



Alex Daoud Interview

Kathy Hersh: My name is Kathy Hersh. It's June 30th, 2015. We are in the home of Alex Daoud, former commissioner and mayor of Miami Beach. This is a recording for the Visual Memoirs Project for the city of Miami Beach.

Just a little explanation before we begin, for your edification, in most of our interviews we really seek people who have a long history with Miami Beach. You were born on the beach. You grew up on the beach. You were a commissioner and a mayor. We're looking for your broad perspective on things, and your memories from childhood onward. Obviously, you were a very controversial person, and we'll discuss that. I'd like to do things in chronological order, if you don't mind, so that it evolves as a story, a conversation that we're having. Then, we'll get to some specifics of that later on in the interview. Is that fine?

Alex Daoud: Whichever way you want to go. You're the captain.

Kathy: You were born on the beach. Do you have any early memories of growing up on the beach?

Alex: Oh, yes, I definitely do. I was born on Miami Beach on May 19th, 1943, way before you were born. I had great memories when I was growing up. There were magnificent mansions, splendid synagogues, wonderful families on the beach. It was absolutely wonderful. Unfortunately, at the age of six my family went to New Jersey, and I contracted polio. I almost died from polio. My body was paralyzed. That near death experience really gave me an appreciation for life and for people.

Kathy: You were on vacation when this happened?

Alex: Yes, my family was.

Kathy: You came back to Miami Beach, and what happened then?

Alex: I went to Miami Children's Hospital, and I wore these big, ugly steel braces. It was very interesting because children can be very cruel. At first, I was in wheelchairs and they used to knock me over the wheelchairs and dance around me. Then, when I wore big ugly steel braces- but, my mother was determined that I'd walk again. The doctor said I'd never walk normal again, and that I'd have crutches and everything else. I got picked on. I grew older, I still had deformities in my leg.

I'll never forget, my mother took me to 5th Street Gym and to Chris Dundee, at the time who was the owner of 5th Street Gym, and his brother, Angelo Dundee. I started to train at 5th Street Gym as a ten or eleven-year-old handicapped child. It was amazing because it was the first time I was ever introduced to African Americans, and it was



the only place in all of Miami Beach back then, in 1952 or 1953, that was integrated. It was really my first experience, and it was really wonderful because not one of the black fighters, or the black trainers, or the black managers ever made fun of me or picked on me. It was like they always used to defend me and teach me how to defend myself. Working with Angelo Dundee, I started to learn how to box. It was a great experience for me. It also gave me an early experience that regardless of our color, regardless of our religion, regardless of our national origin, we're all human beings. We all breathe the same air, walk on the same earth, and have the same dreams for happiness. It gave me a great advantage in life about understanding people. I was very happy working out and training there.

Kathy: You overlapped there with Cassius Clay, and later Mohammed Ali. Tell us about that experience.

Alex: I started to meet Mohammed Ali in the early 60s. He won the gold medal in 1960 for the United States. It was a really sad experience because he represented the United States of America and won a gold medal, and he was so proud. He went back to Louisville, Kentucky with his mother, and went to a restaurant to eat wearing the gold medal, and they wouldn't serve him because he was African American. He threw away the medal in the river in Kentucky. He once told me about this story. At the time, Miami Beach, along with all of Florida, they weren't integrated. Unfortunately, our country went through a horrible period of segregation and hatred. Unfortunately, we're still baring the wounds of it today.

Kathy: Did you hang out with him?

Alex: Yes.

Kathy: Where did you go?

Alex: We used to do road work at night at the golf course

Kathy: What is road work?

Alex: I'm sorry. Road work is when you're running. Mohammed used to like to run at night because he used to fight in Vegas at 9 PM, so it was 12 o'clock here. He always wanted to be up at 9, which was very smart. We'd meet about 12 o'clock. There would be Mohammed Ali, myself, Jimmy Ellis, Gomeo Brennan, Lewis Rodriguez. I was the only white fighter there running. It was so funny because we'd be running around the golf course at at 12 o'clock, 12:30 at night, and invariably the police would come up. Of course, they recognized Mohammed. They recognized Jimmy Ellis. They recognized Louie. They'd look at me and go, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm with my friends." They'd say, "Yeah, what are you doing?" I said, "We're fighters, and we do our road work at night." The guy said to me, "Well, you're White." I'll never forget, Mohammed looked at him and said, "It's not his fault.



He's been sick lately." True story. [laughter] I fell over laughing.

They got accustomed. They used to wave at us when we ran around. In fact, I started sparring with Mohammed, and whenever I climbed in the ring I never wanted to get hit by him, so I used to try and make him laugh. I'd be in the ring, and I'd be going, "I float like a butterfly. I sting like a bee. I'm the greatest of all times. I'm Mohammed Ali." [in Ali impersonation voice] He'd look at me and he'd go, "White boy, you do me better than I do me. Stay away from my wife!" [laughter]

Kathy: That was typical of his sense of humor?

Alex: Oh, he had a great sense of humor. You have to remember, he never once was involved in an incident of allegedly attacking or raping a woman, or beating up somebody, or carrying a gun. The worst thing he did is he had a religion which was not popular, and he went against the war, which was not popular. From the perspective of what African Americans suffered that I was able to see, hopefully it was not a sign of what was going on throughout our whole country, but I'm afraid it might have been. It was really said. We couldn't go to restaurants together and hang out.

Kathy: Did you ever go to the Hampton House with him, in Brownsville?

Alex: Yes. He stayed over, at the time, in Liberty City. We used to go to clubs in Liberty City. It's funny. They would allow me to go to their clubs, and to any Black clubs, and I couldn't get him into one of the clubs on Miami Beach. It was really sad. I used to hang out with Jimmy Ellis and... They were so nice to me. That's why when I became mayor one of the things I wanted to do was rename the hall where Mohammed Ali won his championship the Mohammed Ali Hall of Champions. It's still there, so I'm so excited about that. That's one of the things I did that was really achieving, and kind of a landmark. Everybody that passes through the convention center can see that, and we have a little plaque where they have the ring where he won his championship at.

Kathy: Now, the reason he was down here training was because of Angelo Dundee, right?

Alex: Yes, at 5th Street Gym.

Kathy: Why wasn't that ever designated? It seems to be that would have been a perfect historic designation.

Alex: I have no idea. They destroyed it after I was mayor. Had I been mayor, I would have stopped it, or done everything within my power. That was such a historic landmark. I met Rocky Marciano up there. I met Sugar Ray Robinson, Sugar Ray Leonard. Anybody in boxing went through there, and some of these great fighters were the nicest people in the world – absolutely wonderful, pleasant people, just charming



athletes.

Kathy: Was there anything about Mohammed Ali that surprised you about him? He had a public persona, obviously, but what was he like in person, quietly?

Alex: Quietly, he was such a gentleman. Unfortunately, many fighters today take on the boisterous, and arrogant, and bully type [attitude.] Mohammed did nothing but try to sell tickets. I once asked him, "Why do you always carry on?" He said when he was a child, he went and saw Gorgeous George, the wrestler. Gorgeous George talked to him, and he says, "Always put on a show." Mohammed used to like to psych out his opponent, and he did it with Sonny Liston. He was a psychological master because we all have fear. Unfortunately, we as human beings are burdened by fear. The way we handle that fear often proves what type of character we have. Mohammed taught me how to handle fear, and how to live with fear, how to overcome it. We all have innate weaknesses. He was just really very good. I was just very happy to be able to know him, and Angelo, and Chris.

Kathy: In terms of your getting better with the polio, you were able to get stronger through this training, through boxing. How did that affect your social life, say, in school?

Alex: Oh, my social life got much better. The bullies started avoiding me. The girls started noticing me. I had a little gait to my walk, a little twinkle in my eye. I was never a bully, but I was always prepared knowing anyone who got in my path, I could really... I mean once you step inside the ring with Mohammed Ali, anybody else outside is like a cupcake, especially once you get punched by him. Even when he wasn't trying to hurt me, it hurt. [laughing] It was an experience. Every time I would get out of the ring I would say, "Thank you, God. I got to live." It was a lot of fun. It wasn't just a physical encounter, it was also emotional and mental. Introducing me to African Americans at a young age was a great experience for me because it opened up my mind, opened up my thoughts. I know it made me a much better person, made me a much stronger person. I don't judge anybody by their color, religion, or national origin. I judge people about the way that person is. I think that's the way God wanted us to be judged.

Kathy: You mention God. Let's talk a little bit about your religious upbringing. I gather that you went to Catholic schools?

Alex: Yes. St Patrick's School. My father was Lebanese Catholic. My mother was Catholic converted to Judaism. When she passed away she was Jewish.

Kathy: So, she converted to Judaism?

Alex: Yes. She converted for her second marriage. She asked me, "My husband wants me to convert to Judaism." I said, "Well, it only makes



sense." She said, "What do you think?" I said, "We all pray to the same god. What difference does it make? Jesus was a Jew, so you're just going back to your roots." She started laughing. She said, "I never thought about it that way." I said, "I always think I'm Jewish. I always do." People start to say to me.

Kathy: The high school you went to, was that on the beach or off the beach?

Alex: Yeah, it was St. Patrick's on Miami Beach.

Kathy: What was that like?

Alex: That was interesting. Unfortunately, back in the 60s, we were segregated.

Kathy: How did that jive with your experience in the gym, or did the gym stuff come later than high school?

Alex: I didn't understand it. I candidly didn't understand. I had no ideas about the laws of Plessy v. Ferguson that the Supreme Court had passed about separate or equal until, thank God, the landmark decision of Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas was passed, and we started integrating schools and integrating everything. I never understood it. Again, I just never understood it.

Kathy: Was there interaction much between your high school and Beach High? Did the students mingle much?

Alex: Yes, we mingled a little bit. Again, you have to realize you're in high school, so you pretty much have your own little social cliques, and you stay with them. You're nice with people, and happy with them.

Kathy: What made you decide to go into politics?

Alex: I wrote about it in my book. I was a young, naïve lawyer, got out of law school. I started working at the City of Miami Beach. I met a beautiful woman, a Holocaust survivor by the name of Elsie Cone. She was getting evicted from her apartment by an unscrupulous landlord. It was so amazing because she had a valid lease. She had the law on her side. She had every possible thing that was correct for her. Unfortunately, when I went, the landlord hired a city commissioner, and the judge at the time stood up and saluted him, and summarily just evicted the woman.

The city commissioner was very much a bully. He kept saying, "You better get that old lady out." It really upset me. I started to realize that politics had power, and all of the sudden I decided, I'm going to make sure that I never get beat again because of politics. I'll help these elderly people from getting evicted by unscrupulous landlords.

Kathy: They were being evicted because...?



Alex: Number one, they wanted to raise the rent tremendously. Number two, they wanted to tear down a lot of the buildings. The way to tear it down or sell it is to empty it. At the time, back then, Miami Beach was rather an elderly community.

Kathy: Did you have elderly relatives here?

Alex: Oh yes. My grandmother lived, my mother lived here, and everything else. That was really beautiful experiences. The Jewish Vocational Services used to have senior citizen meals. When I started campaigning, I used to go to these senior citizen meals, and I got to meet the most interesting people. I met Holocaust survivors. I met retired physicians. I met a retired physicist that worked on the Manhattan Project, that made a difference in World War II.

Here, these are elderly people that were discarded by their relatives, and had no one that genuinely cared for them. I really enjoyed being around them. I never realized how quickly I was going to become old [laughing]. At the time, you kind of feel like Dorian Gray, you're going to stay young forever. I really kind of liked the elderly people. I think because I had been through polio, I could sit and talk with them. Because I talked with them and shared their thoughts, it was an uplifting experience. I was learning so much knowledge. The Manhattan Project, I had read about it, but, my gosh, I was here with someone that had actually been a physicist, a Jewish scientist that worked with Albert Einstein. He was the most unassuming little man. He used to wear a little tie. It was phenomenal.

Kathy: You wanted to become a champion for these people, or what was it that pushed you over into running for office?

Alex: I wanted to become a champion, I think, but I also wanted to make a difference. I wanted to become almost a crusader. I wanted to say, "Hey, look. Look at these human beings.

Kathy: Did these issues come up during your time as a commissioner?

Alex: Oh, yes. A lot of the issues were coming up to get rid of the elderly, to throw them out. I felt very sad. I look back on it, and Miami Beach has been transformed. That transformation came at a price. Unfortunately, it's not all a wonderful transformation.

Kathy: Now we get into the real politics. You were a very popular mayor. You were reelected three times. You had 85 percent of the population behind you. What happened?

Alex: Boy, that's a great question. I don't know if you've ever seen the movie *The Natural*. Robert Redford is there with Glenn Close, his childhood sweetheart. They hadn't seen each other. They had had a child, and they had gone their separate ways. Robert Redford's



lamenting that he never played baseball. He said, "I could have been the greatest baseball player there ever was. I'd walk down the street, and people would have said, 'There goes Roy Hobbs.'"

I could have been the greatest politician in the sense of helping people. I could have been such a moving individual. At the end, Glenn Close says, "Roy, what happened to you?" I always ask myself, "What happened to you?" I think the answer that was given was perfect: Life didn't turn out the way I expected. I took a wrong turn. I can remember the first bribe I ever took. To this day, it haunts me. It's like the first cancerous cell in a human body that becomes injected, or the first drink an alcoholic takes, or the first drug a drug addict injects. That first part was the beginning of the end for me.

I had the first bribe. I'll never forget, I was sitting in a waterfront mansion on the Venetian Islands with one of the wealthiest bankers that had the largest Hispanic bank in the entire United States, Capital Bank. His name was Able Holtz. I'm looking out across his magnificent swimming pool, his manicured lawn, his handcrafted Italian yacht, and the expanse of Biscayne Bay as he said to me, "I want to put you on retainer."

I looked at him and said, "Well, great. I'm an attorney. I can work for you." He looked at me, and he said, "That's true. You could, but I have a lot of attorneys. No, I want to start off paying you monthly, and I want to get my son on the zoning board."

Kathy: You were already mayor then?

Alex: No, I was a commissioner.

Kathy: You were a commissioner, okay. You took your first bribe as a commissioner, then?

Alex: Yes, I did.

Kathy: You had no trepidations, or feelings of "This could turn me on the wrong path?"

Alex: I never considered it a bribe. You see, you always mix in the sugar with the poison [laughing]. I turned around and thought, "How could this be a bribe? Here's this wealthy banker who says he wants to hire me," but bells were going off. I just, at the time, was making \$6,000 a year, devoting most of my law practice to poverty-ridden people. What did I have going? I needed to make money. I was newly married. The retainer started. I thought, "Maybe it's not really a breach," but it was.

Kathy: What is the difference between a retainer and a bribe? That's an honest question.

Alex: That's the perfect question to ask – the intent of the giver, and the



intent of the receiver. If it's quid pro quo, if it's something for something – and it was quid pro quo. I want to get my son on the zoning board. That's what it was.

Kathy: What about the next bribe?

Alex: Once you take that, then you start getting the other retainers. They became more, and more, and more, and all of the sudden I was in quicksand. I was drowning. I was taking so much money that, by then, I was addicted to it. I tried to justify it. I said, "Look at all the time I'm spending helping people. They couldn't be mayor. Why should I not get paid decently?" The mayor of Miami Beach was making \$10,000 a year. The commissioner was making \$6,000, which is ridiculous. It's absolutely ridiculous.

You devote 24 hours- I had my phone number listed all the times I was commissioner or mayor. People would call me at home and wake me up.

Kathy: Wanting?

Alex: Well, they'd have problems. I remember one guy almost got arrested. He called me up. Some guy broke into his truck and he beat the heck out of them. They wanted to charge him. I was up at 3 o'clock going down there trying to stop the police from arresting him.

Kathy: Was he ethnic?

Alex: No, he was a veteran, a real nice guy. I think he was Jewish. I'm not sure.

Kathy: Why was he being falsely arrested?

Alex: No, he was just one of these [crosstalk] ex-marines that was- somebody broke in his truck, and he saw him. It was in front of his house, and he went out there and took – at the time, the police were late getting there – he took matters into his own hands, and he beat the hell out of these two guys. He beat them pretty badly [laughing]. They said it was excessive force. The police were going to arrest him.

Kathy: Oh! That was before the Stand Your Ground law?

Alex: Yes.

Kathy: Because that made a difference, didn't it?

Alex: He didn't even use a weapon. He just used his hands. [laughing] I don't think the Stand Your Law Ground... He just, he beat them up. I think he might have done a little bit of a river dance on them. I think that he beat them up pretty badly.



Kathy: Well, if you could go back in time, what would you tell the young Alex Daoud?

Alex: Wow. If we had a time machine, I'd be the happiest person in the world. Trust me. I'd go back to the first bribe I was offered. I'd grab him by the scruff of the neck and pull him out of there, and say, "That's it. Forget about it. It's not for you."

Kathy: What was the milieu like at the time?

Alex: I'm sorry?

Kathy: The milieu at the time... Was there a culture of, and is there still, a culture of quid pro quo and you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours? That goes on everywhere, presumably. What was it like in your time?

Alex: Unfortunately, politics is that. I was just reading how President Eisenhower got the support of, then governor, Earl Warren by promising Governor Warren that he'd put him on the Supreme Court. You have to kind of judge. Politicians are always worried about one thing: getting reelected. It takes absolutely, what I consider to be, an inordinate amount of money to run for political- I think the last fellow who ran for mayor spent almost \$3,000,000 for a \$10,000 a year job. Unless you're a multi-billionaire, how do you raise that kind of money? You have to go out there. What have you got to sell as your support and your word?

Kathy: Who are you representing once you get there, if only someone of means can afford to run for a high office?

Alex: That's very true. You see, unfortunately, in our country, the election laws should be really set up, and I think there should be term limits. I don't know why senate and congress aren't term-limited out. I think term limits are very good.

Kathy: Tell us about the writing of the book. What kept you motivated to write the book?

Alex: There's a lot of factors. I went through a deep depression. I was indicted on October 29th, 1991, and two months before I started my trial, my mother died. My mother lived with me, and I loved her. She was 83 years old. I loved my mother probably more than I loved anyone, even myself. I did love her more than anything. The polio made us much closer. My ex-wife left me two months into my trial, and took my two-month-old son with her. It was a rude awakening. I felt like I was really deserted, abandoned.

I was fighting against the government. I didn't go in and plead. I went to trial with 41 counts, which is insane. I could have still been in prison. You would be doing this interview in prison, except I hired the greatest lawyer I could find, Roy Black. We were 11 not guilty. I was



only convicted on one count. All the rest of the counts were 11 to 1. Eleven jurors out of twelve to acquit me on everything. What I did was kind of on a borderline. I kept saying to people, "If you ever need an attorney that's outside the city business." The mistake I made was contacting people who were doing business with the city, which is unethical. I always thought it skirted the line compared to what it was.

I was a fighter. They offered me, if I'd pled guilty, they'd give me two years, without cooperating. I thought the people I was protecting, like Howard Rosen or Able Holtz, or a lot of those other people that I write about in the book, I thought they'd help me financially, like the movies. I figured, oh my, they're circling in wagons to help my lawyer... It doesn't happen that way. Whoever said, "There's honor among thieves," never did business in Miami Beach.

Kathy: What was the reaction to the book?

Alex: Oh my gosh. You would have thought I'd bombed Pearl Harbor. Holy mackerel. They threatened me with lawsuits. They had a private investigator, when I was researching the book, contact the U.S. Attorney's Office trying to put me back in jail. They threatened me with restraining orders. Nobody sued me. Nobody got a restraining order. Nobody even tried to kill me. It was kind of disappointing because, thank God, in our country there's two forms of defamation: Libel's when you write it, and slander is when you say it, but the truth is a total defense. Had these people sued me, I would have been able to take their depositions and get to the truth, so they didn't want to sue me. They kept saying under their breath, "He's terrible," but it's all the truth in the book.

Kathy: Not one single lawsuit occurred as a result of the publication of this book?

Alex: I never even got a letter from an attorney, and I name names. I name people. I name dates. This is the true story of the corruption, the violence, and the murders that took place on Miami Beach.

Kathy: Miami Beach has a long history of that, actually. Does it not?

Alex: Yes, it does, but I don't think anybody involved ever wrote a book about it [laughing] naming the people. Looking back, again, it harks back to 5th Street Gym. I was the little kid in the braces and the wheelchair. You're not going to pick on me. I'm going to fight you. That's what I said to the government. I don't care if you have a nuclear weapon. I have a water gun. I'm going to fight you. I fought them as best as I could.

The government wears you down. That's why they have a 98 percent conviction ratio. They have something called Rule 35B that you'll read about in this book, once you get started, *Sins of South Beach*.



- Kathy:** Did it sell well?
- Alex:** I sold 21,000 copies.
- Kathy:** Are they making some kind of a movie or series?
- Alex:** They were. I've had three people go ahead and take options on it. Unfortunately, I feel like a bridesmaid while never being a bride. Everybody's taking options, but nobody's delivered. Hopefully, after this interview, we'll definitely get someone to make a movie.
- Kathy:** What was prison like?
- Alex:** Prison is a very interesting experience. There's two things they respect in prison: There is either intelligent, or you're strong. I tried to be both. Also, there's five levels, no six really, or security in federal prisons. One is the easiest, the campers. Five is the worst, or six is like maximum security. I was supposed to be with the campers. Unfortunately, times when they had me travelling to testify and there were threats on my life supposedly, they put me up to level six.
- Kathy:** You were in maximum security?
- Alex:** Yeah, I was behind the wire for quite a while. I was in the hole. It was not a good feeling.
- Kathy:** You mean solitary confinement?
- Alex:** Yes, solitary confinement. [laughing] We call it "the hole."
- Kathy:** How long were you in solitary confinement?
- Alex:** Off and on, I was sentenced to 63 months, 5 years 3 months, I did 18 months. I probably did about 3 ½, 4 months in the hole.
- Kathy:** How does one survive that experience?
- Alex:** I think it will either destroy you, or make you stronger. In my case, I did two things: I became very friendly with the hacks, the guards, so I could try get books so I could read. Number two is the good times they would put me in my own private cell, and hopefully I would have a shower... [knocking]
- Kathy:** [deep sigh] I want to try to get at a sort of culture of Beach politics, in general terms, without really naming specific names. Here we are, on a strip of sand, in one of the most delightful settings on earth, with booming real estate values, which started with Carl Fisher onward, so much pressure to develop, develop... Is it accident of geography? Is it the place? Is it a flux of people? Is there kind of a culture of "anything goes" here that's developed over the years, would you say, or not?



Alex: You have to understand the history. My family used to have an auction gallery, an art gallery on Lincoln Road. You have to understand that this beautiful, unusual island was pulled from sand by Carl Fisher, a promoter. You had a cadre of misanthropes that lived here. You had Bugsy Seagull, that used to come down. You had Al Capone, that used to come down here. You had people like John Wayne, Errol Flynn. During World War II, Clark Gable was stationed down here. They all used to come to Daoud galleries. Humphrey Bogart came to our art galleries. I think Miami Beach has been blessed and cursed at the same time.

It's kind of like the area where it gets very, very artsy, but also crazy people. We have a definite variety of people that come here, and live here, and stay here, and have made the place famous or infamous. John Kennedy was here the week before he went to Dallas, stayed on North Bay Road. They say he met Marilyn Monroe there. There's colorful history.

Kathy: You don't mean they just shook hands?

Alex: I don't know what they did, but from what I understand, the president had a treatment for his back by Marilyn Monroe that was very soothing. [laughter]

Kathy: It seems like that reputation, the edginess, is part of the draw. That's the impression I get. People wanting to come here because it's always been a little ahead in terms of... I don't know even how to describe it. The rules are different, or there are no rules, or you make them up as you go.

Alex: You've got such an unusual place. You've got such a beautiful beach. You've got such an absolutely magnificent ocean. You've got a climate that is so clear, and you've got, what I consider to be, an all-year playground. Where else in the world can you walk around with shorts on? Thank God, we don't have water shortages. We don't have earthquakes. The only thing we do get is hurricanes. That's kind of the attraction is to go through a hurricane, and to stand your ground through the hurricanes. It's a whole environment of Miami Beach, romantic. I love this city.

Kathy: Any predictions for the future? Is it going to be under the water? Are we all going to visit in Kayaks? [laughter] How do you see it evolving? It keeps reinventing itself, doesn't it?

Alex: Yes, it does.

Kathy: What's the next permentation?

Alex: I think Miami Beach is going to get better and better. I think that we're a small island. I think that we've been through some horrific changes at a big price, especially when Castro's criminals poured into our city.



For all intensive purposes, it decimated the predominately elderly, predominately Jewish, totally defenseless population. I believe that Miami Beach is going to keep becoming more, and more, and more a place to visit, a place to stay, and a place to enjoy.

I don't think there's going to be much in the future. Unfortunately, I think it's going to be even more expensive. If you look at the major cities, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, as time passes, the property becomes more valuable. I think the exciting part of it on Miami Beach, it's so small, yet, it is so absolutely historical. There's so much the city can stay happened. You still can look at reruns of Jackie Gleason, *The Honeymooners*, and visit at where they filmed down here, or Miami Vice where they filmed it. I was on the set when Brian DePalma did his famous *Scarface* with Tony Montana.

Kathy: What was the impact of that film?

Alex: Oh! At the time, the Cuban-American population was furious with it, but it was telling a true story. We were overrun by Castro's criminals. In a period of one year, our crime rate went up 600 percent. At one time, Miami Beach was listed by the FBI as the murder capital of the United States of America. Unfortunately, and I documented this in *Sins of South Beach*, the Miami Beach Police Department took matters into their own hands, thank God. They're the true saviors of South Beach.

Kathy: When you say, "They took matters into their own hands," what do you mean by that?

Alex: We have to go back to the time. Our president, Jimmy Carter, was duped by the [desperate] Fidel Castro. When Jimmy Carter said, "We welcome all of the wonderful Cubans," and we had wonderful Cubans come here prior to the Mariel, Castro just, summarily, opened up his jail, sent us all his child molesters, his serial rapists, and his murderers, and threw them in with innocent people. 143,000 people landed on our shores. Federal government never made plans for them, so they started getting housing here, in Miami Beach and South Beach.

The whole area became a drug-infested, crime-infested place. The Miami Police Department was overwhelmed, the way the entire city and community was. The booking officers were getting back later than the actual people who were arrested. The Miami Beach police started to administer what they called, very politely, "attitude adjustment sessions." The attitude adjustment sessions are documented in the book, *Sins of South Beach*, and they were very effective.

Kathy: I presume by that you meant beatings and excessive force?

Alex: Yes, for those who were constantly arrested and we got to know, or beat up. We would beat them very badly. Sometimes we would take them over to the worst dangerous areas, over towns, take their belts off, take their pants off, their shoes [knocking]



- Kathy:** We interviewed someone who was living in poor housing, South Beach at the time, of the Mariel exodus, who described sitting out on the patio at night and having to hit the ground because of bullets buzzing around. Was it really that bad?
- Alex:** Worse. It was worse.
- Kathy:** The police on a typical night, during that period...
- Alex:** I'll let Charlie deal with that. I rode with the police on several occasions, and I can tell you my experience. I used to ride with Charlie. I document it in the book. That's the great advantage you got. You have plenary immunity because of the book. That's why I'm saying to you, this has already gone ahead and been out there. Charlie's been out there saying the same things. Nobody's going to come at you, or anything else. In fact, I spoke at Quantico, Virginia. I got a plaque from the FBI. He said the same thing. They videotaped me. I mentioned all the people that gave me bribes. I mentioned what the police did and everything. Everybody knew about it. Well, people in the know knew about it. Nobody wanted to talk about it, but I can tell you about the two deaths of the police officers we had. I was there when our two police officers were murdered. I can tell you the price that was paid by our police department, by the men and women of the police department.
- Kathy:** There obviously were political challenges along with this law enforcement challenge. People were scared, right?
- Alex:** People were terrified. They were afraid to go out at night. When I rode with Charlie, and I rode with him on several occasions because we had so many complaints, I couldn't believe it. It was like *A Tale of Two Cities*. It was like a city that you saw during the day, and it was a city that Charlie and the men and women of the midnight shift had to deal with. It was like *The Walking Dead*. I never knew what it was like because everybody used to button down the hatches, and lock the doors, and stay in at night. Every store on Lincoln Road, out of twenty stores, I would say sixteen were boarded up. There was only four.
- Kathy:** At night, you mean?
- Alex:** No, open during the day. Only two out of ten were open. The rest were boarded up closed. If they were open, they would break the windows, smash them. You had derelicts, you had bums, you had criminals living in these places. You had absolute groups, packs of vicious criminals looking to prey on the elderly. It was horrible. We lost two wonderful police officers. Both of them were Jewish, and both of them lived in Miami Beach. One was Donald Kramer. He was 42 years old. The other was Scott Rakow. He was 26 years old, I believe.
- Kathy:** They were killed by Marielitos, criminals?



Alex: They were killed by the criminals, yeah.

Kathy: I should say "criminal element of the Marielitos" because not all of them-

Alex: I say "Castro's criminals." That's what I say because that way it defines it. They were Castro's criminals.

Kathy: Like you say, there were good people who came over in the Mariel.

Alex: The cost to the country was phenomenal. That was the first time in my whole life I ever voted Republican. I went in sweating, and I voted for Ronald Reagan. I felt like a chicken going in and voting for Colonel Sanders. I really was nervous. I could not vote for Jimmy Carter again after what he had done. I thought he abandoned all of Florida, and all these criminals and just left them here.

Kathy: What turned it around? Was it attrition? Was it the excessive force that was employed? What got the community out of the grip, finally, of this?

Alex: I believe that it was the dedication of our very fine police officers, like Charlie Seraydar, like Dennis Ward, like Tommy Hunker who were there. We were very fortunate. We had some rabbis. Rabbi Webberman, who had 15 sons, and they formed a crime watch. Then, we had also a lot of awareness by the police department that they had to take matters into their own hands. Our system was broken. The system was not working. The way we were going, Miami Beach was going to be destroyed. Nobody wanted to live here. Nobody wanted to visit here. Nobody wanted to even, in any way, associate or come to Miami Beach. South Beach was a war zone. You couldn't walk the streets, either during the day or night.

Our police department was so overwhelmed, and they never got the credit for what it took to turn around and make things happen and make things much better. It's a shame because the politicians take the credit. The developers take the credit. The Historic Preservation League takes the credit, but no one turns around and says, "Thank you, Miami Police Department. Thank you, Miami Dade Sheriffs." They paid a tremendous price because every time they went to answer a call, Charlie risked his life. I saw things when I rode were just horrific, the way these criminals would beat the elderly, and kill them, and murder them. It was very sad.

An elderly friend of mine, Elsie Cohen, was raped and beaten to death almost, within an inch of her life. I was riding with Charlie, we found her body right over here on Lennox Avenue. Thank God we did. Thank God we did because it was so sad. It was close to 7:30 in the morning. She went out to get milk, and three of Castro's criminals turned and beat and raped her. I wrote about it. Nobody gave credit to Charlie. Nobody gave credit to the police department, and it really bothers me. It bothers me to this day.

Kathy: Do you have any questions?



Carl: No.

Kathy: I think we've covered the waterfront.

Carl: Is there something you feel we should be talking about that we haven't.

Alex: I think you've covered everything. The only thing I would probably close with is [pause] Are there any fears you have in the future, or any concerns of what could happen to Miami Beach to turn it back to what it once was? I don't know if we covered that, did we?

Kathy: Well, we talked about how it keeps evolving and surviving.

Alex: Any dangers in the future?

Kathy: You've described how it was on the brink of extinction, nearly, because of the fear factor. You mention that it might price itself out to the point where only people of wealth can come here, that the real estate values go so high. We talked about it maybe being under water, and having to come here by kayak. Is there anything else?

Alex: No, I think that's it. You did well.

Kathy: Just one minute. I'll ask you the legacy question. You served as mayor for three terms. You were a two or three term commissioner before that. You have given quite a bit of your adult life to Miami Beach. Like you say, everybody makes mistakes. You've admitted that you made mistakes. Is there something that you feel you are leaving in a legacy in a positive way? I ask almost everyone this question. This is not a pandering question. This is an honest, straightforward question.

Alex: I'm heartbroken. I thought you were pandering towards me, Kathy. [laughter from Kathy] I thought I was special! I was so excited! It's the first softball you gave me. I figured, holy mackerel! You're weakening as the interview is going. I felt the romance there with that question.

I think the one legacy I can leave... I have nothing to lose, as I stated to you. There's nothing they can say about me, there's nothing they can do to me, there's nothing they can write about me that I haven't said, done, or written about myself. I think the greatest legacy that I can give is honesty. I think the greatest legacy I can give is to make an awareness of the gratitude we should have for the men and women of the Miami Police Department, for the men and women like Charlie Seraydar, the men and women like Dennis Ward, and like Thomas Hunker, for the people like Donald Kramer, who's passed away and people have forgotten, Scott Rakow, or Rabbi Webberman who put his congregation during the times. These are the true heroes of South Beach, not the politicians, not the developers, and certainly not the Historic Preservation. They weren't putting skin in the game the way Charlie was. They weren't putting skin in the game, and risking their lives the way the men and women of the police department were. They were on the sidelines.



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To me, the one great thing I can do is point the flashlight, or point the spotlight, in the right direction – to the true heroes of Miami Beach.

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