



## Interview with Miami Beach Mayor Philip Levine

**Cathy:** We are in the mayor's Miami Beach office today. It's December 2nd, 2014. We are recording a historic interview for the Miami Beach Visual Memoir's archive. Close-Up Productions. My name is Cathy Hersh as the interviewer. We are interviewing Philip Levine, the mayor of Miami Beach. Welcome.

**Mayor Levine:** Thank you. Thank you for coming.

**Cathy:** I want to know what made you decide to take on this job of mayor.

**Mayor Levine:** Well I'll tell you, when I first decided to run, half of my friends wanted me to see a psychiatrist; the other half said congratulations. I have it to be the most rewarding, amazing job in the world. I did it because I love the city of Miami Beach. As you know, we have an incredible history and culture, and I felt it was a time for a need for new leadership and I decided to run.

I thought a lot of times you see in politics often too many people getting involved running for office for the wrong reasons. They want to help themselves and help their lives. A lot of them have done nothing in their lives and yet they want to give back, and you ask yourself, well, if you haven't accomplished anything, how are you going to be giving back? Of course there are people that are my models, and Mayor Bloomberg is one of them, and I said I'm going to do the same thing for the city that I love.

**Cathy:** What is it that you love about this city? What made you fall in love with this city?

**Mayor Levine:** What's there not to love about this city? That's a better question, and that's challenging. They say when you come to Miami Beach you get sand in your shoes, and you never leave. After college I came to Miami Beach and decided to

start a little company on Ocean Drive above the News Cafe in the late '80s when it was just starting to undergo its new renaissance.

I immediately fell in love. I fell in love with the people, the lifestyle and the beautiful water, just everything about it. When you're in Miami Beach, you feel it. I think when people come to Miami Beach it never leaves them. They come here and they never really leave because Miami Beach always goes with them. They always think about it. It's a little twinkle in their eyes.

**Cathy:** What is that lifestyle?

**Mayor Levine:** I think it's a lifestyle of fun, openness, diversity, athleticism, swimming in an ocean where you can see your feet. It's that clear and that clean. Then, of course, you look to the other side and you see a large major city that's very unusual to have a city and a clean ocean combined. It's a lifestyle that allows you to be healthy, but at the same time collaborate with the most unique people that are visiting you. I always say that if I never left Miami Beach I'd see everybody I had ever met in my entire life because eventually they are going to come through Miami Beach. That's all part of the welcome-ness and openness of being a beach hike.

**Cathy:** There have been a lot of changes in the time that you're talking about. What do you think have been the most important changes that you've seen?

**Mayor Levine:** Changes during that last 20, 25 years?

**Cathy:** Yeah.

**Mayor Levine:** I think the major change we saw is we saw a city that, at one point, was a destination for retirees on fixed incomes. As that changed, we saw a city that got, unfortunately inundated by refugees during the Mariel boat crisis, the boat lift. We had experienced major crime and degradation of the society of Miami Beach but it came back. It came back due to its amazing architecture. Due to the modeling industry. The LGBT community. This feeling that there is something here hip and cool. All these groups coming together with, of course, historic preservation Miami Beach became something special again. We saw it with the art deco renaissance. Then, of course, entrepreneurs

coming and arts coming and art basil coming.

All these events together have made Miami Beach a center for creative collaboration. What's amazing now is it's not just about coming here on vacation. Everyone's moving here. Literally from New York, from Europe, from L.A. I always laugh and say if you're from Argentina and you've done very well in your life, you want a place in Miami Beach. If you've lost everything in Argentina, you move to Miami Beach. If you're the former president, you come to Miami Beach. If you're the new president, you come to Miami Beach. Everyone wants to come to Miami Beach today.

**Cathy:** Well it's, kind of like you say, it's fun. It's, kind of, okay to just be who you are and do what you want to do here. It strikes me anyway.

**Mayor Levine:** Definitely.

**Cathy:** Inherent in that is success ruining Miami Beach? That's one thing I keep worrying about as we're not residents of Miami Beach but we certainly have been here for thirty years plus and we used to come over in the day when the Cafe Cordoza was the only place to come and hang out. There is inherent between everyone wanting to come here and everyone would come here to live. That part of the charm is that it's downsized. It's low in terms of it's not all high rises. How do you keep that balance?

**Mayor Levine:** Well that's our responsibility. Our responsibility is important to make sure we acknowledge our past and our history to know and understand where we're going in the future. You'll see with the majority of all the development that happens in the city, there's a historic component to it. We make sure we preserve. Whether it's our minnow design in North Beach, whether it's art deco architecture in South Beach, we have a very strong historic preservation. It's about being responsible. We're not looking for big, great and large. We're looking for boutique, small, unique because that's who we are as a barrier island.

To give you a perfect example of that, of course, is one of the big election campaign promises I made was that they were going to build a massive convention center here. Something that you would see in Orlando, Atlanta, or Las Vegas. I said we're not Orlando. We not Las Vegas, nor do

we want to be. What we've done is we've renovated our convention center. It's going to begin the end of next year so it's boutique. It's super cool. It's unique. It doesn't increase the footprint.

Matter of fact, we're taking the parking lot in front and we're making the most unbelievable park that Miami Beach has seen in recent history. About five, six, seven acres. We have to increase and better our public transportation. We want less cars in Miami Beach. We want better transportation and we're working on that very aggressively with trolleys. We're working with the city of Miami to build transportation across the COSWAY because we want less cars. I think the idea here is not bigger. It's more of about better. That's what we're doing and I think the administration is very focused on that.

**Cathy:**

I'll give you a minute to think about this but tell us your best story about a day when you've seen all of these things come together. Start with the Cuban breakfast, then you ended up at a concert or whatever. What is...give me a description of one of those very special Miami days when you said to yourself then, no other place could I have done all this in one day?

**Mayor Levine:**

I think that's probably one of those days where you wake up and you go take a run on Miami Beach, on that hard packed sand with that gorgeous ocean. Then go to Joe's Stone Crabs in the morning for their fabulous breakfast they offer. Then, of course, from there, you can go to one our great dog parks. Take a stroll on Ocean Drive and admire the art deco hotels. Get on a boat because there is no better way to see Miami Beach than being on a boat. We are an island of islands. Going out on the boat and then, of course, at night truly we have the area of North Beach, which is hip and happening.

Going up to North Beach, going to see a film at the O Cinema, which has now become, like, the old neat, cool, new area of Miami Beach, and, of course, the clubs at night. I mean, there is nothing like some of our incredible night clubs. If you're out for late night partying, we have enough if it, you know. Whether it's Live at the Fountain Blue which is probably the most successful nightclub in America. After that, going for a late night Cuban coffee at David's Cafe. Literally you could spend your entire day and everyday is

different. For an island that's not that large, there is just so much to do. There really is.

**Cathy:** Do you have a particular story that you want to tell about your experiences here? I mean, an anecdote...I mean we talked to Harold Rosen, of course. Harold Rosen goes way back.

**Mayor Levine:** He sure does.

**Cathy:** He told a story of eating at Joe's Stone Crab with J. Edgar Hoover and Walter Winchell. Some guy came in selling a watch, obviously hot. J. Edgar said okay I could use a watch. I'll give you a hundred dollars for the watch. The guy said a hundred dollars, he says, the reward is better than that.

**Mayor Levine:** That's funny. Well, I can tell you, I remember...it's interesting...when I first moved to Miami Beach, I rented an apartment at the tallest building south of Fifth, which was called South Point Tower. In those days Miami Beach was a real difficult place. You couldn't walk around. It was dangerous. It was crime ridden, and my first office was above the News Cafe. That building was owned by the late great pioneer, Tony Goldman. I'll never forget I really wanted an office above the News Cafe. I wanted just to take a little studio apartment and I think one of the big reasons was the office just above me was modeling agency. I just thought it would be a great place to have an office.

I remember sitting with Tony and having a negotiation. Tony wanted \$550 dollars a month and I said, Tony, I can only afford \$450 dollars a month. We must have negotiated for a month over that rent. That \$50 difference. Until finally, I think, over probably a coffee at the News Cafe he said Phillip I'll tell you what. Make it \$500 and I'll throw in a parking space. I said the deal is done. That was it. That was the beginning of all my companies. That was an example of the kind of things that happened on Miami Beach. That was the day when Tony, with great vision, was taking effect on Miami Beach.

Everyone was starting to build these new companies and, of course, at the time the News Cafe was just a little cafe with two tables. The owner chef, Mark Soyka, used to walk around with bare feet. I used to call him my corporate chef. When he would bring up my corned beef sandwich up to my

office. It was unique time. It was a time when it was the rebirth of Miami Beach.

**Cathy:** Did you spend much time with Tony Goldman?

**Mayor Levine:** Yes. A lot of time.

**Cathy:** Tell us about him as a man, as a person.

**Mayor Levine:** He was such an optimistic, uplifting, warm person. His greatest ability, I think, was recognizing ability. He would see things and understand things before they would happen. I think it was when President Kennedy said how some men dream and think why not and dream why he can and do it. Tony was one of these people that could see things. He could persuade people in a positive way. He was a leader. People loved being with him. He was infectious with his personality. He was contagious in a positive way.

I believe that I would give him probably the greatest medal of honor for what he did for Miami Beach. He was a modern day Carl Fischer, in my opinion. I think him coming down and seeing what he did and then making other people see through his eyes what he sees. He clearly was one of a kind. He was legendary pioneer. I was so happy to have had the opportunity to know him and call him my friend.

**Cathy:** What about Barbara [inaudible] [11:46]?

**Mayor Levine:** I didn't get a chance really meet her at the time. I met her once or twice but, of course, she was one of the original pioneers. There is no question. She recognized how precious these art deco treasures were so. I think it was so important that she did and, of course, I would believe that she was the ultimate early one to bring to light what we have among us. No one understood how valuable it really was. I think the moral of the story is every city should see that.

Once again, you can't tell your future unless you understand your past. We're fighting the same experience in North Beach right now. We have some great North Beach project pioneers and Nancy Leedman has been a great leader in art deco and historic preservation. We're following her lead in North Beach where she is saying, and we agree, is that this [inaudible] [12:35] architecture needs to be saved and it will help economically. It will be something that differentiates the

experience and allows us to create greater economic opportunities.

**Male Speaker:** I just would like...your perspective was sort of unique and one we really haven't had. How was it for you to develop your companies here on the beach? What was the atmosphere? What happened in that development process? If you could...

**Mayor Levine:** You know, it's funny, when I started my company...

**Cathy:** What is the name of your company?

**Mayor Levine:** My company now is called Royal Media Partners. I started a company at the time called Onboard Media, which was my first company. We became the largest partner to the cruise industry in the world and we started at the News Cafe, right above that building there.

**Cathy:** Amazing.

**Mayor Levine:** You know what was fun? It was a time that Miami Beach was experiencing these new beginnings. Everyone was excited. All these new entrepreneurs were bubbling up and popping up. Everyone was having fun. Everyone was walking the streets. Whether you went to the Strand at night and you walked from your apartment. Or, you went to the Muffin Man or you went to Mezzinote for a Friday night. Whatever it was, people were walking. It was like this neighborhood, this village that was undergoing this cool transformation.

I was in the cruise business and no one else in Miami Beach was really in the cruise business. We had one cruise line there called Wind Jammer at the time. It was a great place to begin. I think the Miami Beach Panache, the cache of being in Miami Beach was cool. I used to always love the...All the cruise executives would love to come have coffee with me in Miami Beach. It gave them a reason to come to Miami Beach. Of course, over the years, Miami Beach has grown a lot of great companies. I think it's a testament just to the spirit of the people that live here.

**Cathy:** And where do you see the growth industry business wise here and the media, for example is a hot one. What other kinds of...obviously we don't make widgets in Miami but we

bring together a lot of creative people.

**Mayor Levine:** You hit the nail on the head and what I try to always say is that Miami Beach is becoming the world's center for creative collaboration. Whether you're in the art world and art basil or you're in the high tech world and you're going to the SIME conference or the EMERGE conference, this has become the place that people love to come to meet, to create, and gather new ideas. Now obviously our core competency might be just our hospitality industry. Hospitality is a combination of hospitality and creative collaboration. That's what we're best at.

We also find now, and that's a great area, is that we're moving into financial services. A lot of private equity hedge fund owners are moving to Miami Beach and they're coming for quality of life and they're coming for tax reasons. Six months and a day and you have no state income tax and you're a Florida resident. If you're coming from New York City, where could you go to escape New York income tax but have the sophistication and the quality of life?

There is only one place: it's Miami Beach. I guess they call us the sixth borough or something. It's a little bit like they're all coming here. They're all going to be opening up offices. They are going to be hiring staff and it's a clean industry, which is very good for us. The high tech industry. We have a great company here called Rocker Labs based in Miami Beach, which is a great high tech startup company. We are encouraging more of them to come.

Obviously, our challenge here is that we don't have a university yet. We don't have a lot of inexpensive office space. What we do have, which is important to the high tech industry is we have a tremendous amount of wealth. For investor capital Miami Beach is unlike anything else. When you have a lot of wealthy people buying houses and apartments, after a little while, they get itchy. They want to do something. So what do they do? They try to find opportunities. Whether it's real estate or whether it's high tech, and we believe Miami Beach is a great meeting point between investors and entrepreneurs.

**Cathy:** I will ask you the same question to, kind of, wrap up that unless you have something else. Thank you for that. This is really good. This is, of course, going into historic archive and



it's, kind of, a time capsule in a way. Is there any message that you want to give the future whoever twenty-five, fifty-five years from now who looks at this about where we are now and where we're going?

**Mayor Levine:** Sure. I would say two things. I would say number one: One of the great strengths of Miami Beach is our diversity. The fact that we accept everyone. We respect everyone's rights. Whether you're Hispanic, you're Jewish, or you're African-American, or you're LGBT. Whatever you may be, we've gone out of our way to be the leader of acceptance in our city. We think when you are that way, your economy and everything prospers along with it. We hope in the future that that's maintained in this city.

On a secondary front, we have been one the first cities to aggressively come out and, of course, discuss and bring awareness to climate change and corresponding sea level rise. Since I was elected in November, we have taken aggressive offensive action to fortify our city by putting in 300 million dollars worth of pumps. Putting on flex valve caps and we seen some remarkable progress in our hot zones. I guess a hundred years from today, I hope to God that what we've begun here allows our city to prosper for generations to come.

**Cathy:** People won't be using scuba gear to do the work?

**Mayor Levine:** No, absolutely not.

**Cathy:** Anything else that you would like to go on the record while you have the opportunity?

**Mayor Levine:** I just think that Miami Beach is a city that was built with visionaries and dreamers and I think that it will continue to be that for the future.

**Cathy:** Well, thank you very much.

**Mayor Levine:** Thank you very much. Thank you for the opportunity.