

Dona Zemo Interview

Kathy Hersh: This is March 3rd, 2017. We are interviewing Dona Zemo for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. My name is Kathy Hersh. So Dona, you started coming as a child and you have memories from when you very small.

Dona Zemo: Very young.

Kathy: Tell us about those.

Dona Zemo: Well, my first visit was 1947. I was three years old, and of course I don't remember all the details back then, but I do remember my first palm tree. One asked me, "How do you remember coming to Miami Beach?" I said, "Because of the palm trees." As I got older and school age I would come down here with my parents every year for three months, from January to March/early April, and I would go back and I would go into school and draw these trees. I became the palm tree expert. My friends from New York, they looked at this tree and said, "What is this tree?" We were in first grade. This was exotic to them, as it was to me. That's how I remember Miami as a magical, beautiful, colorful, blue skies, compared to the New York gray winters.

Kathy: So you escaped those?

Dona Zemo: Yes. Well, part of the time, right after New Year's.

Kathy: So it sounds like it left an indelible impression in your mind if you're drawing palm trees as a little girl.

Dona Zemo: Yes, it did.

Kathy: So what was it like coming down and going to school here for that time? How were treated by the other children? What was that like?

Dona Zemo: Well, I was fortunate enough to have cousins, and when you have cousins who are very popular and very well-known in school as a young child, they introduce you to everyone. So you come in as the princess from New York in a way, so I was treated very well. I had a very nice time going to school here. It was a little difficult in the learning process, because in the north I think they were more progressive. In the south they were a little bit more relaxed. First, second, third grade hurt my education a little bit with learning, and reading, and writing, but my parents had tutors for my sister and I was well.

It was a little difficult as far as the learning process, as far as being accepted it was fantastic. Again, we were the cousins of very popular young girls in school. My sister was a few years older than I and her best cousin, who was Ann, was the same age as her. I had two great cousins here that lived here. One was a year older and one was a year and a half, so we were all going to school together. It was a fun time.

However, I learned about the colored and white scene, which I knew nothing about because my parents were never racist. I didn't understand about colored and white and my mom had to explain that to me. There were colored, fat ones, white, so I learned about black and white at an early age through coming to Miami and all of that.

I always loved coming here. It was just a magical place, and I loved the ocean, and I fell in love with Ocean Drive back then. The beauty of Ocean Drive in the early '50s when we would go to the beach, and my parents would go out in the evening in their convertibles, we would watch everyone so glamorously leaving the hotel rooms and that stuck in my mind's eye.

Over the years as I grew up and we moved further north I always came back to South Beach. I watched the decay of South Beach and the start of the Fontainebleau era as well, in the 1950s. When that happened...When the Fontainebleau opened it was such a spectacular hotel compared to the art deco hotels.

The rooms were larger. Ben Novak, the developer, did such an incredible thing because he put restaurants, shops, cabanas, the rooms were larger, it had air conditioning, the rooms were air conditioned, so people...He tried to make one hotel where everyone would stay. It was like the first, I guess, all purpose hotel.

Everyone of course wanted to stay in that type of hotel, so the South Beach area known as Ocean Drive first through fifteenth started to go down. The beauty of it is it was saved by the seniors. Most of them were from New York. They were the loveliest people. They retired here. I met a lot of them when I moved to Miami in the early '80s. They moved here and they rented rooms. They had a beautiful oceanfront room with meals, with shows. Of course there were no restaurants. The restaurants were not in the hotels at the time.

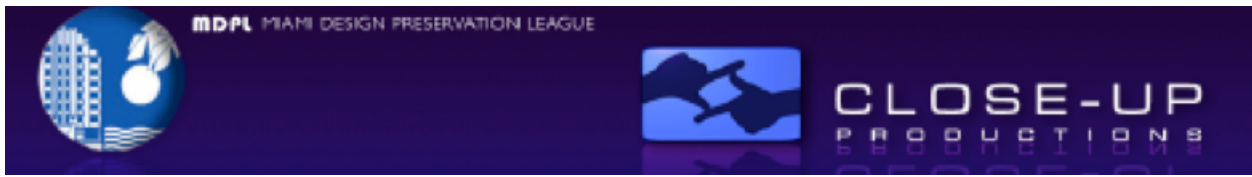
They had card rooms and they had auditoriums for entertainment. They would rent for \$250. When I arrived it was \$250 to \$300 a month to live in oceanfront hotels. For the 20 years when they were busy building the north, the Eden Roc and all of the hotels after that, [phonetic][06:18] the Giraud, they kept that area alive until the late '70s.

When the developers were finished with the north they started their eyes on the south. In steps the angel, Barbara Capitan, she was meant to come here. You hear the saying, "Right time, right place?" Well, that was Barbara Capitan.

Kathy: Tell us about your first meeting her.

Dona Zemo: Well--

Kathy: Well, let's go back to when you decided to move down here.



Dona Zemo:

OK. No, I decided because of Barbara. I never thought I would be...I loved Miami. I loved Florida, but I was a Connecticut person. I had my children. I raised them. They were just grown and I was just on my own. I was living on an organic farm in West Redding, Connecticut and enjoying myself. A friend of mine was opening up a 1930s cafe in, of all places, Danbury, Connecticut. I don't know if you're familiar Danbury. It's very unusual for Danbury.

She said to me, "You know Dona, you know Miami Beach right?" I said, "Yeah." She goes, "I read something about this art deco district in Miami Beach." This is 1981. I said, "You did?" I said, "OK, I know exactly where you're talking about, because I go visit. Every few years I make a trip down there, but there are senior citizens living there."

At the same time in the Village Voice there was a beautiful story. The New York times had a small article. The Village Voice had this great article about this new vision of Barbara Capitman. I'm not sure exactly if it was about art deco movement, or Barbara Capitman, but it was a story and Barbara's name was in there.

It talked all about the South Beach area. Gilberta says, "Why don't we go for the weekend and we'll buy art deco things for my restaurant." I said, "Sounds like a deal to me." I'm going to step back a few steps. I loved art deco. That was my era of glamour, charm, so I would shop in Manhattan at 40 winks. I went to every vintage store. I dressed art deco. I happened to like art deco.

Kathy:

Do you think that stemmed from the fact of your childhood being spent down here in this milieu?

Dona Zemo:

You know, I never thought about that, but perhaps. Perhaps, because I always had this love for it. So thank you Barbara. You just taught me something that I never realized. But I just fell in love with the old movies, and the glamour, and the sophistication, and the beauty, and the music, jazz age. She said, "Let's go down." She said, "They just renovated this Cardozo Hotel. Let's go spend the weekend." I said, "Let's go."

I made the reservation under my name and it was \$40 a night oceanfront right? We said, "Oh God, oceanfront on Miami Beach." We get to Ocean Drive and we're saying, "Hmm, art deco district. It looks like the hotels haven't changed." I said, "In a few years." Where's the district? I was expecting to see antique stores. You know, the hotels refurbished. Nothing was really done except for the Cardozo.

The Cardozo it turned out, which I didn't know at the time, Andrew Capitman--Barbara's son--owned the property and they had all the seniors living in there at the time. They took 10 rooms in the front, the 10 oceanfront rooms, and they renovated them to the beautiful, historic, pure, way. They took the furniture and they had it restored.

You walked into the room and there was the ocean out the window,

and there was your beautiful art deco furniture. The bed, it was magnificent. I had no idea there was only 10 rooms and the rest were seniors still living there, which I loved the seniors. We checked in and it was \$40 a night, and then we said, "Let's get a bottle of champagne." Well, it took us all of half a day to find a liquor store to buy champagne.

We finally bought champagne because we were going to celebrate we were here. We started around and we couldn't find anything really art deco, except for I knew of Woody Vondracek. I remember reading about Woody, so I knew he was an artist living here. It just so happened he was living in the Cardozo Hotel.

That was number one plus. That was, you know, a very good connection. They had just opened the Cafe Cardozo downstairs. They took the laundry room and made it the most beautiful, which I have photographs I'll show it to you of the original, they made it into a beautiful art deco little cafe. It think it had 26 seats, or 32 seats.

There was that, and then there was a front porch. It was a gathering place. There were a few interesting people at the time. Woody Vondracek was one of them, Jack Rothschild, Lisa Clausner, they were all living in the hotel which I didn't know at time. But I would see these people.

Kathy:

Who were these people?

Dona Zemo:

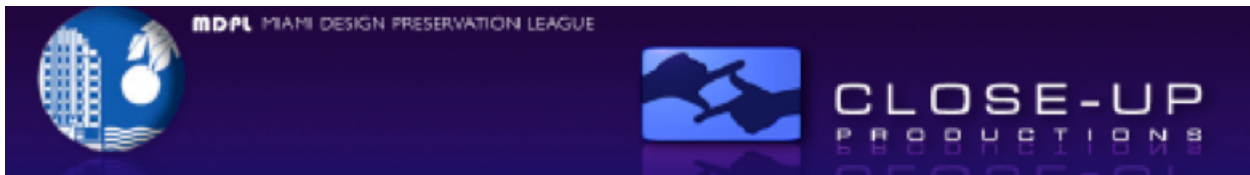
They were people, artists. Lisa was a photographer that found her way here, and she took black white photographs and hand painted them like they did in the '30s and '40s for color. She did beautiful black and white photographs of the palm trees and the hotels, but she would hand paint them into watercolor, so they would look like a color photograph. She took it back to the period.

Woody was, I think he worked for Eastern Airlines before I'm not sure what department, but he was an Eastern Airline employee turned graphic artist. He was the artist that made the very first two posters, the Victor and the Cardozo. Have you ever seen the man with Victor Hotel and the man and woman? Those were his pieces of art.

Woody Vondracek, he lived in the Cardozo. He had lived and had his art studio in the Cardozo. He was the artist that did the first two posters, so I was very interested in buying those posters of course, so I knew he was there.

How I met Barbara, I'm going to go back to I was in the hotel room. We were there not even 24 hours and I had met Woody Vondracek, and I was discussing buying posters for the '30s cafe in Danbury. I did find a place called Definitely Deco. It was owned by Marilyn, and that was in the Washington Storage on the first floor. It was the most fantastic place.

I did meet Lynn Bernstein, which was here several years before me.



She was one of the people on the porch of the Cardozo. That was the only place to go back then. It was like an artist's haven. It was like the perfect place for me, because I loved Greenwich Village and that whole kind of Dorothy Parker era, round table. You sit and chat with all artists and writers. I was like falling in love by the moment.

Then I'm not there, like I said, the phone rings the next morning. It's this woman on the phone with, as you know from your other interviews, she has a very unique voice. She asked for Dona Zemo. I said, "I'm Dona Zemo. How can I help you?" She said she wanted to meet with me in her very unique voice. I said, "Well, who is this?" She said, "My name is Barbara Capitman."

Well I almost died and went to heaven at that moment. I wanted to meet Barbara after hearing about her. I was asking people, "How do I meet Barbara?" I met her that afternoon and she just fascinated me so much with her vision. Again, besides the cafe which was a little room. It wasn't the whole porch. It wasn't the interior. This beautiful little cafe and Definitely Deco, and the hundreds of buildings that were still occupied by seniors. That was the art deco district.

The only way I knew it was through Barbara's vision. She had such a unique vision of what she saw this to happen. She told me about the hotels. I thought I was meeting, like, Eleanor Roosevelt or Margaret Meade of my time. I just found her to be the most fascinating woman.

I became somewhat friendly in the two and a half days I was here, with Barbara. I had a little cocktail party. I gave the cafe some business. I threw a little party for all the people I met before we left town, my friend and I. We found the champagne so we knew where to go. We got more champagne. We invited, there were maybe 10 people. Actually Lisa, and Peter Kasdan, and Felicia, and Andrew Capitman, and Barbara, and Lynn Bernstein, Leonard Horowitz, Woody Vondracek, Charlie Glaser who was living in the hotel, Jack Rothschild, and there were a few other writers here too, but I can't remember their names.

We had a little party and I left. You know, we got on the plane. This is the honest-to-God true story. This is where the fun begins. I'm going back to Connecticut and I'm saying to myself, "Oh God, this is such vision. This woman is amazing." I was like...I raised my children. I was 40 years old. I was a very young mother, so my children were grown. I said, "Mmm. You know I love Redding, but this is very interesting." Never thinking I would ever move to Miami, because I loved Connecticut. 36,000 feet in the there I clicked. I said, "I can do that. I can go back there. I can help them with this renaissance. I can do it. I have background in food. I have background in the arts. I have background in sales."

I mean, even though I was a mother I had my love for art. So I'm saying art is an architectural thing as well. I fell in love with the architect. By the time I got back to Redding, Connecticut from the

airport, about an hour and a half ride to the country. I ran into my cottage, got on the phone and I called Andrew Capitman. I said, "Andrew this is Dona Zemo." I said, "I'm just in love with art deco and the renaissance, and what your mother is trying to do. I want to come back."

He says, "Well, what can you do?" I said, "I don't know, but I can help in the restaurant." I said, "I think I can help because Felicia is the manager and I could maybe help in the back with the vendor." The back scene. I like being the power behind the scene always. I said, "Maybe I can help her with the cafe. She can be the front person. I can be the back person making sure business gets done." I said, "I have a food business. Food and catering so I know that end of it." I said, "I don't know. I'll do whatever."

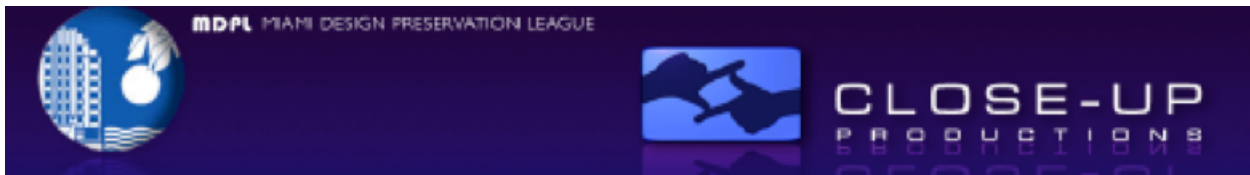
He says, "Well, how about if I give you a room and board and \$150 a week." I said, "Sold." Really, that was the deal. Room, board, and \$150 a week. I said, "When can I come back?" He said, "Do you think you could come back in two weeks?" I said, "I sure can." I had a business at the time. I turned my business over to...I had a food business. It was called Shangri La Foods. I was packaging. Back then remember this wasn't a product yet, but I was selling it to health food stores. All the Korean stores. Humus and baba ganoush.

It was called Shangri La Foods, because I was a health food person I started making it myself and it turned into a cottage industry, so I had that going. I sold it to the people that had Sunflower Sandwiches. Well, first I turned it over for three months to them. They would work all night making sandwiches, bring them to the health food stores. I would go into the kitchen during the day and work all day making my humus, so we shared a commercial kitchen.

I called them immediately. I said, "Would you take over my business. I still have my crew, the staff." I said, "Just take it over. I'm going to Miami for three months just to help this woman Barbara and her son." Three month deal. They said, "Sure." You know, because they knew my business. We were good friends and shared each other's comments about business.

In two weeks I came back and I checked into a room at the Victor Hotel. The very top floor. My mother and father thought I was completely insane to live in a hotel room. My mother's words were, "Dona, I heard people go from rags to riches, but I've never heard anyone go from riches to rags."

I said, "Well mom, this is a special project and I'm here for the project." They were devastated, because at that time South Beach wasn't really what it is today, or didn't have a good name. You said the words South Beach and you were talking...Either people saw it as foolish old senior citizens living here, or it just started to get so decayed that it started crime was happening. It was a mixture of everything was starting to happen.



Kathy: That was the Mariel period too.

Dona Zemo: Yeah. Well, it was just before, or around the same period. There was a lot of action here, but it wasn't good action with the exception of the movement which Barbara had. I started at the cafe working with Felicia. Within three months I became the manager of the cafe. I decided to stay on for another three months.

At that time I was living with a friend of mine, Jane. I think you know Saul Gross, his wife and I were roommates in Connecticut. I called Jane and I said, "Jane, I'm going to stay another three months." She says, "You are? Well, if it's that good I'm coming to visit." She was never in Florida. Well, she went to Key West, but never in Miami. She came down and I had a group of people waiting for her at the cafe.

Back then the sound of a car, you could hear it from almost on first street. On fifth street you could hear it, it was so quiet. No cars. No traffic. No music. Nothing. She arrives and she fell in love with it too. She goes back and another three months happens. It's six months now and I'm here. I called Jane and I say, "Jane, I'm going to stay for a while. We're still partners in the cottage, but I'm staying." She says, "Well, if you're staying do you think you can work with me finding a job and everything?"

I got in touch with Mark Schantz and Andrew Capitman, who were partners. I don't know if you know of Mark Schantz? Mark was Andrew's partner. Andrew was the marketing genius and Mark, at the time, was the financial person who found the funding to buy the seven hotels back then. I called them and I said, "You know, I have a very good friend. She's very business savvy." Which she was. She's corporate savvy. She'd be a great person to have on board to help in the financial end of it. Anyway, she wants to move here too.

They said, "Yeah, you know we could put her in with Mark. Mark can use help in the financial area." Jane D., at the time her name was Jane D. Gross, moves down. We shut down the cottage and we just let it be and she moved down and she moved into the Victor Hotel. Everyone that moved here moved to the Victor at the time. You can imagine the fun that was going at the Victor Hotel. There was a lot going on.

After a year I decided to permanently move here and purged everything in Connecticut, like now and I purged and moved here permanently.

Kathy: What year was that?

Dona Zemo: 1982. Worked very closely with the art deco movement, with Miami Design Preservation League, with Andrew as mentor, so was Barbara. Andrew taught me a lot about marketing. He was a marketing genius. He really was. He knew how to promote this area. Barbara was as well. They started bringing people in. I ran the restaurant for about a year. I was manager.

I believe I did so well bringing people to it, gathering people there, that Andrew asked me if I would join him in the sales and marketing department. I really had a hard time leaving the cafe. I was like the queen of Ocean Drive and it was fun, you know? I would greet people and I was running the show.

Kathy: What kinds of people? Were they local or were people starting come from outside?

Dona Zemo: Well, people were starting to come in. It was strange because...It was beautiful not strange, it was beautiful because a lot of people that came fell in love with it like I did, and then within a month they would be living here as well.

It was people that were reading about it. I'm going to say mostly artists, architects, writers, journalists, film people started, that was very early. Modeling, you know the model industry, the fashion industry.

Kathy: Miami Vice, which you had a role in.

Dona Zemo: Miami Vice, yeah. I remember when I watched Scarface being filmed. In fact I'm in one of the scenes in the very background without knowing it. I said, "Oh my God, there I am sitting on the porch of the Cafe Cardozo. I with an Italian artist who at that time was shooting Barbara Bach, who is Ringo Starr's wife, the model. She was doing the cover story for Time Magazine I believe it was Time. It was one of the top magazines. I forget if it was Time Magazine.

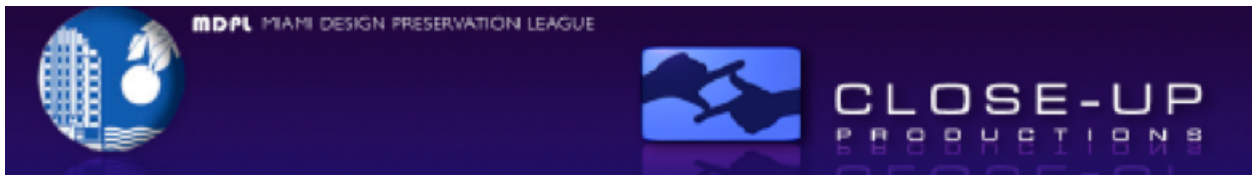
He was here filming Barbara at the Carlisle. We were taking a break and we were discussing the film. Before I knew it there was Al Pacino in the car when they were going to meet the Colombians. I didn't know the scene at the time until I saw it in the movie.

I was here for that, and then I was here in the very beginning of Miami Vice, and that has another story.

Kathy: Before we go into that, I want to get clear about...You said Andrew Capitman was a marketing genius, but you're the one who came up with Sobe, which became the name. How did that happen?

Dona Zemo: Well, OK. How did that happen? At that time I was walking. OK, Ocean Drive, the beach in front of the hotel at that time was a very flat beach. It was always empty. There was never anyone there. I would do my daily walk along the seashore. I would look back at the beautiful architectural beauty. It was so beautiful in the morning seeing all the hotels.

I thought to myself, "You know South Beach is such a beautiful place." The name, back then not like it is today, but South Beach had such a bad name. If you said South Beach people would go, "Ugh, how could you...You know. It's dangerous. It's drugs. It's seniors. It's this. It's



that." I said, "What can we do to change the image?" So I said we have to come up with a new name. As I'm walking I'm thinking.

The next day I went walking with the vice president of Royale Group, Jay Cugopian, and he was walking along the seashore with me and I said, "You know Jay, I have to ask you something. I was thinking last night about the name South Beach." This was the man who bought the hotels from the Capitman family, their organization. I said, "I came up with this word Sobe, S-O-B-E, for South Beach." He says, "Oh, that sounds great. I like it."

He liked it right away. He says, "How did you get the name?" I said, "Well, you know, I'm from New York. I always frequent Greenwich Village. I remember the transition of Soho, South of Houston, or Houston, however you want to say it. I said I remember they had to give it a name because it was all torn down, worn down, old funky warehouses.

When the artists started going because the Village was becoming too expensive, they were switching over to south of Houston, or Houston, and they came up with the name Soho and that kind of made it a trendy name and gave it a character. I said, "What do you think of Sobe?" He said, "I love it." I said, "Can I have the Leslie Hotel, the lobby of the hotel, to open up a coffee shop so I can put Sobe Cafe in neon lights in the window, so we can start to coin it Sobe?" He says, "Absolutely."

That's why I was walking with him. I had the concept already I just had to get his permission to get that space. He said, "Yes." I made a neon light, "Sobe Cafe," and we put it in the window. Then I went a little further, I went to a few friends, Jeff Abbaticchio, and Jane Gross, Jane D., at the time, and Bill Miller had moved here from New York. He was a very big Broadway publicist. He transferred from Manhattan to Miami for a year, took some time off. We had a meeting. I said, "Why don't we start a newspaper called The Sobe News?"

We started The Sobe News. Woody Vondracek designed the logo. I still have it, I'll show it to you later, in my memoirs, my collectibles. I said, "Let's start the newspaper so we can get the word out there." It was great fun. It didn't last long of course, because back then there were not many advertisers. We had a good six to eight month run. It came out every two weeks.

I went to Howard Salis, may he rest in peace, who at that time was the publisher of Entertainment News and Views. I went to him and asked him if we could do an insert, if he would publish it for us. We would do the editorial and he would do the insert in his newspaper and get it around for us. He agreed to it. The Sobe News was established, so the name started getting out there.

I remember walking on Ocean Drive when the new cafe first opened. It was a thrill because I saw six or seven people having breakfast with

the Sobe news little seven page, eight page, insert in their hand. Our wording was our editorial. We always ended with, "Read Sobe News if you know what's good for you."

It was quite an interesting little paper. That's how the word got out about Sobe. Now Florida, the Florida magazine, did a full page story on what people thought of Sobe, the name Sobe. I remember in 1992, and I have that piece too, that page. Some people thought it was ridiculous. It will never last. It was too corny, and this and that. Here we are in 2017 and Sobe is still used.

In fact there's a new group just started called The Sobe Power Women. That's it.

Kathy: How did Barbara react to that?

Dona Zemo: Well, I don't really remember, but probably not well. She wanted it to be called The Art Deco District, which I was big promoter of. In my travels I used The National Historical Art Deco District, because I did travel in marketing around the world at the time. Andrew and I went to many cities in the United States.

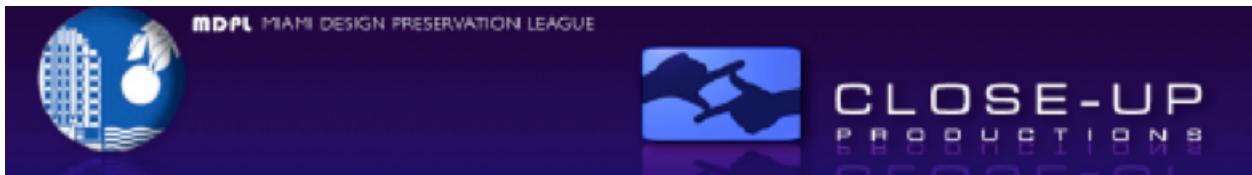
Kathy: How were you received?

Dona Zemo: Well that's a whole story there too. When I first started traveling I would go to travel agents at the time. You know, this was before the internet and travel agents were still in demand. I would walk into a travel agent in White Plains, New York, or Manhattan--because I did seven, eight agents a day for two weeks--with my little package, my little brochures, and they would say, "Miami Beach. We'll never send anyone there. You have to be kidding. It's the worst place we'll ever send anyone."

They would almost boo me out of the office, but I was persistent. Not as persistent as Barbara Capitman, but she taught me about how to be persistent. Every year for three years I would go back. The third year Miami Vice was already on TV. Now I walk in to the same agency that once booed me out and I said, "I'll be back. Remember me." I walked in and they all were in awe of Miami Beach.

They said, "Does Miami Beach really look like the show Miami Vice?" I said, "Yes, that's what I've been trying to tell you. There's something new happening there. There's a whole new trend coming there." That's how Miami Vice really did help Miami. The storyline, that's another story. As far as the visuals, it really brought Miami Beach back. It really put Miami Beach on the map, again. I give that a lot of credit for filming. They shot all along Ocean...Everything the first year was shot in every different hotel on Ocean Drive. Although it was a vet's hospital that was downstairs in the Leslie Hotel, they turned it into a vet's hospital. If it was a nightclub, it was in The Victor. We turned The Victor big auditorium/ballroom into a nightclub. They did.

Kathy: What was your role in that?



Dona Zemo: Well, I was not a location finder, but because I was operating the seven hotels and promoting them...They owned at that time, we had The Cavalier, The Cardozo, The Carlisle, The Oceanfront, The Senator, The Tides, and The Victor Hotel.

Kathy: Those were the ones owned by Andrew Capitman?

Dona Zemo: They were the ones that Andrew acquired. Then at that time, after Andrew and Mark left the scene, the Royale Group from Philadelphia came in and continued with the same group of hotels. They were the first seven hotels. Now the first two hotels, The Cardozo was the first to be partially renovated as I said, 10 rooms I believe in the front. Then the rest the seniors still lived there, because the money. You know, we had to keep the production up.

The first completely renovated property was the Carlisle Hotel. They added The Carlisle Grill, which was designed by Andrew's wife, Margaret Doyle, which was magnificent. It was gorgeous. It was like stepping back into the past. It was done so well.

That was the first official completely renovated and restored hotel on Ocean Drive. It was done by the Art Deco Hotels Limited, owned by Mark and Andrew. It was beautiful. Miami Vice used all the seven properties, because it was easy for them, because there were so many nooks, and crannies, and areas, and rooms. They just concentrated, basically, on those properties. My role was showing Don Johnson, and the producer/directors, different spots. They weren't really location people. I showed Don Johnson had to approve of everything. He worked hands on with Miami Vice.

Kathy: I see, so he had a lot to say?

Dona Zemo: He would come during the day. Oh yeah. I remember taking Don Johnson walking arm in arm with him down Ocean Drive, showing him-

Kathy: Did people recognize him by that time?

Dona Zemo: He directed a few of the shows I believe. He was a director of a few of the shows. Those were the main ones he was involved with. There were the directors, I'm trying to think back.

Kathy: Michael Mann.

Dona Zemo: Basically I was showing a lot of the directors the spots, but I was always walking Miami Vice around showing them different, you know...They wanted to create a nightclub, I showed them a few different spots. I worked hand-in-hand with that. Then of course we had Christo: Surrounded Islands. Andrew brought that into effect.

That was a big thing, because we had 187 rooms rented on seven

properties. Maybe it \$35 a night, but 187 rooms for 12 weeks and the publicity that came from The Surround Islands. That's what I mean, Andrew Capitman was a marketing genius. It was hard getting people south of Lincoln Road back then.

Kathy: Did Andrew approach Christo for the idea?

Dona Zemo: I believe he did.

Kathy: Because that's sort of one of the turning points too, I think, in terms of people starting to look differently at this area, was the Christo--

Dona Zemo: That's the whole purpose of working with Surrounded Islands. He had a hard time, Christo, in the beginning because of the naturalists. It was a beautiful exhibition of taking a few islands in the middle of Biscayne Bay for, I think, two weeks or six weeks, however long it lasted. I know there was a time limit because of the environment.

Meanwhile everyone that worked on the project stayed in the art deco hotels. It was a great, great, time for us. That pushed the art deco hotels into the limelight for sure. Miami Vice, Christo, and then the Broadway show Zev Buffman, do you know Zev Buffman?

Kathy: I know of him.

Dona Zemo: Zev Buffman was the producer of Private Lives with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burn in New York. Zev Buffman rented out The Theater of Performing Arts at the time was called...Now it's the Jackie Gleason. Now it's the Philmore South. It was called The Theater of Performing Arts. Zev brought Broadway series to Miami Beach.

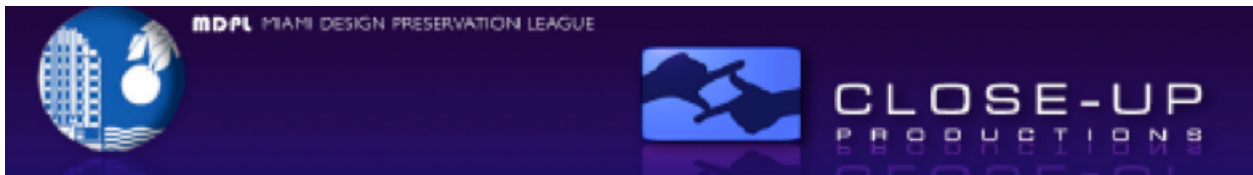
All the people that came in the traveling troupe...You know, they would travel from city to city doing Private Lives, or Sugar Babies, or Your Arms Are Too Short to Box With God, they would stay in The Delano even though it wasn't renovated, The Delano or the Ritz Hotel. Not the Ritz-Carlton, but the Ritz. All the hotels right near the theater. They would never go south of Lincoln Road.

I decided, "How do I get the performers to stay in the art deco hotels?" They would love it. They're theater people. They would love what was going on. The thrill of what was going on. I wrote Bill Miller, who was then just before he moved here. This is what got him here. I wrote Bill Miller who was the publicist for Sugar Babies. He was the publicist for...The one if I think of his name. He was a famous Broadway producer. He did Phantom of the Opera. Lloyd Wright did the writing, but the other one who--

Kathy: Webber?

Dona Zemo: Frank Lloyd Webber was the writer, but there was...I'll think of his name.

Kathy: Andrew Rice and Frank Lloyd Webber.



Dona Zemo:

He was the producer of all the shows. Bill Miller worked with all the traveling troupes including Sugar Babies. I heard Sugar Babies was coming to town. It was big, big, actors in that. I think there were quite a few performers in it. Even though we had computers, you know, it wasn't that big of a thing back in the '80s where you went online and had email. I really studied calligraphy at one point too in my life. I wrote a three page letter in calligraphy writing to Bill Miller, who was the publicist at the time for Sugar Babies.

I wrote him this letter telling him all about the art deco district and how the theater people, all the performers, would love staying on Ocean Drive. What was going on it was a new renaissance period. He said he was so thrilled about getting this three page letter in calligraphy. He couldn't believe it. He had to come and see for himself.

Before the troupe, he would be the scout to go out. He told me when he would be visiting. I got in touch with everyone I knew and told them to show up at The Carlisle and have dinner that night, because Bill Miller is coming into town. We're trying to get the first theater group to stay south of Lincoln Road. It would be 35 rooms for two weeks, the two week run.

Everyone showed up and I took Bill Miller in there. You know, he's from Manhattan. He was my age at the time. We were in our 40s. He just fell in love with it too. He through his encouragement convinced the group to stay in the art deco hotels.

That was the first group. From that group, for the next five years, we had every theater group. The word gets around in the performing arts group, so everyone wanted to stay in the art deco district. We rented \$35 a night. I'm sorry, it was \$35 a night, 25 rooms for two weeks. That was a big stay for us at the time.

Remember, rooms were going for very, very, little back then even in the '80s. They were not \$15 a night, but they were up to \$50 a night. We would give groups a break, \$35 to \$45.

Kathy:

My understanding is that Andrew and his partner actually lost money at one point and they sold out. Were they just a little ahead of their time?

Dona Zemo:

Oh of course, yeah. Well, from what I know. I don't know as much as maybe someone else from this period, but I do know at the time they had private investors. They had limited partnership. When Mark tried to raise more money he wasn't able to. They were a little bit ahead of their time, and they were a little bit ahead of their buying the hotels.

They bought seven properties, which was a great thing to do, but they couldn't raise enough funds to continue the project. They eventually, I believe, ran out of money. I don't know how the Royale Group got involved, but the Royale Group against all the odds of people saying

whatever they want to say about them, and it's not usually good. I'm a big fan of theirs.

I saw what they did. I saw how they came in, took on the hotels, and they continued what could have died and the developers would have been right behind the Capitmans tearing down the property. Against all the odds of the Royale Group, like them or not, I was a big fan of theirs, of their leadership. They helped Barbara Capitman. They gave free room to MDPL. They provided phone service. They were called not lovers of art deco. They were the mafia. They were Italian. Everyone thinks Italian is mafia.

I stayed on with them, because I was Italian and I was part of mafia. This is all the rumor that was going on back then. I knew a little better, because I got to know them. I got to know how much they cared about making it happen against all the odds. Unfortunately it fell from them as well.

Kathy: The tearing down of The New Yorker, and what's his name, the nemesis?

Dona Zemo: Reznick?

Kathy: Abe Reznick, could you talk a bit about that?

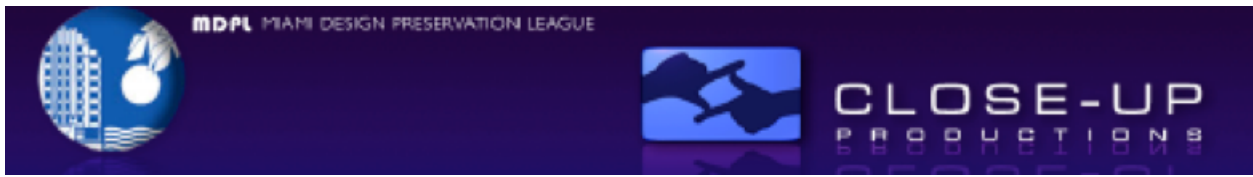
Dona Zemo: I wish I could, but that was before me. All I knew was that he was my enemy, because he was Barbara's enemy. Anyone that was Barbara's enemy, and he was her big enemy, I'm sorry I don't know that much about it, but I know Barbara was heartbroken. I was here for The Senator.

Kathy: Can you tell us about that? Some people say that she chained to the front. Others say no, no, she wasn't chained. Do you know?

Dona Zemo: She was there. I'm not sure about being chained, because that was one of the things I stayed away from, because the Royale Group owned it. It was very hard for me, because I was working with Royale. Although I was a preservationist, 100 percent a preservationist, and I was educating the Royale Group, I was considered a traitor at the time by all the preservationists because of my involvement with the Royale.

They had no idea that I was helping them by talking to the Royale Group, telling them about Barbara, the movement, helping Barbara, helping MDPL have an office through Royale at The Oceanfront free of charge.

The Senator was coming down because the Royale Group had a vision too. Their vision was to make The Victor Hotel centralized, the one central point. They needed parking. There was no parking lot or anything parking. Unfortunately they were not true preservationists 150 percent like the others. They were partially there, because they did put their money into the concept, but they took down The Senator.



I wasn't there the day they took it down, although it upset me and I tried hard to convince them not to do it. It was torn down to put a parking lot there, or a parking facility, that would be for all the six other properties. The main entrance would be The Victor and it would be all centralized.

That was part of Andrew's concept as well, but of course not the tearing down. I know she had the chain at The Biscaya over on West Avenue, you know the larger building? I know that, but I'm not sure about...I know she was at The Senator and they threatened to arrest her. Matti Bower, who was our first female mayor, she was with Barbara. Even though I was called a traitor I was still a preservationist. I just wasn't involved. I had to stay. That was a conflict for me.

Kathy: Did you ever work for MDPL?

Dona Zemo: No, I've never worked for them. I was a board of director. I was a board of director for several years, then I left, because of this whole Royale and Senator thing I just said, "You know, I can't..." I just couldn't work with them any longer, because they didn't understand my truth and my end of it.

Recently, four years ago, I was asked to become a board member again. You forgive and forget. You forget and you forgive, same thing. I am now a board member and I always cared about preservation. Sometimes, I've seen over the years, you have to lose one good thing to save 20. That's my belief. Now when Versace came and tore down The Revere Hotel, everyone was in favor of that. I still don't understand how that happened.

Kathy: Because it was Versace you think?

Dona Zemo: Of course. Not that I love Versace, and I love what he did, and I was in full ray, but he didn't tear it down for a purpose. He tore it down for his purpose to build this swimming pool. The Royale Group tore down The Senator to build a parking garage for the six properties, because that was part of their plan. The preservationists didn't give Versace a hard time doing it. That conflict was always my conflict.

That's why I always believe sometimes you have to tear down one to save the rest. Even though I don't like to see it.

Kathy: Tell us some people stories. Oh, I love the story that you told about giving an art deco tour.

Dona Zemo: Oh, the tour.

Kathy: Yes, tell us about this famous tour.

Dona Zemo: The art deco tour, Where's Art? OK. I became kind of a tour guide for everyone. Like I said, working with Miami Vice and journalists. Any

writer that came into town came to visit Miami Beach at one period of time. It was either Andrew Capitman or I who took them around. After Andrew left it was always myself, they would call me. I would walk people around. One particular group I gave a great tour to, we were at the end. It was a couple hour tour of the art deco district.

At that time you would go from Ocean Drive to Collins, and as far as Washington. You didn't west of Washington. At the end of the tour one of the gentlemen stopped and said, "Dona I have a question." I said, "You can ask me any question you'd like." He said, "Well, when are we going to meet Art?" I just cracked up.

He thought art deco was the name of a man, Art. He really did. I mean, honest. I had to explain, "No, art deco is a concept of art deco as an umbrella over a period of time." He wasn't the only one. Many people thought art deco was a man, was the name of a person. That particular story was one that came to me and said, "When are we meeting Art?"

Quite a few people would ask me along the way, art deco, is that the name of a person? They didn't understand. If you didn't understand art deco was...I think the name came in the 1960s as an umbrella name to all the different designs from the '30s if I'm not wrong. It became the umbrella name of the concept, you know, the period of time.

From Germany, the Italian, the American, architecture of the '30s, which is one of the most romantic periods of our time. Glamorous, jazz age, romantic, the clothing was stunning, people dressed to go out, and took time and enjoyed the supper clubs and got dressed to do something like that. I wish we had that today. I wish people took the time to want to go and see live theater and get dressed for the occasion. It gives you a perk in life to do that.

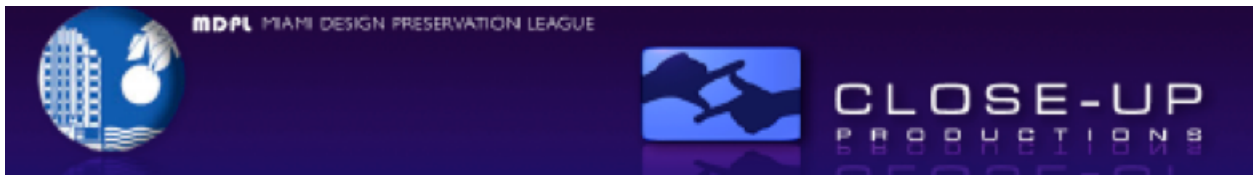
You get out of your jeans and your shirt, and you put on your crystals and high heels, and go out and see a fabulous show.

Kathy: Your parents did that a lot you said.

Dona Zemo: Yes. Oh, yes. My aunt, my uncle, who lived here. My parents went out with them. They went to the Frank Sinatra Show. Jimmy Durante, Martha Raye, The Five O'Clock Club, you know about that right? The Five O'Clock Club, oh my God. The Five O'Clock Club was Martha Raye's club. At 5:00 PM when she opened everyone got a free drink if you were there. At 5:00 AM when she closed everyone got a free drink at 5:00 AM. It was right on Collins Avenue. The Martha Raye Club, she owned it.

Kathy: Where on Collins was that?

Dona Zemo: Near Wolfie's. It was in that area near 21st Street, so was The Jimmy Durante.



Kathy: Did he have a club?

Dona Zemo: Wait, wait, Jimmy Durante. I'm thinking of Jake Lamotta had a club in the '50s. Jimmy Durante performed here, but I'm not sure if he had a club. I know that they would go. My parents would see Jimmy Durante, Red Buttons, Martha Raye, Frank Sinatra, as it got later in the '60s it was Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammie Davis Junior.

Kathy: You said your parents became friends with Frank Sinatra.

Dona Zemo: Yeah. Well, my parents knew Frank Sinatra. Knew him because of my uncle. They weren't buddy-buddies, but they were friends and they would go see his shows at the Fontainebleau at the La Ronde room. You know of the La Ronde room? Well, the La Ronde room was the famous...In the Fontainebleau the La Ronde room was where they all performed, Sammie Davis Junior. You know the Sammie Davis Junior story about Frank Sinatra?

Kathy: Tell us again. I've heard it before, but tell.

Dona Zemo: My version of it is that Frank Sinatra, Sammie Davis Junior, Dean Martin, you know, The Rat Pack, Joey Bishop, they would perform and they wanted Frank Sinatra...Of course Sammie Davis Junior was part of the pack. Up until that time if you were a person of color you still had to go across to the mainland to Liberty City, or Overtown, to stay at night.

Frank Sinatra was the one person who told Ben Novak, "If Sammie can't stay in the hotel we're not performing." Sammie Davis Junior did stay in the hotel. Lena Horne was another good story, because Lena Horne when she performed she came during the Zev Buffman Broadway series Lena Horne, and she performed at The Theater of Performing Arts and her group stayed at the art deco hotels so I met Lena Horne as well.

She didn't stay there, but the troupe stayed there, but Lena came to the Carlisle for dinner, Lena Horne, Della Reese, Patti Labelle, they would all come. They all fell in love in The Carlisle. Of course we didn't have the amenities like The Fontainebleau at the time, you know, room service and all that.

The troupe stayed with us, but Lena Horne told the whole story when she was performing, she did a one woman show. Before or after her show she told the whole story, how nice it was to be able to stay in Miami Beach. She told the audience about her performing on the beach back in the day when she would have to leave the beach after enjoying the stay here, but she'd have to go stay over in Liberty City or Overtown.

However, that was where the best clubs were. That's where people went to hear the best music too. It has a mixed story, because a lot of people back then would go over there to their jazz clubs and be the

whites going to the black neighborhoods to hear the best music.

Kathy: Because of Hampton House?

Dona Zemo: I'm not sure. I'm not too familiar with the history.

Kathy: I'll tell you a little bit about that after we finish.

Dona Zemo: Yeah, I would love to.

Kathy: Because I've been very, very, involved with The Hampton House.

Dona Zemo: Oh yeah? The Lyric Theater? Do you know about The Lyric Theater?

Kathy: The Lyric, yeah.

Dona Zemo: Yeah. I'm not too familiar. I'm just starting to learn about the heritage of that. I was so involved with art deco and worked so hard 24/7 to make this area what it was supposed to be.

Kathy: What is it?

Dona Zemo: What is it? Today? Oh, I have to be positive. Everyone wants to come to Miami Beach, South Beach, I wish they would call it more The Art Deco District. It is now called South Beach or Sobe. I wish it would go back to be more known as America's First National Historic District. OK, let's remember that. I wish people would come here for that reason only. Now it's known as the entertainment center. You know, the entertainment place to come to.

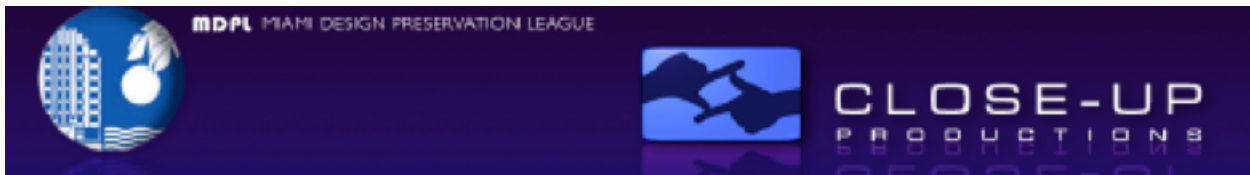
I think art deco took a secondary...It's below the entertainment of what's here.

Kathy: Why do you think that has occurred?

Dona Zemo: Because of Ocean Drive. Every restaurant put in loud music, or put in live music. I'm not against entertainment. I'm very much in favor of entertainment, but Barbara Capitman's idea, her concept, was preserving and while we preserved we wanted to entertain. Yes, there's nothing wrong with bringing entertainment. She would turning if she ever saw Ocean Drive now for what it's turned into.

It's too loud. It's too much. It's too loud. It's the noise. To me, to people that come here they may love it. They love the excitement. They love the neon light. They love the flashing. I think her concept was to create, like, a Left Bank. Like a Paris cafe society.

That's what we started out promoting. We wanted every hotel to have a restaurant or a cafe. We wanted an eatery in every place. Fully we were in favor of that. The music, and the outside music, it wasn't meant to be in the street. It was meant to be like a supper club, in its spot. I think the music is too loud on Ocean Drive. It attracts a different class of people.



My theory is everyone says the bar liquor sales, you can record this or not, liquor sales brings in money, revenue. I think of the opposite. I think if you have a beautiful, one-of-a-kind place, it's like a gem in a box, that we could have brought as much money into Ocean Drive if we kept it the gem that it was supposed to be. The historic art deco nationwide district. We could have had cafes. The hotels would be used more because the noise wouldn't be upstairs. When they say our hotel sales are down, the hotel sales are down because how could anyone stay above blasting music until 5:00 in the morning? I can't stay there.

Unless you're just partying. It brought the party crowd instead of the diamond, sophisticated, artistic, creative crowd, who instead of drinking a martini they could have had, they're drinking beer. That's the difference. I think we could have had a martini crowd and the revenue would have been just as good if they went Barbara Capitman's way. We would have nothing against beer drinkers, excuse me.

You know what I'm saying, it would have been a more sophisticated, more period, it would stay within the period. The romance, the glamour, the beauty, and we would have preserved the historical. In the whole world there's only place like Miami Beach's Art Deco Historic District, and we have it. We should preserve it. We should preserve the period. Let people walk in and feel like they're stepping back in time.

It's only a little piece of America. I think our city should have preserved it to that little piece and keep it pure. Keep the music pure. Where everyone would go there dressed. It would have more impact than it does now. That's my philosophy. I'm sad to see the turning of it. It was supposed to go this way, and it turned to a different direction. At least that's what I believe Barbara's vision was, working with Barbara. I feel sad, that's all. I go to Ocean Drive in the early morning. That's when it still has a touch of the past of what it was when we first started.

You go there in the evening and between the people putting food in your face, fake food, whatever food it is, rubber food, and the loud music, it's nothing to do with art deco. Art deco is more than that. It's the concept.

The Carlisle Grill for instance, I'll use that as an example. Margaret Doyle designed that to be like a really beautiful supper club. It was magnificent. It was like a dinner area. You'd have dinner there. They had a stage. On the stage they had a piano player, a bass player, and a sax player. You walked into that Carlisle Grill and you felt like you were walking back in the 1930s. Now every hotel could have had a little bit of something different, but that's what Barbara's concept was. Each place to have a different, whether it would be a cafe, whether it would be a nightclub, whether it would be a supper club.

It was meant for entertainment, but it wasn't meant for the loudness. It was a different style of entertainment. Trying to repeat the past, and people say, "Well, why step backwards? We're in 2017." I would say if you want to preserve history there are certain areas that you can. We have the opportunity in our lifetimes to preserve a little piece of our history. We can still save it. We can still preserve it. It could turn around. What goes around comes around. Well, I have hope.

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