

Visionaries who make downtown focus of growing Miami

By SUSAN DANSEYAR

Long-term residents of Miami who remember the city's downtown as a very different place than it is today are grateful to those who had the vision to help make it the focus of a growing, expanding community.

Many have pointed to the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts as an early pioneer in the downtown's transformation. Johan Zietsman, its CEO and president, thinks of philanthropist **Adrienne Arsht** as one of the best at making downtown Miami the focus of a growing and expanding community, given her "catalytic gift" that saw the center built, and started the area's dramatic transformation. "She saw a future for Miami that wasn't seen or shared by everybody," Mr. Zietsman said. "She envisioned a development that would turn Miami into a world cultural center."

It was years ago, when the area was a blight, that Ms. Arsht imagined the center would be a draw for world-class artists that would put Miami on the map. Mr. Zietsman

said. "For her to support a project of \$30 million showed her vision of investment in the area. She knew it would be transformative, a catalyst for the area."

The area changed immediately, with other cultural centers being built in the Arsht's wake, he said. "Even today, everyone would say that having a world-class arts center is huge for Miami. Former Mayor Manny Dias told me that property tax revenue skyrocketed after the Arsht was built."

Downtown looked quite different when **Philippe Houdard** moved to Miami in 1997. The CEO and co-founder of Pipeline said downtown was the place where you saw people in suits and ties, an area with a lot of banks and law firms. "That's what represented business activity," Mr. Houdard said. "It was dead after 5 p.m. with no activity."

Someone he feels is among the best in helping this community grow and expand is **Nitin Motwani**, the managing partner of Miami Worldcenter Group, and with whom he co-chairs the Miami Downtown Development Authority's Enterprise Committee. Mr. Motwani has a major role in expanding and enlivening downtown with the immense Miami Worldcenter project, Mr. Houdard said. "He has great credibility as well as vision. He's engaging people in the area to invest in and attract companies to Miami's downtown." Mr. Houdard has observed Mr. Motwani in action, heading up the DDA's Enterprise Committee, and thinks he is excellent at thinking through ideas.

County Commissioner Eileen Higgins of District 5 named Mr. Motwani and Mr. Houdard as a duo for effectively bringing about positive change and growth downtown. As the co-chairs of the DDA's Enterprise Committee, she said, they are a dynamic team and have done a wonderful job on advancing recruitment of companies to the area.

In the time Ms. Higgins has lived in Miami, she's definitely seen change downtown — where she lives — but thinks it's still a work in progress.

"It's an area that is most behind in development but it's the 'next place,' she said. "There are a ton of things going on and a lot of optimism about its future. There's momentum for the transformation."



Nitin Motwani helps city grow.



Joy Trevor fighting for schools.

When Ms. Higgins thinks about those driving the momentum for change, it's what she calls "the bottom up" people who are contributing on a daily basis. Many are residents who have to fight for their neighborhood, she said, and then end up being leaders.

Among the fights still to be had downtown is education, Ms. Higgins said. There's no elementary school and no real middle school nearby.

As families move in, many are faced with the decision to move away because of schools, she said.

"Communities aren't just where you work, live and play," she said. "It should be work, live, play and learn." She thinks **Joy Trevor** is one of the leaders in fighting for more school seats downtown and, as a member of the Downtown Neighbors Alliance's education committee, has made great strides.

Ms. Higgins also applauds **Amal Kabbani**, who for years was president of the Downtown Neighbors Alliance. "She fights for downtown and is making sure central business district gets the attention it deserves."

Amal has made a difference in elevating the needs of downtown."

Under Ms. Kabbani's leadership, the alliance publishes its own newspaper. Ms. Higgins greatly appreciates **Raul Guerrero**, who writes the issues, which get delivered to people in the area's condo buildings.

Another leader who works to make neighborhood vibrant, Ms. Higgins said, is **Robert Geitner**, who has been managing the Olympia Theater. "He spent a lot of time trying to bring the arts into the central business district in a way that activates streets and brings people downtown and has done interesting outdoor events this year," Ms. Higgins said. "Robert is a dogged person. If he sees an empty storefront, he asks how it might be vitalized for the arts. He makes sure there's always a reason to come downtown, other than just going to a restaurant, and is very creative about inside/outside spaces."

Also nominated by Alicia Cervera of Cervera Real Estate were DDA board member **Alan Ojeda**; **Manny Medina**, developer turned technol-



ogy entrepreneur with the founding of Cyxtera Technologies located in downtown Miami; **Jorge Perez** of the Related Group, who was among the first to develop high-rise condos downtown with the twin towers of One Miami to establish the area as a neighborhood; **Ugo Colombo** of the CMC Group, who developed EPIC Residences and Hotel; **Tibor Hollo**, founder of Florida East Coast Realty and one of the first developers in downtown Miami; and **Russell Galbut** for *Nativo Miami*, the first purposefully designed, licensed building for home-sharing in downtown Miami.



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