

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CATHY WURZER: Believe this or not, the Mall of America turns 30 years old this month. If you're under a certain age or new to the area, you may not remember a Minnesota without the Mall of America. But before it opened in 1992, the mall was a long time coming. And its success was far from certain.

530 retail stores, 40 restaurants, an 18-hole mini golf course, an amusement park-- there were many supporters, but there were also many who thought it would turn into a giant empty eyesore. Here are some listeners who called into NPR's midday show with Gary Eichton from July of 1985.

CALLER 1: Hi, I guess I don't know a lot about this project, but what I've read and what I've heard, it just really kind of irks me. I wonder where our priorities are. And I wonder, how many more stores do we need in the twin city areas?

CALLER 2: I go to two to three national conventions a year. I've been going, oh, for the past 20 years. And it sounds great. You're going to have all this stuff under one roof. But people are individuals. And I always hate to get trapped in a situation where it's been pre-planned. You walk in, you see one B. Dalton, you've seen them all.

CALLER 3: Well, I want to know if any of my tax money will go into this because if this project becomes a white elephant, the full burden will fall on the financial resources of the state's taxpayers.

CATHY WURZER: That's a little bit of audio from the NPR archives. As part of our Minnesota Now and Then history segment on the program, we wanted to look at the Mall of America. Maureen Bausch was the mall's public relations manager for 25 years, beginning in 1990. Maureen is with us right now. Hey, it's good to hear your voice. How are you?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Great, how are you, Cathy?

CATHY WURZER: Good, thank you. Well, you were hired essentially to convince folks that the building was going to work.

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Which was-- I'm having a little PTSD right now.

CATHY WURZER: Right, exactly.

[CHUCKLING]

It was kind of a tall order if I remember since there was some evidence to back up some of the naysayers if you remember, right?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Yes, definitely.

CATHY WURZER: There was that-- gosh, was it 1979, there was a report that found that retail in the area was kind of saturated.

MAUREEN BAUSCH: There were lots of stories that were printed, some accurate, some not so much. We had done extensive research before the mall opened, the developers, the Ghermezians, as well as the Simon Group, and our investors. So that's what we had faith in. But, with anything, you can research it and find an answer that meets your needs. And many retailers did not want us entering this market for sure.

CATHY WURZER: Gosh, I remember covering this. And the Ghermezian brothers-- well, let's just say they were unique.

MAUREEN BAUSCH: [CHUCKLES] Visionaries.

CATHY WURZER: Yes, unique visionaries.

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Yes.

CATHY WURZER: Of course, we have a clip, we have a lot of audio. We're going to listen to a clip of Nader Ghermezian. And he happened to be quite frustrated in 1985 over delays in approval for the project.

NADER GHERMEZIAN: Let's come to our senses. What these people are doing, they are undermining everybody and they're trying to kill, indirectly, the biggest and the most viable project that this state could ever have. I don't think anybody could afford to lose a project like that.

CATHY WURZER: And it was a big tussle in the state legislature.

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Yes, yes. A lot of people didn't believe because there wasn't anything like this in the United States. And so it was hard for people to imagine that it was going to work. And also there were some big retailers that did not want new competition.

CATHY WURZER: Did you think right away, Maureen, that the mall would be a success?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: I did, but I was a retailer. I came out of the supermarket industry, I grew up in retail. I traveled the country for the job that I was in at Cub. It was spreading throughout the country at that time.

And for some reason, I just knew it was going to be successful. I didn't know we'd have such fabulous partners like Northwest Airlines who would do these great "shop to you drop" flights. I couldn't imagine people coming from England to shop there, but I did know it was going to be successful.

CATHY WURZER: Now your budget was pretty big for a statewide campaign, but you were trying to reach a national audience, too. I mean, what you were hoping for obviously, right?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Yes.

CATHY WURZER: So how did you marshal your forces to get the PR out there?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: It was almost completely earned media. And I have to thank Mona, Meyer, McGrath & Gavin. Dave Mona, Sarah Gavin really worked with us to help use earned media and tell the story through credible publications. And it worked.

And then we had great partners, again, who would talk about it with us and co-brand with us and that helped also. But it was hard to convince people, first of all, that we were going to open. People didn't think it would ever open. And then that they would like it.

CATHY WURZER: And I remember opening day.

[CHUCKLING]

Yeah. How did you feel opening day?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Probably exhausted, to be honest with you because we had worked so hard the last few months. And we had done more research that said people finally believed it would open, but they were going to come and absolutely hate it. And it was so funny.

And so I remember rounding the corner outside the media center. And I don't know, Cathy, if you were in that media center. It was on the first floor on the north side. And we had 2,400 media from around the country covering it. It was just amazing.

But we rounded that corner, and there were people with their faces pressed up against the door. And the crowd was as far and deep as you could see. And, of course, I was pretty exhausted.

I think I started to cry and like, oh, my gosh, they're actually coming. And we had 13,000 people starting work the very first day at the same time in those hundreds of stores. 150,000 people entered the building that day, and it just never stopped.

CATHY WURZER: I give you a tip of a hat to the various events that have been held at the mall over the years because that was a big marketing tactic for you, right?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: It was. And what we realized very early on was that we had to keep that building fresh, that we had to always have something new and something happening. And, in those days, the record labels and the agents really liked to get their celebrities out to promote whatever they have-- a book, a movie, a video. And so we marketed to them. And they brought their celebrities and their events to Mall of America because there were a lot of people.

CATHY WURZER: I remember broadcasting every Saturday from the WCCO radio booth with the little headphones on the third floor. Yeah, and it was every conceivable celeb who came through. Yeah. And it seemed to work.

MAUREEN BAUSCH: It did, it really did because people knew that new they'd find something new. And there was such a variety there, that whether you were 1 or 100 or you had \$1 or \$10,000 to spend, you could come and enjoy yourself. And that place for fun in your life really captured it. It's a promise that we could keep.

CATHY WURZER: OK, any favorite memories from some of the live events?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Oh, my gosh, there are so many. And I don't think we have that much time, but I remember-- and these are oldies. But Zsa Zsa Gabor came in 1994. And she was in her 70s.

CATHY WURZER: Oh, what? Don't remember that.

MAUREEN BAUSCH: She came into my office and I was in the basement of the mall with the fluorescent lights. And she said, oh, darling, never sit under fluorescent lights, you'll age so quickly. I was like 30-something.

[CHUCKLING]

She was hysterical. And Joan Rivers, oh, my gosh, that woman was a workaholic. Mary-Kate and Ashley were 11-year-olds that ran around our office for 10 days while they filmed *Dance Party*, their movie. They were just delightful girls, so respectful. They called me Mrs. Bausch all week.

And Britney Spears. We used to get celebrities on their way up or on their way down because we did not ever pay. And so Britney Spears, when she had pigtails and her little pleated skirt. NSYNC, Backstreet Boys. And remember when Planet Hollywood opened?

CATHY WURZER: Yes.

MAUREEN BAUSCH: And then, of course, the wonderful Vince Flynn. He had his first and, I believe, his last book signing at Mall of America. He was a real friend to the mall.

CATHY WURZER: Well, obviously, everyone's shopping online these days. And, of course, so many of the big name stores at the Mall of America have come and gone. Where do you think that leaves the Mall of America in this time and day?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: I have to commend the team of the Ghermezians and Rich Hoge, Jill Renslow, Kurt Hagen, and their leasing team. They have brought in attractions and retail to that building that can't be found online. And it's beautiful, probably prettier than the day it opened.

And it's in fabulous condition. And, again, they're still adding new things every day. But there are a lot of attractions, and you just can't do those online.

CATHY WURZER: And is that the key?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Yeah.

CATHY WURZER: The secret to success, it's more of an experience?

MAUREEN BAUSCH: Absolutely. Absolutely. Retail experience, attraction experience, dining experience, people still like to get out and do that. And even through COVID, they're doing extremely well, so I commend that team.

CATHY WURZER: I wonder what the future holds for the Mall of America. I mean, they can't expand it anymore, can they?

[CHUCKLING]

**MAUREEN
BAUSCH:** Oh, yes.

**CATHY
WURZER:** Oh, great!

**MAUREEN
BAUSCH:** They're adding the big waterpark to the north and--

**CATHY
WURZER:** Oh, that's right.

**MAUREEN
BAUSCH:** --probably more hotels. And it's like Disneyland and Disney World, as long as you keep adding and changing with your customers and understanding what consumers want, you'll be fine.

**CATHY
WURZER:** Oh, Maureen, what a trip it has been from the very first time I was in Governor Perpich's reception room when he introduced the Ghermezian brothers and the idea. Remember the Capitol Press Corps was like, what is this? What?

**MAUREEN
BAUSCH:** Yeah.

**CATHY
WURZER:** Are you kidding me? Yeah.

**MAUREEN
BAUSCH:** Oh, it is. They found that piece of land. They had something similar up in Canada if you recall. And they were here for the Mayo Clinic appointment. And they drove by that piece of land, that was the Viking and Twin Stadium and said that would be an ideal place for a mall like Edmonton. And they made it happen, so I credit them.

**CATHY
WURZER:** Well, Maureen, thanks for going down memory lane with us today.

**MAUREEN
BAUSCH:** [CHUCKLES] It's been fun. It's been very fun.

**CATHY
WURZER:** Excellent. Thank you so much. Maureen Bausch was the Mall of America's Public Relations Manager for 25 years. She also co-wrote a book, including some of her experiences at the mall called *Big Brands, Little Budgets*.

And by the way, special thanks to Gene from the Bloomington Historical Society for helping us with the research for this interview. It was fun. Thank you to Maureen for coming in.