



Herb Sosa Interview

Kathy Hersh: It's February 10th, and we are in the Community Church of Miami Beach, and my name is Kathy Hersh. I'm interviewing Herb Sosa about his involvement in the Miami Beach preservation of the art deco district. My first question is to ask when you first came to Miami Beach. You live on the beach, right?

Herb Sosa: Right. I live on Miami Beach. I was born in Miami, one of about five people that are natives. I first moved to Miami Beach early 80s, and I lived in Kendall, like many other people did, and first was fortunate enough to find a foreclosure house on Le [phonetic] [00:47] Gorson Alton. It was a mess. It was a mess, but it was a beautiful, beautiful art deco palace. I'd say that was probably one of my earliest- when I first became in love with Miami Beach and its history. Probably, if truth be known, my passion for preservation probably started in high school, because I was fortunate enough to go to Miami Senior High School, which is a gorgeous Mediterranean revival building, so when I look back, I think that was probably the first time I really appreciated architecture for its beauty.

Kathy: Is that what drew you over to the beach, you think?

Herb: What drew me over to the beach was a combination of things. It was the sense of neighborhood. Again, I'm from Miami. I love it. I love South Florida, but as much as the weather and the beaches and everything else are a huge draw, we're not- or we weren't as neighborhood oriented, or as community oriented as hopefully we are now. Miami Beach, to me, was really about the only place that had that sense of community, and that was true for many, many things, for historic preservation, for the LGBT community, for the diversity of everybody's from somewhere else. I love that. That's the kind of community I love to live in, so Miami Beach, to me, was the perfect place.

Kathy: It's kind of ironic that there is a sense of community, and yet everyone is from somewhere else. Can you explain that, possibly?

Herb: Oh, I wish I could. I don't think that it's something that needs to be explained, per se. I see it more what draws us together is really that diversity. It's really that cosmopolitan feel. A very wise person taught me years ago that every great city in the world comes into its own after its first 100 years of existence, and it makes sense, because if you do the math, Miami proper is really just over 100 years old, and Miami Beach just celebrated its centennial, and when you think about the great elements of historic preservation, of diversity of community, certainly you look at Art Basel and some of the other cultural institutions that have come around in the last few years, we're growing up. We're maturing. You look at the Faena Project, so many things- we're really coming into our own, I believe, as a community, and I think that has everything to do with a sense of pride and sense of place.

Kathy: Tell us how you got involved with the historic preservation movement here.

Herb: Very interesting story. I worked for Burdine's Department Stores, which eventually became Macy's. Burdine's was the Florida store. It was 47 plus department stores, and my first, I guess dip, into the historic preservation pond, so to speak, was I used to call our display warehouse every day and ask for different things to be shipped to different stores, and the person on the other side of that phone, or the other end of that line, was Dennis Wilhelm. Dennis Wilhelm and his husband Michael Kinerk were instrumental in historic preservation, right alongside Barbara Capitman and Leonard Horwitz and Andy [phonetic] [04:14] Foudegas, and the rest of us. They were probably the first ones that kind of drew me in. It was a combination of things.

It was that, it was my appreciation for the Miami Beach Burdine store, which at the time was a little run down, but it was still absolutely magnificent, with beautiful murals on the ceilings and beautiful details that really just drew me, and of course, Barbara Capitman. My first experience in meeting her, quite candidly, I didn't know who she was, and I walked in to a meeting, and all of a sudden this lady, a little disheveled, grabs me by the hand and pulls me aside and instantly just starts lecturing me on the marriage, if you will, of the Paris Exhibition of 1925 art deco and all things Egyptian, or the King Tut Exhibit, which also was traveling for the first time around that era. She just kept pulling papers and little clippings of newspapers and little notes out of this canvas bag, and I'm thinking, who is this woman? Why is she telling me all this.

I got to say, 20 minutes later, I got it. I got it. And then, somebody whispered in my ear, "You know that's Barbara Capitman. She's the one that's starting this whole movement." Quite honestly, I was hooked. I was hooked from that point on.

Kathy: What was the first thing you can remember you did as sort of joining that cadre?

Herb: First thing would probably be my efforts, much to the dismay of my bosses, my efforts to really try and revive the Miami Beach Burdine store. It was scheduled to be closed at that point, and I just really loved everything about its architecture and its design, and I would secretly put money into that store and fix it up and send props and all of that, and I think that that was my first way of kind of joining, if you will, marrying my personal life and my professional life.

Certainly, getting a certificate out of Barbara Capitman's little canvas bag that she would fill out on the spot with a sharpie, that also was kind of inspiring. Then, I think, when it all kind of came together was when I was - I became involved, obviously, with Miami Design Preservation League on various levels.

I designed, then opened the very first gift shop they ever had at 661 Washington Avenue. When I say designed, literally from painting the floor to designing product, and really just about every other role that MBPL had. I think when it all came together was when I was asked to be the

executive director of MBPL. To me, that was a dream job. It was a dream job. It was brought together my passions for my city, for my community.

I am the son of exiles. My parents were born in Cuba. My roots are very important to me, and where I come from is very important to me, so though my blood and my soul, if you will, might come from somewhere else, this is where I'm from, and these are my roots. The combination of all of that really, I think, makes me a better person.

Kathy: What year was it that you were executive director of MBPL? Do you know? Or years? She was still alive?

Herb: Absolutely. I had the privilege of knowing her, working alongside her, not a long time, but certainly several years.

Kathy: What was she like to work with?

Herb: She was difficult. She was difficult. I'm not going to kid you, but I have not met a person that was more intriguing, more of a pied piper, more of an inspiration, somebody that you just wanted to follow, just wanted to work with, and I'm not a follower, but I definitely was a follower with Barbara. She was just so impassioned in her belief, and when she looked at these buildings that all of us drove by day after day, and she saw something that most of us didn't, and that was intoxicating. That was intoxicating.

Personally, she was a – I'll say it again – disheveled and disorganized, and had this very particular voice that if you heard it, you'd never forget it, but that was all part of who she was. That was all part of who she was. She was relentless, and thank God for that, because because of her being relentless, we are all here, and we not only saved an amazing city, but we established the first mid-20th century historic architectural district in the world. We have grown to 11 plus districts.

Even beyond that, I think, if there's anything that I could say would be a huge part of her legacy, is obviously the buildings. Driving around and seeing the buildings, without question, but I think it's really much more than that.

It's really the community that we live- you know, that's the true test is Barbara's unfortunately left this world, but the fact that we have a vibrant city, a diverse city, the fact that we have elected countless officials and committee members, and people in power if you will, in decision-making roles in Miami Beach that all somehow find their roots back to Barbara and to the historic preservation movement. To me, that's the biggest testament to she was here and she made a difference.

Kathy: She recruited, not intentionally, a lot of people from the gay community. A lot of that cadre came from the gay community. Can you explain that phenomenon?

Herb: I think this is something that is certainly not unique to Miami Beach and



certainly not unique to the art deco district, but absolutely, I would say a pivotal part, or a turning point if you will, in historic preservation, but really looking at it a little more globally, the gay community has, as far back as we want to go, really been the catalyst in turning a lot of neighborhoods around. I personally believe that that has to do with a variety of things. I think that we go into neighborhoods that aren't shiny and pretty, that are a little rough around the edges. More often than not, the schools are not great, the parks are not great. They're rough. They're rough. I think that that is attributed to a variety of things. Up until recently, we couldn't legally be married. We couldn't legally have children, certainly not in Florida, and I think that historic preservation created a sense of community, created a sense of family, created a sense of purpose.

Some would say that the gay community has talents as well, creatively. Some do. I've met a few that don't. Nevertheless, I think that the collective of the community and bringing it all together, and also the sense of fitting in to someplace where you don't fit in, but all of a sudden you do, because we're all misfits of sorts, and I think that anybody that is a zealot, that is passionate about anything, somehow that brings those unlikely characters together, and I think that the LGBT community, the gay community, has everything to do with that, and unquestionably had a huge part in the renaissance of Miami Beach.

Kathy: You mentioned political office. We did an interview with Cy Gelber, and he gave a lot of credit to the LGBT community for his becoming mayor. Were you around during-

Herb: Absolutely. I was honored to receive a Herb Sosa Proclamation from Mayor Gelber, so yes, absolutely.

Kathy: Tell us about that and how everybody pitched in to get him elected.

Herb: I think again it was a combination of things. I think that the preservation movement, I would argue, was probably a little more difficult to get city hall on our side than the LGBT movement, and I say that every generally. Nothing's ever simple, but I believe, at least in my recollection, it was a lot more difficult to convince our commission and our mayors – not Mayor Gelber, necessarily, but just the political climate at the time, that all this was worth saving. I was around when we wanted to tear everything down south of 5th Street and turn it into a Club Med and dig up the streets.

I was around to see, unfortunately, the Senator and the New Yorker torn down, and countless other buildings, but I also put my money where my mouth is, and I invested in this area, and I live right in the heart of the art deco, or the architectural historic district. I do to this day. I love it. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. In that process of historic preservation, I think it allowed for a climate in this city of diversity of openness, of creativity, which I'd like to think are certainly characteristics of the LGBT community as well. I think that with that sensitivity came also sensitivity to diversity for humans, for all of us.



- Kathy:** Do you think that part of the initial difficulty in getting city hall on your side had to do maybe with discrimination or prejudice against the LGBT community?
- Herb:** No. I personally wouldn't say that I felt that it was blatant discrimination against. I think that Miami Beach proper grew so quickly and became so diverse so quickly, we went from the not so attractive moniker of God's Waiting Room, we were primarily an elderly Jewish community. I used to come to South Beach when I was in high school, but you'd go to South Point Pier and then sit by the pier by the dog track. There was no such thing as South Beach. It certainly wasn't sexy. It certainly wasn't a place you wanted to hang out as a young person. Then the Mariel boatlift came and brought 160,000 plus people to Miami Shores in eight weeks, and we had nowhere to put them as a community, and Miami Beach became the best and the worst of places for that, because then you had this explosion, if you will, of bringing together a lot of criminals, because sadly, amongst the many great people that came here with Mariel boatlift, a lot of criminals were also forced to come here, so you had this very toxic combination in Miami Beach.
- I mention all of that because I think that since that, because of a variety of things, again, historic preservation, the LGBT movement, many other countries migrating here, we have very quickly changed the demographic of Miami Beach and changed the vocabulary of Miami Beach, so I think that, in fairness, I don't believe that it was a plan to discriminate against any particular group. It's just we were only one or two groups as a community, and all of a sudden, it's 30 or 50 or whatever. We are a very diverse, very cosmopolitan, international city now, and I think along with that, there's growing pains, but I'd like to think we're doing really well, especially with LGBT rights. We lead the nation, which is a lot to say. We lead the nation in LGBT rights, and that's a lot to say for a small, little barrier island.
- Kathy:** Give an example.
- Herb:** Certainly, a lot of the laws that have been passed, a lot of the antidiscrimination laws, a lot of the laws to increase quality of life, really, for the LGBT community- our city commission and mayors have gone to great lengths to give us rights that, at a state level, we don't have, and certainly on a national level, we don't, so we've been at the forefront of that, and we continue to do that. Now, that's a combination. It's a partnership, if you will, between the community, which has to stay relentless and has to stay vigilant, but also elected officials that understand their community and respect it.
- Kathy:** Certainly, Cy Gelber said that he made some appointments of gay people afterwards as an acknowledgement of the role that they played in getting him elected.
- Herb:** I totally agree, but I'd like to see it in a slightly different perspective. We all have little checkboxes that we can check off and say this is who I am. I'm this, and I'm this, and I'm this. I certainly have a lot of checkboxes,



but I'd like to think that in my particular case, I've chaired the Historic Preservation Board of Miami Beach off and on since 1994. I believe I have the distinct pleasure of being the longest serving chairman of the historic preservation board in totality. Was I appointed because I am an openly gay man, because I'm the son of immigrants or exiles? I'd like to think I was appointed because I was the best person for that role, and I'd like to think that a lot of the appointments, if not all of the appointments throughout the years, have been in that context. Mattie Bower. Mattie Bower came out of the historic preservation movement. Was she elected three times, I believe, as commissioner as well as mayor, because she was a Hispanic woman and a preservationist? I'd like to think that she was the best qualified candidate. Again, we grow, and we mature as a community, and certainly as a city, and I'm very proud to be from Miami Beach and to be a voter here and to be part of the movement.

Kathy: Many people have expressed the thought that if it hadn't been for the LGBT community, the preservation movement not have been so successful. How do you feel about that idea?

Herb: It's tough to be a Monday morning quarterback, and it's very difficult to say they should have, could have, would have. I think that it wasn't any one particular group. I think that, again, when you look at the combination of Barbara Capitman leading the way, having the vision, looking at these rundown old buildings that had been left behind, because you have to look at the history. You have to look at the evolution of Miami Beach. We start with the Brown's Hotel in 1915, 16 units, no restaurant, no pool, nothing really by today's standards, and in 50, 60 years, we have the Fontainebleau and the Eden Roc with bowling alleys and skating rinks and malls. My God. That's- it's overwhelming, when you think of it. In that context, for Barbara Capitman to come down here as a tourist and see these old buildings that had been left behind, because quite honestly, they weren't as attractive. People didn't want to stay in them anymore, and they, for the most part, became retirement communities. For her to have that vision, for her to have that energy to have people like Leonard Horowitz, Andy Foudegas, myself, many of us, to drink the Kool Aid and follow her in this process. I think that's what made this Miami Beach what it is today, and if some of us happen to be gay along the way, some of us happen to be Hispanic or Jewish or whatever the case is, I think that's just icing on the cake.

Speaker 3: I really want to get to the [inaudible] [21:34] of the gay community.

Herb: How did this become, first of all, a safe enclave?

Kathy: There had to be some kind of- maybe a pivotal point.

Herb: Let me kind of-

Kathy: Okay. Think it over.

Herb: I got it. South Florida's not often thought of as history changing when it comes to the LGBT movement, but in fact, I would argue we're right on up



there with San Francisco and New York, and why I say that, you got to go back a couple of years. You've got to go back to 1971, 72, when we had this incredible woman by the name of Anita Bryant, who was America's darling at the time. She was a former Miss America, and she represented the Orange Growers Association. She was on TV every single day. We all knew her. We all heard her music and saw her beauty.

Well, all of a sudden, she decided that everything that was wrong in South Florida was because of the gay community and because we were just horrible individuals, and Jesus didn't love us, and all of these really, really horrible, horrible things, and she started a crusade to strip us of whatever value we had as humans, not only in the law books at a county level, but just personally, just strip us of any dignity.

That was pivotal, I think, for the LGBT community, of which, I have to say, one would argue there wasn't an LGBT community, certainly not a united one, in South Florida, or pretty much in any other community. When you look at Stonewall in New York, that came out of anger, and that's what started an LGBT movement. There really wasn't one until that, and San Francisco, you could argue the murder of Harvey Milk also started a movement. Well, Anita started that movement here for us. She united us.

Maybe wasn't something that many people wanted to even think about then, but it's your life. It's your life, and it's your rights, and it's your dignity. That created a movement. Certainly, people like Ruth Shack and many others that were in politics at the time were allies of the LGBT community, and we started to unite, and we started to say, "You know what? No. We do deserve respect, and we are good people." Simple as that. I go back to that.

Then, fast forward to 2002, when for the most part, we felt comfortable as an LGBT community. This is paradise. It's beautiful outside. There aren't really a whole lot of laws or threats against us. Were there things to work out and more rights to be gained? Absolutely, but life was pretty good for the most part. In 2002, there was a challenge to the Miami Dade County Human Rights Ordinance, which goes back to Anita Bryant days, that protected LGBT rights in housing and in employment, and in a variety of other things. That was threatened by a series of write-in signatures by groups that claimed to be Christians.

That united the community again. That brought together a lot of people that were maybe a little complacent, and maybe weren't as active as they could have or should have been, but it certainly brought our community together, and we were able to, as a community, with allies- this is not an effort of just the LGBT community. It was really bringing everybody together. We were able to overturn that threat to us.

The very organization that I run, Unity Coalition, Coalicion Unida, was born out of that movement. We realized that there wasn't a voice for the Latino Hispanic LGBT community in South Florida, and this was right after I worked for Miami Design Preservation League. I had no intention of



starting a non-profit, certainly not a civil rights non-profit. I often would joke, I save buildings, I don't save people, but here I am, and I couldn't be prouder of the work that I've been able to do and the people that have come along with me in this process, in this journey, if you will, for equality.

That's all it is. It's living in harmony with other people. It's not about me having better rights or special rights than you. Quite the opposite. It's about all of us living and working together. I mention all of that because I think that that has everything to do with why Miami Beach, and South Beach in particular, has evolved as a gay mecca, if you will, both for residents and for tourists.

I think that we have established not only a beautiful canvas of weather and beach and palm trees and architecture, but we've really been able to establish a safe haven, if you will, of a community of diversity, of a community of acceptance. I am not a fan of boundaries. I'm not a fan of saying this is the gay neighborhood. This is the Jewish neighborhood. I don't think that makes us good human beings. I think that mixing and meeting each other and talking to people has everything to do with that.

This amazing building that we're in, it's a 1927 Miami Beach Community Church, this is right on Lincoln Road. My God, you're right in the smack of life in Miami and Miami Beach, and everybody that walks through that door knows that this is an opening and affirming church, and to me, it's a microcosm of just that, of our community. We're all different. We're all different, and yes, it's important to have protections and not discriminate against any one group, but I think our strength is really in the diversity of it. It's not this is my group and that's your group. Did that- I know I kind of drifted. Did that-

Speaker 3: I'm delighted.

Kathy: That's excellent.

Herb: I heard myself halfway through. I drifted.

Kathy: No, it's excellent.

Speaker 3: I'd like to go to the drag queens [inaudible] [28:25] part of this community.

Kathy: Oh, yes. Yes, [crosstalk] [28:30] yes, yes.

Speaker 3: How they've interacted with police and [inaudible] [28:32] how that has changed.

Herb: Okay.

Kathy: Once upon a time...

Herb: Once upon a time, exactly. Miami Beach's history- you really can't



separate the LGBT community, or gays, let's just say, because the terminology may not have been a community. You can't really separate one from the other, even from its earliest inception. When you think of how we became this billion dollar sandbar, there was a lot of play. There was a lot of illegal activity. This was certainly a place to escape from the rest of the country.

One could argue that this is really the birthplace of middle income family vacations, long before Disney ever existed. A lot of the union bosses and a lot of the factory owners, and even some mobsters from up north, Chicago, New Jersey, Philadelphia, that whole area invested in this area, so when you look at the history and you study your history, and you say well how is it that when the rest of the country is going through a major depression and coming to a screeching halt, things are exploding and vibrant out here. Well, this was an escape. This was our adult Disney long before Disney existed.

When you look at the architecture of the buildings, that tells the story right there. You have these beautiful fantasy facades, very grand lobbies, and pretty humble rooms when you really get to it. Well, because this is an escape. We see the beautiful cruise ships going down Government Cut today. Very few people could afford to go on those cruise ships back then, so these buildings became that escape, that fantasy. I believe that that, from its very early beginnings, was true for everybody. It was an escape.

It was a fantasy for many groups. It certainly was for the Jewish community here, to a certain extent for the black community, although we would celebrate performers at the big hotels, but they couldn't spend the night on Miami Beach, so that was certainly not a proud moment in our history, but certainly gays, from a very early time, were a vital part of our community. We had restaurants like The Famous, which back in the 1940s was fully staffed by drag queens.

Very few cities could say that. Very few cities could claim that. They certainly were not shut down. This was not an underground club. This was one of the most celebrated restaurant supper clubs in Miami Beach. There were a variety of casino type clubs up and down Dade Boulevard that also had a variety of clientele and performance.

I think that, looking at female impersonators, or drag queens, I think that they have been an integral part, again, of Miami Beach from the 1930s, and the continue to be today. We have been fortunate, in general as a community, that we haven't had to have the physical conflicts with authority as what happened in Stonewall in New York City. That doesn't mean we haven't had conflicts. That doesn't mean- that people have been attacked wrongly by citizens, and often by authority as well, because of how they looked or how they were perceived. That's something that we still work at as a community, but I'm proud to say that today, both our elected officials, our police, fire, really have a really great relationship and understanding with the LGBT community.

Kathy:

That's good to hear. That's good.

Herb: It's true. It's true.

Kathy: I love that banner. I covet that banner. [Crosstalk] [32:47] Are you still rolling?

Speaker 3: Yes. [Crosstalk] [32:50]

Herb: Let me just add a little piece, because I think it might tie in to what you're saying. When we look at Miami Beach today, and we look at historic preservation, and we look at the gay community in particular, which we've been talking about, some people would say, "Well, it's not as impassioned as it used to be. A lot of the gay community has moved out, moved away. Historic preservationists may not be as passionate as they were." I would disagree. I would disagree.

I think that what some people might confuse as less than passionate or less than interested, or moving on, I see it as the very success of everything we've all been hoping for. Integrating and working together and moving on to other things that are also important for quality of life. When you look at our community, yes, there's very specific gay businesses and gay magnets, if you will, around the community, but I'm far prouder of the community as a whole, I'm far prouder when I see families, same sex families or couples that can walk freely down the street holding hands on Lincoln Road and Alton Road and North Beach, not just on a certain block in a certain area of town, and that's true for everybody.

That's true for the diversity of our religious groups, the diversity of everybody, of everybody that's Miami Beach. I don't see that as we've gotten lazy or we don't have that spark in us. I think we very much have that spark in us. Historic preservation is a daily fight, and it's a daily education. The very fact that everybody in our community comes from somewhere else means every day, we've got to re-educate and reteach and keep those passions alive, again, whether it's the LGBT community or the historic preservation community, but I, by far, do not feel that we've given up or that we're done by any means. I'm proud to be here. I hopefully will be here a long time, and I'm proud of our community, and I'm proud of the diversity that our community has.

Speaker 3: I have one final [inaudible] [35:09] Area. In most cities, it was because being gay was illegal. Gay activities were illegal. There was a gay underground. There were gay clubs where very often, authorities didn't bother. Can you identify- was there sort of a gay underground in Miami Beach? You mentioned the open feature face, but I'm wondering, was there a gay underground, and where was it?

Kathy: That's a good question.

Herb: There really wasn't, but I got you. [Crosstalk] [35:48]

Kathy: Then say so.

**Herb:**

Yes, I got you. When we look at the underground Miami Beach, if you will, it's not just an LGBT community thing. You look at the very architecture of our buildings. We have the parapets, or the walls, if you will. When you look up at some of these art deco buildings, and they look very square and flat, there are these walls around the roof that some walls are particularly high. Some walls are four or five feet tall, when there's no logical or practical reason for that. That was during a time of prohibition.

Again, this was a party place. This was a party place, and those walls, when the police would walk around and do their nightly watch, they'd hear music and they'd hear giggling and whatever, clanking of glasses, but they couldn't figure out quite where it was because of these parapets. I'm pretty sure- I don't know this for a fact, but I'm pretty sure that the LGBT community also had an underground, if you will, in Miami Beach.

Let's not forget that it really wasn't until just a couple of decades ago that we've even coined phrases like LGBT or gay community, or gay, for that matter. Gay meant something very different in the 1930s than it does today. Was it always paradise for the LGBT community? No, of course not.

Do we still have challenges? Absolutely, we do. At least, in my adult life, living in Miami Beach, there have always been gay bars. There have been gay community centers. There have been places, whether they have the rainbow flag outside or not, places that have been welcoming and have just been welcoming to the community, but again, more importantly than those specific gay places, for me, are the places that just welcome everybody, and I go back to that because that's the Miami Beach that I know. That's the Miami Beach that I love, and the Miami Beach that I'm passionate about is the Miami Beach where I'm just like everybody else, and everybody else is just like me, and we live together.

Like any family, we argue, we have issues, but we work on them. We work on them, and I'm proud to say that whatever issues historic preservation might have, politics, LGBT community, this is a city that allows for diversity and allows for discourse and allows for disagreements, but we work it out. We really do work it out.

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