



# ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in Celebration of the  
City of Sugar Land  
60th Anniversary



CITY OF SUGAR LAND

Gary Becker  
President,  
Smart Financial  
Centre  
at Sugar Land



**GOODSILL:** I am interviewing Gary Becker at Smart Financial Centre. My goal today is to learn how the venue came to be in SL and how it functions.

**BECKER:** It was October 2009 when we got a call from a good friend of my Dad's saying the City of Sugar Land requested to meet with us regarding our company partnering with the city to build an entertainment venue to continue the city's vision of making the Sugar Land a destination location. They had been in conversations with another entertainment company, but it was not going in the direction of their liking. We visited with the city leaders and it did not take us long to see their vision and agree that we wanted to be involved in this project. After a few conversations, the city wanted to go through a vetting

and RFI process. After 2+ years of competing with several other organizations, ACE SL, LLC was awarded the contract by the City of Sugar Land.

ACE SL, LLC was a company owned by ACE, an acronym for Arts Center Enterprises. At the time ACE was operating 4 theaters in San Antonio and New Orleans, as well as developing a 5th in Brooklyn. Historically, ACE primarily promoted, presented and hosted Broadway theatrical and performing arts performances since the early 80's, as well as operate the day to day responsibilities of the theaters. Owned under the banner of PACE Entertainment Corporation, the ACE organization was not purchased when PACE was sold to SFX in 1999. Since 1966, Allen Becker and Sidney Shlenker, both Houstonians, founded a company whose purpose was to create entertainment properties to play in the Houston Astrodome between Baseball and Football. After a pivotal meeting with Judge Hofheinz, Allen and Sidney opened PACE Management Corporation. Over the years, PACE expanded its business from doing Boat shows, Home shows, Thrill Shows and Destruction Derbies to live music events

and theatrical performances. By the mid 80's PACE was one of the premier live entertainment promoters, producers and presenters in America. In 1999, PACE had an opportunity to be purchased by SFX along with several other family operated live music promoters. The only company not part of that deal was our theater operating company, ACE.

Our corporate headquarters have always been in Houston, Texas. It was the "local" involvement that caught the eye of the city of Sugar Land. Not only did they want a professional company with experience to operate the venue, but they wanted someone who knew the Houston market, understood the Houston market and one who shared the same vision as the city of Sugar Land. Not only to be a commercial partnership that had financial benefits, but one who can become a part of the community. That was key to how the city wanted this investment to be managed.

After several brainstorming sessions reviewing the different possibilities for the venue, we all agreed on a multi-faceted venue that can cater to all forms of music and theater. One that can provide the local area an opportunity for private events, church events, ISD commencements and other community happenings. We also wanted to maximize the usage and created a venue that had a variety of different configurations and capacities. One that created an intimate feeling regardless of the audience size. To best achieve this, a series of moving walls and curtains enabled the venue to transform from a 3,000-seat venue into a 6,400-seat venue within a matter of 60 minutes. This allowed us to produce over 130 performances in the first year of operation.

To get a better feel of what the theater could look like, the Task Force, made up of several city employees, council members and our team, visited a variety of theaters around the country. With the help of our architect, we created what is now known as Smart Financial Centre. This process took several years, a great deal of design changes and tedious hours of involvement among the TASK Force. Once we were confident the city's vision had been met, we spent the next couple of years in schematic design, re-budgeting and cost analysis. The primary goal the city was most adamant about was staying within the budget.

On December 9, 2014, we broke ground on what is to become one of the most successful mid-size venues in the World. Just 2 months later, The Sugar Land City Council unanimously approved the naming rights granting of this state-of-the-art entertainment venue to Smart Financial Credit union, naming the venue Smart Financial Centre at Sugar Land. In addition to Smart Financial Credit Union, Mercedes Benz of Sugar Land, Silver Eagle Distributors and Pepsi came soon after. The importance of these local community leading corporations was monumental to our success both financially and strategically.



**There was no rest for the weary as we produced over 130 performances in our first year with over 352,000 tickets sold.**

*Gary Becker*



We celebrated the steel topping out ceremony on December 1, 2015 and we were now less than two years from opening.

ACE started to put together a team of experienced professionals in the business. Our executive team has over 250 years' experience in the music touring, production and venue management. On January 14, 2017 the Grand Opening of The Smart Financial Centre at Sugar Land opened to great fanfare with 2 sold out shows featuring Jerry Seinfeld. There was no rest for the weary as we produced over 130 performances in our first year with over 352,000 tickets sold. We hit our 5- year target in the first year and it continues to be strong. Being recognized as one of the top 10 mid-size venues in the world base on ticket sales was just one of our many honors.

The public/private partnership between City of Sugar Land and ACE SL, LLC is a perfect example how a government body and private organization can create a relationship with

multiple benefits. The city owns the venue with oversight and ACE SL, LLC manages, operates, promotes, and maintains all aspects of the venue.

Through the 12-year vision which stemmed from a group of Sugar Land residents, focus and hard work from committed city staff, City Council Members and Mayors, Smart Financial Centre has created for the City of Sugar Land a destination venue for decades to come.

**GOODSILL:** Give us the inside scoop on what it is like, trying to get diverse offering.

**BECKER:** As they say, if you build it, they will come. This venue can create an intimate setting for shows with capacities of 3,000 up to 6,400 and caters to outside promoters of different events. Our Latin music, Urban music, and other cultural type shows have done extremely well. Audiences of all types and ages enjoy coming to the venue. It has easy access, plenty of parking and a first class indoor air-conditioned environment the Houston area has never seen. Technically, the venue has state of the art sound, acoustics, lighting and LED video, which is all in-house. More importantly, the relationships we have created with several of the promoters who bring us these shows, as well as the success they enjoy, maintains the diversity in music we continue to bring to Smart.

**GOODSILL:** Can you explain the difference between a promoter and producer

**BECKER:** Basically, when a show comes into our venue, we are the promoters. The show itself, whether it be an artist, band or theatrical performance(s) are considered the producers.

For example: We buy a show through a talent agency. We guarantee a fee plus pay for all expenses for the presentation of the show, costs to operate venue, etc. We take 100% of the risk and share the profits from the event with the producer.

**GOODSILL:** Building this facility was a public/private partnership, right? So, the city still gets part of the revenue.

**BECKER:** In a way, yes. ACE invested capital in the construction of the venue, guaranteed revenue bond payments and cover all the costs to operate the venue. The city shares in some of the ongoing revenue streams in addition to some overages based on the success of the venue. In addition, the venue brings over 350,000 people to the area each year. 71% of those people come from outside of Fort Bend County. The additional revenues from sales tax and success for surrounding businesses further benefits the city.

**GOODSILL:** And that was what Sugar Land wanted.



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Gary Becker



**BECKER:** Sugar Land has created a long-term plan of making its city a premier location for business, entertainment and residency. Smart Financial Centre is one of the many investments the city has made to successfully become that premier city. In addition to the Festival Site, Constellation Field, The Museum and other investment opportunities, yes, I believe Sugar Land has achieved what they wanted.

**GOODSILL:** I am amazed the performer gets 90% of show profits. That seems high. I don't see how you can make that much of a profit.

**BECKER:** There are many factors for us to be profitable. Parking, Food and Beverage, merchandise, sponsorship and suite sales are all part of the equation. The biggest factor in our success is booking shows and selling tickets. This is the first step to be successful above all other areas. If we do a good job at that, it all works out well for everybody. Unfortunately, we do not own the content. We depend on the producers to provide us the content. If certain acts are not working during a certain part of the year, we are not in the business to create alternatives. The good news is that most acts see our venue as THE place to play in this area and have continued to come here and be successful.

**GOODSILL:** For all of us who live in Sugar Land it is great to be 15 minutes from home instead of going up to Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion or into Houston.

**BECKER:** We love to hear that. We attempted to create the feeling that Smart is a "Sugar Land" hometown venue. Knowing that Houston and surrounding areas are critical for our success, we brand the venue as such. Cynthia Woods and Toyota are both great places to see great shows. We all provide different experiences. Our goal for Smart is to create a special experience without the drive and hassle of parking, walking, being hot or in a large arena not built for an intimate concert experience. Our sound, lighting, staging, video, acoustics and comfort all lend itself for a more enjoyable experience.

**GOODSILL:** There is a lot of variety in your job.

**BECKER:** Actually, my job was to hire the best people possible who shared my vision and the city's vision. I hired the best out there with years and years of experience in every department. I am the perfect example of leading a group of hard-working dedicated professionals that make me look good. My job was allowing them to do their job, giving them the support, they needed at all times, AS LONG AS THEY SHARED OUR VISION. That vision was simple. We wanted to be the coolest kid on the block. Everything we did we attempted to do our best. We listened. We made changes. We cared. We cared about the person who came in the front door as much as the people who came in the back door. Our ticket buyers are



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just as important as our road crews who visit us. We have created a reputation of being one of the best, if not the best, venues to work with in the country. You do not get there by just building a pretty house. That is driven by its people.

**GOODSILL:** Sounds like it has been a success

**BECKER:** The success we have had in our first 18 months is amazing. We knew we were creating something special and the right niche for this area, but I had no idea we would be so successful in all areas. We have become that important piece of the puzzle for the city. Our people have become part of the city, most of them reside here in Sugar Land. Also, my spectacular wife and I are moving here in the Spring of 2020. When you can work, live and play in your community, that is what I call success.

**GOODSILL:** I met with Allen Bogard yesterday and he explained originally there was a lot of land available in the city limits that could be built-out. Now that the city is about all built-out, what is left is maintaining what we have. Which costs a lot of money without a lot of new revenue streams coming in. Having steady revenue from a concert venue and ballpark are going to be important

**BECKER:** Absolutely. In addition to exemplary schools, a lawful community, active civic participation and good parks, businesses like Smart Financial Centre improve the overall quality of life in our city and will continue to attract new companies and increase employment in the area.

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*Sugar Land*   
**HERITAGE**  
**FOUNDATION**

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