

Interview with Norman Braman

Kathy Hersh: Mr. Braman, would you please tell us about your relationship to Miami Beach over the years? Have you ever lived on the beach or?

Norman Braman: Yes, yes. We lived on the, we moved, our first residence was in Coral Gables, and we moved to the beach in 1977, 1978, and we lived on the beach until 1991.

Interviewer: Were you involved there with city politics?

Braman: I've always been involved, even, I've always been involved with the City of Miami Beach. I was one of the original members of the South Beach Redevelopment Authority many, many years ago, which was chaired by Steve Muss, and consisted of Irwin Sawitz of Joe's Stone Crab fame, and Max Serchuck, who really represented the senior citizens, and some other interesting people, and later on in a variety of other areas as well.

Interviewer: What time period was that?

Braman: That was the early 80s, I believe, if I recall.

Interviewer: Things were forming up there in terms of the Art Deco District?

Braman: Not really. There was a considerable number of people, especially in the power structure of the beach that really wanted to do away with the Art Deco District. Under a number of the proposals that were made, that would have happened. Very frankly, if it weren't for the efforts of people like Barbara Capitman and Nancy Liebman, and people who saw the future of the Art Deco area like Tony Goldman and Craig Robins, and his brother, who realized what type of precious commodity existed on Miami Beach.

Interviewer: Were you one of the.

Braman: Fortunately were able to save it, but it came this close to



failing.

Interviewer: What was your position then?

Braman: I, wasn't really my position. I wasn't really involved in making that decision. My primary interest at that time was looking after, really, the benefits of the senior population. South Beach was populated at that time by senior citizens, older people who were not in the best shape financially. Had the plans for the redevelopment proceeded, these people basically would have been without a place to live. That was my major concern at that time. I really didn't have a feel, I'm not an expert on real estate. I didn't have a feel for the Art Deco District at that time, to be very candid with you.

Interviewer: Well, it didn't start showing off its charms until later when it got fixed up by.

Braman: Well, people saw it, I mean.

Interviewer: Yes.

Braman: People saw it. Barbara saw it. Nancy saw it. The Robins brothers saw it. Tony Goldman certainly saw it. I mean, people there were really recognized the potential and the uniqueness of that area and what it could do for the beach.

Interviewer: There was some displacement, in any case, of the senior citizens.

Braman: Not nearly to the degree. It happened gradually. Senior citizens weren't put out of their homes and so forth. The way the plans laid themselves out, because the plans originally called for the building of canals through the beach and just changing everything there.

Interviewer: Tell us about your involvement with the Holocaust Memorial. I understand there was some controversy about it in the beginning.

Braman: No, there wasn't controversy at the beginning of it. In



1985 a group of survivors, along with a very prominent developer-architect, Ken Treister, came to visit me, and told me that they had been trying for many, many years to create some sort of a memorial to the 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust. They asked me at that time if I would lead an effort, and I agreed. We negotiated arrangements with Miami Beach. One of the survivors who was a member of the group was Abe Resnick, and Abe Resnick was a member of the council, of the commission, of Miami Beach. We negotiated a parcel of land owned by the City of Miami Beach near the convention facility, and we agreed that we would construct a memorial. A group of us, six of us, each put up \$250,000. We decided that timing and urgency was necessary, even at that time. We didn't want to go through the process of a fundraising drive, and we wanted to keep our decision-making among the small group of us that were making this type of an investment. We were aided by two other individuals outside of the fundraising aspect, and that was Rabbi Solomon Schiff, who was still living, and the late Harry Smith, who provided legal services for us. We were able to negotiate an arrangement with the City of Miami Beach where we would build the memorial and then turn the memorial over to the City of Miami Beach so that they would administer it.

It sounded good and it worked out well until a neo-Nazi group decided to apply for a permit to have demonstration at the memorial. Now, the memorial opened in 1990, so we were able from 1985 when the effort began, and within five years the memorial opened. Elie Wiesel, who was a close and dear friend of mine, came down for the inauguration of it, so it opened. In 1990, middle of 1990s, I think it was 1995, 1996, something like that, when the permit to hold the demonstration was applied for by the neo-Nazi group, the city was in a difficult position because it was public land, and under the First Amendment, people had a right for a demonstration. There was no real way to prevent it from happening. I was chair at that time. We persuaded the city to deny the application from this group, and of course the American Civil Liberties Union came in to



represent the neo-Nazi group, and sued, and sued in federal court here in Miami. We had been very diligent in the operation of the memorial. If you visited it, you see the panels with all the names of people that are memorialized there. We convinced a federal judge in this court case that the memorial was a holy ground. These people whose names are on there have no cemetery plots. They were murdered, bodies were incinerated and buried in pits all over, so that having their names there was truly a cemetery. Incredibly enough, the judge ruled in our favor, but we had a dilemma on our hands, which we recognized that we were very fortunate. We convinced the judge, by the way, because I had actually denied candidate Bill Clinton from bringing the press to the memorial when he was running for President of the United States. We did it for every politician. We walk them there, but we didn't allow any publicity, and cameras, or anything like that, covering it. That made a big impression on the judge.

Interviewer: That was one of the things that you used to explain.

Braman: Then we decided that what we had to do was to acquire the memorial from the City of Miami Beach. To make a very, very long, complicated story with a lot of aggravation, we reached agreement with the City of Miami Beach Mayor Gelber, the older Mayor Gelber.

Interviewer: Sy.

Braman: Sy Gelber was Mayor of Miami Beach. We reached an agreement, so we took over the memorial. Being that the memorial was now owned by a private property, we had no concerns about any demonstration. The controversy. That was one controversy. The other controversy was the effort of one of the predecessors of Mayor Gelber, and that was Alex Daoud and the commission, wanted to put a plaque up at the memorial, put a plaque up honoring themselves for their role in the memorial. I resented that. The only names that are on that memorial, with the exception of the founders, which are on a back wall out of sight for anybody, are the names of those who were memorialized. I felt that it was, just wasn't acceptable to have something



like that occur there. I prevented it. They threatened that if I, they actually put the plaque up. I went out with a crowbar and took the plaque off, and they threatened to arrest me. I said, "Fine, go ahead and arrest me for it. We're not going to allow the commercialization or the politicalization of this memorial.". Those were the real controversies. The memorial has served a very valid purpose for what it stands for. I'm very, very proud of my part in making this happen.

Interviewer: Have there been some special moments there since the dedication that you recall?

Braman: We've had a lot of special moments there. It's acted as a beacon, not only for the Jewish community, but for the non-Jewish community as well. We have, our docents over the years have been Holocaust survivors. To them, even taking away all everything else, when we opened the memorial in 1990, we probably had 10 full buses, 10 to 12 full buses of Holocaust survivors who were there for that opening. For them to see their loved ones who perished and to see the memorial, that in itself made it all worthwhile. It's also been a beacon for fights against anti-Semitism. The public school system, the parochial school system have been very cooperative in having students visit the memorial. As I said, my wife thinks of everything that I've done, that the memorial is perhaps my greatest achievement. I'm very proud of it.

Interviewer: I read somewhere that at the time it was being first discussed, that there were some people that said, "No, Miami Beach is a land of sunshine, sun and fun. We don't want to have anything depressing here.".

Braman: I don't remember that. We received cooperation from the administration at that time. The vote, and the commission, I think was a unanimous vote. I don't recall the exact time of the public hearing, but I don't recall any really significant opposition to the construction of the memorial.

Interviewer: Or to the design of it.



Braman: There was, the initial arm was to be much higher than what it turned out to be, but no one objected to that. That was something internally that we discussed. I discussed that with Elie Wiesel I remember, and we just decided that the arm was a little too high, so we lowered the arm. Everything else, it was there. That's a stunning memorial, it really is. It's been visited by hundreds of thousands of people each and every year. It's gained international recognition as well.

Interviewer: Did you work with Kenneth Treister on the idea, or did he come up with it entirely himself?

Braman: You know, this was Ken's design. The two key people involved in the memorial were Ken Treister and a professor who was a Holocaust survivor who taught at the University of Miami by the name of Helen Fagin. I like to say that it was words by Fagin and music by Treister. That was the combination really. The two of them, all the verbiage there was all put together by Helen, and of course the architectural design by Ken Treister. That's why we were able to do it quickly. Projects like this could take 20 years. We started meeting the at my home was in the end of 1985. In 2000, it was constructed, built, and open.

Interviewer: There was something I read also about the address that impressed everyone when they heard the numerical address, particularly, of the plot of ground that it's on.

Braman: You're giving me information that I.

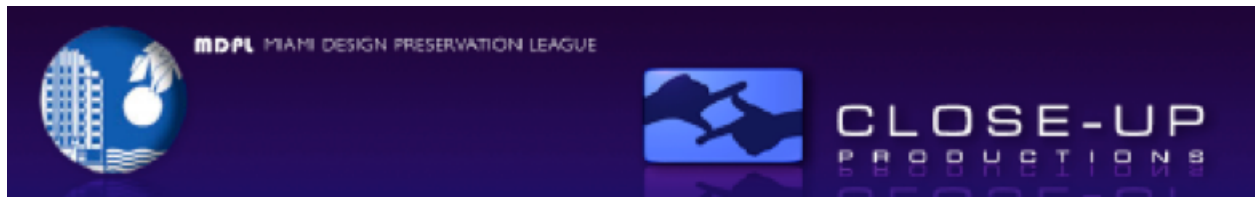
Interviewer: OK. I think the address was, what did we say Carl? It was.

Carl: 1933, 1933, 1945.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Braman: Yeah.

Interviewer: On Meridian. Meridian Avenue. The address was 1933 to 1945.



Braman: Yeah. The Holocaust itself, it really, really, the experts really believe that it really started at Kristallnacht November 9th, 1938, which we'll be commemorating in a couple weeks. The two major events that we have each year are Yom Hashoah, which is in the spring, which is the major holiday commemorating, memorializing the 6 million who died, and of course Kristallnacht in November 1938 when the synagogues and businesses were attacked and Jews were arrested in a mass way for the first time.

Interviewer: I think the address was 1938 to 1945.

Braman: I think it's 1938 to 45.

Interviewer: Yes, and someone said "bashert" at the time when they heard the address. This was before it was built. That's what I read.

Braman: Could be right. Could be right.

Interviewer: Now, we might, if we believe in Wikipedia, you know, but that.

Braman: I'm sure you've done your homework well.

Interviewer: I thought it was a lovely story anyway, you know, it was very touching. Anyway. Miami Beach then had a period where it had a, many Jews felt at home there, because it was very Jewish.

Braman: The population of the beach was 80 percent Jewish.

Interviewer: That's so different now.

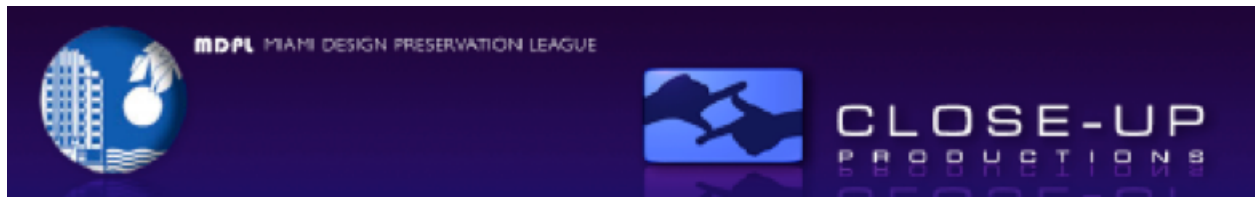
Braman: Pardon me?

Interviewer: It's so different now.

Braman: Yes, well, it changed. I mean, it changed from the state. When we moved to the beach, we were kids. We were so



young. The beach was so old. I don't live far from the beach today. I live north of the beach today, but I love the beach and I love the youth of the beach. It makes me feel good. I mean, the average age, it dropped. The average age when we moved to the beach was 70-some years of age. The average age today of the beach is 40 years of age. I mean, that's a profound difference. I think it's a good difference and it's a healthy difference. The vibrancy of the beach, and to see what's happened on the beach. Those individuals, people that are really, things change, things began to change on the beach in what I call the Sy Gelber era of good government of the beach. That's when things began to change. These were people who didn't have, it wasn't their personal agenda anymore. Prior to that, so many on that commission that had a real personal agenda. Then after Sy, Neisen Kasdin was a wonderful mayor. Really since then, the quality of people on the beach in government has been exceptionally, has been exceptional. I've had the privilege of working with them, with Art Basel, in bringing Art Basel to Miami Beach, the finest art fair in the United States, and probably the finest in the world today. Art Basel Miami Beach has eclipsed its parent, the fair in Basel, Switzerland. It's made, it's brought culture to us, and people who have visited the beach from all over. If you remember in the 1990s, the beach had a terrible reputation. We had tourists who were attacked. It was awful. Bad, awful press, in the European press especially. I mean, people considered the beach, you know, it was the, even the TV program, the drugs, the crime and so forth. People really didn't want to visit, didn't want to come here. We had the race riots in the 80s in the city. The 80s and 90s, beginning of the 90s were very difficult. We were able to bring, persuade, Art Basel to come here, without subsidy. No City of Miami Beach money. Not one cent of taxpayers' dollars I'd add, which is such a rarity in terms of what the county and the other municipalities do. They extended a degree of cooperation in terms of George Gonzales who was the then the manager. After George, all the city managers, and look what we have. All this occurred because of the uniqueness and the willingness of the political establishment to support the museum, to support the show and do



whatever it possibly could to make it a success here, and they have.

Interviewer: And your role in Art Basel?

Braman: Well, I was involved in the effort to bring them here, and very much involved with that, and I've chaired it since its inception. It just means so much to the community and all the other additional fairs that it had. We did some work, that prior to Art Basel, there were only six art galleries in Miami-Dade County. Only six. Two years ago we counted 127 that there were. It transformed not only Miami Beach, it's transformed Wynwood into a viable area. Craig Robins will talk about what it's done for the Design District as well. The Bass Museum has prospered. A major renovation of the Bass. You wouldn't have the Perez Art Museum if it weren't for Art Basel. You wouldn't have the new ICA, which of course our family has been so involved with, without Art Basel. It's interesting, because I know some of the people who have come here from Europe. We have every major curator of museums not only in Europe, in Asia, the Middle East, who come for this fair here. We have every major art collector in the world that comes here. We have support groups for all these institutions that come here for this. We have the finest art galleries in the world that bring their art here. We've established something very, very special here. I know so many of these people who have purchased condos here. Now, they were amazed as to what they say when they came here. It wasn't what they read in the German newspapers. It wasn't what they read in the Chicago Tribune. It wasn't what they read in the Los Angeles Times, and they came here. The community, that all wanted to be complimentary to the community. people have opened up their homes. People have opened up their art collections to these people who have come here. It's been, it's just had the most beneficial effect, in very positive economic terms, but also in terms of imaging. We've been very fortunate here with the type of leadership that we've had. You mentioned Matti Bower, who was wonderfully supportive of the fair when she was mayor. Dan Gelber and Phil Levine, all these people have



led this community, led the Miami Beach community in the same honor or tradition as Sy Gelber and Neisen Kasdin and those. I look at the beginning of the resurrection and the comeback of the beach to Sy Gelber and that commission.

Interviewer: Well thank you. Carl, do you have any questions?

Carl: Who did you convince, or who was responsible convincing the powers that be from Art Basel that this was, that the beach was viable?

Braman: That's a good question. That's easy. I have, for example, I collect art, and have collected it very seriously since the 1970s. I had been attending the art fair in Basel for 15 years before they came here to Miami Beach. You establish relationships. The individual who was in charge of that fair, a fellow by the name of Lorenzo Rudolf. Understand that the company that owns Art Basel is a for-profit company. They make money. What keeps, what makes Art Basel a success, the fact that galleries come here, collectors come here, collectors buy the art, galleries make their profit, enough profit to pay the rent for the fair and etcetera. As a result of these relationships, and I wasn't the only one. Marty Margulies, the Rubells, the de la Cruzes were also very instrumental in this. We said, "Hey, look, Art Basel's in June. It would be wonderful to have something in the United States in December. Why not Miami Beach? Our weather is ideal, and so forth.". It wasn't easy, because when we finally persuaded them to come here, they wanted to come here in January, the middle of January, but there had been an art fair here called Art Miami. Art Miami started off well but it died, but not enough to kill it. Not enough to kill it, but they had those dates. Under the regulations of Miami Beach, they fulfilled their responsibilities. That was a problem. We went back to the people at Art Basel, and we said to them, "Why not try the first week in December? It's a quiet time on Miami Beach. After Thanksgiving holiday until Christmastime comes, the beach is quiet. It's a very quiet time. Hotels will be plentiful, good rates. Restaurants and so forth. That would be the time.". They were very concerned that it was too



close to Christmas when people would be traveling for Christmas, but they tried it. Of course, the first year, all the first year, it was the same year as the tragedy in New York of 9/11. People from Art Basel decided to cancel the fair that year. They just felt that it just wasn't right to have a new art fair after the tragedy that occurred here. They waited until the following year. We still had some problems though, even with the date from the City of Miami Beach. The Art Miami crowd wanted to keep Art Basel out. We had some difficulties. People, fortunately, helped. Craig Robins came through with his relationship with the Pritzker family that were involved at that time in the management of the convention facility. We were able to overcome that, again, with cooperation of the mayor and the support of Neisen at that time, of Neisen Kasdin. That's how we were able to do it, but it was, it's been terrific.

Interviewer: No one.

Braman: It's only grown, and grown, and grown. Today, there are not only the success of Art Basel, there are close to 27 other art fairs going on at the same time as Art Basel. You have to give Phil Levine, and under his administration, great credit for making the investment in the convention facility. I don't know if either of you have seen this new convention facility. It is fabulous. It's a real credit to the city. I hope that the hotel passes, and the referendum coming up in November, that will be a marvelous addition to the beach as well. The funny part about it is that everything that we told them would happen, all of it did not happen. The hotels, the first year they were here, the rates were reasonable. As the success of the fair increased, so did the hotel rates, to absurd proportions, and to people demanding five-night stays, charging more for hotel rooms than the Super Bowl charges on Miami Beach. This is something that we were very tuned in. It's one of the reasons why I'm pushing the convention hotel, to have some pressure to keep rates reasonably down.

Interviewer: Because a lot of young artists, we've experienced, in fact,



we had some staying at our house during Art Basel who.

Braman: Can't afford it.

Interviewer: Young, struggling artists wanting to come down and breathe the rarified air and get stimulated, and they can't afford to even stay here.

Braman: No, no. It's a tragedy because now, you know, we used to have a lot of those young artists on the beach. We don't have them anymore. They're even being priced out of Wynwood now.

Interviewer: Yes.

Braman: They're being priced out of, really, the whole center of the county, being pushed further north and so forth. It's a shame to lose them.

Interviewer: We need more affordable housing.

Braman: Yeah, we do.

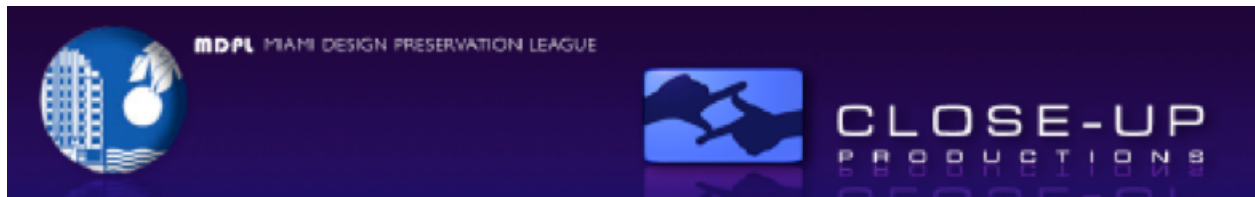
Interviewer: Well, I'm glad you asked that question Carl.

Carl: I have another, and that is what do you see as the future of the beach?

Braman: Challenges. Challenges.

Carl: What kinds? Can you be more specific? What kinds of challenges? I mean, obviously water is a challenge. Do you see that?

Braman: I see political challenges, in terms of the future. I see, I see some individuals who are active politically who really don't share, who do not share the values of the Sy Gelbers, and the Dan Gelbers, and the Matti Bowers, and Phil Levines, and Neisen Kasdins. I see a threat. I see perhaps a backward shift to the days of when our government wasn't very responsive. That's what worries me.



Interviewer: Well, hopefully that won't come true.

Braman: Pardon me?

Interviewer: Hopefully that won't come true.

Braman: Well, I think the inroads are there for that to happen.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Carl: But you've always been active and vocal.

Braman: Yeah. I'll stay that way.

Carl: OK.

Braman: I'm not going to change at this stage in my life. No. Government, good government is so essential. We don't have it in the county. We've had stellar people in the beach. We wouldn't be, the beach would not be where it was if it wasn't for the type of the leadership that we've had successively from Sy Gelber's administration. We've had excellent mayors for all this time. Haven't agreed with them all, but they've been excellent, and they care about Miami Beach.

Interviewer: Jimmy Morales is the City Manager

Braman: Jimmy Morales is marvelous. We are so fortunate to have Jimmy.

Interviewer: We did an interview with him about his years at Beach High, and we interviewed both Sy Gelber and Dan Gelber, and apparently Dan and Jimmy were in the same year, and they were both on the debate team. They kind of had a rivalry of who was the better debater.

Braman: Sy Gelber taught me a lesson that, a lesson on life. When we were negotiating the memorial to take it back from the city, I had reached an agreement with Sy Gelber on it. Sy



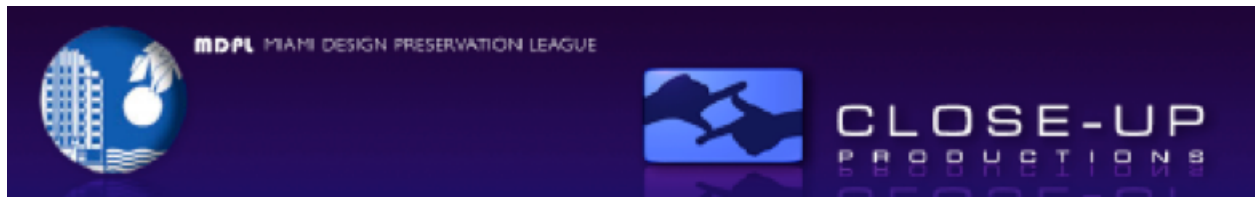
Gelber, the day before the commission meeting to ratify it, Sy Gelber called me on the telephone and said, "Norm", he said, "No deal.". I said, "What? No deal?". He said, "Yeah, no deal.". He said, "I can't do it the way you want to do it.". I said to him, I said to him, "But you gave me your word. We had an agreement.". You know, Sy never got excited, as you know. The way you interviewed him, that's the way he was. He said to me, "You still want to have the commission meeting? You still want to have it on the agenda for tomorrow?". I said, "Yes mayor, damn right I do.". I went before the commission. I went there and raked Sy Gelber over like crazy, you know. He sat there calm as can be, and I vented my anger, my frustrations and everything. Finally, he said to me, waited for when I was finished, he says, "Norm, are you finished now?". "Yes mayor, I'm finished now. I've said what I have to say.", and said it in an angry way. In his very soft manner, he said to me, "Norm, let me ask you a question.". I said, "Sure, you can ask me whatever you want to ask me.". He said, "Have you every changed your mind in your life?". Like that. I just felt like this slinky all the way down as low as I possibly could, you know. It's just the way he said it to me, just in that manner. Of course then we reached an agreement a week or two later, it was just some points or whatever the heck it was that was there. He's a special person, really is. A very, very special person. The whole Gelber family is a wonderful family. Dan's family. Dan's a chip off the old block. He really is. He's a wonderful person, in addition to being an excellent mayor, these are quality people. Quality people.

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Braman: It's a great story with the beach, and the beach is special. People, the wonderful people like Bob Goodman. I don't know if you've interviewed Bobby yet.

Interviewer: Yes, we have. That's how we got to you.

Braman: Bobby's fabulous, and he cares about the beach. Still does. He's been very instrumental. When we put the team together for Art Basel, I recommended Bobby to the



people in Switzerland, and he's still with them. The two people I recommended were Bobby Goodman and a lively woman by the name of Stefanie Reed. They've served well, they've been wonderful, been wonderful. Bobby cares about the beach, cares about the quality of the beach.

Interviewer: There are a lot of people who do, and we've interviewed a lot of them.

Braman: Good.

Carl: Is there something else that you would like to tell us about the beach that we haven't come to?

Braman: I think between everything that you're doing, you've got a pretty, pretty interesting. It's a lot tell, you know? I remember in the early 70s, coming into contact with Stanley Whitman who owned so much property on Lincoln Road at that time, and poo-pooed Miami Beach and.

Interviewer: Yes.

Braman: Poo-pooed Lincoln Road. "Oh, look at it. It's terrible. It's never going to come back. That's why I moved to Bal Harbour.". When you see the success of the beach, and you see what's become of the beach, it's a remarkable story, but it's fragile. It can change. It can truly change.

Interviewer: Well, it has to.

Braman: I just hope, I just would like to see more Dan Gelbers, more of that type. I just see traces of, and I fear for gambling. I do. Gambling could change the beach tomorrow.

Interviewer: Sea level rise is going to change the beach. It's already started. We had a fantastic interview last week with Wayne Pathman about the future of development and the sustainability of the beach. Mitigating against sea level rise. We thought it was going to be a doom-and-gloom kind of interview, but it was quite the contrary. I mean, it



was really fascinating. His contention is that it's going to require governments to talk to one another and private-public sector talking with one another, and with the governments.

Braman: People don't think that far ahead. They don't want to. Politicians, developers, they don't want to think that far ahead. They're out for now. They're not afraid of 2000, at the end of this century when the whole community could be underwater. It's difficult to ask that, you know? Very, very hard, you know, people to pay the price for it. No way to achieve something for nothing. It just doesn't work in life. It just doesn't.

Interviewer: There are enough people, I think, who have made a stake in the beaches as their year-round home, as their home. Not just their winter home, their year-round home.

Braman: Oh my God, yeah. I mean, fortunately, that's one of the major change that we saw, the snow birds. You have a different, you have snow birds, but not to the degree you had before. You have younger snow birds, vibrant snow birds. People don't want to think about 2060, 2070, 2080, you know? They just don't want to think about that. The same people that run our government in Washington, they're not interested in 2040, 2060, 2080. They're interested in the next election.

Interviewer: Yeah. We're all interested in the next election.

Braman: That's just the way it is. It's hard. I mean, it's why you have to give Phil Levine credit for that, you know, for looking at the sea level rise and installing of the pumps and raising some of the levels up. There were opposition to it. There were opposition. People don't want to pay more taxes. People don't want to do that. Just don't.

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