

**Uniquely Pittsburgh** is a monthly feature in *Smart Business Pittsburgh* that takes an in-depth look at the people, places and things that give Pittsburgh its identity. To suggest a unique subject for us to explore, contact Associate Editor Jayne Gest at [jgest@sbnonline.com](mailto:jgest@sbnonline.com).

# GULF TOWER

# LIGHT IT UP!

**O**n July 4, 2012, the weather beacon, a Pittsburgh icon, was reinstalled atop Gulf Tower with a few twists from the original.

No longer needed as a forecast when everyone carries the weather on their smartphone, the lights function more as public art that pays homage to its history — and as a way to celebrate pivotal moments.

Larry Walsh, principal and COO of Rugby Realty Co. Inc., Pittsburgh, which owns the art deco skyscraper, says from the moment he started working in the building 12 years ago he'd get questions on tours.

"People would ask, 'What's the deal with the weather beacon? I remember when I was a boy or a little girl and my parents would always point out the weather beacon,'" he says.

The beacon, turned off in the 1970s, was recreated two years ago because Walsh says the availability and price of LED technology made the project feasible.

Pittsburghers Christopher Popowich and Cindy Limauro of C&C Lighting LLC designed the light system, which runs

from dusk to dawn. The weather beacon is tied to a live weather sensor that dictates what colors appear at the various levels.

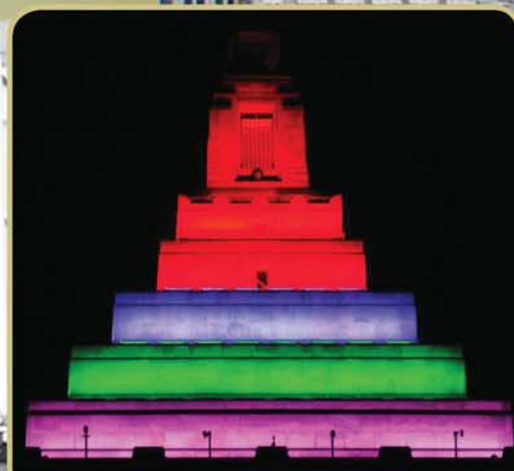
"Creatively, we had a great time thinking about how to create the design — and it was very complex knowing that it needed to be a beautiful sculpture of light all of the time," Limauro says.

The KDKA-TV Weather Beacon can be overridden for about 20 preprogrammed holidays. The Pirates and Penguins organizations also utilize the lights.

In addition, Walsh gets 15 to 20 requests a year asking to have the lights changed for things like breast cancer or autism awareness month. If he wants to add a new light sequence, he can just email the system's programmer.

Walsh also has the ability to control the lights from his phone.

"People know that and they'll call me and say, 'I've got a visitor from out of town. Can you flash it black and gold, or red, white and blue?'" he says. "So, I'll do it every once and a while just to make somebody smile." ●



## ON AND OFF

Built in the 1930s, the Gulf Tower's forecast was used by people to determine if they should bring an umbrella or coat to work, based on what they saw from their porch.

During the 1970s energy crisis, Gulf Oil Co. feared bad publicity from the beacon and turned it off. The original neon system could power 28 homes for a year. But once the energy crisis passed, a lack of maintenance had taken too much of a toll.

In the early 1980s, five levels of high pressure sodium spotlights were installed. The changing lights remained operational on the top level, which has an enclosed cupola. Over time, however, it was increasingly difficult to find parts to keep it lit.

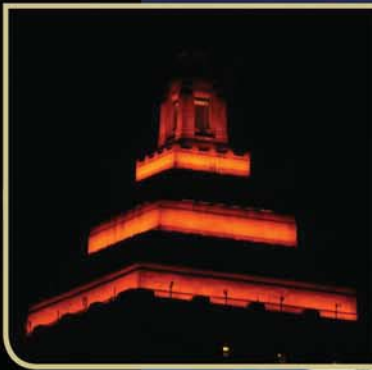


## VICTORY

From the beginning, a black and gold moving sequence was planned for sports team wins. Originally, Walsh would pay attention to the scores and trigger the lights himself.

When that became tiresome, Walsh got the Penguins and then the Pirates set up with a VPN to be able to control certain sequences over the Internet. For example, during the recent Penguins playoff run, the team would trigger a red light sequence that mimicked the turning light on top of the goal for each point scored. The building also flashed, "Pens win" in Morse code.

And what about the Steelers? The Gulf Tower isn't easily visible from Heinz Field, but Walsh says he goes to all eight of the home games and takes care of it.



## THE SPECS

The tower has 186 fixtures with red, green and blue LED lights. Every one-foot section can be controlled independently, which is how the complex Fourth of July show is created.

Theoretically, it can reproduce 16.2 million colors.

The lights are rated for about 75,000 hours. By only running dusk to dawn, the lights should last at least 20 years.



Photography by William E. Gossett

## DECIPHERING THE BEACON LIGHTS

### TEMPERATURE (Floors 42-44)

Red: 80°+

Orange: 66° - 79°

Amber: 50° - 65°

Light blue: 33° - 49°

Medium blue: 0° - 32°

Dark blue: Below 0°

### PRECIPITATION (41st floor)

Red purple: Above 0.25 inches

Blue purple: 0.25 inches and below

### HUMIDITY (40th floor)

Dark green: 50 percent and above

Light green: Below 50 percent

### WIND SPEED (39th floor)

Magenta: More than 10 mph

Pink: 10 mph and less

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