

The Town That Bob Built: Assessing Robert Traurig's Legacy And the Powerhouse Law Firm He Left Behind

by Zach Schlein

The idiom “Rome wasn’t built in a day” is meant to impart a universal lesson, namely, that great things take time to build. For whatever reason, this lesson escaped Robert “Bob” Traurig.

The Greenberg Traurig co-founder repeatedly achieved the miraculous, bringing together disparate parties and making the impossible — transforming vacant Miami lots into bustling hubs of life — tangible. Traurig has been regarded as the man who put the magic into the Magic City, and in his role as the “dean of zoning,” is largely credited with making Miami the world-class destination and commercial behemoth it is today. By the time of his passing on July 17 at the age of 93, had the rare privilege of witnessing the exponential growth of both his adopted city and the law firm he took part in creating.

When Traurig founded the firm alongside Larry J. Hoffman and Mel Greenberg in 1967 at 150 SE Second Ave. — the same building where Northeast Airlines once occupied office space — there were few hints that Greenberg Traurig would grow to become the international heavyweight it is today. By 1975, the firm only had 22 attorneys; today, it employs upward of 2,000.

“When I started practicing law, much of Miami was farmland,” said Matthew B. Gorson, senior chairman of Greenberg Traurig.

Gorson first joined that firm 45 years ago and has since “held every

position except CEO.” Like Traurig did, Gorson has also spent decades in this town, having lived in Miami since the late 1950s. For all Miami-Dade’s current high-rises and multimillion-dollar real estate, Gorson remembers a time when the county’s skyline was barren, comprising little more than old hotels on Miami Beach and “spare residencies and farmland.”

But Traurig helped to change that.

And in the process, he earned himself the title that he and only he carried alone: “the dean of zoning.”

“Bob Traurig was the guy that brought suburbia to Dade County,” Gorson said. “He’s the one that transformed Miami into the urban environment that we know now in terms of single-family housing, townhousing and the first residential and commercial highrises.”

‘BOB COULD TELL ME WHO OWNED IT’

Those familiar with Traurig and the history of Miami property development say the breadth of his influence is staggering.

“I could name any block in Dade County, and Bob could tell me who owned it,” Gorson said.

That’s partly because Traurig’s clients included Lennar Corp., the largest home builder in the U.S., and he was at the forefront of a then-fledgling real estate sector, bringing the first high-rises to the Brickell area and working on the zoning for the iconic Bayside Marketplace in Downtown Miami.



Robert “Bob” Traurig shaped the Miami skyline as it’s seen today.

Kerri L. Barsh, shareholder and co-chair of Greenberg Traurig’s environmental practice, worked on several projects with Traurig, including The Falls shopping center in Kendall as well as the Bakery Center, which later became the Shops at Sunset Place. Barsh also cited Traurig’s legal work representing Key Biscayne as evidence of the respect he commanded and the authority with which he was regarded by government officials and housing interests.

According to Barsh, he navigated negotiations deftly.

“[Traurig] would reach out and see if he could meet with and understand the concerns of other neighbors and stakeholders,” Barsh said. “[Bob would] come forward with an application that could have as much support from the surrounding community as you could.”

His work helped create a practice area for a slew of Miami real estate attorneys who now benefit from Traurig’s legacy every day; a booming sector born in the shade of the buildings he helped erect.

Barsh joined the firm in the late 1980s and practiced under Traurig’s wing. According to her, Traurig’s influence went far beyond his impact on the Miami skyline or the firm’s business practices.

“It’s funny. When we used to meet people and I said I worked under or with Bob, you would think that he had thousands of best friends,” Barsh said. “Everybody that you talked to would say, ‘My aunt, my cousin ... They’re best friends with Bob.’ Everyone spoke highly of him in that sense.”

Aaron Podhurst agreed.

Podhurst, a founding partner at Miami-based Podhurst Orseck, once worked with Traurig in the early days of Greenberg Traurig. At the time, he was the litigation attorney as the firm did not have an in-house litigator.

“Bob Traurig was the most likable, loveable — I am not exaggerating — person or lawyer you would ever meet,” Podhurst said.

Podhurst acknowledged that a career as a zoning lawyer was not the most glamorous, but Traurig had a flair for the work, and “the uncanny ability to have everybody like him.”

“He was the go-to guy for South Florida and Miami-Dade projects. His reputation was as a very fine specialist,” Podhurst said. “He built that reputation on honesty and integrity ... never tried to use undue influence on anything.”

‘LET’S WORK THIS OUT’

That reputation set the tone and positioned Greenberg Traurig to become the juggernaut it is today. As noted in the 2018 AM Law 100 report which

ranked it as the 14th largest law firm in the United States, Greenberg Traurig — which boasts more than 2,000 lawyers in 38 offices worldwide — posted \$1.48 billion in revenue in 2017, one of only 31 law firms to bring in more than a billion dollars in 2017.

Executive chairman Richard Rosenbaum, who oversaw much of the firm’s expansion at the close of the 20th century, said Traurig fostered a camaraderie and culture that became integral in each new branch around the world.

“When I think about it, I learned a lot

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of that from Bob Traurig,” he said. “Bob was really the person who taught us the importance of that.”

Jerry M. Markowitz, managing partner at Markowitz Ringel Trusty + Hartog in Miami, spoke of Traurig’s generosity.

In 2011 Markowitz, as the former president of the University of Miami Law Alumni Association, chaired an alumni dinner honoring Traurig. It was at this dinner that the law school’s real property development graduate program was officially rechristened the Robert Traurig/Greenberg Traurig Graduate Program in Real Property Development. The name change came in part because of a gift from Traurig’s firm, as well as the school’s acknowledgment of the founder’s immense influence on the city.

But Markowitz said that had things gone Traurig’s way, the dinner would never have been held.

“Bob was a very humble guy. For someone who had the power and the influence that he did, he was a regular person,” Markowitz recounted. “When we first got in touch with him he didn’t want to do [the dinner]! ‘I don’t like crowds!’”

Despite his aversion to the spotlight, Markowitz, who knew Traurig as a young boy, said that the attorney had a gift for creating consensus, which served him well in his business.

“He knew how to resolve conflicts in a way that left people happy when it was over with, instead of feeling like they got screwed,” Markowitz said. “What you hear from everybody was what a wonderful human being he was. He gave back so much to the community both in his time and his money.”

Even in his death — or perhaps even more so now — Traurig occupies a larger-than-life position in the minds of those who knew him.

“I never met a person — and I’m paraphrasing Will Rogers — who didn’t like Bob Traurig. Can’t say that about too many people,” Podhurst said.

“Bob had a habit — which I loved — of always calming people down in disputes. ... He always tried to be the mediator, the compromiser, with his big cigar in his mouth saying, ‘Let’s work this out,’” Podhurst continued. “That’s how I know Bob Traurig.”

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