

Jeff Berkowitz: Developing at new heights

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Convincing tenants and lenders that vertically stacked retail was a viable concept was a serious challenge. Back in 1996, it was still a new concept.

But developer Jeff Berkowitz took the risk and opened the three-story Dadeland Station off U.S. 1 in east Kendall, now home to the often-packed Bed Bath & Beyond, Best Buy, Michaels, Target and Sports Authority.

Despite some well-publicized structural problems with a parking garage ramp, the concept was a huge success.

He's now planning in Miami Beach a smaller version of the vertical shopping center and with a more urban flavor, said Berkowitz from his office on the 12th floor of the Grand Bay Plaza office tower in Coconut Grove.

Berkowitz and his partners, car dealers Alan and Robert Potamkin, for the past three years have been working on the design of Fifth & Alton in South Beach. The project, in the permitting stage, is in a prominent spot at the gateway to Miami Beach.

Born and raised in Boston, Berkowitz said that staying focused, being resourceful and flexible are keys to his company's success.

He learned that the hard way.

It's been 14 years since Berkowitz conceived Kendall Village Center in western Miami-Dade County.

Kendall Village was proposed originally as a 10-dealership, showroom-only auto

Human interests

- **Age:** 56
- **Spouse:** Yolanda
- **Children:** Andrew, 28, and Michael, 24
- **What makes you happy?** My life. My wife. My kids. My dogs. Sailing. Fly fishing in remote lands. When a plan works.
- **Favorite restaurants?** Blue and The Forge
- **What is something about you that most people don't know?** I'm really a pussycat.
- **What is the philosophy that guides your life?** It's never too late to have a happy childhood.
- **Who would play you in a movie of your life?** Jack Nicholson

park. The project, not yet completed, evolved into a mixed-use commercial center. It now has a stadium-seating theater under construction and a site for 90,000 square feet of office space.

"During the process," Berkowitz said, "I built a lot of character. I learned many lessons. Financial survival is a wonderful motivating force. Politicians will always vote their political self-interest, regardless of the merits of a project. Watch out for hidden agendas. There are a lot of dishonest people out there."

After receiving a political science degree from Cornell University, he moved to Miami to attend the University of Miami School of



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The next project for Jeff Berkowitz is Fifth & Alton in South Beach.

Law, graduating in 1974. He worked as a real estate lawyer until 1978, when he became involved in his first shopping center and fell in love with being a developer.

In 1986, he gave up his law practice to focus on his projects. In the past 26 years, he's done 12 developments, mostly shopping centers and most in the Kendall area.

But the one closest to his heart will always be Dadeland Station, he said.

So much so that he's decided to add original art to his work. In May, he will be

installing at the center's entrance a four-story high "Welcome" statue designed by world-renowned Miami artist Romero Britto. After it is assembled by crane, Britto will paint the aluminum figure in his signature colorful style of patterns and shapes.

"Romero Britto's art has always put a smile on my face," Berkowitz said. "I thought that the Dadeland North Metrorail station would be the perfect opportunity to put smiles on the faces of hundreds of thousands of people who enter Downtown Dadeland for generations to come."

Dadeland Station, at the Dadeland North Metrorail station, helped transform suburban south Miami-Dade, anchored by Dadeland Mall.

But Berkowitz's life is not only hard work. He likes to play hard, too.

At least once a month, he and his family travel to the Virgin Islands, where his sail boat *Day Dream* awaits.

His passion for sailing is given away by framed pictures of his sailboat riding waves in the Caribbean waters.

"My new slogan is 'live slow, sail fast,'" he said with a smile.

Perseverance, tenacity, integrity and a good sense of humor led Berkowitz on the path to where he is today, he says.

However, his advice to a young developer eager to follow his steps is: "Marry a very wealthy woman," he said, laughing.

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