

# NEIGHBORS

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The Miami Herald 

## MIAMI STORIES

# Couple's special spot: The Betsy Hotel

BY JOE SELMA  
Special to The Miami Herald

I first met my wife Elena on the beach in Havana in 1947. She was 16 and the most beautiful woman I had ever seen - she was wearing a two-piece bathing suit and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

We were engaged for four years; her father insisted that I finish school and have a good job before we were allowed to marry. We were married on July 14, 1951 in Havana and came to the United States for our honeymoon.

A cousin had told us that The Betsy Hotel on Ocean Drive was a beautiful place, and even more important to us as a young couple - very affordable. I think the deal was, you paid \$18 for the week, with breakfast, and you got a free night thrown in as well. We had a room on the second floor facing the ocean and it was fantastic - in fact, we liked it so much we stayed there again the following year.

Back then we would walk to places like the Pick N'Chicken where you'd get a full meal for \$2.99 and to Wolfie's and over to Lincoln Road.

After our romantic sojourn in Miami, we returned to Havana and built our life there. Elena was a school teacher, and then went to work for Chase Manhattan in Havana while I worked as an accountant. We came back to Miami Beach the

year after we were married - and stayed at The Betsy Hotel once again.

We came back once more in 1956, this time we spent a month traveling all over the United States - out west, Yosemite, up north. We saw everything. It was our last trip before our children were born. Our first son, Jose Emilio, was born in 1957 and Alex Mario joined the family two years later.

In 1961, our whole world changed and like many other Cubans, we had to leave our country very quickly. We came to Miami to start our new lives. A cousin told me to go to the Everglades Hotel on Biscayne Boulevard, and I got a job there washing dishes. I was an accountant in Cuba but here I needed to find whatever work I could to support my family. Elena looked after the boys; and within six months her mother joined us as well. Our first place was near 28th Street and 29th Avenue.

We lived there with all the doors open and never worried about anything. After a while, we moved to what's now Carol City, but it was considered Opa Locka back then. We lived in our house for 12 years. We used to go to the Royal Castle for hamburgers, you would get 12 hamburgers for a dollar. We used to pile the kids in the car and go to the drive-in movies on Opa Locka Boulevard.

Miami was very different



**WEDDED BLISS:** Joe and Elena Selma, on their wedding day in Havana, July 14, 1951.

in those days. Miami Beach had a lot of wide open spaces - up Collins Avenue there were only a few hotels. Before long, I was lucky to get a job in the accounting department at the Doral Resort thanks to my friend, who was a manager at the hotel. When the Doral opened on Miami Beach in 1963 I spent my time going back and forth between the two properties.

I worked my way up and

when I retired in 1991 after 30 years, I was the company controller. I worked closely with Herman Kaskel, who took me to the Beach with him when the Doral Beach Resort opened in 1963. It was a very fancy property - in fact we celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary at the Starlight Roof - which was considered the place to have your affair back then.

The family that owned the Doral, the Kaskels, were

## Tell us your story

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**About this project:** Miami Stories is a collaboration by HistoryMiami, The Miami Herald, Arva Moore Parks, Miami-Dade County Public Schools and National Conference on Citizenship Chairman Michael Weiser.

very good to me and my family. In 1965, Elena's sister was still in Cuba and we needed to get her and her husband to Miami. Mr. Kaskel knew about the situation. He had a 28' sailboat, which he sold to us for \$1. We sent it to Cuba with a captain to help bring them out. The plan was when they arrived, I'd sell the boat back to him for the same price.

Elena's sister and husband, their mother and two nephews boarded the boat which, unfortunately, was sunk by the Coast Guard. They were all safe and allowed to enter this country but the boat was gone forever. Not only did he not say a word about the boat, he told me to take him to the warehouse - where all the mattresses, furniture, supplies for both hotels were kept - and told us to take whatever we needed to help them get started in Miami.

We moved from Opa Locka to Pembroke Pines once the kids grew up, and now we're back in the Doral area. I retired with a lifetime country club membership. I'm 82 but I still go to the gym four to five times a week and play golf two to three times a week.

We've had the good fortune to travel the world the 60 years that we've been blessed to share together - Europe, India, Africa, Japan and Singapore. For our 60th wedding anniversary, though, we wanted to return to the place we first experienced marital bliss - The Betsy Hotel.

The prices have gone up but they were kind enough to charge us \$18/night - not quite the \$18/week we paid in 1961 but pretty close. It's still beautiful after all these years. It's a jewel of Miami Beach - just like my beautiful bride!