



HARVEY OYER III



“OUR AMENITIES, PEOPLE, DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, CULTURAL EXPERIENCES, FLIGHTS FROM PBIA AND INFLUX OF HUMAN CAPITAL HAS CREATED A NEW LANDSCAPE FOR SUCCESS.”

You know those neuropsychological tests that made us all crazy in high school where you struggle to identify the single connection between five seemingly random activities? Let’s give one a whirl:

A: Spend three weeks skiing from Norway to the North Pole, dragging a 100 lb. sled of survival gear, provisions and a sawed-off shotgun to keep polar bears away;

B: Stand very still at a black-tie dinner in Buckingham Palace while Prince Phillip attaches a pin from his personal foundation to your lapel;

C: Write five best-selling children’s books about your family’s history that are devoured each year by 120,000 fourth-graders;

D: Hurl yourself headfirst off one of the world’s highest bridges in New Zealand with a bungee cord tied to your ankles;

E: Descend in scuba gear through sludgy water to scratch your initials into the hull of the oldest shipwreck in the New World, sunk in a hurricane in September 1559.

(Okay, the initials thing is a total lie, but helping to excavate the historic Pensacola wreck is accurate).

And the common denominator is? Anyone??

If your hypothesis was “Harvey Oyer,” shrewdly conjectured from the giant headline at the top of this page, you are correct. These are just a few of the side-hustles and time-fillers between his job as one of Palm Beach County’s busiest land-use attorneys and as father and stepdad to three girls under the age of 10. Plus, he serves as the current President of the Forum Club of the Palm Beaches and will take the reins as chair of the BDB this fall. No surprise, his biggest fear is dying before he’s accomplished everything that he wants to achieve in life. At this rate, we’ll be crying at his funeral in, maybe, 2099.

As a member of the Explorer’s Club for more than two decades and in his role as a Captain in the United States Marine Corps, Harvey has absorbed a wealth of knowledge and culture from around the world, but his most meaningful life lesson comes from two revered local residents: the late Rear Admiral Phil Whitacre, and the brilliant Alexander Dreyfoos Jr., inventor, philanthropist and the cultural catalyst behind the founding of the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts.

“They both taught me to “Make no little plans,” Harvey says, quoting the famous American architect, Daniel Burnham, who believed that small thinking has ‘...no magic to stir men’s blood.’ When Dreyfoos presented his original concepts for the Kravis Center in the mid-1980s they were fiscally conservative and appropriately scaled to the market. He struggled for years to achieve buy-in from donors, but once he realized that going big and bold was the way to get people excited, the dream became a reality and the center opened debt-free in the early 1990s – unheard of at the time.

A decade later, Harvey was chairman of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County’s board of governors and led the effort to find millions in public and private funding to unwrap the ugly additions and restore the original 1916 county courthouse. Both Whitacre and Dreyfoos counselled him to present an audacious plan with real vision that would preserve and activate this icon of Palm Beach County history, shaping it to be relevant to all residents. Harvey’s eloquence, persistence and infectious enthusiasm got the job done, and today the building serves as a magnificent cultural cornerstone enjoyed by tens of thousands of schoolchildren and visitors each year.

The fifth-generation Floridian, whose family has been here for 149 years and whose great-great grandfather helped to plant the coconuts that washed ashore from the 1878 shipwreck of the Providencia, populating Palm Beach with the palm trees for which our county is named, is largely viewed as the county’s de facto historian. He is also recognized around the state and nation for his extensive knowledge of Florida history. You’d think that he’d be one of those guys who cling to a romanticized view of the past, when ‘...Military Trail was a dirt road, and The Hut was the favorite hangout on the west side of the middle bridge.”

“In my view, Palm Beach County is now a far better place than it was when I was growing up. The amenities, people, diversity, inclusion, cultural experiences, restaurants, number of flights, and unprecedented influx of intellectual capital have created the kind of energy that propels communities forward and allows them to thrive,” he says.

Harvey has owned a cattle ranch in Okeechobee for 20 years, a cherished weekend escape for his family. “It was important to me to be able to give my children the full experience of Nature. Teach them where food comes from, and how we humans survive and thrive. I feel like we are detaching from Mother Earth, with so much concrete and technology. Just two generations ago, people knew how to grow and store food, make clothing, repair a house. The panic and hoarding of the past year shines a light on our status of collectively not knowing how to truly survive,” he says. “I am definitely ‘corded to the earth’ and feel a fundamental connection to its rhythms and currents. It’s important to me to share that with my family.”

His love of terra firma may be partly responsible for his fear of heights. The recipient of the lofty Thomas Jefferson Award for Public Service and one of the nation’s highest commendations, the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, gets woozy and acrophobic in dizzying situations.

“No matter what cognitive behavioral strategy I use to overcome it -- bungee jumping, parachuting, hang-gliding or pretending my way through the treetop ropes course in the Marine Corps -- I can’t seem to beat it.”

But it sure doesn’t stop him from flying high through life and sharing the thrilling ride with all of us in his orbit.

– Carey O’Donnell

TOURS OF DUTY

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Hanging out with Olivia, Eve and Fiona

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