

# Marilynn Gardner

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As the first President and CEO of Navy Pier, lifelong Chicagoan Marilyn Gardner is responsible for the multifaceted operations, programming, and fiscal health of the Midwest's most visited cultural destination. The hallmark of her tenure has been the Pier's continual evolution, which began with a \$400 million all-encompassing redevelopment and has continued through the 2025 groundbreaking for the hard-won Navy Pier Marina.

Building upon her early career in public relations—a skill she marshaled in her first role at the Pier—Gardner laddered up a variety of leadership positions, becoming CEO in 2011. She led the transition of the landmark, which she fondly frequented in her youth, into a nongovernmental, nonprofit responsible for its own mission, management, revenue, and future viability.

Gardner embraces Navy Pier's moniker as "The People's Pier." Adhering to Daniel Burnham's vision that the waterfront belongs to the people, she has led the charge to reimagine the once-shuttered and neglected space into a vibrant cultural district and economic catalyst that celebrates Chicago's artistic vibrancy, culinary experiences, and small business community with more than 8 million guests each year.

Committed to ensuring that all people have access to Chicago's lakefront, cultural diversity, architectural achievements, and historical significance, Gardner oversees an ambitious slate of more than 500 free and ticketed cultural events each year, most featuring emerging local talents. She curates a symbiotic community of 70 on-site tenant partners, who help excite Navy Pier's calendar to help each visit feel unique. Gardner recently launched a small-business accelerator to help nascent companies grow in Navy Pier's spotlight, which also shines on more than 125 local entrepreneurs who participate in the Pier's rotating Artisan Markets, which prioritize women- and minority-owned businesses.

In addition to such placemaking, Gardner prioritizes teambuilding and collaborates closely with the notable business and civic leaders who comprise Navy Pier's all-volunteer boards. More than 3,000 jobs are sustained annually through Navy Pier, from the spacious grand entrance that is Polk Bros Park to the historically significant Aon Grand Ballroom, jutting nearly a mile into Lake Michigan.

Key to Gardner's success is attracting innovators and investors to create exciting new opportunities for guests to enjoy authentic Chicago experiences. This innovation is realized in such amenities as an on-pier hotel, Sable, and the enthusiastically-received Flyover Chicago experience.

Gardner's insights on business and board development, tourism, placemaking, event management, and programming make her a compelling speaker for peer institutions, media outlets, and such organizations as YPO Gold, City Club of Chicago, Harvard Business School Alumni Organization, Global Cultural Districts Network, and the Urban Land Institute.

These experiences led her to become a founding member of newly formed Team Culture, a group of likeminded arts and civic leaders advancing concepts to breathe new life into downtown Chicago. Gardner is a member of World Business Chicago Vibrancy Focus Group Committee, charged with planning for the city's growth over the next 25 years.

Gardner was recently appointed to the Advisory Council of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center. She also serves as Vice Chair of Choose Chicago and Executive Committee member of the Chicago Sports Commission. A former board member, she remains actively involved in CURE Epilepsy, a cause close to her family's heart. Gardner serves on the Regional Advisory Committee for the Ireland Funds, Chicago Chapter. She remains committed to her alma mater university and high school, previously serving on the board of St. Ignatius College Prep, as chairman of its Mission and Academic Committee, as well as previously serving on the National Alumni Board of Marquette University, where she earned her B.A. in journalism. She is a member of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, Economic Club of Chicago, the Magnificent Mile Association, and Executives' Club of Chicago.

Gardner has been recognized as Chicago Skyline Executive of the Year (2017) by the Public Relations Society of America Chicago Chapter and Innovator of the Year (2018) by the Executive's Club of Chicago. She was included in Crain's Chicago Business's Notable Women Executives Over 50 (2019), and Chicago Magazine's 50 Most Powerful Women (2020). Her honors include the Clarion Award from the Association of Women in Business for her leadership in advancing Navy Pier's Centennial Vision and the Alumni Business Leader Award from St. Ignatius.