

# *Farewell to a Friend*

He was an incredible man. He cared deeply for those closest to him and countless others he never knew. Over the years, he built an empire, yet never lost sight of those less fortunate along the way.



Joaquin Blaya (left) with Renee and Jay Weiss.

*J*ay W. Weiss, a founder of Southern Wine & Spirits and chair emeritus of the University of Miami Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center's Board of Governors, died January 31 at the age of 76. He left behind an incredible legacy and an indelible mark on UM/Sylvester.

Weiss' impact on the cancer center was huge. But it was just a part of his impact on the University, its hospitals and clinics as a whole. Weiss raised millions of dollars for the University of Miami and Jackson Memorial Hospital. Many of those dollars came from his own pocket. He was also former chairman and member of the Miami-Dade County Public Health Trust. Aside from the administrative and oversight responsibilities that came with that

post, Weiss was first and foremost concerned with ensuring that the county's poorest residents had access to quality medical care.

Weiss will long be remembered in South Florida for his efforts to pass a half-penny tax to support Jackson and its programs and for securing millions of dollars to make the Ryder Trauma Center a reality. Today, that center is one of the busiest trauma centers in the nation.

"Jay Weiss was the most giving and the most caring man that I have ever known," says Joaquin Blaya, chairman of UM/Sylvester's Board of Governors. "He was truly an extraordinary human being—his love and compassion for the less fortunate knew no bounds."

All told, Weiss raised more than \$150 million for the University of Miami. Yet that figure doesn't even begin to account for his contributions as a leader and a friend. As chairman

of the board, Weiss led UM/Sylvester during its most difficult years with integrity, tenacity, and grace. "He was, quite simply, a remarkable man," says UM/Sylvester Director W. Jarrard Goodwin, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Ironically, it was cancer that claimed Weiss' life. It was a disease he approached with courage and equanimity.

"As one of Jay's treating physicians, I had the privilege of spending precious time with Jay in his hour of need," recalls Joseph D. Rosenblatt, M.D., scientific director for UM/Sylvester, during a memorial service in Weiss' honor. "Sometimes patient encounters can leave one drained, especially when what you can offer falls short of a patient's needs. As was always the case with Jay, each encounter left me feeling a bit richer, stronger, and happier. Caring for Jay was in itself a transforming experience."

## FAMILY AND FRIENDS FIRST

Though Weiss was largely about helping people he never even knew, no one came before his family and close circle of friends.

Weiss was husband to Renee and father to Jennie, Rayanne, and Laurie. But his family didn't stop there. Weiss took others in, like Richard Booth, now vice president and general manager of Southern Wine & Spirits, and Booth's sister, Lisa. When a close friend died, Weiss brought that friend's children into the fold.

He reached out to hundreds more as well. Weiss is credited with putting some 50 students through college and making education a reality for countless others.

For some kids, Weiss truly went out on a limb.

After a young boy confessed to robbing and tying up members of Weiss' family in the 1970's, Weiss not

## *Tribute to a Friend*

Thousands came to say goodbye and celebrate Weiss' life. Excerpted below are the words of a friend.

"...He was a man of boundless compassion, imbued with a strong sense of justice, and most importantly, an optimism and faith in the essential goodness of his fellow man. Where there were problems, he labored selflessly for solutions, deriving strength from the task itself.

There is a Jewish legend that says that this world exists but for the deeds of 36 righteous men whose deeds

remain hidden from view. Indeed, in the week following Jay's death many of us were regaled with an ever-multiplying number of anecdotes about Jay's generosity and acts of hidden kindness, performed with humility, far from the limelight. Jay did the right thing instinctively and never for accolades or recognition. This imperfect world will need to continue with only 35 hidden righteous men because we have identified one of the 36..."

Joseph D. Rosenblatt, M.D., scientific director for UM/Sylvester

only forgave the boy, but took him in, helped him finish high school, and put the boy through college and law school.

“How quietly he did it all. That was the most extraordinary thing about him,” says South Florida wine expert Chip Cassidy, who, along with Weiss, helped build the Southern Wine & Spirits Beverage Management Center at Florida International University. “Problems were always opportunities to him.”

### A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN

Shortly after moving to Florida with his first wife, Mary Beth, Weiss began his career working with his uncle and father in the liquor business.

In the late 1960’s, Weiss went out on his own, partnering with business associate Harvey Chaplin, and purchasing what would become Southern

Wine & Spirits, the country’s largest liquor distributor. Today, Southern has operations in ten states and annual revenue in excess of \$4 billion.

After his first wife died of leukemia in 1977, Weiss established the Mary Beth Weiss Research Center at Jackson Memorial Hospital.

Years later he met and married his second wife, Renee. Together they served the community gracefully, stylishly, and with untold generosity. In 2002, they were awarded the Caroline W. Halpern Award for selfless dedication to advancing cancer research and treatment at UM/Sylvester.



Top: Jay Weiss with the Sylvester family and President Shalala at the University of Miami’s Momentum Campaign launch. Left middle: Jay Weiss inducted into the Iron Arrow Society. Right middle: From left to right: Dr. W. Jarrard Goodwin, Dean Clarkson, Joaquin Blaya, Jay Weiss, Mike Abrams, Dean Fogel, and Dr. Gerard Kaiser. Bottom: Jay and Renee Weiss and President Shalala.

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Joaquin F. Blaya, chairman of UM/Sylvester’s Board of Governors

### ALWAYS SERVING OTHERS

Weiss’ reach extended far beyond the University and its related programs. He was tied to numerous community organizations and worthwhile causes. Weiss was an active member of the Board of Trustees for Barry University and the Orange Bowl Committee. He played an instrumental role in the *We Will Rebuild* task force following the devastation of Hurricane Andrew in 1992. The accolades and recognition bestowed on Weiss over the years could fill a book. But that’s not something he’d ever want to see.

Weiss will be sorely missed and forever remembered. He was the best friend UM/Sylvester will ever know.