



Interview with Miami Beach Resident Susan Schermer

Kathy Hersh: It is 8th of February 2015. I'm Kathy Hersh, interviewing Susan Schermer for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project, in the Schermer home. I'd like to start out by asking you, you said something very interesting, that you have always lived in this neighborhood. Tell me about the beginnings of that.

Susan Schermer: Oh, okay. My parents came from New York to Miami Beach in 1948. My father felt that he wasn't making it in New York. Miami Beach seemed like groundbreaking area. Things were popping here. My father was a publisher in New York. He published a beverage journal. He decided to come to Miami Beach because New York just wasn't getting him success fast enough.

He bought a house on 41st and Sheridan Avenue, took my mother. My mother took me and my sister. Later, we followed and we moved into that house. My mother was miserable. She hated it. It was too hot. I was happy as a lark. I mean, I had a lot of freedom down here that I didn't have up North. I could walk anywhere. We didn't lock our doors. I met all kinds of kids my own age. In fact, I met all my friends at Polo Park. They had a preschool summer program. That was my first acquaintance with Miami Beach.

Kathy Hersh: So, tell me about this Polo Park place.

Susan Schermer: Polo Park, they had a program. I guess it was run by the parks and recreation department. It was for young kids and it was almost like daycare. We would go there and play Jacks and pickup sticks and all the things they did back there in the old days. I think I made my first childhood friends there. These friends stuck with me in elementary school, North Beach. Some of them are still my friends today.

Kathy Hersh: Really?

Susan Schermer: Yes.

Kathy Hersh: What is that like to have a friend that you've had since you could remember?

Susan Schermer: You know, I wouldn't know what it's like not to. Because I have stayed put, whereas most people have moved around. At least, after they got through with High School they went off to College. I didn't. I met my husband the year I graduated High School. He was a Miami boy so I was coming back. I wasn't going to stay away. So, I really spent the majority of my life here. So, my friends, most of them go back to elementary and junior high school.

It's wonderful. I wouldn't know what it's like not to have those kind of friends.

Kathy Hersh: What do you talk about when you get together with them?

Susan Schermer: What do we talk about? The same things that all women talk about, everything, our lives... We don't always, not all of them live here. Some of them have gone to Palm Beach and other areas in South Florida. But, we do get together every now and then. Reunions, lots of them. It's a pleasure. It really is. It's a great pleasure to have all that in common with people.

Kathy Hersh: Do you think that it's unusual, having that kind of longevity of friendships?

Susan Schermer: It probably is, but it's not unusual for us.

Kathy Hersh: Why is that? What was it about this place that made people so cohesive? This is something we've observed in a lot of the interviews we've done, that people are still friends.

Susan Schermer: Even if we weren't friends, if I meet you and I don't remember you. All of a sudden we make all these connections because you were in a different class but we had the same teachers, we had the same restaurants, and playgrounds, theatre whatever. We have so much in common. [Crosstalk] There is a thing that... What?

Kathy Hersh: You raised your children together?

Susan Schermer: We raised our children here. I think also Miami Beach in those days was much more insular. There wasn't a huge variety of cultures like there is today. Today there's a great big cultural mix. But, back then everybody was kind of, middle class. I didn't know anybody that was poor. Everybody was comfortable and we all had homes to go to. Everybody spoke the same language. It was before the Cuban revolution. It was before Civil Rights too, which was another story about our childhood here that we're not proud of.

It's [crosstalk] the way we treated the Black people that were in our lives that couldn't live on Miami Beach. That worked in our homes.

Kathy Hersh: Do you have any stories about that or any perspective on that now?

Susan Schermer: Yeah, sure. We all do. My parents' household help lived in a little back room, very tiny. They never mixed with the family, they just kept to themselves. They did live in our house, but they couldn't go walking around the neighborhood at night. They would be suspect. It was all the things that the blacks fought against during the Civil Rights movement. I can remember as a child, really being so happy that I wasn't black. I always thought the worst thing in the world would be to be born black. So, that's not a part of our history that I'm proud of.

Kathy Hersh: But, you had awareness [Crosstalk] [Background talking]

Susan Schermer: I won't rub against it.

Male: Well, you don't rub against it. We can't see it with that pattern. Okay, please continue. Sorry.

Kathy Hersh: You say that you thought the worst thing in the world would be to be black. Then you were aware that they had second-class status.

Susan Schermer: Terrible. We used to go into Woolworth and see them sitting at one end of the counter. We couldn't mix with them. In the movie theater, they sat at the back of the theater. The bus, they got in the back of the bus. I mean, I knew that they were relegated to a lower status and I didn't want that ever to happen to me. Of course, you know, I was too young to really understand. But, that's how I felt.

Kathy Hersh: When you matured in say High School, did you try to do anything about it? Or, were you involved in any kind of group that was working for civil rights?

Susan Schermer: No, I wasn't. I was a young mother. I was responsible for two little babies. Then my kids were subjected to the beginnings of integration which were not that smooth.

Kathy Hersh: What happened?

Susan Schermer: I guess, I kind of, felt that my kids had to go through this, and that it was a part of life. I wasn't going to shelter them from it. So, they went to school and they learned. They learned that there were other cultures, and that they were going to have to integrate and be accepting of them. When I was a young mother and my kids started school, I wanted to work. I went back to school. I was a substitute teacher at North Beach Elementary. I was the music and art teacher for the kids that were bussed from Liberty City to Miami Beach in order to facilitate integration. They were not integrated into the classrooms. But, they were brought into the school as an early attempt at say, facilitating integration. But, they were as segregated as ever. I was really thrilled.

Kathy Hersh: You mean they brought them into the school, but they were in their own classes.

Susan Schermer: They were in their own classes. Exactly. Isn't that weird? But, I was really happy to be teaching them because I felt that I had a lot to offer in the way of cultural exposure to art and music that a lot of them didn't have. So, they were happy, you know, to take what I had to offer whereas, probably, our kids were bored, a lot of the times. No, but they were very, very receptive. It was a joy for me to be able to teach them.

Kathy Hersh: Do you know Ruth Greenfield?

Susan Schermer: No

Kathy Hersh: She was someone who went to Beach High. She then lived off the Beach after graduating I think from High School. But, she started first integrated music program. Like an institute that was integrated. She got a lot of death threats.

Susan Schermer: Oh boy. Yeah. Well, our principal at that time, at North Beach elementary, Aldo Simmons, was wonderful. He wasn't there for long

and I was there for long. Not long after that I actually went back to school for my Master's degree. When I got my Master's degree, I had a choice of going into education, or [laughing] going into my own business. I chose to go into my own business.

Kathy Hersh: What was that?

Susan Schermer: That was a flower shop. Actually at that time, it wasn't a flower shop. It was a nursery. It was a plant shop. Back in the late 60s or early 70s, there was this green revolution. All of a sudden everybody wanted to make their houses green. Not because of the environment, like today but because everything was all concrete and artificial. It was a kind of back to nature movement that went along with being a hippie and you know all that other stuff. So, I had experienced in other cities 'plant boutiques', where you walked into a store and the store was inside but it was filled with green and there were fountains and sculpture and all kinds of outdoorsy looking things inside. So, I decided I wanted to do that, because I love gardening. So, that's what started 'Living Things'.

Kathy Hersh: That's the name of the shop.

Susan Schermer: That was the name of the shop, 'Living Things'. It was near my kids' school on 41st street, so you know, I wouldn't be out of the house. It would be part of my life. It became part of my whole life. Living close by, having my kids in the school, and having my business all sort of, of a piece. And it worked for me.

Kathy Hersh: So you were a female business owner at the time.

Susan Schermer: Early.

Kathy Hersh: Early.

Susan Schermer: Yeah, which was right when the women's movement got started, I was one of the few of my generation who did go into business at that time. I just never wanted to stay home. Just had the bug. [Laughter]

Kathy Hersh: So, 35 years. It sounds like it was successful.

Susan Schermer: It was. It was very gratifying. It put me in contact with people. I went to people's homes and I got to decorate. I got to do gardens for them, and then I graduated into being a florist. I started doing weddings, and bar mitzvahs, sending people gifts at their home. It was creative, I got my juices going. I loved it.

Kathy Hersh: Great. You retired then?

Susan Schermer: I retired. After a while the city changed. I guess, things changed and business started not to do so well. We weren't making enough money to make it pay anymore. So, it was just ...

Kathy Hersh: What about the city, that changed, affected your business?

Susan Schermer: The whole population changed. I guess, a younger group came in. All the people that were our contemporaries were beginning to move out. A lot of them moved to Palm Beach County. We lost a lot of that

business. We got a little older, you know, you stop wanting to chase business. So, younger people came in and they got the business and did what we were doing, and took over where we left off. We knew it was time for use to go.

Kathy Hersh: It strikes me, and this may not just be Miami Beach. But, having the reputation for innovation that it has, people would come down because there were new hotels, new centurions, you know, streamline, mid-century modern. I see this, maybe in the art world here, the little bit that I see the little slice of the newest thing. The newest latest thing is what people are after.

Susan Schermer: Oh absolutely. I'm an old thing. [Laughter]

Kathy Hersh: Miami Beach has had that reputation, I think, almost since the beginning that, come down here, play, and have fun, see all this new stuff.

Susan Schermer: Yeah. Well, my house hasn't changed. It's still the same.

Kathy Hersh: But, the South Beach, particularly South Beach seems to be like even the night clubs change every couple of years. The restaurants...

Susan Schermer: New Restaurants. Yeah, they go in and out. Yeah, so, you know, we were yesterday's show.

Kathy Hersh: Exactly

Susan Schermer: And that's okay.

Kathy Hersh: But, you had your good run

Susan Schermer: Oh, we had a great run, yes.

Kathy Hersh: Okay. Going back to, you mentioning that your children had to deal with the whole desegregation thing and that it wasn't a pretty picture. Could you give us a little more details about that?

Susan Schermer: Well, I can remember my daughter coming home and telling me about the conversations that she overheard, this is in junior high school, about their sex lives and things like that which were, you know, a little bit shocking to my daughter. My son was actually mugged coming out of the temple, but got away. So, they had their moments. However, they dealt with it. But, I don't think they really, really got integrated. Because they were still in school with black people but they were separate cultures. They never did blend. So, I don't know. You know, we still have problems today. What can I tell you?

Kathy Hersh: But, your 'growing up' was quite different from that. You felt very safe. You wouldn't have possibly worried about getting mugged coming out.

Susan Schermer: No, never

Kathy Hersh: So, that must've been an adjustment.

Susan Schermer: Oh absolutely. I really didn't worry about my kids too much either until my son got mugged. But, my childhood was... [Laughing] I didn't know that there was a place like Miami Beach anywhere. It was just like being in a little piece of heaven carved out where you got to play all the time. We were in the sun, in the surf, and freely roaming streets. We used to take the bus to downtown Miami. We used to go to Coral Gables to go ice skating all by ourselves. 10 years old, 12 years old, great freedom. Walked to our friends' houses, we had a good time.

Kathy Hersh: What about the dating period? What was dating like? What decade are we talking about here?

Susan Schermer: It was the 50s. We went jitterbugging. We played kissing games at parties. We would pair off and go for walks, come back and get together and say, who did you walk with? [Laughing] What did you do? Did you get kissed? [Laughter]

Kathy Hersh: So innocent.

Susan Schermer: Or, I kissed this one and our braces locked. [Laughter]

Kathy Hersh: What about the parties? I heard stories about a lot of bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs, and all kinds of birthday parties and things that went on.

Susan Schermer: We had sweet sixteen parties and they were always really dressy. We got all dressed up. We used to buy these formals made out of twill, strapless, big bouffant skirts. It was very glamorous. Those days, people really dressed. So, clothing was a very important thing in our culture. Having the right shoes, the right skirts, the right crinolines, the sweaters, and it was like a clothing culture. That was a big part of it.

Kathy Hersh: In music, was Latin music the rage or Rock 'n Roll?

Susan Schermer: Nat King Cole, and then Rock 'n Roll. But, I don't remember Latin music at all until I started dating my husband. That was after high school. Then, there was a lot of Latin night club stuff. We went out to the Fontainebleau, and the Eden Rock. They both had lounges with Latin bands. We [inaudible] to the cha-cha, and the mambo, the meringue, [laughing] I loved it. We had a lot of fun with the dancing. So, that was a good part of growing up.

Kathy Hersh: Did you celebrity watch? Because there were a lot of famous entertainers down....

Susan Schermer: There were, and I was never a celebrity hound. But, a lot of my friends were. I mean I would hear stories. I didn't go looking. [Laughing] I couldn't care less. Kathy Hersh: You were more the artistic temperament person.

Susan Schermer: Yeah, I guess so.

Kathy Hersh: But you loved going to the lounges and hearing the Latin bands.

Susan Schermer: I liked dancing. I've always liked dancing. So, that was fun.

Kathy Hersh: We did an interview, and actually a video, which you can see at the museum at 10th and Ocean, about a man who became a Latin band leader here. He was Jewish, from Coney Island. His name was Marvin Baumel. He became a Latin band leader, Rey Mambo. I don't know if you went to any... He played the Flamingo Hotel, he played the Fontainebleau sometimes. Played all of the places and made his living for many, many years as a Latin band leader. Based on coming here, when he was 13 and falling in love with music and Latin culture, and learned Spanish [laughing].

Susan Schermer: I guess I didn't get introduced to that until a little later. But, we did go to nightclubs and there were great celebrity shows here in those days. Big names came down here, and that used to be a big evening out for us.

Kathy Hersh: That must've been very interesting to have lived in the daytime in a place that felt like a small town. But, yet you had this night life that was incredible.

Susan Schermer: Yes. Barbra Streisand, Sammy Davis Jr., and Harry Belafonte, and we would go to those shows. I mean, I'm amazed that we were able to, young people to have the money to do that. Today you can't do it. [Laughing] Really!

Kathy Hersh: It probably was not as expensive, relative to the economy, than it is now.

Susan Schermer: Exactly. But, it amazes me that we'd get all dressed up and we would go and pay a cover charge and sit at a table. I mean, I guess we had to be 18 to do that. But, I did that for a good part of my young life.

Kathy Hersh: What are some of the shows you remember?

Susan Schermer: Well, the ones I mentioned. Barbra Streisand, I mean, nobody had even heard of her when she first came here. She hadn't made one album. Of course, Harry Belafonte, Sammy Davis, and the Latin Quarter was a fun show. Now, that I went to when I was very young because my parents took me. You could go with an adult, of course.

So, it was all this glamorous showgirl stuff with skimpy and very ostentatious, gorgeous, glamorous outfits. And, that really knocked my socks off when I was a kid. I loved it.

Kathy Hersh: That was Louis Walters, right, Barbara Walter's father?

Susan Schermer: Louis, Barbara Walters' father, exactly. It was on Star Island. Not star, Palm Island.

Kathy Hersh: Palm Island.

Susan Schermer: Yeah.

Kathy Hersh: But it burned.

Susan Schermer: I think so. It was called the Latin Quarter.

Kathy Hersh: I think this phenomenon of parents taking their children to nightclubs, here, which I've heard from several people, is very interesting. The kids I think here were pretty sophisticated.

Susan Schermer: Sophisticated. I went to the University of Texas. I went with a girlfriend from Miami. We were like objects of curiosity to them. All they wanted to know was about our life in Miami Beach. Because they knew Miami Beach by reputation as being this great playground, so they want to hear everything.

Kathy Hersh: There was a lot of gambling that went in those days. Did you ever see any of that going on? Or you heard about it?

Susan Schermer: Mickey, my husband, he'll tell you [crosstalk] more about that.

Kathy Hersh: Alright

Susan Schermer: Those were his buddies, the guys. He hung out with those guys. He kind of has a fascination for that culture.

Kathy Hersh: Okay, we'll talk about gambling with Mickey. [Crosstalk]

Susan Schermer: I think I was a little more... My parents were very much into my education and being smart, and studying.

Kathy Hersh: They were more intellectual

Susan Schermer: They were more intellectual. Mickey's more of an earthy kind of a guy. [Laughter]

Kathy Hersh: Is there anything else that, an outstanding memory, that you have of something you saw, or did, that you've told your children? And your... Do you have grandchildren?

Susan Schermer: I have a granddaughter.

Kathy Hersh: That, you know, sticks in your mind. A family story, maybe.

Susan Schermer: Oh, you got me stumped. [Laughter] You should have told me that to think of something before.

Kathy Hersh: Well, you know, quite often what happens is people sit and reminisce. It dredges up things and people go, 'Oh, I haven't remembered that in years.'

Susan Schermer: Yeah

Kathy Hersh: Haven't thought about that, so, I guess maybe we haven't dredged [laughing]

Susan Schermer: Maybe we haven't.

Carl Hersh: Kathy, May I?

Kathy Hersh: Yeah

Male: You sound like you were an uptown girl.

Susan Schermer: I was an uptown girl

Carl Hersh: Tell me about that difference between the uptown girl and the downtown girl. How come you didn't know South Beach, as you seem to have indicated? What is that, sort of, differentiation?

Susan Schermer: It is true. South Beach was like, almost a different town. South Beach was mostly apartments. When you talk to Mickey you'll find about his growing up. He lived in the living room. They weren't poor, they were just different. It was a different culture. My parents were assimilated Jews. People down there tend to have been more ethnic. They stuck to the old ways a little more. I really do think that's true. So, this part of town, the Mid-Beach, the culture was more ... We were Jewish but we were reformed. We were assimilated and our parents socialized with people. We all had private homes. Even if we didn't have more money we lived like we did, than the people in South Beach. They were more like Brooklyn. It was like Brooklyn and Manhattan.

Kathy Hersh: Okay

Susan Schermer: Okay?

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