more.

Social media – especially Instagram – is becoming an increasingly important marketing tool for hotels. What are your thoughts on this trend, and do you take it into account when designing spaces?

Sonya: We always consider social media now. We aren't necessarily creating an 'Instagramable moment' by design in which you can tell that was created for someone to take a photo, but we are designing spaces so that the angle or view created would make someone want to snap a pic and share.

Holly: You would be a fool to ignore it. It is incredibly important for marketing also. It is essentially free marketing. We think about it for every space we design. How would this look in a photo? Does it connect with the overall story? It is going to make people want to go there to

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West Hall - Photography by Helen Kazak



PGA National Resort Spa - Photography by Will Pryce

Mid Town Athletic Club - Photography by Anthony Thaller

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get 'the photo'. For certain projects, it's obviously more important than for others. But as hotels now become more and more connected to the fabric of the community they are in, it is not only important that they appeal to travellers, but also the locals.

Do you believe simple design has become luxurious?

Sonya: Absolutely, the more simplistic the design and details, the more difficult they are to create and/or construct.

Holly: Simplicity has always been luxurious.

Do you think there is a difference in tone and texture between ideas of hospitality in the US and Europe?

Sonya: Yes, European hospitality is, and has always been, based on service, as well as sophistication of design, with less being more. Much of the US basis of hospitality is service driven, and either over-designed or not considered. The key is to find the sweet spot.

Holly: Europe has always been known to be the leader in design trends. We see a trickle-on effect one to two years later in the US, particularly with colour and styles. The US is

starting to take more risks like our European counterparts do. It's exciting to see that here, and see hotel design push some traditional boundaries. It is no longer just cookie-cutter guest rooms.

Is there anything exciting you're working on that you can tell us about?

Sonya: We have several international hotels we are working on in Puerto Rico right now. I can't wait to be a guest in the next year or so. We also have few hotels projects here in our back yard.

Holly: We have a handful of projects across the country due to complete this year, along with some international hotel projects in the works, including a couple in Puerto Rico. We also have some exciting local hospitality projects going on right now that include guest rooms, restaurants and public spaces. Stay tuned!

You recently launched your first product range in collaboration with Wolf-Gordon. Is this something the studio enjoyed, and will you be looking to add more partnerships in the future?

Sonya: We did enjoy the collaboration with Wolf-Gordon – they are such a classy company that really knows what they are doing. We are

always interested in conversations related to products and being able to flex all our creative muscles.

Holly: To collaborate with such an internationally recognised and respected company is such an honour. It was interesting to learn about another side of our industry in much deeper detail. It gave us more understanding about textiles and what to think about when selecting them for future projects.

What's next for you and V Starr?

Sonya: There is a saying to never peak too early ... that is my motto in life – we are still adapting according to markets, and always loving what we do.

Holly: We have a lot of different projects in the hospitality field going on right now and we are excited to expand our partnerships and capabilities as we push into new territories. As we grow, we make sure we don't lose sight of where we began, and at the same time are always looking to how we can evolve. Our priority is to always 'love what you do', and that remains a key value of V Starr moving forward.

www.vstarr.com