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Volume 5, Issue 5

## Young, Ambitious, and Black

Jason Walker weighs a run against Miami Commissioner Marc Sarnoff  
 By Christian Cipriani  
 Special to BT

Until a few weeks ago, speculation swirled around former Miami Commissioner Johnny Winton. He was facing felony charges of battery on a police officer following a much-publicized altercation last year with cops at Miami International Airport. A court date loomed. If he were to go to trial and lose, he could face jail time and the possibility of losing his real-estate broker's license. Were he to prevail in court, however, he could reclaim his

**Walker thinks Miami's biggest, wealthiest, and most Anglo district may not be ready for a young black commissioner.**

interviews in May, Walker said he fully expected his former boss to return to city hall after beating the charges against him. Walker also expected that Winton would serve out his term, which expires this coming November, then retire from politics. Under that scenario, Walker predicted, a heated political battle would ensue as the

November election approached. Sarnoff would not have the advantage of incumbency, and Winton would have had several months to help position a favored successor.

Walker knows a thing or two about such political maneu-

vering, having run against Winton for that very same District 2 seat back in 1999. Walker lost the race, but he impressed Winton, who ended up hiring him. Just a few weeks ago, as he thought about how things might unfold after Winton triumphantly marched back into city hall, Walker was actively considering another try at elected office, this time facing off against Sarnoff in November, and this time with Winton as an ally, not an opponent.

During a series of

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## New Life for the Coppertone Girl



*The idea: Move her from downtown to a restored architectural gem on Biscayne Boulevard*

By Margaret Griffis  
 Special to BT

Miami has a fleetingly short history, and much of that has already met the wrecking ball. Change like that is as integral to the city's fabric as palm trees and *café cubano*. Now two works of midcentury architecture are struggling to rise from the rubble and join together in another quintessentially

Miami experience: rebirth. Call it willful reinvention.

Nearly everyone in Miami is familiar with the Coppertone girl. She is the little pig-tailed blonde whose black Scottish terrier perpetually tugs at the bottom of her blue bathing suit and reveals a shocking sight – tan lines! The image is indelibly burned into the American psyche, so deeply that even

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### Community News

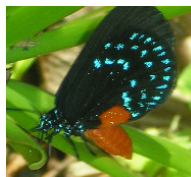
You'll never guess what's inside.



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A glimpse of South Florida wilderness.



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Fresh produce comes in three languages.



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Impromptu iguana funeral?



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### Coppertone Girl

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the subtlest parodies are instantly recognizable. A tiny version of her is on nearly every Coppertone sunscreen product, but – and this is a very big *but* – there's also a 35-foot-tall version of the hapless little scamp hanging in downtown Miami.

As big as she is now, the complete Coppertone sign at its original location on Biscayne Boulevard was even bigger. It occupied at least half the north wall of the 13-story Parkleigh Building and towered over a tiny Sinclair gas station and its comparatively puny bron-tosaurus logo. Across the railroad tracks were the Freedom Tower and, for a time, queues of newly arrived Cuban exiles. Part of the sign was painted directly on the Parkleigh's wall. The rest was made of neon tubes and enclosed light cabinets forming the girl and the dog. If you were caught waiting for a train crawling across Biscayne Boulevard, you got to enjoy a flashing light show.

During the 1980s, Miami-Dade Community College bought the property, and plans to raze the Parkleigh in 1991 brought demands for preservation – of just the sign. Coppertone donated the significant and salvageable portions of it to the city and the Dade Heritage Trust. For three years she sat in a warehouse before being groomed and ceremoniously placed on the Concord Building at 66 W. Flagler St., across from the courthouse, but only after a change in law permitted historically important signs to be erected downtown. Unfortunately she's now deteriorating rapidly, thanks to the Florida sun and surf. Mom should have reapplied that moisturizing sunscreen more frequently.

Usually such demands for preservation are reserved for architecturally or historically important structures. Where exactly does an old advertising sign fall into the spectrum? While ranting *against* every other billboard in the area, the *Miami Herald's* architecture critic made one exception in a 1984 column: "Only one billboard in South Florida seems worth fighting for. The Coppertone sign, on Biscayne Boulevard at Sixth Street in downtown Miami, is just kitschy enough to be a piece of municipal pop art; Andy Warhol couldn't do any better."

But the story is a little more colorful than high-end art. One Benjamin Green,



Above: Robert Law Weed's 1954 MiMo classic is today's Andiamo Pizza. Below: The girl and dog are the worse for wear today in downtown Miami.



a future pharmacist, noticed that thousands of his fellow World War II soldiers training in Miami Beach were suffering from sunburns. In his kitchen, he cooked up a prototype sunscreen using cocoa butter and essence of jasmine, and then tested it on his bald pate. (Please, no jokes about it being as smooth as a baby's bottom.) In 1944 he mass-marketed his "Coppertone" lotion, and it became a hit just as Miami was enjoying its boom as a post-war travel destination. Schering-Plough bought Coppertone Corporation in 1957 and soon began a search for a new ad campaign that would expand sales.

Unlike many advertising icons, little miss pigtailed had a real name. Cheri was the three-year-old daughter of well-known artist, Joyce Ballantyne Brand, who passed away in Ocala last year. Brand was a pin-up artist on the level of other notable genre painters such as Gil Elvgren and Alberto Vargas. If you were a young man in the 1950s, you likely saw one of her slightly racy calendar girls. If you were a young lady, you secretly wanted to be one.

In 1959 Coppertone, seeking to launch a new ad campaign, sent preliminary sketches of a young girl and a puppy to several prominent commercial

artists, who were invited to submit finished work. Cheri's mom delivered the winner – using her daughter as a model – and thus an icon was born. Within months the three-story-tall version of Cheri and her neighbor's terrier was gracing Biscayne Boulevard. Other billboards blossomed in Miami Beach and Hollywood; one even welcomed tourists at the airport. The best-remembered sign was at the freeway cloverleaf in north Miami-Dade (now called the Golden Glades Interchange), where it greeted visitors as they streamed in on I-95 and the Florida Turnpike. That one was a mechanical version of the terrier tugging on Cheri's swimsuit over and over again – for decades. The devilish dog actually won the battle a few times.

Eventually Cheri's bare butt would grace anything that could hold her image. Moms and dads appreciated the reminder to protect their little ones, while children saw themselves in the image. She remains one of the most popular and beloved icons in modern American history. Which is why many fought to save the downtown Miami sign when it first came down, and why they want it restored and moved to a more appropriate location now.

At a popular pizzeria in Miami's Upper Eastside another tale of rebirth unfolds. Mark Soyka is the owner of the pizzeria, Andiamo, in the newly designated MiMo Historic District. The area runs along Biscayne Boulevard from 50th to 77th streets. Soyka is somewhat of a South Florida institution himself, having opened the News Café on Ocean Drive and the Van Dyke on Lincoln Road before Miami Beach reconfigured itself as SoBe. He'd like to see the MiMo area bounce back as Miami Beach has, and he began the process by opening Soyka Restaurant on NE 4th Court. Other businesses followed, and the neighborhood, filled with numerous examples of Miami Modern architecture, began its revival.

Soyka then opened Andiamo in a stunning architectural gem that sits at a bend in the Boulevard. Designed in 1954 by architect Robert Law Weed, for years it housed a General Tire showroom and was topped off by soaring, curved I-beams that held the business's sign. The beams and sign were removed for unknown reasons at some point and replaced with a standard billboard – until the city managed to get rid of it.

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## COVER STORY

### Coppertone Girl

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Soyka's spokesman, Ryan York, says the original look of the building was revealed on an old postcard that architect Camilo Alvarado Boshell, developer of the adjacent Kubik condominium, found on the Internet. Soyka, York, and Boshell began talking about restoring the building to its original design. Shortly thereafter, the MiMo Biscayne Association, which is spearheading architectural preservation in the area, approached them with the very same idea – and mentioned the Coppertone sign. Would they like to bring both treasures back to life?

"Mark and I and the Kubik people would very much support the effort," says York. "And then we would have to have a discussion as to what will go on the sign."

Whether either plan proceeds – restoring

the old billboard and putting the Coppertone girl on it – is up in the air, so to speak. The City of Miami is officially opposed to large signs (though you wouldn't know it from the proliferation of huge mural ads hanging on downtown buildings) and may object to the whole project or parts of it, despite the historical value.

Here's the problem. The MiMo Biscayne Association has been told that the original sign now on Flagler Street is too fragile to move to the Andiamo building. The question of a new reproduction of the sign has been bandied about, but everyone's fear is that the city will say No to a mere reproduction and will nix the Andiamo building restoration for similar reasons.

Requests for financial assistance from Coppertone are also in limbo. A Coppertone spokeswoman will only say that the company is aware of local interest in the proposed Upper Eastside project and that the downtown sign is in disrepair. In fact the sign is missing half of Cheri, making her appear as a ghostly paleface. Even if restoration were possible, it might be prohibitively expensive.

However, even a newly built reproduction would be valuable to the citizens of Miami, says Kim

Cooper, a cultural historian and founder of Save the 76 Ball, an organization dedicated to saving a similarly popular icon in California. "The Coppertone girl is symbolic of Florida beach culture and belongs as much to the people as it does to the corporation now," Cooper asserts. "After 48 years, it's more than an advertisement, it's an icon. Even if the sign needs to be replicated in order to be moved, the replica will still be a pleasing, nostalgic, gentle reminder of that great American and Floridian desire: to hit the sand with your best pup, forget about your cares, and enjoy the sun and surf. Any

tourism-based city that doesn't see the value in preserving its own central mythology needs to think again."

Another person who would be pleased to see either the original or a reproduction is Broward art appraiser Jerry Bengis, whose

family created the original sign and who would want to place a bid on re-creating the sign. "I'd love to see that thing stay up," he says. "It's near and dear to my heart. You know, I have a little bit of experience with the little girl."

Indeed Bengis's family has an even deeper relationship. "My father's first sketch man worked with Mr. [Benjamin] Green, who came up with Coppertone originally. And they designed that logo." So they're the ones who provided artist Joyce Ballantyne Brand with preliminary sketches. Another coincidental relationship: The Bengis Sign Company used to be located right around the corner from the Robert Law Weed building. If the Bengis family were to be involved with even a newly manufactured reproduction, the sign would still have significant historical provenance through them and back to the late Benjamin Green, the fellow with the bald pate and the kitchen stove.

Of course the vintage original would be preferable, but if city leaders balk at either proposal, those involved in the project hope a grassroots campaign would remind officials that she's Miami's little girl now, and all she needs is a lift uptown.

Feedback: [letters@biscaynetimes.com](mailto:letters@biscaynetimes.com)

**"The Coppertone girl belongs as much to the people as to the corporation now. After 48 years, it's more than an advertisement, it's an icon."**

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## COMMUNITY NEWS

## Get That Girl in the Picture

*Piece by piece, the Coppertone toddler may yet return to Biscayne Boulevard*

**By Margaret Griffis**

Special to *BT*

Everyone has enjoyed the sense of accomplishment when the final piece of a difficult jigsaw puzzle falls into place — everyone, that is, who perseveres to the end. Much of the real world can seem like a puzzle, too — so many little pieces need to be united before the final image can be revealed. It's often a daunting task that only the stubborn can complete.

The ultimate picture of one particular community puzzle happens to include the Coppertone Girl, an icon Miamians instantly recognize as part of their history and mythology. A symbol of fun and sun, she's the little girl known to millions worldwide thanks to her revealed baby's bottom, courtesy of a rascally dog, and, of course, those tan lines. The individual pieces of this puzzle are varied in shape and size, but they may be starting to fit.

Last summer the MiMo Biscayne Association, a nonprofit citizen's group devoted to promoting the Miami Modern/Biscayne Boulevard Historic District, hatched a plan to refurbish and relocate the vintage Coppertone sign that has hung over W. Flagler Street in downtown Miami for about 15 years. It's the second home to the gigantic sign. For more than three decades it had originally overlooked the bay from Biscayne Boulevard at NE 6th Street. The sign was not only beloved by the merchants, who parlayed its popularity into sales of suntan oil, but also by the public and even connoisseurs of art and architecture. She was a pop-art diamond formed in the fomenting dawn of the 1960s.

In 1991 the demolition of the sign's former home — the 13-story Parkleigh Building — meant that the girl would have to find a new sunning location. Schering-Plough, owners of the Coppertone trademark, donated the sign to the citizens of Miami and placed it in



**Hey, it looks like the Coppertone girl might fit here!**



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the care of the Dade Heritage Trust, a nonprofit preservation organization. The Trust has taken loving care of its adopted daughter ever since. After refurbishing the critical parts that could be salvaged then — light boxes containing the girl, her dog, and the letters that spell out Coppertone — the group ceremoniously placed the sign on the east side of the Concord Building at 66 W. Flagler St., not too far from her old home. Sadly, now this second locale is no longer able to host the popular image.

Miami is a town of drastic changes, and the kinetic landscape has never been particularly hospitable to relics a half-century old. According to Becky Matkov, the executive director of Dade Heritage Trust, a couple of oversize problems have cropped up. First, the sign was severely damaged during the 2005 hurricane season. Not only does the Trust lack the funds to repair it, its insurance company canceled the commercial liability coverage on the sign. Until the damage is repaired, the policy cannot be reinstated.

Second, the new owners of the neighboring property have been infected by the current Miami miasma to supersize, and are planning to build a towering structure that will completely obscure the sign. No matter what happens next, the Coppertone Girl has to come down. Now.

The perfect solution was to entrust the sign to the MiMo Biscayne Association. The group was verbally promised the sign last November and has been just as diligent as the Trust in pursuing any option that will save it for a second time. “This is a good opportunity to get it restored and back up somewhere,” says Matkov. Fortunately Schering-Plough has offered \$2000 for the removal and inspection of the landmark, so this one part of the puzzle should be completed soon. According to a spokesperson, Schering-Plough expects the sign to come down sometime in April at the latest, and then all parties involved will determine the next steps for the Coppertone tyke.

With that financial portion of the puzzle seemingly solved, Chico Goldsmith, a Trust member and former owner of the Concord, has been coordinating with 66 West Flagler Limited, the partnership that now owns the building, on the physical plans to remove the sign as soon as possible. When asked about the status, attorney Julio Ayala, a partner in the Concord, said the “[partnership likes] the sign because of its historical significance” and he’s going to miss it when it comes down.

As for our girl’s new home, MiMo Biscayne would like to see her returned to the Boulevard in the recently hatched MiMo Historic District on the Upper Eastside. Sources say that local historian Antolín Carbonell is producing a study that examines possible locations, and has narrowed it down to a few choices. He did not respond to a phone call, but a quick drive up the Boulevard reveals few opportunities among the low-rise buildings. One place previously mentioned is the classic MiMo building at 56th Street, designed by Robert Law Weed and now housing Andiamo Pizza.

However, it may be too soon to even start the guessing game. “It just seems senseless to be knocking on people’s doors, talking about the sign, when we don’t know if it can be restored, if we’re going to find the money, or if we’re even going to [physically] get it,” says Fran Rollason, president of the MiMo Biscayne Association.

In other words, the puzzle is still far from complete. Before the Coppertone girl coyly shows Miami her bum, funding for the restoration and permission from the city to hang the sign will have to be secured. A company involved from the beginning, which was working directly with Coppertone inventor Benjamin Green, will have a look at her and determine whether she’s even salvageable, and if so, how much a restoration would cost.

But with luck the Coppertone Girl will remain a Miami reality and not a Miami memory. Or maybe, with a little more time and concentration from the jigsaw masters, a completed picture of the past *and* the present.

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