

Ronald Esserman (January 8, 1927-July 20, 2020) ***Visionary Mind, Optimistic Spirit, Generous Heart***

Ronald Esserman, husband, father, beloved employer and pillar of the South Florida community died July 20, 2020. He dedicated his life to the betterment of South Florida from the Miami Metrozoo, to the Miami Ballet, the Performing Arts Center, and the amazing business he built. All will remember his visionary mind, optimistic spirit, and generous heart.

Never daunted by adversity, he overcame all obstacles. He had polio as a child but overcame the weakness in his legs. Later in life, he suffered from post-polio syndrome which caused him to be confined to his scooter later in life. But he was determined not to be limited, going to work every day in a suit and tie until the day he passed away.



Ron was no stranger to down turns in business or disasters from mother nature. Early in his career when a downturn in the fortunes of Chrysler and Dodge caused his business to fail, he picked up the pieces, moved to Miami and built a diversified unparalleled automotive enterprise that was eponymous with quality.

Charlie Goldstein brought Ron to Miami to manage Volkswagen South, then a sleepy business on Route 1. (He lived upstairs in his office with a sofa, hotplate and bathroom to make sure everything would work out before he moved his family from Chicago). Not only did it work out, but he built up the business and acquired 17 franchises and turned it into automotive giant, South Motors. The business was sold in 1988. However, Ron retired for only a couple of weeks before he established the Esserman Automotive group in South Florida.

His business was built on a foundation of quality that allowed him to survive and thrive in spite of several recessions, or changes in the fortunes of one franchise or another. Miamians recognize the name Esserman because of his reputation and the “Esserman International” on so many license plates in South Florida. His secret to success was hard work, business acumen, fierce optimism, devotion to providing quality products and service, and hiring high quality personnel. He built great teams and had long standing relationships with his colleagues and partners, including his Chief Financial Officer and partner John Hctor, Dick Assmar, Rick Lemaire, Francisco Diez-Rivas, Hugh Murray, and his secretary of 50 years, Lynn Jarvis. Underlying the philosophy of his business was a progressive management style. He was a devotee of Peter Drucker; He invested in and empowered his manager and was always on the cutting edge in terms of building teamwork and trust. He always said that quality should come first. He built his own organization, with this principle first and foremost and infused these concepts into companies on whose boards he served.

Ron served as the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Esserman Automotive Group which included Esserman Acura, Kia, Volkswagen, Largo Honda, and previously Esserman Nissan from 1989 until the day he passed away. He was the Past President of South Motors Miami (1968—1988) as well as Overseas Motors Corp in Fort Meyers (1972-1988) and Vista Motors Corp (Pompano Beach, and the Past Chief Executive Officer of the International Helicopter Service (1974-2004). He was the CEO of Catamaran Charters, LTD. And Catamaran Sales, Inc. (1994-2017). He was the past Chairman of the Acura National Dealer Advertising Counsel. He was one of the few automobile dealers to serve on the National Dealer Councils for Honda, Volkswagen, and BMW. He served on the boards of several banks. He received innumerable awards within the automotive field, including the AIDA Distinguished Dealer Award from Sports Illustrated (1983-1999) and the American Import Auto Dealers Minute Man Award.

Combining his business acumen and his aptitude for architecture, he designed and built all of the buildings for his businesses (starting with South Motors and ending with Largo Honda) with his architect collaborator, Charles Smith. When Hurricane Andrew slammed South Florida, their home was destroyed, but he was always able to see the bright side and use it as an opportunity to design and build a new house on the water, despite the disaster of Andrew.

It seemed like he had a magic touch with business and every company he owned excelled and was the best in class. His companies included everything that moved—boats, helicopters, and cars. He was an avid sailor, and had always sailed mono-hulls, but became fascinated by catamarans. When he wanted to buy a catamaran, his wife Charlene put her foot down and said no. Never daunted, Ron bought the Catamaran Company, and turned it from a struggling business to the largest importer of catamarans in the United States. Needless to say, he got his catamaran and was able to go out sailing on his beloved Biscayne Bay with his family and friend Parker Thompson until the very end of his days.

Ron was a progressive, and never voted because of self-interest. He felt that the community would thrive if policies benefited everyone and they had an equal chance to succeed, not just a few at the top. He viewed his business as a way to provide transportation and independence to people. “What good is a good deal without a good dealer?” was his tag line and he meant it. He used his business as a way to invest in building careers for people in the community. When Hurricane Andrew put people out of work, he paid to put them back to work cleaning up the mess Andrew left in its wake, at a time the community most needed support. Generators and trailers were quickly installed so that people could get back to a semblance of normal as soon as possible. The Miami Metrozoo was devastated by the hurricane and he had trees planted for each car that was sold.

A life-long democrat, he began his foray in politics by working for Adlai Stevenson and Otto Kerner in Illinois. When he came to Florida, he threw his support behind Ruben Askew and Lawton Chiles and worked tirelessly for his dear friends Bob Graham and Bill Nelson. He stalwartly supported a number of organizations such as Common Cause, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the Anti-Defamation League. He and his wife Charlene worked tirelessly for political candidates and progressive causes, who reflected the philosophy of building communities, investing in education, training, and equal rights for all. He was a champion of gun control and was one of the first to support the Brady Foundation. He and Charlene were life-long supporters of the ACLU. Although he was an automobile dealer, he supported mass transit and the emergence of hybrid and electronic technology for cars. He was a supporter of efforts to reduce emissions from cars despite industry reluctance and warned that business had to support efforts to reduce global warming, even before “An Inconvenient Truth”

was published. He was a supporter of women's rights and promoted women in his business and worked to support the Equal Rights Amendment with his wife Charlene, and together they made sure that their three daughters would have all opportunities open to them.

Ron and Charlene were always looking for ways to build up the community in which they lived. While still in Flossmoor, Ron was a founder of Temple Anshe Sholom in Olympia Fields, and founder of Homewood Flossmoor High School. When the family moved to South Florida, he became the head of the South Dade Chamber of Commerce and began to look for opportunities to make Miami a great city. He was one of the founders of the Zoological Society of South Florida, developing a plan to build a new home and cutting-edge



conservation and breeding facility. He served as president for many years and sponsored the tiger exhibit since its inception. He then turned to the arts, as he felt that a great city needed great cultural organizations. He supported the Florida Grand Opera and the Coconut Grove Playhouse. However, his most significant role was in creating a stable foundation for the Miami City Ballet. He met Edward Villella, who founded the Miami City Ballet and Ron joined as President and later Treasurer and brought together the banks to finance the building a world class company. He even personally guaranteed the money to keep it afloat early on. Today the Miami City Ballet is a nationally recognized company, and they have honored Ron and Charlene on many occasions for their support.

Perhaps the most important campaign he took on was the building of the Miami Performing Arts Center. He believed that every great city needed a great cultural center. Together with Parker Thomson, Woody Weiser, and many others, they worked tirelessly until their dream came true. Today Miami can boast of a fantastic Performing Arts Center. Ron said that he wanted to work on world class projects. In his volunteer capacity, he took on high risk projects and is one of the

business leaders that transformed the city, transforming what was a wasteland to a beautiful thriving downtown. Ron received many, many awards from the innumerable organizations he supported. He was named Rotary Man of the Year (1989), Art and Business Council Dean Lott Spirit Award and Twelve Good Men Honoree (1999), Ronald MacDonald House Honoree, South Florida Business Statesman Award (2007) by Harvard Business Club, and Philanthropists of the year (2011) by the Association of Fundraising Professionals. He saved the property and helped to found the Deering Estate at Cutler Foundation and served on many boards including SunTrust Bank, Baptist Hospital Foundation, the Miami Metrozoo, Miami City Ballet, and the Performing Arts Center.

Ron was born in Oak Park Illinois and attended Hyde Park High School and then graduated from the University of Illinois in Champagne Urbana where he was President of his fraternity, and lead tenor for the singing group that serenaded sororities around campus. The only one that he did not serenade during college was his beautiful wife Charlene, whom he then serenaded for the rest of her life. Music was always a part of his life, and he would break into song at a moment's notice. He infused the lives of his children with love, hope, determination, and music. He was a wonderful and devoted father, a role model, and an exemplar of what it means to be a person of character, principle, and integrity. He had a quote for everything and pushed his children to be all that they could be and was so pleased that their contributions made the world a better place.

Ron would want to thank the incredible staff for their devotion, loving care and support: his contractor Jose Santiago; his driver Modesto Lopez; his trusted valet of many years, Jim Davies; his housekeeper Francisca Ponce, and his caretakers Paulette Pierre-Louis and Charmaine Bent.

He was the son of Leah and Irving Esserman of Chicago and is predeceased by his brother Robert Esserman and his sisters June Lewin and Rochelle Benjamin of Chicago. He is survived by his life partner of 71 years and his four children: Dr. James Esserman (Lynda Esserman); Ambassador Susan Esserman (Andrew Marks); Dr. Lisa Esserman (Dr. Harris Goldberg); Dr. Laura Esserman (Michael Endicott). He has 9 grandchildren: David and Marc Esserman; Stephen, Clifford, and Michael Marks; Elyse and Alexis Goldberg; and Marisa and Max Endicott. He is also survived by his sister in-law Babette Maza of South Bend and brother in law Stephen Cohen of Chicago. He was a member of Temple Beth Am since 1968

when he moved to South Florida. His spirit will live on in the hearts of those that remember him and whose lives he has transformed by the everyday acts of kindness, his enduring optimism, and his drive to make his community, his businesses, and the world a better place.

Ron always wanted his children to come together to carry on his and Charlene's legacy of giving back to the community. In 2020, Ron and Charlene and his 4 children established, in collaboration with the Knight Foundation, the Esserman Knight Prize to honor and support local journalism. On June 17, the first awards were presented (<https://knightfoundation.org/esserman-knight-prize/>) and an investigative journalism fellowship program was launched at the Miami Herald. He would be honored for the community to join him helping to ensure that accountability journalism survives and thrives at the local level and keeps the fire of democracy burning.

There will be a private service July 23, 2020 and a celebration of Ron's life later in the fall or early spring when COVID conditions permit. In lieu of flowers, Charlene and the family request that any donations be sent to the Esserman Family Fund for Investigative Journalism at The Miami Foundation.

<https://miamifoundation.org/essermanjournalism>