

### Interview with Gaylord Cull

**Kathy Hersh:** This is the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. I'm Kathy Hersh. I'm interviewing Gaylord Cull this morning in the Miami Beach Botanical Garden. Today's date is March the 22<sup>nd</sup> 2019. Okay. Here we go. Gaylord, would you give us a brief history of this place, of the Botanical Gardens, how it came to be.

**Gaylord Cull:** Well, it was a golf course 100 years ago. It was called Fishers Golf Course. He was from Indianapolis, Indiana. He built this golf course to lure his wealthy friends down from Indianapolis. It's city property, and so it's fluid. It's always changing. The convention center was built in 1957. They just remodeled it. It took two and a half years. All those roads were blocked off.

This was just a vacant lot across the street from the convention center in 1962. The garden club is 90 years old. It still meets here today. They transformed this into this garden today. It opened on just a vacant lot. 25 years ago, we opened with four and a half acres. 25 years ago, they took two acres away to create the Holocaust memorial. That left us cut in half, 2.6 acres. It needed to be redesigned.

They hired Raymond Jungles, the landscape architect, to redesign the garden. He moved 85 percent of all the trees. The banyan tree is 90 years old. It stayed. The secret tree is also 90 years old. It stayed, but everything else was moved. He opened it up. Now you stand at the front gate, you look all the way back to the canal. That's where we do a lot of weddings and special events. We do three weddings a week.

**Interviewer:** This is not really a secret, but it's almost hidden in a way.

**Cull:** It really kind of is a secret garden. Even without the construction, we're blocked off for two and a half years. Even without the construction, the convention center drive is practically a dead on each side, so there's not much through traffic. People don't really know about us.

Now that half the garden is the Holocaust memorial, people come from around the world to see that, and even school groups go there first and they come here. They come here, I give them tours of the garden. It brings a lot of visitors from around the world.

**Interviewer:** Tell us about the man, Jungles, who designed this.

**Cull:** Well, his name is Jungles. It's so funny. Raymond Jungles, he's a landscape architect. He was a student of Burle, I forgot his name. He's a very famous Brazilian artist and landscaper. He's a student of his. That's why it looks kind of Brazilian.

Raymond Jungles has a lot of work in this area on Lincoln Road. The Frank



Gehry building, the rooftop that has a garden. He designed that New World Symphony space, the garden there. Nine blocks away on Lincoln Road on the west by alternate road, there's a parking garage.

Next to the parking garage is a Sun Trust Bank with a private house on top. The house just sold for \$40 million. It needed a backyard, so Raymond Jungles designed. It's called a slope garden, and it slopes up. You can take the elevator up to the seventh floor and have a beautiful view, but you'll be under the garden.

That's a private garden. Then the plaza in front of Banana Republic, I worked there for nine years. He transformed that. He pedestrianized that plaza just a few years ago, and it's planted with trees native of the Everglades.

**Interviewer:** This guy is still around then.

**Cull:** Oh, very much so. In fact, he's still. We're expanding because of the global warming. The reason they see this Collins Canal, Collins was a Quaker avocado farmer from New Jersey. He dug the canal in 1912 to take avocados to market. Because of global warming, the city is raising the wall all along the canal, but they're raising it four feet. We're going to go right to the edge of the canal and then we're going to have a restaurant there.

Raymond Jungles is going to. They ran out of money. He did this garden for only \$1 million, which is amazing. They ran out of money to complete it. Now they're able to complete it, so he's going to be brought in to finish the garden.

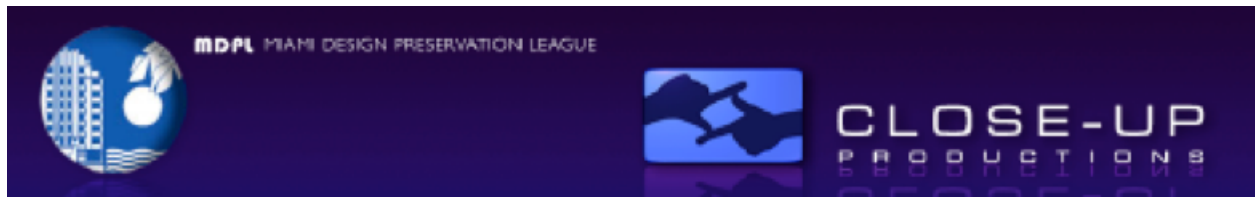
**Interviewer:** This garden is free and open to the public.

**Cull:** That's our mission. We opened in '62. It's always been free to the public. Actually, after Hurricane Andrew came through in '92 and destroyed the garden and people wanted to close it, people lost interest in the garden. It took a group of concerned citizens to form the conservancy. It's a private-public partnership with city hall.

We restored the garden, and I worked for the conservancy. We raise money. We pay rent to the garden every year, but all the special events, we're the center of Art Basel every year they come through here. This becomes Michele Bernstein's restaurant for a whole week, 1,000 people. They bring in tables and chairs. 1,000 people eat here every day. The ground gets torn up because the grass, we don't book a wedding until after Art Basel leaves. We wait two weeks. We're still trying to recover.

**Interviewer:** Even though this is very tranquil, it sounds like there's a lot of activity.

**Cull:** It's just amazing. It's just amazing. People come here from around the world. There's a lot going on. This weekend we have poetry in pajamas. Kids dress in pajamas. I'm going to wear a wig with curlers on it. They



bring beds in. The kids come in their pajamas and they do poetry. They read poetry. Just right now there's a bridal shoot going on. There's so much going on here.

**Interviewer:** Tell us about the Japanese Spring Fair that happens every year.

**Cull:** The Japanese Spring Festival is our largest annual event. It draws like 800 people. It's free, and people come with their families. It's a great event. People come dressed in Japanese costumes. We sell parasols. They pose on the bridge of the Japanese garden. This time there's going to be a sushi demonstration. I'm going to wear a red shirt with sushi on it and sushi socks. There's flower arranging, a tea ceremony. Since we're expecting, very exciting. It's going to be a lot of people. That's every year.

**Interviewer:** Wow. How did that get started? Do you know how that tradition came about?

**Cull:** Well, I'm sure it's because we had a beautiful Japanese garden. I wasn't here at the time, so I don't know, but the Japanese garden represents all of nature in miniaturized form. Japanese plants won't survive this climate, so they've chosen tropical plants that have an Asian look and feel to it.

When you walk in the garden, you see a real crooked tree. It looks like a Japanese painting. It's actually made of the Central America, the building trumpet tree. It's blooming right now. It has beautiful yellow flowers that attract bees and hummingbirds.

**Interviewer:** What's the reaction of schoolchildren when they come in here?

**Cull:** Well, they're on their cell phone. I make big hats, and I perform. I've done a lot of nightclub work in New York City, and I can entertain drug addicts at four o'clock in the morning. You entertain them. I put big hats on. I tell stories, and I talk.

I say because I don't want to bore them. Some of them don't want to be here. I don't want to bore them, so I say, "Can you run?" We run from tree to tree. Two more trees, two more trees, so I engage them and make it fun and make it exciting. They love it. They applaud at the end of it because nobody gets hurt. It's a lot of fun.

**Interviewer:** Tell us about yourself and how you came to Miami.

**Cull:** Well, I worked in the Neiman Marcus for 12 years, and I started in the Dallas, Texas store. They sent me around the country. I'm an artist, and Stanley Marcus collected my artwork. He knew my art very well. He liked it. He supported me, and I worked in the store. He believed in my taste level, and he sent me around to do this.

Neiman Marcus is, I think, the best store in the world. It's been bought and sold many times, but the time I was there in the '70s, it was



intimidating. I was hired to warm the store up and make it fun and make it inviting. I was sent out. I have been in every Neiman Marcus throughout the country, Chicago and Newport Beach, California, Las Vegas.

I was in Saint Louis at the time, and they asked me to come down to Miami because they were doing traditional Christmases, and they felt it was too heavy. The big Jewish population here, they didn't think it was appropriate, so I was sent down to the Bal Harbor store, and I worked here for four years in the Bal Harbor store.

**Interviewer:** What kind of ways did you alter the traditional Christmas displays here?

**Cull:** Well, they sold \$10,000 dresses, but they gave me only \$3,000 to do Christmas. I was stuck with traditional plastic Christmas trees. I spent the \$3,000 on plastic oranges and Lenny Horowitz. I hired him to help me. We stamped Neiman Marcus on the oranges, and we made snowmen out of the fruits.

That was a Christmas in Miami. Second year we did Santa Claus and all the elves wearing bathing suits in beach chairs. I had a 16-foot-long alligator called Rudolph the Alligator. I had a red nose that lit up that went in the elevator well. The other year, I forget what it was.

**Interviewer:** This was some pretty far out stuff. How did it go down?

**Cull:** Well, they loved it. It's nice to work for a place that, Richard Marcus, who was Stanley's son, he's got to be in his 80s now. Richard sent me a note saying it was superb. That's the best you can get. They had me. I had carte blanche to do whatever I wanted with the stores. That's why they sent me here, so I didn't have to ask permission. I just did it. That's the way Lenny worked also. We didn't ask permission. We would just do it. We didn't know any better.

**Interviewer:** How did you first meet Leonard?

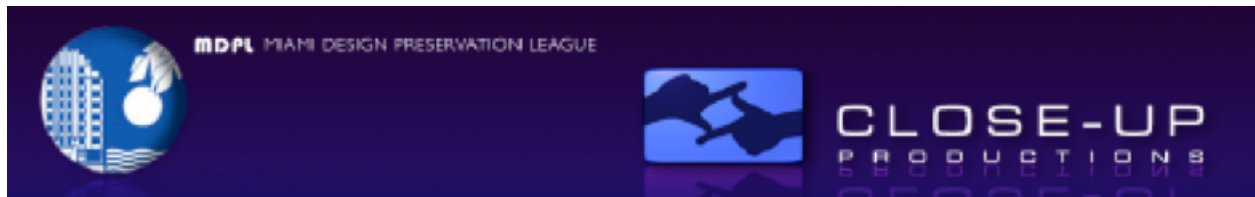
**Cull:** On the 21<sup>st</sup> Street beach, I was down here. I went to the beach, and that's where we met. We just went to my place, looked at my artwork. We're both artists, and we stayed up all night looking at my paintings. That's how we met. Then we stayed friends for 10 years.

**Interviewer:** What was he like as a person?

**Cull:** He was wonderful. He never had a negative. He's a crazy guy, crazy guy on a bicycle screaming "Color, color, color," because at that time all of the buildings were beige. He just felt that it needed to have color. He was so funny. He had so many friends. He's just really charismatic. He has a funny laugh. He always had a great time. We did everything together.

**Interviewer:** Did you get to know Barbara Capitman through him?

**Cull:** They were together much of the time. We'd go to dinner, here's Barbara. I



loved Barbara. You might have heard this before. People have thought she's homeless. She looks homeless. She did. She always looked at that. That's Barbara. I loved Barbara. She was wonderful.

He introduced me to her. She was doing some kind of product. You sample the product and then write a review of it. It's something like that. I forget exactly what it was. That was her job, so we'd go to her place. She'd test us like guinea pigs. That's how I met Barbara.

This was early on. This was before I hired him in Neiman Marcus in 1986 when we did the ice skating alligators. The preservation league hadn't happened. It was the next year in '77 when he, Barbara. There's a woman from Boston. This was a group of like five people that had shrimp dinner. You've probably heard the story. They had shrimp dinner on the floor, eating shrimp dinner.

One was a lady from Boston. Do you know the swan boats in Boston, the swan boats? They used to keep the swan boats in the wintertime in her back yard. I think she had money, but I don't know who the other people. There might have been two other people. That was the famous evening when I wasn't there. That's when they created the preservation league. It was early on. Can you imagine? It was a different world.

**Interviewer:** It was an interesting coming together of the right people at the right time.

**Cull:** Absolutely. It absolutely—

**Interviewer:** Were you involved at all in the historic preservation movement?

**Cull:** Well, they used my artwork because it's big, cartoony. It wasn't Deco style but more like red grooms. The first 10 years, we used my artwork to promote the preservation league one year. Now, this is like not asking permission. Lenny, we're best friends. We wanted to use. There's an art exhibit going on in front of City Hall.

By the way, Lenny knew everyone. Andy Fabregas was a gay Cuban architect. He designed that City Hall. I forget which year it was, like '77, probably open by '77. Then he loved Lenny and the preservation movement. If it had been a couple years later, it would have been an Art Deco inspired city hall. It's what I feel. They had an art fair here.

**Interviewer:** What was his name again?

**Cull:** Andy Fabregas . His office, his design firm is in Brickell.

**Interviewer:** He's still around?

**Cull:** No, no. He left us a long time ago. Like everybody mid '80s, we lost everybody, mid '80s.



**Interviewer:** During the HIV crisis.

**Cull:** Absolutely. He was a great guy He was a friend of Lenny's. I said, "Lenny, let's make a New Yorker Hotel." It was still standing at the time. I had a ton of tubes, and then we built a New Yorker Hotel. We had a little limousine. There was an alligator that said Gucci on the side.

I saw that on Facebook. I saw a photograph of that alligator, and Sweet, I forgot her name, Andy Sweet's sister. You know Andy Sweet? Last Resort, Andy Sweet, the photographer, the young guy, the photographer. Well, she ran a photograph. There's a photograph of me at a banquet table. She asked, "If anyone has any information, please tell us where this is."

Early on, we used my artwork everywhere. I said, "It was a costume contest, and we were the judges." Gucci, the real Gucci guy, Gucci from Gucci was sitting next to me. They set my alligator in front of him that said Gucci on it. That's what it was. That's how I met his sister.

**Interviewer:** What did Mr. Gucci think of the alligator?

**Cull:** Oh, he loved it. He laughed. They just had a good time.

**Interviewer:** Did you know Andy Sweet then?

**Cull:** No, no, but we were in the room at the same time because he took that photograph. Isn't that amazing? We must have been the same age. I was 26 at that time.

**Interviewer:** When Leonard was running around then painting buildings, you were best friends with him during those years?

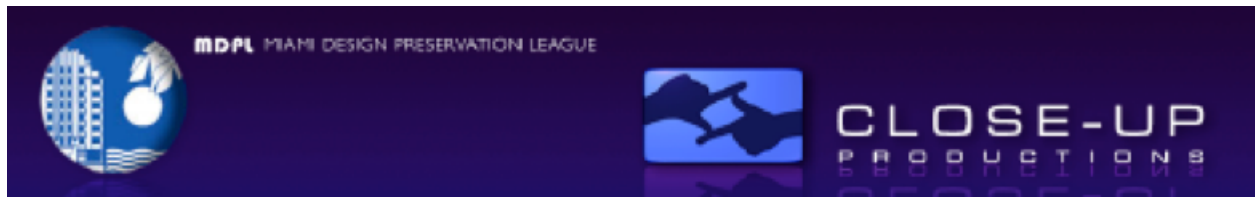
**Cull:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**Interviewer:** He must have been ecstatic at the reaction, the positive reaction from it.

**Cull:** He was amazing. He started with the bakery. I forget the name of the bakery. Right now they've gutted the entire block. Just the shell is standing. That was his first project. He did that. I remember when he did. All the hotels at that time, now they're beige. No, now they're white. They were beige at that time. He got the Raleigh Hotel. His colors were really subtle, the beautiful colors.

He was a painter, abstract paintings. It was all about color. He would do real muted yellows and grays together. Then it picked up. It was a cheap way to bring life back to the South Beach, and so other people jumped on the bandwagon, but they didn't have the same taste level. They had hot. It was hot pink and turquoise. Well, those were never Lenny's colors, but that became a lot of buildings went that way, really garish.

When Miami Vice was looking for a location, it was between New Orleans and Miami Beach or Miami. They chose Miami. It was called Gold Coast



originally. They chose Miami because of Lenny's colors, so no matter how you trace it back, it all goes back to Lenny and Barbara. It all goes back to Lenny's colors.

**Interviewer:** That's quite a legacy.

**Cull:** It's amazing. It's amazing. He was well aware of it in his lifetime.

**Interviewer:** Did he continue doing his art during that time or did that take over his life?

**Cull:** He became a part of the preservation league, of course. He didn't do any art, but he was getting commissions, doing some design projects. The Carlisle Hotel was the first one to be redone. It was done on a shoestring. Nobody really had the kind of money it took to do it, but he did the restaurant in the Carlisle. That was the first one to be done. It was the Carlisle Hotel.

**Interviewer:** What was it like to go out and about with him? He knew everybody. He was bringing the buildings back to life.

**Cull:** It was just so much fun. He was just the center of the universe at the time, and we all knew it. It was so exciting, but you just didn't realize because it took a while. It took like 10 years for it to really take hold. In 1985 Tony Goldman came down and bought 18 Art Deco hotels and really had the money to put them back on the map.

He had the vision. Everyone else, I feel like they all saved it for Tony Goldman to come along. Now, he raised the bar. He changed. It was never, forgive me for saying it, never an overpriced pretentious resort that it is now. He's the guy that raised the bar.

He's the one that envisioned. He brought the fat models into the fashion show. He'd have red boats. He's the one that really put them back on the map. It was also his vision that he started buying N Money and he started buying Windward. It's amazing.

**Interviewer:** What do you think Lenny would think of South Beach now?

**Cull:** Oh, I think he'd be so pleased.

[Silence]

**Cull:** He'd be very happy.

**Interviewer:** A lot of people really mourned his passing.

**Cull:** I was in New York. I spent four years in Miami at the time. I met him in '76. Then I went. Blooming Gales moved me to New York, so I went back to New York. I was up in New York 25 years. I'd come down and visit him,



and he'd come to New York. I had this show for the 10<sup>th</sup> annual.

The first Moon Over Miami Ball, back in those days hotels would close in the summertime. There were no guests at all. They wanted to do water ballet, and so the hotels would close. The Victor Hotel was the first one, the first Moon Over Miami Ball. They had the fire department come out with a truck and fill the swimming pool. Can you imagine?

Now they're open year-round because the seasons flipped. In summertime hotels don't close. It's winter, Brazil and Argentina. Blue jeans in Brazil cost \$300. 10 issues cost \$300, so people come here from South America. They come here, their winter, our summer. They come here, so the hotels don't close up any longer.

**Interviewer:** That's made a difference here, hasn't it?

**Cull:** Every time I see a building, well, now they're knocking down the interiors and seeing the façade. I always think of Barbara and Lenny. They did it. No denying it. It's so exciting to be best friends with Lenny and friends with Barbara. It's so exciting to see the result. They brought in billions of dollars.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that he perhaps played some kind of role in making people aware of the AIDS epidemic because of his fame on the beach?

**Cull:** I do. I really do. It was sad to see because I've seen articles in the paper saying Lenny's health is failing just like the colors in the hotel. Oh gosh. It's heartbreaking to see that. That's not where I go when I think about Lenny. I just think about this crazy guy on a bicycle screaming "Color, color, color." That was the Lenny I remember. I'd come down here when he got really sick.

Now, I did shows in New York, and I did a lot. I started doing installation shows with Lenny down here on South Beach. Then I went back to New York and did like a dozen big shows, stage shows in New York. Dead Women musical, the Nicaragua USO show. That's what I did up there.

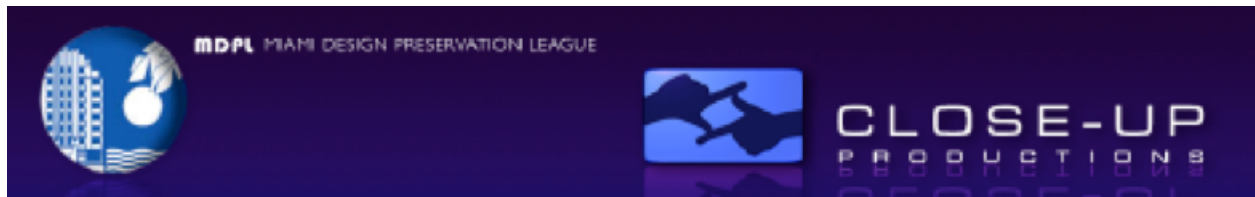
Well, there's a famous trans performer named Crisis, the international crisis. What a man, what a woman, what a crisis. Well, she got sick from AIDS. It's all in the mid '80s. She got sick from AIDS and died. Her home attendant was also Lenny's home attendant down here, the same home attendant. Isn't that amazing? I'd come down and see Lenny and push him on his wheelchair. I miss him.

**Interviewer:** He sounds like the kind of guy, though, that is floating around in here now.

**Cull:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** When you were growing up, had you heard about Miami Beach?





**Cull:** I didn't really know about it until I was sent down here for Bal Harbor. Now I know better, but back then I would see an Art Deco building because I knew there's Art Deco here. I didn't know what it was called. I saw an Art Deco building in Dallas. "Oh, that's a Miami building." I thought it was Florida architecture, which it is, but there's more to it than that.

**Interviewer:** Lenny and Barbara had a lot to do with establishing Art Deco as a legitimate recognized architectural art form.

**Cull:** Absolutely, absolutely. I moved down here. I was the first one to actually live on the beach. Lenny was living in Edgewater. Barbara was living on Venetian Causeway and later Key Biscayne. I was living on South Beach because I loved the architecture. I finally learned it what it was, but I came here because I loved it. Lenny was here for the same reason. We loved the architecture.

It was so cheap. I had the rooftop hotel on Pennsylvania for \$130 a month. As chopstick [Phonetic] [21:13] Putosala, that Cuban restaurant that's still there, this chopstick was \$3 for dinner. Lenny taught me some tricks. None of us had money at the time. He said, "You can go to any elegant restaurant and order onion soup, and you can stay there all night, and that's your dinner." We did. We would do that.

He would barter. He got some design jobs where he would make money from it, but many times he didn't. He would barter. That's how he barter goods and services. He did a lot of bartering. That's what he did. There's one time I was coming from 7-11. I ran into an old Jewish man. He was a rabbi, Rabbi Ralfield Bing, the button and bow king, and we became friends. He must have been 50 years old. Then we became friends.

Then I moved back to New York. He was the button and bow king. He sold trinkets to go with women's shoes, buttons and bows and things. He had thousands. I saw them. He had thousands. Well, he left them in Lenny's office. I didn't know that they became friends, but he left them there.

Well, Rabbi Ralfield Bing was murdered on the harbor way. He was murdered. The rest of Lenny's life, he was passing out these trinkets, passing out diamonds to people, and I knew where they're coming from. It's just so sweet. It's amazing how people just overlap, crisscross.

**Interviewer:** It was a very special place.

**Cull:** It was. It really was. This was just in my world, my favorite way. I was here four years, and then I kept coming back every year. It was always a special place.

**Interviewer:** How do you see it changed?

**Cull:** Pretentious, overpriced resort. The hotels take pride in being more expensive than New York. I'm so happy it was saved, but I'm glad I was



here when it was really cheap and accessible. When I met Lenny at the 21<sup>st</sup> Street Beach, there was no beach. In high tide, the Seagull Hotel was right there in high tide. The water would touch the hotel and then last 30 years. It took 30 years to fill in the land. They filled in 300 feet of beachfront. That's all landfill. It wasn't there before.

Before, you couldn't walk down the beach. Only Luminous Park had a beach. In the movie, Hole in the Head with Frank Sinatra, they walked out of the hotel and dived right into the water. Now it's 300 feet away. It's changed a lot, but I'm so happy I was here back in those days because now to save money, I live in Little Haiti. That's the next place where it's all my fault, gentrification. Wherever I go, it follows.

**Interviewer:** That's happening all over Miami.

**Cull:** It really is.

**Interviewer:** Carl, is there anything you want to touch on?

**Carl Hersh:** Why did you come back?

**Cull:** Well, because I had been in New York 25 years. I performed, and I had done. I did things. I didn't go there to perform and do shows. That wasn't the goal at all, but it just happened. I did Carnegie Hall. Oh, I don't ask permission. The first time I did Carnegie Hall, the side doors open. It's actually Union House. You can't touch the doorknob. They have to touch the door. They have to open. Otherwise they close the place down. You can't touch the doorknob.

I had a dressing gown on, and you nod. My music started saying Moon Over Miami. The music started, I nodded. That dropped the robe, and he opened the door, and I was naked except I was wearing a flamingo costume. The neck was here. I had pink gloves on. I sang, "Moon over Miami." Then I stood on one leg and I said, "Oh God. I've always wanted to sing in Carnegie Hall."

I don't ask permission. Then I did Carnegie Hall six times. After you've done that and you've done working for drug addicts, I did everything more than I ever dreamed of doing, and it was time. I had freelanced for 25 years, and I'm getting older. It's time to go back to Miami. I always remember Miami being very cheap to live here. That's a good question. That's why I'm back. Then this is the best thing to ever happen to me, working in the garden.

**Interviewer:** What's your typical day like?

**Cull:** Well, I give a lot of tours to explain the garden. I run the gift shop. I do the buying and run the gift shop. I'm stuck here in Paradise. If you need me, I'll be at the beach.

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