



Robert Traurig

June 9, 1925 - July 17, 2018

Robert Traurig helped build one of the largest law firms in the world and, in so doing, swept Miami-Dade County upward.

Brickell Avenue skyscrapers. Open-air malls like Cocowalk in Coconut Grove. Residential communities on the edge of the Everglades. Traurig was the expert zoning lawyer to whom developers turned when they knew that they would be facing opposition.

And when the civic community needed a powerhouse advocate to raise funds for the opera, performing arts center, the University of Miami or Jewish causes, it called on Traurig, whose influence with politicians, fellow attorneys and business leaders made him a formidable ally.

Traurig, 93, died on Tuesday in Miami, his home since he was a teenager, leaving a legacy of law smarts and community leadership.

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He founded the law firm of Greenberg Traurig in 1967 with Melvin Greenberg and Larry Hoffman. Traurig was the real estate lawyer; Greenberg practiced tax law; Hoffman was the expert in the corporate law. The firm now numbers more than 2,000 attorneys and lobbyists in 38 locations worldwide, including 29 in the United States. The firm also has branches in Europe, Israel, Latin America and Asia.

Three Jewish men who felt they didn't fit in with Miami's corporate law practices built a firm renowned for its diversity. The firm placed No. 1 among Am Law 100 firms based on the number of Hispanic-American attorneys and African-American partners on The American Lawyer 2018 Diversity Scorecard for fiscal year 2017.

“The vision was not an overly ambitious one. We wanted to be very good attorneys and do high quality work in South Florida and never believed we would be a large firm,” said Hoffman, who is now the firm’s founding chairman. But after a few years, lawyers on both sides of the bench noticed their work, and Greenberg Traurig expanded.

“Bob was always a very important part of that. He probably had the widest array of people who respect him of anybody,” Hoffman said.

That included both competitors and opposing counsel.

“I’ve known him for 50 years and Robert is probably one of the great citizens of the last half-century in the Miami-Dade community,” said attorney Aaron Podhurst, firm president of Podhurst Orseck and chairman of Perez Art Museum Miami.

“Not only a fabulous lawyer who built a great firm, but probably the outstanding zoning lawyer in his time in the last half of the 20th century. He had a profound effect on zoning. He was admired by everybody: lawyers, commissioners, the politicians, he had many friends and he was loved. I can’t think of any person I knew that was more loved than he was,” Podhurst said.

Traurig’s “modest and unassuming” style, paired with his concern for the community, resonated outside of the courtroom, said Hoffman.

“Not as many people were as astute about what the community needed,” Hoffman said. “He had this tremendous interest in winning for his client but always thought about what would the effect on the community be. The reason developers get thought of badly is often because they don’t care, but he cared. We used to kid him about being able to change developers’ minds. Most of the developers realized in the long run what he did for them was the right thing — but more importantly, the best thing.”

If late band manager Brian Epstein was considered the “fifth Beatle” by some for his guidance of the British pop music band, then the Waterbury, Conn.-born Traurig was the “14th Miami-Dade Commissioner.” His impact as a land-use attorney earned him the moniker “father of Miami land use law.”

In 1983, Traurig battled the Miami Planning Advisory Board to increase the building density along northern Brickell Avenue — a move the board said would “change essentially the character of Brickell.” The change set the stage for Miami’s cosmopolitan transformation; the National Law Journal named Traurig as one of the nation’s 100 most

powerful attorneys in 1985. “The ability to wield force, authority or influence” was the hallmark of the chosen few.

Traurig was often called “the soul of the firm” by Hoffman and current Executive Chairman Richard Rosenbaum.

“Three very unique individuals started the firm, all were quite different than each other, and that marriage of the three made the firm so special,” Rosenbaum said. “The part Bob played was to be very much out there in the community, in the political arena, in the sports arena. He was always fair, always trying to find a fair resolution to a problem, and he taught that to the people that worked at the firm. His legacy will be a spirit of charity.”

But Traurig invariably downplayed his professional achievements.

“As the population increased and the need for new residential communities became more obvious, I was in the right place at the right time. There were few people at that point who were representing builders and land developers at public hearings and I was the beneficiary of good luck,” Traurig said to the Herald in 2003 on the eve of one of many honors that recognized his accomplishments: the Friend of Israel Humanitarian Award from the Greater Miami Jewish Federation.

Honors included the 1997 Sand in My Shoes Award for community service from the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, the National Conference of Christians and Jews’ Silver Medallion award. He was named to the Greater Miami Jewish Federation’s Commerce and Professions Hall of Fame and recognized by Miami Business magazine as one of the “100 Most Powerful People in Miami.”

He got there, in part, for his many civic activities. Traurig chaired the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce from 1991 to 1992, and guided the organization as a director for 11 years. He led the Florida Grand Opera, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the Performing Arts Center Foundation, the University of Miami’s Citizens Board and the Greater Miami Jewish Federation. And he was a trustee of his synagogue, Beth David Congregation.

“So here’s a fellow who helped build a great American law firm and was the premier zoning attorney of his generation, but he most deserves to be remembered for being the very soul of decency,” said David Lawrence Jr., retired Herald publisher and now an early childhood advocate.

Cesar Alvarez, former Greenberg Traurig CEO and now the firm's senior chairman, remembers a lesson Traurig taught him some 40 years ago when the two first started working together. The memory makes him tear up.

"He was involved in many causes, always asking for money. I thought I was unlucky. My office was next to his so it was easy for him to come ask me."

Traurig asked. Alvarez responded. It was bonus time and the young attorney wanted to impress the founding partner. He scribbled an amount on the check and waited for Traurig. "I said, 'Bob, look. Here's a check I wrote until it really hurt.'"

Traurig took the check, ripped it in half, and handed it back to the startled attorney. He thought to himself, "Jesus. What a country! This is terrific. You don't even have to give the money. If you have good intentions, it's good enough."

Traurig seemed to read Alvarez's thoughts. "He said, 'I don't want you to write a check that hurts you. I want you to write a check that makes you feel good.' I did write a check. The check was bigger."

That was no surprise to Podhurst. Traurig was "a role model for young lawyers and for young people and for what you ought to do as a lawyer. He was a hell of a person."

Traurig's survivors include his wife of 65 years, Jacqueline Traurig; daughters Madeline Sackel and Wendy Traurig; grandchildren Shelley Booken, Jodi Schneider and Andrew Perlin; and three great-grandchildren.

Funeral services will be at noon Thursday at Beth David Congregation, 2625 SW Third Ave., Miami. Donations in Traurig's name can be made to The Parkinson's Foundation, Beth David Congregation or the Greater Miami Jewish Federation.

Arrangements by Blasberg-Rubin-Zilbert Memorial Chapel (305) 865-2353

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July 17, 2018 06:34 PM