

A Relationship-Driven Business

An Interview with Itzaskun “Itzy” Garay, Co-President, Managing Director of Sales, Upper East Side, Brown Harris Stevens



Itzaskun “Itzy” Garay



Kevin W. Kovesci, Co-President

EDITORS’ NOTE Itzy Garay serves as Co-President and Managing Director of Sales, Upper East Side for Brown Harris Stevens. With more than 20 years of extensive management, sales, and leadership experience, Garay joined Brown Harris Stevens (formerly Halstead) in 2017 as the Executive Director of Sales for the prestigious Park Avenue office. In her role, she oversees day-to-day operations and fosters a culture of growth and excellence, consistently delivering exceptional results through mentorship and strategic leadership. A proud resident of New York City for nearly 30 years, Garay has lived in various neighborhoods across New York City, including the Upper West Side, Upper East Side, Murray Hill, Hell’s Kitchen, Tribeca, and Brooklyn. In recognition of her outstanding contributions, she was named a 2024 “Real Estate Newsmaker” by RISMedia and was honored as a “Power Woman of Brooklyn” by Schneps Media in 2022. Beyond her professional achievements, Garay is deeply passionate about and dedicated to philanthropy, supporting causes such as St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital. Known for

her personal commitment to making a difference, she regularly donates her hair to organizations like Locks of Love. As a co-founder of Helping Hands at Brown Harris Stevens – a philanthropic initiative launched with fellow executives Sara Rotter and Steve Klym – Garay has been instrumental in organizing events that support communities in need, including a notable partnership with New York Cares that has collected over 25,000 coats.

FIRM BRIEF Brown Harris Stevens (bhsusa.com) is one of the most prominent privately held real estate firms in the world. Established in 1873, the company is headquartered in New York City, operates in the Hamptons, Westchester, Hudson Valley, Connecticut, New Jersey, Palm Beach, and Miami, and oversees the sale of marquee properties around the world. Its operating divisions offer a full suite of residential sales services, residential property management, new development marketing and sales, relocation, appraisal and consulting, commercial sales, healthcare real estate and insurance services.

Will you discuss your role as Co-President of Brown Harris Stevens?

I’ve spent 25 years in the real estate industry, beginning my career as an agent, an experience that continues to shape how I lead today. Working directly with clients gave me a deep understanding of the complexity of this business, the power of relationships, the resilience required to succeed, as well as the day-to-day realities our agents navigate. After several years in sales and rentals, I transitioned into management, where I’ve focused on building high-performing offices, recruiting talent, and mentoring agents.

As Co-President, I work closely with my fellow Co-President, Kevin Kovesci, and our leadership team to drive strategy across the organization, spanning operations, marketing, talent development, and growth initiatives. I remain closely connected to our agents and sales leaders who are central to everything we do. Our agents are my number one priority. I am focused on ensuring they feel supported, empowered, and positioned to excel in a rapidly changing market.

How do you describe BHS’ culture and what sets BHS apart?

Our culture is very familial, collaborative, and hands-on. We pride ourselves on being extremely present in our offices and deeply engaged with our agents. This is a high-touch business, and we operate that way, whether it’s coaching, strategizing, creating learning opportunities, or simply being available when someone needs guidance.

We are constantly thinking about how to add value, how to help agents grow their businesses, sharpen their skills, and build meaningful connections with one another and with clients. That means building an environment where innovation, collaboration, and excellence are the standard. Real estate is evolving rapidly, and success today requires more than transactional expertise. It requires vision, adaptability, and a deep commitment to our agents.

There is also a tremendous amount of respect here – respect for the craft, professionalism, and for relationships. That combination of accessibility, mentorship, and genuine care is something our agents consistently say sets BHS apart.

“We are constantly thinking about how to add value, how to help agents grow their businesses, sharpen their skills, and build meaningful connections with one another and with clients.”

“The best agents are relentless advocates for their clients. They understand the nuances of the market, prepare meticulously, and ask the right questions.”

What have been the keys to BHS’ strength and leadership in the industry, and does being private make a difference?

It absolutely makes a difference that we are privately held. It allows us to be nimble, thoughtful and decisive, with the ability to make meaningful investments in our people, our platform, and our brand with a long-term perspective. Ownership has consistently demonstrated its commitment to the company and our agents, investing thoughtfully in the future of the business.

That flexibility, combined with strong leadership and a clear focus on service, has been key to our longevity and success. We’re able to evolve with the market while staying true to who we are, an organization built around excellence, integrity, and unwavering support for our agents.

What makes a successful real estate agent?

The best agents are relentless advocates for their clients. They understand the nuances of the market, prepare meticulously, and ask the right questions. Equally important, they know how to really listen and to understand a client’s goals, concerns, and lifestyle, and then guide them thoughtfully through what is often one of the biggest decisions of their lives.

That guidance also requires knowing how and when to deliver difficult news. Agents, by nature, want to please, but part of the role is helping clients navigate realities they may not want to hear. The ability to communicate those moments with clarity and empathy is often what separates a great agent from a good one.

How valuable has it been to have strong and consistent leadership at BHS?

It has been invaluable. Consistent leadership creates stability, clarity, and trust, both internally and externally. Hall Willkie’s steady

leadership over more than 30 years helped shape the culture and values that define the company today. His example set a standard of professionalism and integrity that continues to guide the firm’s leadership.

Today, under Bess Freedman’s leadership as CEO, that foundation has continued to evolve and strengthen. Bess has established her own standard as an industry leader while maintaining the culture that makes BHS unique. She leads with conviction, integrity, and courage, standing firmly behind what she believes is right even when it may not be the easiest path. She is a powerful advocate for our agents and our teams, and she is incredibly vocal in a positive, purposeful way about the importance of doing the right thing and earning the trust of our clients every day. That clarity of values has had a profound impact on our organization.

At the same time, it is equally important to bring in new talent and fresh perspectives to ensure the company continues to evolve and grow. The level of expertise, integrity, and care across our leadership team is second to none. That combination of continuity and thoughtful expansion has allowed us to grow strategically, preserve our culture, and support our agents through every type of market cycle.

Have the changes in the brokerage business over the last decade been positive or negative?

I wouldn’t frame it as positive or negative; it has simply evolved. Information is everywhere now, which means agents truly need to be experts. Clients don’t just want access, they want interpretation, strategy, and guidance. Being able to analyze data, understand trends, and translate that into smart advice is critical.

At the same time, agents need more support than ever from their firms, and we have to remain forward thinking, embracing technology, new marketing tools, and smarter systems, while never losing sight of the fact that this is, at its core, a relationship-driven business.

Is it still necessary to work with a real estate agent to find a home?

Buying a home is incredibly complex, especially in markets like New York. An agent’s expertise is essential, whether that is knowing how to assemble a co-op board package, asking the right questions about a building, understanding financing structures, or navigating negotiations. It is far more than opening a door. Deals are more complicated than ever, and having someone who is your advocate, your strategist, and your negotiator throughout the process can make all the difference between a smooth transaction and a stressful one.

What advice do you offer to young people considering a career in real estate?

It is a wonderful and incredibly rewarding career, but it is not something you can do part-time. You must be fully committed. Success requires hard work, discipline, and a constant dedication to mastering the craft. That means knowing buildings and the market inside and out, understanding how deals are structured, sharpening your negotiation skills, and continually investing in your own education.

Above all, this is a relationship-driven business. Your reputation, integrity, and the trust you build with clients and colleagues will ultimately define your career. The agents who succeed long term are the ones who combine hustle with expertise, professionalism with warmth, and who show up every day determined to be exceptional at what they do. ●

“Deals are more complicated than ever, and having someone who is your advocate, your strategist, and your negotiator throughout the process can make all the difference between a smooth transaction and a stressful one.”