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## The Trade Show Planner Who Became a Property Manager

By Bill Morris

➤ **IT WAS 1975** and President Gerald Ford had just told New York City to, in so many words, drop dead. For Ellen Kornfeld, the infamous Daily News headline was personal. She was working at the time as a public information officer for the Municipal Assistance Corporation, which was involved in bare-knuckled negotiations to save the city from financial collapse. She had a ring-side seat at a potential disaster.

“That was kind of bizarre,” says Kornfeld, who had grown up in blue-collar Brooklyn, where her father was a plumber, her mother a city clerk. Kornfeld had recently graduated from high school but had not yet attended college, and there she was, surrounded by powerful, well educated people in a pressure-packed situation, the city’s fate in the balance. Seated nearby were Governor Hugh Carey, Mayor Abe Beame, and her boss, the finance giant Felix Rohatyn. Yet Kornfeld was not intimidated. “I kind of instinctively knew what to do,” she says. “You teach yourself, and you sink or you swim. You’re always insecure when people have a degree and you don’t. Fortunately, that experience drove me to go to college.”

After the negotiations ended, Kornfeld enrolled in the honors curriculum at Hunter College, earning a humanities degree with a minor in film. But her dream of becoming a movie producer didn’t pan out, and she worked a series of jobs setting up conferences, business meetings, and trade shows. It was detail-oriented work that had to be tailored to each client, and it involved a lot of travel. “It’s not like everything works for everybody,” Kornfeld says, “so you become a chameleon.”



Through one of those jobs she met Edwin Pordy, who owned a book bindery. They married, and Kornfeld, at age 38, became stepmother to Pordy’s three grown children. Soon afterwards, her life took another sharp turn.

Burnt out from traveling, Kornfeld agreed to go to work for a friend who owned a property management company. “It was a long learning curve,” Kornfeld admits. “I didn’t know what I was doing, but I learned to keep my mouth shut and listen – then nod.” She laughs her gravelly laugh. “People assumed I knew what I was doing.”

Before long, the chameleon did know what she was doing – and her previous work experiences and native instincts were a big help. “I’d learned that challenges make us stronger,” she says, “and as you learn your weaknesses and learn to adjust, you get a little tough. Property management is all about having to make decisions all day long. If you can’t make a decision – if you’re wishy-washy and always going back to the board – you’re going to have a wishy-washy board, and you’re not going to survive in this business. We propose, boards dispose.”

When the company she was working for was sold, Kornfeld, who was managing five Manhattan properties, joined John B. Lovett, who managed properties in Queens. Today she’s vice president of the Lovett Group of Companies, which manages 14,000 units across all five boroughs.

Like every other job she’s ever had, Kornfeld says property management comes down to one thing: people. “I don’t care about computers,” she says. “My strength is my intuitive nature. I can read people in two seconds, and I’m sensitive to the inner workings of people. And in this job you’ve got to deal with every level of economic strata – shareholders, boards, contractors, supers, porters. You have to understand that each person is important.”

In a sense, it all goes back to those smoke-filled rooms full of negotiators trying to pull New York City back from the brink of financial ruin. The high school grad from blue-collar Brooklyn realized it was sink or swim. She figured out a way to swim. Four decades later, she’s still swimming. ■