

The Miami Herald

BUSINESSMONDAY

December 24, 2012

Circulation: 160,505

Promoting downtown Miami

The executive director of the Miami DDA reflects on how far the urban core has come.

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When Alyce Robertson moved to Miami from South Bend, Ind., in 1979 as a management trainee for Miami-Dade County, the downtown skyline boasted only two "towers" (the courthouse and the Freedom Tower) and the Cocaine Cowboys were about to stampe.

In the years since, banks, law firms and international offices have moved into more than 94 towers, and more than 80,000 people have come to call downtown home.

Q. Tell us about your background. What did you learn in previous jobs that prepared you for what you do today?

A. I spent 30 years in Miami-Dade County government in a variety of positions, including the Budget Office, the County Manager's Office and 10 years as the Assistant Director of the Department of Environmental Resources Management (DERM), where I supervised the education and outreach and the enforcement divisions of the department. I learned how to wield both the carrot and the stick. I would much rather wield the carrot and edu-

cate people as to why a sustainable environment is both in their human interest but also their economic interest. I also learned by being part of a large bureaucracy how to get things done in spite of it.

Q. What exactly is the Miami Downtown Development Authority? How long has it been around, and what is its current mission? How is it funded?

A. The Miami DDA was formed in 1965 to grow, strengthen and promote the economic health and vitality of downtown Miami. As an independent agency of the city, we advocate, plan and execute business development, urban planning, capital improvements and marketing and communications strategies. Our focus is twofold: sustain the commercial and residential sector growth within the urban core that has helped downtown Miami evolve into an international destination, and make meaningful improvements at the street level to enhance quality of life for our residents and visitors. We are funded by an ad valorem assessment of up to .5 mills for properties within the DDA district.

Q. You often are in the press because of your position as

executive director of the DDA. But what exactly does your job entail on a daily basis?

A. We have a lot to promote these days. Downtown Miami has gone from ghost town to boom town in a very short time span. The evolution of Miami's urban core is the number one story behind Miami's dramatic economic turnaround. We are seeing billions of dollars from around the world being invested not in South Florida, but in downtown Miami. We've gone from a city known for its beaches and bikinis to one that is recognized as a center for international commerce as well as arts and culture. ... Downtown is home to every major international bank and law firm, we have more 4-star hotels per capita than anywhere else in the state, our condo market is booming, more businesses are opening each year and retail is thriving, and our nightlife rivals that of the world's best cities. So you ask about my job — I wake up every day focused on telling that story. I sell downtown Miami, and I love it.

Q. Tell us what was downtown Miami like when you came here in 1979?

A. Though I had never been [to Miami] before, I thought

of it as a retirement village. Boy was I wrong. I moved here less than a year before the McDuffie riots and the Mariel Boat Lift. Downtown Miami had the Courthouse and the Freedom Tower for tall buildings, no Metrorail or Metromover, and County Hall was yet to be constructed. The ethnic strife in the community was awful. The cocaine problem led to many drug-related deaths. My Hoosier relatives wondered why I stayed. Fortunately, we have come a long way since those days!

Q. When you came into your current position, downtown's condos were ghost towers, and real estate soothsayers predicted it would take years for

them to fill. Now the place is buzzing. What caused the change?

A. We owe our thanks to the private sector that had the foresight to build vertically and create the level of urban development we have today. More than \$13 billion was invested in housing and commercial devel-

opment during the real estate

boom. Many criticized Miami for its overbuilding but the old adage of 'if you build it, they will come' certainly rang true.... Today, [condo occupancy] stands at more than 95 percent, with more new construction underway in the urban core than anywhere else in South Florida.

Q. Pretty much everyone complains about the traffic downtown (well, everywhere, but especially downtown.) New projects like the two museums, Brickell CityCentre and the new Zaha Hadid-designed condo planned near the Arena are undoubtedly going to make the streets even more clogged. What's the answer?

A. Since Miami developed

•TURN TO Q&A, 7G



ALYCE ROBERTSON

- **Job title:** Executive Director, Miami Downtown Development Authority
- **Years in position:** nearly 5 years
- **Education:** Undergraduate (BA) in Spanish and Portuguese; Masters in Public Administration – both from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana; junior year studied overseas in Sao Paulo, Brazil
- **Personal:** Married 26 years to Neil Rob-

ertson, lawyer with the Coral Gables firm Daniels, Kashtan, Downs, Robertson and McGirney

• **Children:** Anne Marie – 22, Miami-Dade College, just returned from a semester at Kingston University, London; Katherine – 19 sophomore at Wagner College, Staten Island, NY

What should downtown Miami be in five years?

• Q&A, FROM 6G

as a city after the advent of the automobile, the vision for growth hinged on suburban sprawl as opposed to urban density. Today that's changing....As a result, we're seeing more sustainable practices such as the use of public transit and more pedestrian-friendly activities. While it isn't a perfect system, downtown Miami has one of the most robust public transit systems in the entire state. Metrorail is now connected to the Miami International Airport and the new Biscayne/Brickell trolley is serving as an enhancement to other options such as the Metromover. And in a few short years, All Aboard Florida will connect downtown Miami to Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach and Orlando. These amenities won't entirely solve our traffic problem, but it will certainly be a big improvement.

Q. What kind of effect, if any, has the Miami Heat's success had on downtown?

A. The Heat, with "The Big Three," are obviously a huge draw and have made a tremendous economic impact on downtown Miami. That said, the DDA has worked overtime over the past two years in sending the message that the Miami Heat actually play in downtown Miami, as opposed to South Beach. ...The national broadcast stations that cover the NBA refer to downtown Miami now as opposed to the Beach. And major corporations like BMW are using our skyline and city streets as backdrops for ad campaigns.

Q. Downtown is a long way from Sun Life Stadium. From the perspective of downtown development, does it matter whether the Super Bowl comes to Miami?

A. There are approximately

6,600 rooms in downtown Miami. If the Super Bowl is awarded in 2016, we need all hands on deck to welcome the 50th anniversary of the Super Bowl. The international publicity alone is worth hosting the Super Bowl, so we need to make it happen. As far as competing events, I look to community leaders to come together and make this event happen for Miami and South Florida as a whole.

Q. What's your vision of what downtown could and should be in five years?

A. I want to see downtown Miami fulfill its vision as a world class, global city on the water. To continue on this trajectory, we need to expand its global reach into new and emerging markets such as technology, finance, arts and culture. There is a lot of traction already underway in this regard, with programs such as Launch Pad Tech, an accelerator program created in partnership between the University of Miami, [Miami-Dade County] and the Miami DDA, fostering a startup and entrepreneurial culture that is helping drive innovation and diversify Miami's economy. Additionally, major mixed-use and public works projects underway — from the Miami International Airport and Port of Miami expansions, to Brickell City Centre and Museum Park — are helping to elevate the stature of our city, putting it on the map as a major international destination.

Q. In your view, what are the pros and cons of having a destination gambling resort downtown on the site now occupied by The Miami Herald?

A. The Miami DDA Board has not taken a position on this issue, so I cannot speak to it directly. But regardless of one's opinion, it's important to recognize the value

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in having so much interest from major corporations from across the globe. The city and its stakeholders will have meaningful conversations and debates on the topic of gambling in the year ahead, which is only made possible because major international investors are setting their sights on Miami.

Q. We know everyone hates to play favorites, but tell us three of your favorite downtown restaurants that might not be household names?

A. Hard to pick, considering more new restaurants are opening in downtown than anywhere else in the city! Ceviche 105 — the best ceviche in Miami. Kork has a wine list that is extensive and a basement perfect for private parties. City Hall is the place to see and be seen. I love Tre, even though I

must disclose that one of my bosses owns it, it feels like “Cheers” when you eat there. Tuyo at the Miami Dade College Culinary Institute has great food and views. And I love the new Toro Toro by celeb chef Richard Sandoval at the InterContinental Miami hotel. On Brickell, the new PM steak and seafood restaurant is fantastic, and I can’t wait for China Grille and Meat Market to open. OK, that’s more than three, but there are so many dining experiences in downtown Miami, it’s hard to pick favorites. We produce a dining guide that’s available in print or online (www.miamidda.com).

Q. Your job involves a lot of negotiating between developers, landowners, city officials. What’s your No. 1 tip

on negotiating successfully?

A. Patience and well-timed impatience. I also try to see the problem from the perspective of the different parties and find common elements.

Q. What’s the best piece of advice you ever got?

A. Treat people how you want to be treated.

Q. What course do you wish you had taken — in school or afterward — that would help you today?

A. Change management — how do you stay on top of a fast-paced world when I was raised in a pre-digital age.

Q. What one question haven’t we asked that you think we should have asked?

A. How does a Polish, Catholic girl from South Bend adapt to Miami? I am 3rd

and 4th generation from the immigrant experience and while I didn’t experience communism first hand, I visited Poland during communism and was grateful my ancestors sought new opportunities in America. I cannot fathom the disruption of being forced from your homeland by either a brutal ruler or extreme poverty. I think empathy is one characteristic Miami could use more of.

Q. What is one thing your co-workers might not know about you that would surprise them?

A. Well, they already know I make my own sausage and consider it highly preferable to watching legislation being made. I played cello next to Jonathan (Jay) Pollard, convicted spy for Israel, in my high school orchestra.