Benchstories

Honor Legacies. Mark your Memories.

In partnership with the City of Coral Gables, the Coral Gables Community Foundation launched the Commemorative Bench Program in 2016.

Families and friends from around the community have placed benches in Coral Gables' beautiful parks to honor memories, milestones and loved ones.

This is a collection of the stories behind the benches, Benchstories.

Thank you to the City of Coral Gables for making the Commemorative Bench Program possible.
Coral Gables residents, Alex and Claudia Binelo donated a beautiful bench to Coral Bay Park. They chose that park because they live across the street in the Gables by the Sea community. The Binelo family enjoys the park almost every day with their two young boys: Alexander Maurice, 2, & Santiago Leonardo, 1.

Alex is a CPA and an equity partner at the largest accounting firm in Florida, MBAF. Claudia is a full time mom and member of the Gables by the Sea Homeowner’s Association. Their two energetic boys keep them active and they love living in Coral Gables. Alex and Claudia are proud to support wonderful Miami organizations like the United Way of Miami-Dade and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center.

United Way of Miami-Dade, Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, and FIU’s Dean Council, amongst others. Claudia’s beloved grandfather is former Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré and her brother-in-law is State Senator Jose Javier Rodriguez of District #37, which includes Coral Gables.
Long-time Coral Gables residents, Jack and Natasha Lowell donated a bench through the Commemorative Bench Program to their children’s favorite park, Sunrise Harbor Park. The Park is special to the Lowell family as their children, Lena and John, played in the beautiful park on a daily basis as children. Jack and Natasha still reside in the same home on Sunrise Avenue where they raised their family, which is down the street from the park.

Spending many years working in New York and abroad in Brazil and Mexico, John is a Global Risk Advisory Manager at Deloitte in Miami. Lena loves being a new mom to son Zander. Today, Lena and her husband Eddie, a Partner at Deloitte Consulting, bring Zander to the park often to play and enjoy the fresh air.

Friends to everyone they know, Jack and Natasha share their commitment and passion for community with their children. Jack currently serves as the Chairman of the Coral Gables Community Foundation. Over the years, Jack’s leadership has influenced the commercial real estate landscape in Miami in significant ways. Jack has served as Chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce as well as Chair of The Beacon Council. He is on advisory boards for both Teach for America and WPBT Channel 2. Natasha is Senior Vice President and Private Banking Manager at First National Bank of South Miami. Natasha has more than 30 years of experience in the banking industry. She proudly serves on the Board of Trustees of Florida International University and as an Advisory Board Member to Casa Familia, a non-profit organization dedicated to securing affordable, quality housing for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
Plaque Text

"WE’RE FREE TO GO WHERE WE WISH AND TO BE WHAT WE ARE – JLS FOREVER, JACK O’ROURKE"

The life of O’Rourke family patriarch Jack O’Rourke is celebrated by his loving family with a bench in Pittman Park. Jack O’Rourke was born on March 13, 1937 in Newark, New Jersey. Following his honorable discharge from the military, he married his childhood sweetheart, Patricia Ann Beyer in 1958. Jack had a successful 32-year career in the insurance business serving as General Manager of ManuLife in Omaha, Cleveland and Miami. A proud Irishman, Jack loved spending time with his family boating and fishing off the waters of Biscayne Bay. He served as Commodore of Coral Reef Yacht Club from 1994-1995. He had a great love of adventure and travel as well as photography. Jack O’Rourke was a beloved husband, father and grandfather to Jack IV, Katherine, Ashley, Ryan, Rain and Keegan. Jack’s son, John is the immediate Past Chairman of the Coral Gables Community Foundation and has been instrumental in the organization’s success; he is also Vice President of Private Banking and Wealth Advisor at First American Bank in Coral Gables. John’s father was to him a mentor in community philanthropy.
Dr. Alfred Graham Smith

Bench Location: Granada Golf Course, Burger Bob’s

Plaque Text

“IN HONOR OF OUR FRIEND
DR. ALFRED G. SMITH “DOC”
1928-2018
“MAYOR” OF BURGER BOB’S”

Dr. Alfred Graham Smith, affectionately known as “Doc”, was a longtime Coral Gables resident and a renowned ophthalmologist. He was a charter member of the American Association of Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus (AAOPS) where he served as president from 1982-1983. He was elected to the AAOPS Hall of Fame as a Bronze Medalist.

Doc established his practice in the City of Coral Gables, making him the first pediatric ophthalmologist in the State of Florida. He founded the pediatric ophthalmology clinic in Miami Children’s Hospital, now Nicklaus Children’s Hospital. He also spent time as a volunteer faculty member for the University of Miami Medical School Ophthalmology Department. A pioneer in his field, he even arranged for the residents of the now Bascom Palmer Eye Institute to complete their pediatric training at Nicklaus Children’s Hospital.

Doc also served with the Society for the Prevention of Blindness, Dade County School Health Advisory Committee, where he performed vision screenings, and with the Florida Ophthalmology Society.

As many of his friends and family know, Doc’s favorite hangout was Burger Bob’s in Coral Gables. He was such a beloved regular, that the burger joint named him “Mayor of Burger Bob’s.” Dr. Alfred Smith is survived by his three children, Alfred George Smith, Jr. (Monica Cronin), Mary Leslie Smith (Bruce Brockhouse), and Marshall Graham Smith (Morgan Park), and by his six grandchildren, Alexandra Georgia Smith, Mary Shannon Smith, Melissa Margaret Smith, Duncan Daniel Smith, Kirksey Margaret Smith, and Walker Park Smith.

Family and friends gathered at Burger Bob’s to remember “Doc” and dedicate his bench.
Long-time Coral Gables resident Tim Anagnost was born in Chicago in 1943 and moved to Miami at the age of three. Growing up, his family endured difficult financial circumstances, however remained hard working and focused on their family. Tim's mother worked at a shoe factory and his father as a waiter. Tim had a memorable and happy childhood. When he was 12, Tim became the bat boy for the original Miami Marlins baseball team by winning a contest in the Miami Herald.

Tim went on to graduate from Miami Senior High School and attended the University of Miami on an academic scholarship for his undergraduate degree and for law school. Tim became a successful lawyer and in 1975, he bought a home in Coral Gables and has lived here ever since.

Tim carries on the legacy of his family by two charitable funds he established at the Coral Gables Community Foundation - the Anagnost Family Fund in memory of his parents, George and Georgia Anagnost and the James Captain Memorial Scholarship Fund. Established in memory of Tim's late brother James Captain, the Scholarship Fund provides funding for children from Coral Gables and Coconut Grove to attend summer camp and just awarded its first scholarship this summer.

James Captain was born in Brooklyn in 1934. James, his brother Tim and their family, moved to South Florida when he was 12. James graduated with a degree in Speech Correction from the University of Miami and also completed a master's degree in Communication Disorders and Audiology. He was a speech therapist in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools system for many years. James loved sports and helping disadvantaged children and this Memorial Scholarship celebrates his legacy.

Tim Anagnost has solidified his dedication to his community by pledging to support the Foundation in perpetuity by establishing the Timoleon G. Anagnost Endowment Fund at the Community Foundation. Tim’s significant legacy gift will preserve his wishes while continuing the standards of charitable giving and involvement that our community has come to expect from the Coral Gables Community Foundation.
The Ortega Family

Bench Location: Salvadore Park

Plaque Text

“ALEXA, OUR OPENED HEARTS ARE FOREVER INDEBTED TO YOU; WITH GRATITUDE AND LOVE, MOM AND DAD”

Natalie and Jose Luis Ortega are Miami natives of Cuban descent. Coral Gables has always had a special place in the Ortega Family household. Natalie and Jose Luis met in the Gables and got married at the Coral Gables Congregational Church approximately 9 years ago. In their free time, they have enjoyed playing tennis at Salvadore Park for the last decade.

Salvadore Park has been a place that Natalie holds dear to her heart as she worked in the park’s pro-shop during her high school years and has cherished countless hours on its courts for 30 years. The Ortega Family is delighted to contribute to the City Beautiful where they enjoy all their free time—whether it is through strolls along Miracle Mile, at church, or riding bikes, Coral Gables provides an oasis for the family. They are delighted that other families will be able to enjoy their commemorative bench at the park.

Natalie and Jose Luis have a daughter, Olivia who is 5 years old and a son, Max Luca who just turned 1. The commemorative bench is in honor of their unborn daughter, Alexa, who is forever cherished in their hearts.
Rachel and Wil Blechman’s dog Daisy loved walking in Kerdyk Park.

Daisy was an 85-pound Belgian Malinois with the temperament of a poodle. Loving and beloved by all, she guarded the house, played catch with our grandchildren and was our devoted companion. She was the only dog we knew who had human friends outside the family; people who treasured a friendship with her and visited her in her final hours. One of the most extraordinary things about Daisy was how she came to be a member of our family.

We had been grieving the loss of another dog, a Belgian Malinois we had for 14 years named Tally, when my husband Wil, who was pushing a reel lawn mower in our back yard looked up and was stunned to see a Belgian Malinois in our fenced-in yard. He called to me and I raced outside to see a tall, muscular dog with red with black points standing there looking at us. It was obviously a female who had recently had puppies. We could not imagine how she got in. The gate was closed. I thought she might have come from the Bergman house behind us.

By the time I reached the Bergman house, the dog was back in their yard; her route a mystery that has never been solved. Mrs. Bergman told me how she and her three children rescued this Malinois in the Redlands. Soon after bringing her home, the dog gave birth to thirteen puppies on their patio. Mrs. Bergman led me onto to the patio to a tangle of gorgeous puppies. Many were already spoken for. Perhaps, because she thought we had been selected by the mother dog, Mrs. Bergman offered us one of the 3 remaining females, and we happily accepted.

The smallest of the three kept coming to us, wagging her tail. Mrs. Bergman explained that she was one of the pups the kids had helped to feed when the larger puppies would not let them get to the mother. She was used to being handled. Malinois can be very aggressive, and we thought it a great advantage that this one was so positive and gentle. She was the one we selected.

We named her Daisy as suggested by the daisies on her collar, and she turned out to be a loyal and loving friend, and a treasured member of our family.

By Rachel and Wil Blechman
Cheli Cerra has dedicated her life to helping grow and improve public education for hundreds of students and their families. Cheli retired in 2018 as Principal of Coral Gables Preparatory Academy after serving 15 successful years in the role. The bench in Cheli’s honor was donated by the Parent Teacher Association at Coral Gables Prep.

In 1999, Cheli founded one of the first K-8 public schools in Miami-Dade County, which earned the highest educational rating in Florida. In 2001, inspired by her own two children and the students she taught over the years, Cheli left her job in the school system to start Eduville which helps families choose the best school for their children and navigate the educational system. She devoted all her energy into turning Eduville into a success. She attended numerous conferences on education, created her own website and authored the book, *Every Parent’s Guide to School Choice*. She is also the co-author of the bestselling six-book series *SchoolTalk!* published by Wiley.

Cheli Cerra is a Child Success and Education Expert and has been considered America’s Most Trusted Principal. In 2003, Women’s Day Magazine named her “The Right Choice” for education. After her more than three decades as a school teacher and principal, Cheli is now a Financial Services Professional helping public employees navigate and understand the Florida Retirement system.
Harry and Mary Perrin, originally of Richmond, Virginia, came to Coral Gables in the 1960’s and found a new home that they dearly loved. Harry was a Veteran of the Normandy landing in WWII and worked for the federal Small Business Administration throughout the Southeast United States. Harry and Mary became active members of the Country Club of Coral Gables where they played golf (on the Granada Course), socialized, danced and played Bridge. Mary was active in local cancer leagues and garden clubs. Harry served as President of the “10th Holers” – the men’s golf association at the C.G.C.C. Upon their death, they instructed Don Slesnick, as their personal representative, to establish a fund at the Coral Gables Community Foundation, for support of worthy projects in the City which they loved.

Donations from that fund have supported projects such as the George Merrick Statue in front of City Hall, a meditation spot at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden and the Ponce/Tamiami Trail Entrance clock tower. A major gift of $250,000 helped make possible the rehabilitation of the old Police and Fire Station in the process of becoming the City’s Museum and another $250,000 facilitated the completion of the Coral Gables Art Cinema. This bench is a small tribute to two great Gableites!