



Interview with “Jeff” Donnelly

Kathy: Alright. It's January 25th, 2016. We are interviewing Jeff Donnelly about the history of Miami Beach and this is Kathy Hersh speaking and this is part of the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs project.

You first came here in the 80's I understand.

Jeff: Right. Nancy and I moved to the Miami area in 1984 and we moved to Miami Beach in 1986. What happened was that Seth Gordon -- who is still around and still has his public relations firm here -- appeared at the university where we both were at St. Thomas University and it was a forum on casino gambling. He was opposed to casino gambling and he said, "Miami Beach doesn't need casino gambling. What they really ought to do is work on developing what they have going on South Beach and this was 1985 maybe and so we said “hmmm let's go see what he's talking about”.

We drove over here and -- actually a colleague of ours from St. Thomas came with us, who had come to South Beach as a child -- and so he showed us the things that he knew about and then I just looked around and I said these people have no idea what they have here. And shortly after that we came over again and we went to one building and the manager said you don't belong here, we said fine.

We kept moving and we were about to drive north on Collins Avenue and we saw a sign on the building of 100 Lincoln Road and that said "apartment for rent." So we went in. It's 100 Lincoln Road which is this huge footing for a bridge to Bimini, basically, and we went in and they had this gigantic chandelier in the middle of the lobby and Nancy said, "I don't know about this place," but I said, "Lets keep going." So we went to the office and said we see that you have apartments for rent. Do you have any two bedrooms? Because at that point, Nancy's daughter Victoria was in college and would need a place to stay if she came to Miami Beach.

We go up the 11th floor and we are heading down the corridor at 100 Lincoln Road which must be 200 yards long and so I said, "We're walking towards the water," and we opened the door and all we could see was blue -- the blue of the water, the blue of the sky -- and I hadn't even brought a checkbook, which you needed in those days to make a transaction.

They actually, believe it or not, offered us two months free rent and a year's free parking for two cars in the building as an incentive to moving into an ocean front apartment at 100 Lincoln Road. My original conviction about Miami Beach was just reinforced. These people have absolutely no idea of the value of what they have. None.

We said we wanted to come back at night to make sure that... Of course we heard terrible things about South Beach and we wanted to come back and make sure that it would be safe for Victoria and it was. She was living in Greenwich Village, she was going to school at NYU and I said this is not going to bother her.

So we moved from Miami Lakes over to Miami Beach and that was the summer of '86. We were both at St. Thomas University; we both changed positions at the end of that school year and I started at Miami Country Day and Nancy started at the Bass Museum of Art.

What came about then was -- I had done walking tours in New York City when I taught at both at NYU and at Florida as part of the academic program that we had. I was always interested in walking tours. I just liked to do them myself so I saw somewhere -- and I don't remember where -- that there was a walking tour for the Miami Design Preservation League on a Saturday morning and I went. Richard Hoberman at that point was the only tour guide that Miami Design and Preservation League had which meant that he had to show up every Saturday at 10:30 in order to fulfill what was being advertised.

So I went and at the end of it I said, "Would you like some help doing these tours?" And he just said, "Of course." You know, he was very happy with that idea. So I went around with him a couple of

more times and I started offering the tours. That would have been some time in the spring of 1988. Although, even though I'm an historian I don't have an idea of what the exact date was but I figured it out. It has to be sometime in the spring of 1988.

So I started giving the tours. Randall Robinson joined Richard and I maybe in the next year. Then beginning in 1990 we began what we called Tour School and now it's called the Art Deco + MiMo Tour Guide Academy and that offers training for tour guides twice a year.

Kathy: Do you get a fair amount of people coming?

Jeff: Yes. We usually get somewhere between 12 and 15. Not atypical for adult education a certain percentage don't show up the second week and then of those who complete the full program, about one third actually will end up offering tours. So every one of those programs gets maybe three to four to five people who offer tours. Now, their lives change, they move away, whatever, which means that we have to keep replenishing our tour guide core and then in addition to that we of course have to meet the ever expanding program that the league has. We now offer a walking tour every day of the week, plus private tours for groups and so on. The demand on the guides is substantially more.

Kathy: Is it volunteer?

Jeff: It's all volunteer.

Kathy: That's amazing that you can keep that many people in.

Jeff: Well it's been wonderful for us. We've gone through periods... When the number of tours was expanding, it really put some stress on the volunteers. Particularly the tours during the week. Those people who had been used to Saturday and Sunday and then a Thursday evening tour were not available during the week because many of them -- like myself -- had a full time position somewhere and you just were not available. So it meant recruiting people who were snowbirds, retired folks or people whose schedule -- maybe they worked at night or something -- and so it meant going out to a different group of people. That transition was not easy but we've

made it and we can now supply two guides, which are necessary, particularly in-season. We can supply two guides for those; we now have eight scheduled tours a week. Seven at 10:30 in the morning and then one at 6:30 on Thursday evening.

The program continues; the program introduces truly hundreds of people to the Miami Beach Architectural District and to the Art Deco of our district and to the work of Leonard Horowitz and Barbara Capitman in establishing both the League and the District.

What we say is that we have three learning objectives, if I can be pedagogical about it.

Kathy: Please.

Jeff: We want to tell the story of the Miami Design Preservation League and our efforts and then we want to tell the story of their efforts to preserve design. Then we wanna tell the story of the designs, which is the second story. Then the third story is the history of Miami Beach which gives context to the first two stories. That's what we do. We tell the story of Miami Beach and its work in preserving the designs here; we tell the story of the designs and we tell the story and the history of Miami beach. We use the buildings to tell those stories. And beyond the buildings the streets gape and the way in which the buildings all work together to create a visual image that reflects a reality of the 20's the 30's and went into the 40's that we can hope bring people and show them a relic of that -- a source -- this is to use that kind of word-- that they can see and participate in some way in those times and the life of those people and their ideals and what they were interested in and how they saw their world.

That's what we do.

Kathy: What's the demographic of people who take the tours?

Jeff: It varies. The last tour I gave was last Thursday and there were two people from Scotland there were two people from Great Britain there were four from Chicago there was one from Toronto. There was somebody from a county that we don't usually get and I'm blanking on it for a moment. But generally speaking about half will be

international tourists on any given day. That could change. Sometimes we would have none from international tourism. They tend to be people who are probably over forty. They sometimes bring along younger people and we as tour guides try to engage the younger people as well as the more mature folks. We have a pretty diverse group of people as far as background and cultural background is concerned.

Kathy: What about socioeconomic?

Jeff: I would assume that most of the people can afford to travel to Miami Beach. We would get people not of that higher socioeconomic from our school programs. We've done programs with South Point Elementary; we've done programs with other schools around Miami-Dade County and with their teachers. That way we're reaching deeper and broader, taller, socioeconomic profile. We're talking about people who basically can afford to come and have the leisure and the time and the time to come.

Kathy: Is there a typical reaction?

Jeff: I think in some ways more interesting what their interests are. In the beginning when I first started doing the tours in 1988, the overwhelming majority of the people were preservationists. They had heard about this preservation district and they wanted to come and see this preservation district and they wanted to know what was it about the city of Miami Beach doing to preserve the district. They were frequently very knowledgeable about the national standards for historic preservation and so they were preservationists.

Then very quickly, about in 1990, '91, after the impact not only of Miami Vice but also of the fashion photography industry. We began getting what Andrés Duany has called "people of the eye." We were getting artists; we were getting designers; we were getting architects; we were getting people who were interested in what the buildings look like and they were less interested -- although they were interested -- they were less interested in how do you preserve these buildings? They just took for granted that they were going to be preserved. Because by 1991, '92 and by 1992 the city of Miami Beach actually had put into place local protection for the entirety of

the Miami Beach architectural district.

So we could tell them that and that this district is genuinely protected, not only by designation by the national government but also the local ordinance put into place a process that will require public decision about demolition, about additions and so on. So that was a change.

Now I think we have people for whom the Art Deco tour is on their check-off list, or their concierge at their hotel says you've gotta go on the Art Deco tour or whatever. So their interest and the knowledge that they bring is of a different level than the people who used to come-- not that we don't always still get them in the group.

I tell the guides when we're talking about training and so on, "Listen to the first couple of questions and you'll hear what you've got." Whether they're people who are interested in preservation, whether they're interested in design, including the history of the designs, or are they just really there because this is what they do if they come to South Beach and then do your tour to them. I never tell the tourist that the first three people get to tell what the tour is going to be.

Kathy: [laughs]

Jeff: Which is really one of the reasons why having amateurs, if you like - - volunteers -- is because the amateurs are more professional than others because they have a profession. They are architects; they are historians, so on, designers, etc. So they bring the strength of their background and they can in fact respond to that kind of distinction among the people who are on the tour and their interests, which you couldn't get if you were paying people and giving them a script to go by.

Kathy: What interested in anybody with an architectural background who is a tour guide --

Jeff: Yep.

Kathy: -- Who would that be? Do you have anyone at the moment who fits the bill on that?

Jeff: Well, Steve Pynes is one and he doesn't do as many tours lately.

Kathy: Steve Pynes. OK.

Jeff: He's the chair of the league.

Kathy: OK.

Jeff: OK. He has done tours; he's an architect. As you asked that question, I'd have to look at the list. Lourdes Solera -- I'm thinking of some people in the past who have been so. When I finished a tour somebody asked me on Thursday, "Are you an architect?" and I say, "No." I'm not an architect; I know a lot of architects and I'm an historian but... No, I can't think of anybody right off the top of my head.

Kathy: OK. I'm just thinking of --

Jeff: Yeah.

Kathy: -- future reference.

Jeff: Yes. Absolutely. You know, when I get the list I may pull it.

Kathy: OK. Let's talk a little bit about the dedication of the Barbara Capitman Memorial --

Jeff: Right.

Kathy: -- that we saw last weekend. Was that a significant event in your view?

Jeff: Yes. I think, first off, the existence of the memorial is a significant event. Saturday's event was a lot of fun and people who haven't seen one another for 20, 30 years got to do that. Of course that kind of event is always very pleasant and fun and memorable as a result.

But the role of Barbara Capitman in the recognition of the national register district, the creation of Miami Design Preservation League

and just as important in some ways, although not recognized here very often, the international Art Deco societies. They exist all over the world now. Some of them are in existence because of her. Others were coming along anyhow because she was catching a wave of interest in Art Deco design and architecture when she came to Miami Beach in '76 and inventoried the district and so on. She was catching a level of interest that had really started with the publication of Bevis Hillier's book in 1968.

Art Deco for her was probably more important than preservation in some ways. What was also very important for her was the preservation of a community and she and John Capitman -- her son, John -- are quoted as saying, "Maybe we can use these lovely buildings to save the people who live in them."

This has been realized only in this neighborhood -- in the Flamingo neighborhood. Other places, the people who lived in those hotels or even who visited those hotels in the wintertime in the 80's, they're -- first off, they would be passing on naturally anyhow -- but they no longer are in those hotels.

Kathy: They got moved out.

Jeff: They got moved out. Or they decided to go elsewhere or whatever. There are still people living in this neighborhood who were here then. If they owned property in 1990 because they've seen tremendous increase in value. If they were renters they were, generally speaking, forced out. The other thing that people don't understand I think about the district is that the people actually on whom the gentrification of the district worked the most stress were not the older Jewish folks who were quite literally passing on in the 70's and in the 80's. It was the young Hispanic families who had moved in to here in the late 70's and in the early 80's. And they, generally speaking -- unless they owned, or unless as our neighbors immediately next door -- are the grandchildren of people who owned. They're not here anymore.

Kathy: Couldn't afford to be here now.

Jeff: No. A lot of people couldn't afford to be here now who are here if

they were coming in and they were buying at this time or whatever.

Kathy: Do you feel that the preservation of the area has been secured for the future?

Jeff: No. Preservation is never secured. We can create a culture; we can create a political community; we can create a basis historic, basis for the preservation of anything. But no, any of these -- these are ordinances. You can overturn an ordinance. All it will take in the case of preservation ordinances for the most part it would take five votes out of seven people out of Miami Beach commission to do that. Also, unlike the late 80's and the early 90's when -- as I said -- nobody wanted, well, the people who owned these properties didn't understand who would want to move here or live here. They were desperate; they were giving people --

Kathy: Good deals.

Jeff: -- two months free rent in order to move in. Now the economics are just the reverse. The opposition to preservation now is much more effective, much better funded, much more sophisticated than it was in the late 80's and the early 90's when we won all of that series of victories that created the Art Deco district that we know today.

We've had great difficulties in Bay Harbor Islands; we've had difficulties in Surfside; we had difficulties in Little Havana which is ongoing right now. Preservation is not an easy sell when in fact the value of the land below the buildings is higher than the value of the buildings themselves. That's a really difficult sell to somebody who is primarily motivated by an increase in value.

Kathy: Even private residential homeowners.

Jeff: Especially private residential homeowners. We -- the Miami Design Preservation League -- took a chance, December of 2013, when we tried to get the home at 41 Star Island designated. After the person who bought --

Kathy: Explain that home for future reference.

Jeff: The home at 41 Star Island was probably the most significant structure on the island because of its history, of its ownership and its position facing south and east, immediately facing the public right of way on the causeway. There were no protections in place. None. There was no designation; there was no historic designation. None. The person who bought the property from a family that had owned it for some time -- he originally said he was interested in preserving it and apparently was not and came to the city with a proposal to demolish the structure. That's what the law permitted him to do.

We were working on a very steep slope to try and change that situation. We tried to work with the owner. That turned out not to be possible. Then we went public and we tried to get... The historic preservation board agreed with us and urged the designation of that property and the planning board advised the city commission not to do it and the city commission voted against it.

Kathy: Against preservation?

Jeff: Against designation.

Kathy: Designation.

Jeff: Against designation.

But that action of ours raised consciousness among single-family home owners all around the beach and I forget the exact number but more than half of the single family homes in Miami Beach were built before 1966. So the majority of the structures in Miami Beach could be designated by national standards. In fact William Carey who was at that point the head of the historic preservation office in the city of Miami Beach and the Assistant Director of Planning Department said that 41 Star Island could become not just a single designation by the city of Miami Beach, but could be a national register site in and of itself. It was that significant. It involved people who were part of the original development of Star Island. It involved relationships with Carl Fisher; it involved relationships with the creation of Star Island itself. It was a very significant building not only architecturally but also historically.

We've had a series of events since then trying to find ways to preserve the historic single family homes, not so much by designation which didn't seem to have legs politically, but to pass laws that would discourage the maximizing of the value of the land. In other words, somebody would come in and in order to justify the price they paid for the land they would want to demolish the smaller historic building and build a bigger structure. If the size of the next structure were limited then their incentive to demolish would be reduced and they might be persuaded -- as people at 27 Star Island were persuaded -- to keep the historic home and build a new home next to it.

Kathy: So, preservation through zoning.

Jeff: Yes. Preservation as far as municipal terms is zoning. It's a form of zoning. It's a way of regulating land use. That's what it's about. It's no different than any other kind of zoning. It doesn't take rights away that are not taken away by any other kind of zoning.

You and I had a discussion that in this neighborhood, transient rentals are not permitted. That's zoning. It's a way of regulating the use of this land. It's passed by ordinance. It can be changed if somebody is in a mood to change it and it's supposed to do what? It's supposed to foster more for the common good.

Kathy: Residential stability.

Jeff: Residential stability in that case. I'm absolutely the last person to ever say that historic preservation is a threat to my personal wealth. My family considers me a noncombatant in the economic struggle and they're correct. They are all -- including our children -- are all far exceeding us in personal wealth and entrepreneurial ambition and everything else but we have done better than many of them. Just by sitting here and working hard to have this district created. This apartment in which we are sitting was purchased for \$21,000 in 1990. The current valuation by Miami-Dade county property appraiser I believe is well over 150,000. No one can argue with us that historic preservation reduces the value of properties and this isn't even an historic property. It's surrounded by historic properties and that's what's giving it its value.

Kathy: It's the ambiance.

Jeff: Yeah. Without this... City of New York once had an ocean front resort that was open to the public, yes, but it was really dominated by very wealthy people. It was Coney Island. Eventually -- first off, the water quality declined -- but the place fell apart. When I was a child, Coney Island was a place that everybody went to, to hang out and to ride the rides and go to the beach. Have a million people on the sand when I was growing up as a child. By the time I was a young adult, Coney Island had collapsed. Nobody went there any more. It was crime-ridden and so forth and so on. That's what would have happened here. It was on it's way. It was on it's way down. It truly was and then it changed.

Kathy: It changed. That had a lot to do with one woman's vision.

Jeff: Absolutely.

Kathy: Which is amazing.

Jeff: It is. I think it's important to say that the whole of the process has been an ensemble performance. There are many, many people who contributed to both the recognition of the district, to the education of the world about the district, to its redevelopment, to what they call the "Deco developers" and so on. Many people contributed to this but without Barbara Capitman it's my argument that none of those people -- including me -- would have done what we have done to make this district economic success. A place where people like us can still live. What's happening in the Flamingo Park neighborhood is not what's happening in Surfside or Bay Harbor Islands. In Bay Harbor Islands, what's happening there now is that condominiums are basically being bought out by people, and then they are going to tear them down and create much larger structures. That might have happened here, but also what also might have happened here is the Coney Island effect. Coney Island is now coming back but it took 70 years.

Kathy: Well it was so close to being leveled when Barbara first hitched her wagon and got people on the bandwagon.

Jeff: Yes. Right. The proposal for south of 5th Street did -- it was not only leveled but dig canals through it and so on. It was a different vision for what could create a viable community. What she brought to it I think was first off, she was a person of the eye and she understood what would appeal to people of the eye but also she really did understand. She was not so much an investor herself but she understood what investors needed in order to create an economically successful neighborhood out of this architectural district. That was what she brought to the process. She understood what developers needed and others followed and were able to attract those developers who had the same reaction that I did -- truly a non-entrepreneurial person.

It was so clear to me. I looked out that door and window. Here I was, looking at the Atlantic Ocean. I was looking at Ocean Drive and this guy is telling me that he will give us two months free rent to move in here. It was hard for me to keep a straight face. I mean, what are you talking about?

But we said yes. Did you see "The Big Short" --

Kathy: And you went home and got your checkbook.

Jeff: Yeah, checkbook.

Kathy: [laughs]

Jeff: It was just...

Kathy: Yeah. We saw "The Big Short."

Jeff: Yes. My reaction was the same as some of the people in "The Big Short." I mean, you guys don't understand what... The thing is they do. They understand it in a way. I mean these are big business people. Some of them are still around. Some of them are very successful and on and on. These are people who say that they understand the world of business but they didn't. They really didn't.

Kathy: It's a kind of myopia when something's right under your nose, isn't

it?

Jeff: I guess. Yes. What's under my nose? I spent my whole childhood in New York City being taken to Radio City Music Hall and to Rockefeller Center because my mother's doctor was nearby and I had lunch at Schrafft's just like every other kid like me.

Did I recognize the architecture that I was surrounded by? No, I did not. Did I think it -- I didn't even think about it, let alone did I think it had any value. When Nancy and I went to the Art Deco world congress in New York in 2005 -- "Wow, this is my city." I never knew all this stuff was here but that's part of the education that working here provided.

Kathy: Thank you very much, Carl.

Male Voice: I was just thinking. I would like your historian's perspective on this agglomeration of architecture that happened here. I don't want the detail but some of the overview of, how come this strip of sand got this and how did this, in that time frame -- how did that happen to make this important, if the architecture is the importance. How did that happen over time?

Kathy: Kind of the uniqueness of it.

Jeff: One of the things -- I have an article too that I could give to you. Part of it is the -- in my view -- in many ways the New Deal created what we have here. It was a perfect bringing together of several different forces. First of all, the people who had been without a vacation in the 1920's because of the New Deal, 40% of industrial workers in the United States had a paid vacation and some of them could be attracted to come here in the wintertime.

Secondly, there was that international exposition in 1925 in Paris. They'd introduced modern -- what they'd call modern architecture -- to the world and it was available to use. Natural forces, the hurricane had knocked down a lot of buildings in 1926 and the land was very cheap. People who had accumulated money during the late 20's and the 30's who held on to it though the depression had a place to invest. Their clientele were people who were people who

were looking to the future. People newly rich in a way the world had never seen before is the way Polly Redford describes that. They wanted modern and up to date everything -- trains, cars, buildings, etc., toasters, everything -- had to be modern and up to date. It's the accumulation of those forces; no one person or faction or people can say we did it all, many things that were happening all at the same time. There were other factors, almost sure -- the problem is the evidence is very difficult to obtain -- but it's almost sure that some of the investment here after 1933 came from people who had been invested in the illegal liquor trade. They had no more business, or they go into the legal liquor trade but it's not nearly as... They have this money they need to go to work and so the people who had been here in the 1920's are quoted as saying that what we have in the Art Deco district is gangster architecture.

So that's a factor. It's always hard to unpack things. The classic thing is poor Al Capone who by the time he gets to Miami Beach after he's in prison and so forth is such a sick man he's not doing anything. But he's supposed to be responsible for everything here. No. There were plenty of other criminals capable of doing whatever it was what he was going to do. He was here; he lived here; he owned a place on Palm Island, but not every single gambling outfit was part of his. There were other people as well.

Kathy: Like Meyer Lansky.

Jeff: Like Meyer Lansky. Everybody was here, apparently. It's a lot of fun to read the Kefauver Committee investigation on Miami Beach because the only thing that they testified to most of the time is their address. They're probably telling the truth about that. Almost everything else you have no idea. First off, they frequently say, "I decline to answer on the grounds that it might tend to incriminate me." But even if they're speaking, you have no idea whether it's clear or not. They're here; they're everywhere. I think the evidence is pretty good that they just came here because it was sunny and they wanted to go fishing and they wanted to enjoy themselves and --

Kathy: Is it true they didn't do any business.

Jeff: No that's not true. But they also allowed the S&G Syndicate to putter along without interfering and the S&G Syndicate actually closed down when the people from Chicago tried to capture the wire. They just said we're not gonna take any bets as long as we don't know -- we can't guarantee that the wire is... The wire is the telegraphed information about the results of a race. If you can hold the wire you know who won first before everybody else and so on. "The Sting" is the perfect movie cinematic version of that. The S&G syndicate actually held betting until they were sure that the wire was going to continue to be an honest wire. But they were cheek by jowl with the other folks.

Kathy: We've been trying to get people with connections to that era, either descendants or to talk. It's amazing how people still wont talk about it.

Jeff: No. The only way that I've ever been able to do anything along that line is with the -- and I can't say who it is -- there's somebody who will tell me if I'm right. He will not give me any new information.

Kathy: What's he blink his eye or something? [laughs]

Jeff: No. He'll say, "You got that one." Yeah, he was here; yeah I knew him. But he wont tell me that without me coming to him. I say you know Joe Adonis, was he here? "Oh yeah, he was here." No. I don't say was Joe Adonis here. What I say is, I read in the crime report or in the Kefauver Committee that Joe Adonis was here. "Oh, yeah, that's right." And then...

Kathy: That gives you a second source.

Jeff: Yeah. He'll confirm. You know, it's the classic kind of thing. So he can always say to whomever, "I didn't tell him. Somebody else told him. I didn't tell him." That's the only way I've ever been able to... actually I know some other people but they will not talk about it. That's all. Although I have to say one of those things that you never think is gonna happen to you is -- on this very phone there was a message left, and the message went like this. "Hello Jeff, this is Meyer Lansky. I'd like to talk with you. It was Meyer Lansky three who wanted to talk. He's not a good source about those things

because he was so young. He was so young in the times that we're talking about. He's a good source about other things but he's not a good source about that one. And he's not my confirming source.

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