“Then Suzi got the job as a diplomat. When the time came to transition over to here, it was clear that I would focus on the kids and keep my business running, while Suzi would focus on her job.”

Eric LeVine

As a couple, they are ambassadors for diversity

Representing President Obama as US Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein for almost three years was a natural step for Suzi LeVine’s career – a career that has journeyed through technology, marketing, communication, entrepreneurship, innovation, education, travel, youth outreach, and motherhood. Now back in the United States, LeVine’s non-linear professional trajectory is intimately interwoven with that of her husband, Eric LeVine, with whom she continues to advocate for diversity, innovation and education.

Hillary Sanctuary
INTERVIEW

What did you study at university?
When I was a little girl, I wanted to be an astronaut. I still do. So I went to Brown University. I studied mechanical engineering with aerospace applications and in fact, I got two degrees: I did that and English.

What did you do after you graduated?
I first started working for Microsoft and that was both because that year the aerospace industry was not hiring, but it was also because I was looking for technology companies where could I apply this connection between technology and non-technologists and use my skills. I started out in 1993, moving from the East Coast to Seattle. Growing up in New Jersey, I barely even knew where it was! So it was an amazing place to move at that time of my life.

What did you do at Microsoft?
I started out working on MS-DOS, which was the Jurassic period of technology. I was in marketing. I had the opportunity to work closely with the developers and the program managers and understand what they were doing to be able to communicate the value proposition to potential consumers or businesses. From there, I worked on operating systems for many years (Windows 95, Windows NT). Then ultimately moved within Microsoft to Expedia in 1999 when it was spun out as a separate company. I stayed until 2005 at which point I had risen up to be a vice president of sales and marketing for luxury travel business.

How did you balance family and professional life?
At that time, we had our second baby and I wanted to be home with the kids. At the same time, from 2005 to 2009, I created a couple of startups. One a Jewish community group and the other an advisory board for an early learning and brain sciences Research Institute at the University of Washington. So I was getting a deep understanding of the role of research at universities and most importantly of baby brains since, at that point, I had a couple of those little munchkins around the house. It helped to understand that it wasn’t “No!” that the kids were saying, but an exploration of “other”.

Tell us about your experience as Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein.
It was during that time that I met President Obama – then senator Obama – and was very moved by him and his approach to the world, and decided that I would help get him elected, so I got involved with his campaign. Then in 2009, I went back to work at Microsoft. I stayed there from 2009 until

« At Microsoft, I started out working on MS-DOS, which was the Jurassic period of technology. »

Suzi LeVine

Suzi and Eric LeVine. © Hillary Sanctuary
2012 and then left again to be home with the kids. Again there were some challenges that we faced and they needed me. I stayed involved with the Obama campaign and ultimately the president and his team, recognizing my background, my skills, my experiences, asked me to become US Ambassador here in Switzerland. That job is finished now, so again, I’ve left paid work and I’m home with the kids, as is Eric now too.

What are you doing now?
We have become very dedicated to taking the Swiss model of apprenticeship and advocating for it in the United States. We are trying to get more and more folks to recognize the value of that model, learn from it and either adapt and/or adopt it in the United States. But what has been amazing about this journey is how it has dovetailed and intertwined with that of my husband, Eric.

Eric: what’s your background?
I went to Harvard, started studying computer science. I love computers. I actually knew it in 1984 when I was 14, I got an original Macintosh right as it came out and I was pretty much smitten. I loved programming which was great and then I got to the science part of computers and didn’t enjoy it and so got a Bachelor of Arts in History from Harvard instead. I ended up getting some internships at a PR firm that was working for Lotus and that was my entrée towards the marketing side of the technology business. That led to a job at Lotus which ultimately led to a job at Microsoft.

What did you do at Microsoft?
Eric: I joined Microsoft in marketing as a product manager on Microsoft Word. My evolution there was from marketing to something called product planning which I helped create in the Office team, and then ultimately program management which was writing specifications and working very closely with developments and with testing. Later on, when we were doing web-based things with operations as well, we were sort of the glue in the middle of the whole process. I just really fell in love with Microsoft, met and fell in love with Suzi, and it was an amazing time.

How did you end up creating a start-up?
Eric: We went bicycling in Tuscany and I’ve always enjoyed wine. I remember tasting the Chianti Classico Riserva Vino Nobile and the Montepulciano. I came home with two bottles in the basement, which turned into 25 bottles, which turned into 750! As the collection started to grow, I decided to build some software, a database to let me catalog my collection. I put the database in the cloud which in 2003 was a little weird at the time, but it was just for me. I showed it to two friends who said they wanted to use it too, so I made some changes to the system. I just made this thing as a hobby and then threw it out on the internet and it started to grow.

Is the start-up the reason why you left Microsoft?
Eric: I remember days when I would leave to go to work at Microsoft and my son was asleep, I would get home after a long day of meetings and he was asleep. I realized that I wanted to see my son. My start-up CellarTracker gave me an excuse to leave Microsoft, so that’s what I started doing at the end of 2004. I can basically run the business anywhere in the world as long as I have my laptop. Then Suzi got the job as a diplomat. When the time came to transition over to here, it was clear that I would focus on the kids and keep my business running, while Suzi would focus on her job.

How did these decisions affect the family?
Suzi: It was wonderful to have that kind of flexibility. As a woman leader, to be able to have my husband there and able to help take
care of the kids and to help raise them has had a profound effect. I think it also had a profound effect on both the kids and on him, where the kids got to have a whole different adult perspective on things. It has really pushed us to think about how couples choreograph their progression throughout their lives and their careers and how they ensure mutual dignity, respect, and mutual responsibility.

Together you advocate for diversity, how did you choose this theme?

Eric: When you’re in the situation where one is the ambassador, one’s in front, the other is behind. Because there are limited ways that a spouse can engage when your partner’s the ambassador, the area where we were able to do the most together diplomatically was ironically around gender and diversity. I think our realization, even as we struggled with the issues around that, was that for more women to lead they need more men to help create the space for women.

Suzi: A fun example of the importance of diversity was my first week on the job at Microsoft when the team was naming a feature in MS-DOS. It was all men and me, I was the only woman on the team. They were going to name a feature ‘maxi protection technology’. I raised my hand in this room full of men and said, ‘Fellas, that might not be the best name, it sounds like something you’d really only want to use once a month.’ These gentlemen, who had very enlightened partners or girlfriends at the time, they got it and they were appreciative of the feedback. It’s a simple way to demonstrate that having more voices, more diversity in the room helps you come to better decisions, especially given the fact that women are 80% of consumer buyers in the world.

What inspires you about the Swiss apprenticeship model?

Suzi: It changed the paradigm where companies become creators and not just consumers of talent. Here in Switzerland, the success of this system leads employers to have the talent that they need, it leads the citizens to have the jobs that they want and it leaves the economy to be in a very healthy place. So I sit down with company leaders and ask them, “What is it that we can do to help you expand your footprint in the United States?” Invariably it came back to talent. So I started asking them, “Well, would you consider bringing your apprenticeship model to the United States?” Many of them started to say yes.

We started to get some traction on that front. We signed an intergovernmental agreement where we have a joint declaration of intent to collaborate and learn from each other. Ultimately that program of getting companies, Swiss companies, to agree to do it in the United States grew to about 30 companies including Nestle, ABB, SICPA. But then another aspect of what we did here was host US governors to come and see the system.

Eric: Governors preside over the businesses and the economy of any given State. They preside over the school systems as well. One governor in particular from Colorado, aided in part by a very passionate businessperson who had come and seen the model in great depth here for about two weeks at the ETH, brought a large delegation of 45 business, academic, state government and philanthropic leaders from Colorado in January 2016. The impact to that group was transformational. Now they have a 10-year goal in Colorado where they’re going to do very much Swiss-style apprenticeship across three years starting with high school juniors. The mix of white and blue collar is important, so we see the potential over the long haul in a bottoms-up way, really focusing on the States to fundamentally transform the way that people think about pathways and education and create an opportunity. That is what we’ve been talking about endlessly since we got back to the United States.