

Demonstrating Deliberate Development

By Patsy Mennuti
Photography by Scott Barfield

Ramola Motwani is an inspiring woman and a living testament to the power of vision and determination. Shortly after her husband, Ramesh "Bob" Motwani, passed away in 1994, she found herself suddenly single with two boys to raise. She and Bob had a shared vision of transformation of Fort Lauderdale Beach, and they were convinced that their oceanfront property would eventually hold tremendous value. "We had assembled the block, and I could have sold [after Bob's death], but something was not allowing me to sell, even as a single woman in a bad market with lots of challenges. I believed in it. I had a true vision and inner strength, and my passion became my driving force."

As a single owner of the block, Motwani got busy with building up her value. Not a developer and with no expertise in this field (but armed with a law degree and an eager spirit), she, for the most part single-handedly, went to the City in 2000 for approvals for her development. When asked who the attorney was who walked her through this process—that's usually how large-scale developments get approved in the City—she said that she didn't have one, but that Ron Mastriana came in later.

"I am a learner. I don't have that fear or hesitation. I educated myself on the process," she said. She found an architect, came up with a plan and took it through the Planning & Zoning Advisory Board, the City's development review process and ultimately the City Commission for approval. She had started with a block of dated buildings and now had approvals for a world-class resort. Now, she had something to sell. But she needed a developer, and time was of the essence. She had a short window in which to actually put a shovel in the ground.

"Many developers started coming to me as I was going through this process. In my first meeting, I had no idea of a price, so I asked a lot of questions," she said. "As I was talking to them, I was



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educating them about what the beach needed. My vision was not to just transform one block, but the destination. Because I was so involved with the City, the Chamber and the CVB [Convention & Visitor's Bureau] on beach redevelopment, I had so much information to offer developers I was meeting with. I actually overpriced my block so that the developers would go to the next one to develop."

The developers did go to the next blocks, and this not only established a concrete value for what was paid for an oceanfront parcel similar to Motwani's parcel, but it also built the value of her piece. "As each parcel of oceanfront land sold, it increased my value because there wasn't much oceanfront land left for development. I didn't want to be the first one or the last one to sell, but I wanted a good price," she said.

At one point, the Ritz-Carlton came to her, as she was accustomed to now touring developers block by block. "They said, 'Your market is not ready for it.' I said to myself, 'Well, I guess you will be back,'" Motwani said. And indeed, the luxury resort brand is rumored to be coming to the beach in the near future.

Motwani's tourings and others' activities had by now created quite a level of interest in Fort Lauderdale Beach. Many flags were interested in the destination, including the St. Regis, Starwood's Atlantic and Hilton. Trump was a natural progression. "I was invited to Trump International in New York. I liked the product, the quality, the service, and I thought it would be great for our beach. It fit into my vision. Donald Jr. then came to see me with the entire development team. I am glad today that I chose them. This name escalates the market," she said.

A partner in Trump International, Motwani is also president and CEO of Merrimac Ventures, and she has now assembled the next block to the south where Waterfront Inns and Tropic Cay sit. "I have a bond with the beach. I raised a family there, I have my businesses there, and I dreamed this vision. When you believe in something and you have vision, you must achieve it. It was not about just one block, it was a community. The city needed it, the community needed it, the beach needed it and the market determined the destination," summarized Motwani. ☞



Plaque in honor of Ramesh "Bob" Motwani, who passed in 1994, commending his efforts.