PastForward Online 2022 Conference Proceedings: From Vision to Action
The Ball and Chain: The Heart(beat) and Soul of Little Havana

Chris Rupp: Hi, I’m Chris Rupp, executive director of Dade Heritage Trust, and in our continuing efforts to bring conference participants a flavor of Miami, I want to introduce you to Bill Fuller, the owner of the world-famous Ball & Chain in Little Havana. Bill, can you tell our participants about your investment in Little Havana?

Bill Fuller: Chris, great to welcome you here to the Ball & Chain. Little Havana, for me, was a passion project, mainly because my mother is of Cuban heritage, and it was a way of merging both my interest in real estate with my passion for the heritage. And at the same time [I fell] in love with the historic building stock, the authenticity of the neighborhood that existed, and its people. It was the idea of working on these buildings, and working with the people and creatives, entrepreneurs, restaurateurs, in reassembling and developing a renaissance around this wonderful street which we have called Calle Ocho. I think it’s going pretty well, so far.

Chris Rupp: Bill, Little Havana is the second-most visited place in Miami after South Beach. What has been the effect of your investment and vision for the neighborhood?
Bill Fuller: When we first started investing in Little Havana, in 2004, based on what we know from the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, the visitors to the street were about 250,000 a year. Now, we realize about 4 million a year, which represents about a quarter of the visitors who come to Miami Dade. So it’s been an exponential growth, but it’s been a responsible growth. It’s been one where it hasn’t required any new, large, disruptive buildings to take place in the neighborhood. We’ve been very sensitive to the original building stock. We’ve been very considerate of heritage businesses that have existed and families that have run those businesses for years. We really tried to keep as much of the national tenancy out of what we call the Cultural Historic District. They’re great, but when people come here, they’re looking for something really unique and authentic.

Chris Rupp: As a developer, why do you invest in historic properties and see preservation as a positive?

Bill Fuller: For us, it’s really in the hard drive and DNA of our company. My partner, Martin Pinilla, and I, we are aligned on so many levels, but an important bedrock of the company is that we really respect the history of Miami, of South Florida, and of everything that has happened in our past. It’s so important to keep retelling stories, important to keep sharing with future generations to come. All of these properties—the historic properties and the legacy businesses—are so important to keep around and to protect and cherish. It’s part of the message. It’s part of what drives us. It drives our passion.

Exploring and understanding the history is a fun part of the expedition, but then also we’re bringing it back to life where new generations can remember what it was like to be in South Florida. We’re in a really unique space right now because of the development, the high-rise and mid-rise entrenchment that we have coming into our community. The reality is that we have very scarce land in South Florida, and our historic building stock is going to be under pressure forever. And so we really need to look back at our earliest building stock—from the 1920s, 1930s, in some cases, even 1910—that we have here in the neighborhood. And really, look to protect as many of those structures as we can, because they do age, almost like a fine wine.
As I look back on the history of our renaissance, let’s say over the last 15 years, there are very specific businesses that I can point to that I think are real game changers. One of the first was Azucar Ice Cream, where Suzy Batlle developed a one-of-a-kind Cuban-based ice cream. And then came the Ball & Chain, which was absolutely a catalyst. It showed fellow food and beverage operators in South Florida that we could drive very high-volume numbers out of an establishment like this. Calle Ocho and Little Havana were always overlooked. It was overlooked as a neighborhood that was an immigrant neighborhood, a neighborhood that really was not at the top of the hospitality game. And all of that has radically changed over the last few years. Many of my fellow food and beverage operators, top of class, are now in the neighborhood. They have great concepts and continue to drive the entertainment and the traffic to the neighborhood. I think that’s going to continue to grow in the near future.

**Chris Rupp:** What will drive the continued success of Little Havana?

**Bill Fuller:** The success of Little Havana is predicated on preserving the people that live here. It’s really, really important. They’re not just talking words. It’s really important that we find a way to embrace all of the different economic classes that have been part of the foundation of this neighborhood. It is what is the authentic part of Little Havana. It is what drives me and keeps us all grounded. That we are part of a real community, not a fabrication. And it’s important that we protect the people, because without the people, everything that we have protected then becomes, in a sense, superficial. So that is really the heartbeat. When we discuss El Corazon de Miami, we’re talking about the epicenter. Little Havana is the geographic epicenter of all of our great neighborhoods: The Grove, the Gables, the beach, North Miami. But really, the corazon, the heartbeat, is the people. It’s that force that really drives all the creativity and ambition that we see in the neighborhood.

**Chris Rupp:** Bill, tell us about the history of the Ball & Chain.

**Bill Fuller:** The Ball & Chain originally opened in 1935 and had 22 years of great history as being really important to the music
scene in South Florida. It hosted some of the best acts in the country at the time, including Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Chet Baker, and Lena Horne, until it closed actually in 1957. In 2013, we brought it back as best as we could with the storytelling, as if it had never closed. Today we have 90 hours of music produced live every week, and it’s become the musical heartbeat of the neighborhood.

**Chris Rupp:** Bill, you served as a board member for Dade Heritage Trust. What does the organization mean to you?

**Bill Fuller:** I’m proud to be a member of Dade Heritage Trust for several years and watch the growth of the organization. Now in its 50th year, it’s really an incredible institution. In South Florida and in Miami Dade, we’re very grateful to have the organization and all the great leadership behind it. Everybody is deeply passionate about it, and its message has really taken root. It has a great foundation to move forward into the future generations. Thank you. FJ

CHRIS RUPP is executive director of Dade Heritage Trust. BILL FULLER is the owner of the Ball and Chain in Little Havana.