MIA M STORIES

The birth of the book fair

When Miami was known for drugs and violence, longtime residents envisioned a book fair uniting a disparate community.

BY EDUARDO J. PADRON

In the early ’80s, Miami had the national reputation of a cultural wasteland, fueled in large part by films and television shows that glamorized the local crime scene.

Longtime residents, like Mitch Kaplan and I, viewed our city through a different lens — one that witnessed intellectual conversation and growth incited by the opening of new art museums and libraries.

At this time, Mitch was the owner of a small bookstore in Coral Gables, and I was the president of Miami Dade College’s Wolfson Campus. Mitch knew that people in Miami were hungry for books, and I was looking for a way to transform the downtown area of our fledgling community.

A couple of librarians, notably Margarita Cano, thought that if they put together a book sale in Bayfront Park, it would help promote the nearby library branch. Margarita asked Wolfson Campus’ librarian, Juanita Johnson, if she could borrow some tables for the book sale.

I had just returned from a trip to Spain, which included a stop at an impressive book fair. So when Juanita told me about the group’s plan for a book sale, we began to envision a more elaborate affair. The college could provide more than just tables; we could offer a sizable venue, staff support and passion.

Juanita and I called a meeting with the local library staff and independent booksellers and came up with a plan for a large literary event that could serve as a powerful driver for bringing our disparate community together and helping downtown Miami live up to its artistic potential.

That first year of “Books on the Bay” in 1984 planted the seed for what is now the Miami Book Fair International. Booths lined the streets of Kyriakides Plaza at Wolfson Campus during our initial two-day festival, and fairgoers lined up to see authors such as James Baldwin, Ken Kesey and Marge Piercy. There had been a lot of skepticism about whether people would come. But they did, and we had a wonderful sense that we were onto something important.

As the fair evolved in the late ’80s, culture began to gain a foothold.

When Alina Interiën came on board in 1989, she began developing the international aspect of the fair and worked to increase outreach to the multinational community that South Florida had become. The Book Fair became the venue for a who’s who in the Spanish-language literary scene, and celebrated Caribbean authors began bringing their untold stories to the city.

The Book Fair quickly became an event that attracted attention from all over the country and helped the world rediscover Miami. People who wanted to emulate our success visited from other cities, and publishers began to understand the Fair’s potential. Starting the Book Fair took a lot of hands and a huge leap of faith.

The ’80s were an era known for cocaine cowboys and violence, and tourism was at a low point.

However, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people from Latin America and the Caribbean enriched and strengthened the city’s culture and transformed Miami into the booming tropical metropolis of present day.

The Book Fair has certainly grown over the years, but some things have remained constant — remarkable support from the community, large enthusiastic audiences and terrific, committed volunteers.

I am proud of the Miami Book Fair International and its role in transforming our city’s educational and cultural landscape.

More than 2 ½ decades since its inception, this celebration of literature and literacy continues to unite our community.

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