

Interview Subject: Mitchell Kaplan

Date Recorded: 7-7-12

Location: MDPL office, Art Deco Welcome Center
1005 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach

Date of Birth: 2-8-55

Grew up on the Beach with his earliest memories playing with 5-year-old playmates on Hibiscus Island. His grandparents lived near Flamingo Park, and he often visited them overnight and played in the park.

The Beach, he says, was a sociological microcosm of the U.S., with lower socio-economic, working class people living on the south end and more affluent living in the northern area.

Probably the most important development during his school years was the influx of Cubans from post-revolutionary Cuba. There was no notion of bilingual education in those days, so they had Cuban children much older in their classes because of insufficient English.

There were big kids in his class who were very smart but just didn't have the English skills. The Cuban students were accepted, with everyone understanding that everyone had to adjust to the influx. In school, they had human relations clubs and students would actually go and meet the planes at the airport with the latest group.

The Beach was aging demographically with the median age of 68. He recalls seeing poor, elderly Jews on fixed incomes being mistreated and talked down to at the pharmacies getting their medicines. The police gave Jews who jaywalked on Miami Beach fines. There was a film made about this.

Mitchell's father was "exceedingly political." He was a labor organizer and worked with Cesar Chavez organizing orange pickers in Florida.

Mitchell was heavily influenced by the politics and rock and roll of the time. He subscribed to the Black Panther newspaper. Later, after he owned

Books & Books, he met Eldridge Cleaver and showed him his collection. Cleaver autographed every issue.

Mitchell says that the 1972 convention on Miami Beach was the last gasp of the political counter culture and was the last time many of the counterculture figures of that time got together. During this time the Beach was in decline.

Mitchell went to college in Boulder and later law school in D.C. He was spending more time in the bookstores around the university than in the law library and decided he wanted to go into the book business. He eventually rented space in Coral Gables and Books & Books was born. Later he opened a branch on Lincoln Road near where he used to go to Doubleday with his father.

He talks quite a bit about the integration of schools. Ida Fisher was the first school to be integrated. Miami Beach schools had a good reputation as having high academic standards and prominent blacks wanted their children to go to Beach High. It wasn't perfect, but it went pretty smoothly from his perspective.

He mentions having had amazing teachers: Fran Schmidt, Grace Abrams, Zelda Glazer, and Florence Greenhouse.

There was a mandatory course called "Americanism v. Communism" which was required by the state legislature.

He stresses that his experiences were unique to his age and time. His younger siblings had different experiences.

Miami Beach in the 60's and 70's was very liberal. The principals were liberal. Governor LeRoy Collins was liberal, which may explain why the integration was smoother than in places like Georgia with George Wallace.