

Charles Seraydar Interview

Kathy Hersh: My name is Kathy Hersh. I'm interviewing Charles Seraydar. Did I pronounce it correctly?

Charles Seraydar: Yep.

Kathy Hersh: Seraydar...for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs project. The date is June 30th 2015, and we are in the home of Alex Daoud, former mayor of Miami Beach. Let's start with your story of what brought you and your family to Miami Beach.

Charles Seraydar: I moved here from Brooklyn, New York in 1967. I came to live with my father, Gary. I went to junior high school here.

Kathy Hersh: There was just one junior high school?

Charles Seraydar: Yeah. I went to Coral Gables Ponce de Leon, and then I went to Coral Gables High School.

Kathy Hersh: So, you weren't living on the beach?

Charles Seraydar: No I'm a Miami brat.

Kathy Hersh: So, you never did come to Miami Beach to live?

Charles Seraydar: No, I only came to Miami Beach when I was employed by the police department.

Kathy Hersh: When did that begin?

Charles Seraydar: That was in March of 1973.

Kathy Hersh: You've been in the Miami Beach Police Department since then?

Charles Seraydar: Yes, and I retired in 2002.

Kathy Hersh: Were you ready to retire?

Charles Seraydar: Was I what?

Kathy Hersh: Were you ready to retire?

Charles Seraydar: Oh yeah. I put in almost 29 years.

Kathy Hersh: You've seen a lot of stuff.

Charles Seraydar: Miami Beach went through some tremendous changes during those tumultuous years, yes.

Kathy Hersh: How old were you when, you do the math for me please, 1973... You were a young man...

Charles Seraydar: I was 19 when I came on the department, and I retired when I was 48 with over 29 years on.

Kathy Hersh: What was it like as a 19 year-old coming over here, and what was going on then that had to really pay attention to?

Charles Seraydar: Back in the '70s, Miami Beach was known as "the elephants' graveyard," and so there were a lot of old, Jewish retirees who were from the north, who spend their waning years on the front porches of all the hotels. Ocean Drive was not usually a vibrant community. It was a retirement home.

Kathy Hersh: So what kind of policing and things were you involved with then?

Charles Seraydar: Calls for service, generally, reports of burglaries, car thefts. Back in the early 70s, the murder rate was two to three a year. Although they were murders, they were offender-known type. Very rarely did you have any random homicides. Most of it was calls for service, opportunities to help the older residents of Miami Beach, and, of course the upper north end and the middle zones, which were, at that time, havens for burglaries who were professionals looking to hit well known or wealthy residents of Miami Beach.

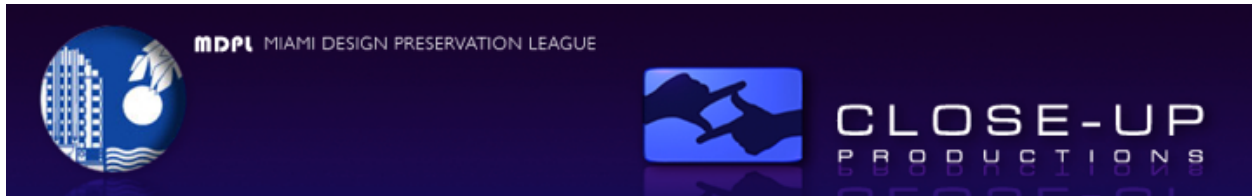
Kathy Hersh: When did you start seeing things change, particularly at the South Beach end?

Charles Seraydar: I would say that the major impetus was the Mariel Boatlift. Although the retirees from up north were seasonal, as such, once the Mariel Boatlift occurred, there was a dynamic change not just to the environment of Miami Beach, but to the number of victims that started becoming victimized by Castro's – the term has been used "criminals," but it's a group of people who essentially only understood crime. They came from a crime area, so they came to Miami Beach and Miami not knowing anything other than crime and violence. That permeated throughout them coming here in great numbers.

Kathy Hersh: What adjustments were made within the police department to deal with this?

Charles Seraydar: Initially, none. We had never experienced anything like that before. We had burglaries where older residents were woken up out of their sleep with someone sitting on their chest, beating them with their fists to shut their eyes so they couldn't be identified, women who had their fingers cut off with pliers to try and get the rings off their fingers. There were some horrendous crimes that were occurring that before had just never happened. It was more of a culture shock to the police officers and people working and living in the city than anything else.

Kathy Hersh: Even policemen who had been used to dealing, or at least prepared in their training, to deal with certain violent acts were still shocked by what they encountered?



Charles Seraydar: I don't think you can train somebody for violent acts. It's a life experience. Once you see it, it's engraved in your mind and the response to it is you want to try and help the people.

Kathy Hersh: Did the police department call for help? Did they get federal funds? What happened?

Charles Seraydar: Initially, the calls for service picked up with regard to responding to crimes. The crimes became more heinous as the Mariel refugees settled in, if you will. We had a Tent City over under I-95, and that tent city housed a number of Mariel refugees. Of course, they took the opportunity to steal cars in their neighborhoods, and then mosey over to Miami Beach and commit crimes here, flee across the causeways, and go back to Tent City. We only had three or four officers who spoke Spanish. The Mariel refugees didn't speak English, so even when we did catch them, we had a very severe shortage of being able to communicate with them. One thing was clear; they were essentially a violent group. If they were involved in criminal activity, it was very serious criminal activity.

Kathy Hersh: So, there was, it sounds like, a reign of terror? People were really scared.

Charles Seraydar: That would be a good saying for it. We had a chief of police by the name of Peter Corso. He was 42 years old. He had been the chief not for a long time.

Kathy Hersh: Peter Corso?

Charles Seraydar: Corso. C-O-R-S-O. He was one of the first ones to come out and verbalize that the increase, upwards of 600 percent, of violent crime was attributed directly to the Mariel refugees, and he was castigated for that. The Miami Herald, everybody just didn't want to focus the attention, but it was factual. It was truthful.

Kathy Hersh: Why didn't they want to see the truth of that?

Charles Seraydar: I guess when President Carter allowed the Mariel refugees to come to this country unfettered - it was just an open gateway from Cuba - over 125,000 Cuban people came to Florida. And like in most cities or counties, you can't just absorb those types of people in the sense of just numbers, and get social services to work with them, and residential placement, food, all the necessities that our country offers. When you reach a certain point to where it becomes unmanageable, and then you add the criminal element to it, you have a recipe for disaster. That's what Miami, Miami Beach, Dade County did. Miami Beach went from a sleepy little town with three to four murders a year to over forty the first year. Dade County, or Miami, went over 600. These numbers were never seen before in our communities. It was attributed directly to the Mariel refugees, the criminal element, not the main group of them. We got dumped on. Of course, the law enforcement community, not having been prepared for this, faltered in many, many cases. The leadership was lacking because no one wanted to

pinpoint that the problem was from the federal government that caused our local headaches. As a result of that, federal aid and state aid was lacking for a long time, and people were being victimized until it was shown that it was, in fact, as a result of the political administration's will is what started to change the reinforcement and the backing support that we needed as police to do a job.

Kathy Hersh: Did the police make trips to Washington? Was there a certain lobbying effort to make them understand the dynamics of this?

Charles Seraydar: I don't know what was going on behind the scenes. I can just tell you from the police department's reaction: underfunded, underequipped, undermanned. During that time, we had six-bullet guns. We used Smith & Wesson model 66 and model 60 revolvers. The bad guys had machine guns. Miami Beach went through a significant number of changes during this culture swap. Drugs became the mainstay of Miami Beach. At the end of the day, it was left up to the victims to deal with it, and the police to deal with it.

Kathy Hersh: When the criminal element of the Mariel's settled in, did you see them organizing themselves? How did they get automatic weapons? Did they establish gangs or networks?

Charles Seraydar: We definitely had Mariel gangs. We had groups that were involved with drug dealing, weapons, almost all of the vices that you would have seen in a third world country they brought with them here. They all knew each other from their own country. They all came over together. It's really not a far thought to think that what their political and aspirational goals were living in Cuba, they brought here to an unsuspecting public.

Kathy Hersh: Was part of the reticence to name the problem coming from the Cuban population here in Miami? I'm speaking of, for example, the reaction to the movie Scarface, that they felt had misrepresented them or overblown the situation.

Charles Seraydar: How do you misrepresent a bunch of Mariel criminal Cubans from going into a Dadeland store with a vehicle full of armed machine guns and bulletproof vests and killing a number of people? That was unheard of here.

Kathy Hersh: That was the famous Dadeland Mall shooting?

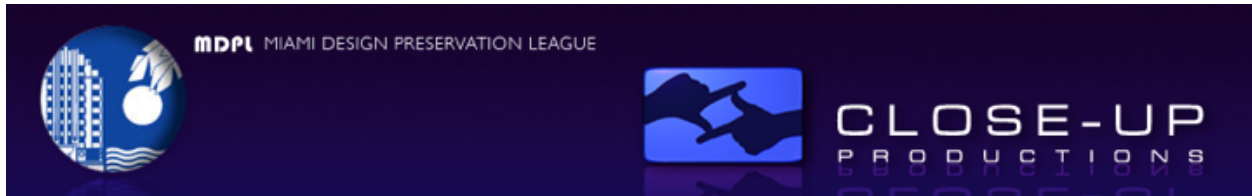
Charles Seraydar: Yes, that's correct.

Kathy Hersh: That was over cocaine, was it not?

Charles Seraydar: That's in the day of the "Cocaine Cowboys," which is another era of Miami Beach and Miami, but had significant ties, of course, to the Mariel criminal element.

Kathy Hersh: Then the *Miami Vice* show comes along. Were you involved with that show at all?

Charles Seraydar: No.



- Kathy Hersh: There was some concern that it would paint Miami, particularly Miami Beach, in a bad light. What are your thoughts on that?
- Charles Seraydar: Entertainment is entertainment. I believe during those years I was working homicide anyway. They say publicity could be good or bad, but even bad publicity can be good. The fact that it showed what Miami Beach was, I think a coup for Miami Beach. You can't hide the truth. The truth was that drugs built a significant amount of what Miami Beach was. The downside to that was that a lot of innocent victims were killed as a result of that renaissance, but it happened. It's the truth. It's factual. I don't think there's any denial about where Miami Beach actually started making its strides in becoming a world-class location. It had been before. It then steeped itself in poverty, and despair, and total breakdown of the moral and political fiber of Miami Beach, and then all the sudden it started coming back. There were visionaries, people involved in looking past what the Mariel refugees brought. As I said, we're not trying to paint the color black of all of them. We had to first deal with the criminal element. In doing so, from my perspective, we would have a murderer on a particular weekend and spend numerous hours trying to identify the subject of that murder. The following week, that subject would be the victim of our newest murder. It became almost a joke around the working cops that maybe you didn't need to work so hard going after the bad guy because next week he was going to be the victim of a retaliation murder. We started defining our murders based on felony murders or misdemeanor murders. A felony murder was if a citizen who was innocent got killed, versus a Mariel refugee drug dealer who got killed by another Mariel refugee drug dealer or Columbian drug dealer. The effort to try and work the cases for the innocent people would take precedence over the bad guys. It really became just a simple case of see who your victim was.
- Kathy Hersh: Wow. Were you studied at the time? Did anybody come in, law enforcement theorists or whatever, to see what was going on? This is a phenomenal story.
- Charles Seraydar: Miami Beach, when I came on, I believe there were 167 officers. After the Mariel refugee, and the hiring processes, and going through the McDuffie riots, we ballooned out to over 350. We've been as high as 425. Over the years, Miami Beach because of the number of visitors and changes that have come to Miami Beach, and the type of events that are hosted by Miami Beach and private companies, it really is a world-class location. You need to have adequate enforcement to protect people. I think the political will of the city, at some point, had to have turned. They said, "We're tired of being victimized." The central point of our enforcement is going to be our cops. We had, as Alex pointed out, two officers who were gunned down in the course of doing their jobs. I think that's when it started to hit the political portion of we need to make serious changes. The effectiveness of the police department prior to the Mariel refugees had to change, too many victims. I always said, "If it was your mother, or your father, your brother, or your sister that was victimized, you would want the police department to respond and provide adequate service or

investigation that you deserve as a citizen of Miami Beach.” Although there were points where it was important, it was never more important when it was a political connection. Then, people like Alex Daoud would come ride with the police officers and see it first hand. They would see the inadequacies of the equipment, the personnel. Crimes that are occurring- you’re going from call to call to call, and something must be sacrificed if you can’t address all the calls. It’s either the service, or, like anything else, the reporting information that’s needed to evaluate the current situation of what was going on was missing. I brought up about Pete Corso. He made a public statement regarding the criminal element from the Mariel refugees, and he was attacked by The Miami Herald and a number of leaders – thought leaders and political leaders – and he was at home on a weekend, and had a heart attack and drowned in his pool at 42 years of age. Nobody wanted to face the reality of what was brought to our community, but it was staring them in the face. It wasn’t until that political will changed that we started seeing some advancements in equipment advancement, people advancement to be able to do the job.

Kathy Hersh: You saw that change under Alex Daoud’s leadership?

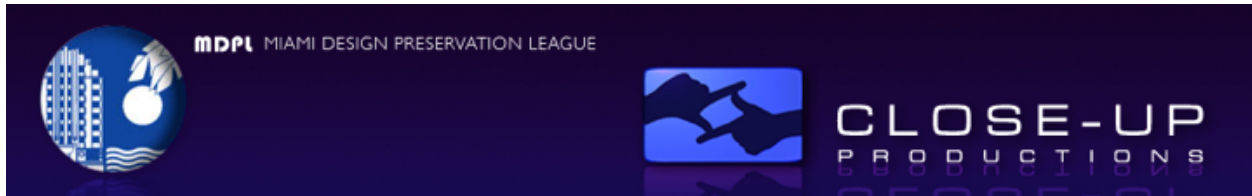
Charles Seraydar: It started under the leadership of Alex Daoud as a commissioner. I believe he was a three-time commissioner before he became a three-time mayor. There were other politicians who empathized with our position, but lacked the political ability to pull everyone together to do the right thing. You had ones that were very pro-police, but they lacked the ability to pull the commission together in order to fund. At the end of the day, Miami Beach buildings were vacant. There was a very small tax base at that point. It had dropped significantly. On the political front, it was very difficult for them to be able to do what they needed to do with a strong will towards solving the problem. It was more about putting patches on at that time, and Band-Aids.

Kathy Hersh: During the height of this crime wave, if you call it a “wave,” tsunami... On a typical night, how many calls of burglary, rape, murder, serious crimes would you get?

Charles Seraydar: We got to the point to where we were operating with almost 30 uniform officers. I can recall nights where the log sheets were just going from one call to another to another. With the dispatchers calling policemen off of existing calls to respond to more relevant alert calls. We had signal three, which was an emergency. That’s the way we did that for months. We were actually conditioned to expect, once roll call broke, to just get out and start covering the streets, and don’t have time for traffic enforcement because those things start taking a toll on the officers’ time. When you call to investigate a crime, whether it’s a burglary, there are certain protocols that need to be done, but if you’re strapped and they pull you off to go answer a man-with-a-gun call, then that’s the expense of what I was explaining before about something is always sacrificed.

Kathy Hersh: It must have been quite a strain on the adrenaline system, too, to be answering a lot of number three calls.

Charles Seraydar: That’s an understatement, but it was kind of neat. Here we are, a bunch of young cops, never having been exposed to man’s inhumanity to man. That’s really what it boiled down to. When you think about it, it’s like working in an emergency room and seeing trauma patients come in all the



time. The difference is we get them in a non-holistic environment. We get them right there in the middle of the street, the gunshots, the stabbings, the rapes, the robberies. Conditioning is what actually empowered us to deal with the problem. When the political will changed, and the directive was we need to stop this crime wave, as you've succinctly put it, we were prepared mentally to do that.

Kathy Hersh: Were there some that fell out of ranks, that couldn't handle the pressure?

Charles Seraydar: Those people went off the street. We had squads. It's a system in which officers work closely together. This type of environment that we were forced into brought everyone together. Policemen have two families: They have their family at home, and they have their family that they work with in the police department. They're very protective. If an officer was hurt, generally the offender was hurt. It was as simple as that. It would be like someone coming into your home and hurting your family member.

Kathy Hersh: Carl, you've had a lot more experience riding with policemen and so forth. Anything you want to comment or ask about?

Carl Hersh: We need to approach some of this what probably was extralegal approach that police might take. Certainly, a tune-up, an attitude adjustment. You make an officer run, you're probably going to suffer for that. There are a number of things that within normal operations, but this sounds like it was way beyond normal operations.

Charles Seraydar: There was nothing normal back then – nothing. I will say that there were officers who relished the idea of being able to administer street justice to lowlifes who deserved it and who had victimized honest, innocent people. The handcuffs were removed from the police officers on dealing with criminals in the very same sense that they were provided with the equipment to do the job better. It's difficult to explain to people today who don't tolerate police misconduct. Yet, you're being told, "Stop the problem." The only way to stop the problem is- when you're dealing with individuals who only understand violence as a language, it's difficult to try and walk up to them and say, "Please don't come back to Miami Beach again. You're not welcome because you committed a robbery." They just don't understand that type of communication. Yet, we removed many people from Miami Beach using a method which would never be condoned today. It was absolutely effective. I will say, it may have moved the criminal element to another area, but for our Miami Beach residents... My concern was Miami Beach. There were many, many a nights where I can recall driving across the MacArthur Causeway with some scumbag in the back of my police car, passing a Miami police car who was dropping the last scumbag off that we threw over in Miami. It became, I won't say "a game," [laughing snort] but at the same time, you have to find humor in how the police departments handled a lot of this stuff. We were arresting so many people that if it was not a serious crime, just to get them off the beach they would go over to Dade County Jail over on 12th Avenue. As we were walking them in the front door, the people we arrested three hours

earlier were being walked out the back door because now you have a problem. They can't house all of the criminals that were being arrested. Then, you have to start looking at the degrees of the crimes that you're arresting people for. Then, you would realize it was really futile to arrest somebody for loitering and prowling. You knew that they had committed burglaries. You knew it. You just can't prove it. Are you going to arrest them for a misdemeanor and take them over to county - where it's really your time, the city's vehicle, lack of officers' availability on the street - to bring them to the jail just to have them out two hours later, being ferried back by the other police department who's trying to get them out of that area because they're committing crimes over there. Where do you put a balance on all of this? The only way we recognized that was effective was to deal with that particular criminal element as an individual. Eventually, just like the murderers murdered other bad guys the following week, we started seeing that what we were doing was working because those people were no longer around.

Kathy Hersh: They were afraid to come over here?

Charles Seraydar: We spoke to them in the most elegant language that they were use to. Violence begets violence.

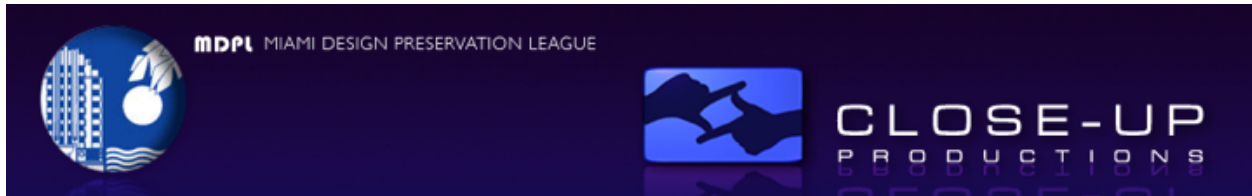
Carl Hersh: The shift that you're seeing now, obviously, as you point out the public now expects the police to operate to another standard. Obviously, on Miami Beach your crime situation has changed dramatically. Did you notice part of that during your tenure? If you were there until two thousand...

Charles Seraydar: Two.

Carl Hersh: What happened during those intervening years, those last twelve years of your career? How did that perspective change about the police and what you were doing? Now you're past the 80s. We're into the late 80s, early 90s.

Charles Seraydar: Every department must operate under rules. During this time, there really were no rules, or at least enforced rules. The public pays police to protect, and to use deadly force if necessary, for citizens. That's the way I was brought up in the police department. Unfortunately, during this time it was almost like a break in the time warp. It was like those rules no longer existed. In order to get the job done, you had to do things. We got them done. The reason why I say they're not tolerated today is because I believe professionalism still is the mainstay of the police department. Ethically, all police officers need to do the right thing. Unless as a citizen you're put into the position that we were at the time, how do you second guess what we were trying to do? It wasn't with malfeasance or misfeasance that we were doing our job. It was to do the political will of the demands of the community in which we lived in. By the 90s, I lived in Miami Beach. I lived up in Biscayne Point. I was a resident of Miami Beach. It's very difficult for me because I understand what the citizens demand of the police. If the citizens, again, were screaming at the police to solve the problem, they have to turn their eye on how the problem is solved. They're only looking for that political will to say, "Okay, we got through this period."

Kathy Hersh: So, people turned a blind eye to what was going on?



Charles Seraydar: Without a doubt. We would get instructions at roll call, "We've got burglaries going on in this particular area. We don't care how you do it. Get rid of them," and that's what we did. There was a situation in which Miami Beach was in the top ten auto theft statistics in the United States because we had a half a million people visiting Miami Beach. People would come in through the airport. They would drive to Miami Beach, everything from losing their car to them stealing their cars. You have two trains of thought: You either catch the bad guys who were stealing them- and, if you only have a three-man auto theft division, it's kind of hard to keep up with fifteen, twenty cars a day that are reported stolen, right? What they did, when I say "they," the will of the police department, was stop reporting the statistics to the FBI. If the FBI can't calculate the statistics because they're not provided with the information, within a year, we fell off the top ten. Politically, that's an important thing for Miami Beach. [laughing]

Kathy Hersh: Wow.

Charles Seraydar: That would not be tolerated today because UCR statistics are what governs the use of funding for police departments in order to support personnel. See, there was a whole different way of thinking back then on making the problem disappear. Some of it I find very humorous, and others... At that time, it was a different culture. That's one of the things, answering your question about the difference between today and then, it was a different culture to live in Miami Beach and be a resident. It was a different culture to be a criminal back then, and it was a different culture to be a working police officer. As a perfect example, you had people who were fine jewel thieves back in the 1950s and '60s, and preyed on the wealthy. They were very successful, because they were good at what they did. They weren't common burglars. They were exceptional burglars. Our job was to catch them, and we did. Moving forward twenty years to the criminal element, who was really beating the crap out of the old retirees who were here, we got rid of them. All I can say is, we were successful. You may not have liked our motives. You may not have approved of them. They may have been morally wrong, but it effectuated a solution to a problem that was multitier. It wasn't just about the people who lived here being victimized. It was the downfall and the economy that was affected, and the fact that visitors would no longer come to Miami Beach. Then, you had the blight. That was a result of that. The old Jewish retirees were replaced by the people who took over the abandoned buildings, used them as drug stash houses, committing robberies. Miami Beach went through a very interesting period during those years, and the only people who stayed were the cops. Everybody else ran.

Carl Hersh: Remember that Time magazine cover, that "Paradise Lost?"

Charles Seraydar: Yes.

Carl Hersh: We all do.

[laughter from all]

Charles Seraydar: I was fortunate enough to go through the highs, the lows, the highs, the lows a couple times within this rollercoaster of Miami Beach. I found it to be the most exciting part of my life because you actually got to see the effect of, not an individual like me, a collective effort, whether it was the police, the politicians, the residents who pulled together and reinvested - the outsiders who reinvested in the economy in Miami Beach, and turned it into a vibrant community. It is really a neat thing to reflect back and say, "This was really a cool ride."

Carl Hersh: I think I'm cool.

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