

N E W S M A K E R S

His baby

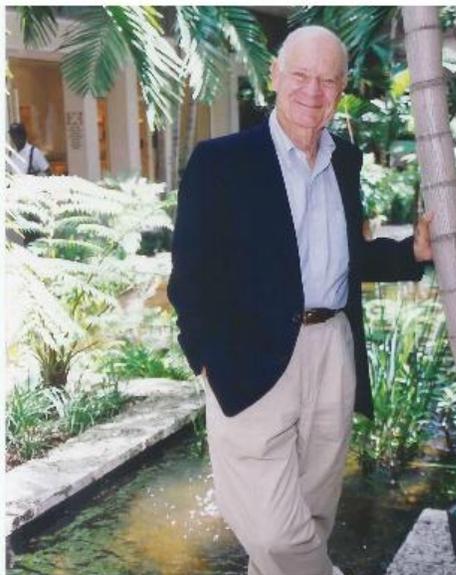
STANLEY WHITMAN, 95, STILL VISITS BAL HARBOUR SHOPS ALMOST DAILY

By Joel Groover

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TANLEY F. WHITMAN,

founder of Bal Harbour Shops, in Miami Beach, has marked many a milestone during his lengthy business career. The ultra-exclusive



shopping center was the first mall location for Bulgari, Cartier and Gucci, for example, and the first venture outside New York City for the likes of Dolce & Gabbana, Louis Vuitton, Prada and Sergio Rossi. And the mall also happens to be widely considered the most productive on the planet. But last November Whitman and his two children, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren gathered to celebrate a milestone of a more personal sort: his 95th birthday.

Whitman is a World War II veteran who admits to being slowed down a bit these days by some back trouble. This does not hinder his easy laugh, though — or a

dry wit: Ask him for longevity tips and he is likely to chuckle and extol the benefits of a robust sex life. He continues to head over to Bal Harbour several days a week to stroll around the open-air center's palm-shaded grounds and chat with shoppers and retailers. Whitman has followed this basic routine ever since Bal Harbour opened, in 1965. With a store directory that reads like a laundry list of the most prestigious designers around, Bal Harbour continues to rack up sales. "Our sales per square foot now

are right at \$2,800,” Whitman said. “We have a department store that is doing well over \$1,000 a square foot, which is totally unheard of.” A single restaurant at Bal Harbour made \$20 million last year, he says.

Whitman, who was born in 1918 as World War I was winding down, continues to follow general retail trends – including one that emerged when he was in his late 70s: e-commerce. “Our merchants have told us that they do get business from the Internet, but the Internet affects us a lot less than any other class of retailing,” Whitman said. “If someone is going to spend \$5,000 for a pocketbook – which they do here, and a lot more – they’ll

want to come in and see it, touch it and smell it. In the mid- and low-price markets, that is not as much the case.”

When Whitman opened Bal Harbour, most of the shoppers were wealthy Americans seeking respite from the chilly Northeast. He describes watching with interest how tourists from Latin America, China, India and Russia play an increasingly large role at Bal Harbour and in luxury retail overall. “Today we get more business out of Latin America than anywhere else,” Whitman said. “We also get a huge amount of Russian business. The shopper will change; it’s the obligation of the shopping center to keep current with those changes and satisfy that changing market.”

Whitman, whose father was a developer of key neighborhoods in Miami Beach at the turn of the 20th century, still pays close attention to the latest real estate news in the city. He readily offers his opinions about the likes of the burgeoning Miami Design District and the Mall at Miami Worldcenter – a newly announced project by Taubman Centers and Forbes Co. For decades Bal Harbour was the only game in town for luxury retail, thanks in part to strict lease restrictions imposed on tenants. But the Whitman family is branching out with a new project of its own downtown: Brickell City Centre, a collaboration with mixed-use developer Swire Properties. The first phase of this \$1 billion complex

Whitman’s passion for his trademark property Bal Harbour Shops might be one of the secrets to his longevity.

is under construction in the financial district, with a grand opening slated for 2015 or early 2016. “So why are we involved in that, and not the others?” Whitman said. “The answer is tourists. Five-star hotels are coming up in that area of Brickell just like mushrooms after a rain. Bal Harbour will continue to get the resort tourist, but Brickell City Centre is going to get the business tourist. There will be a cross-pollination: We’ll have 750,000 square feet of retail there, and Swire will have

five-star hotels, condos and office buildings. It should be very successful.”

Meanwhile, Bal Harbour has submitted plans to the Village of Bal Harbour for expansion by about 250,000 square feet. “We’re looking forward to moving forward aggressively on that this year,” said Matthew Whitman Lazenby, Whitman’s grandson, who heads leasing for Bal Harbour as general partner. Bal Harbour’s success has everything to do with Whitman’s indefatigable spirit, says Lazenby. Whitman is famous for never allowing “a leaf out of place” on the property, as one observer put it, and he defied naysayers in insisting on Bal Harbour’s

open-air design, towering palm trees and riotous beds of tropical plants and flowers. Back in the ’60s, more than one shop owner threw him out as he walked up and down New York City’s Fifth Avenue trying to persuade coveted Manhattan retailers to buy into his vision for a high-fashion mall in wealthy Miami Beach. Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue initially passed on the idea; today they are Bal Harbour anchors. “He lives and breathes Bal Harbour Shops,” Lazenby said. “His tenacity of will is the reason the shopping center came to be, and it will no doubt be a huge component as Bal Harbour now expands to its next phase.”

Whitman’s passion for the property might even be one of the secrets to his extraordinary longevity, as Lazenby sees it. “He has always taken his health very seriously and been an avid runner, weight lifter and exercise freak,” he said. “But if you ask me, the majority of it owes to him keeping his mind — his brain muscle — flexing through his love and his passion for Bal Harbour Shops.” **SCT**



BRICKELL CITY CENTRE