

Rooms for Change

The Betsy serves up the boutique hotel concept with a philanthropic twist

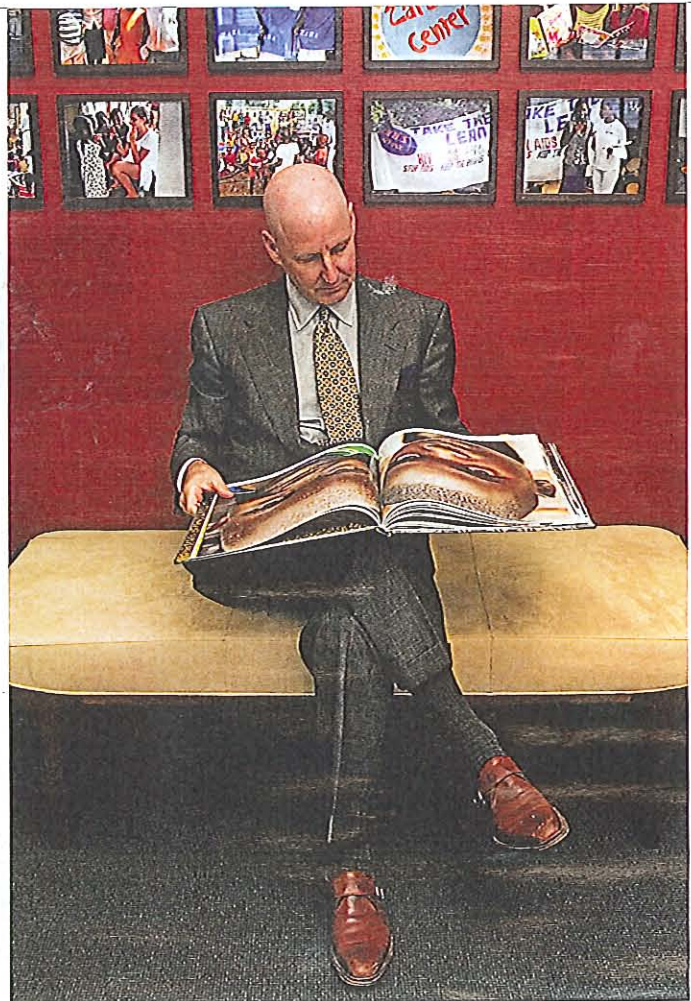
| By Alexandra Polier | Portrait by Kate Glicksberg |

At a recent fundraiser for the launch of the Miami City Ballet, local patrons and spindly dancers floated through the halls of the newly renovated Betsy Hotel. They admired the photographs and the charming interiors while artists and guests stood in salon-style fashion discussing the importance of supporting art and culture.

One man sitting nearby couldn't have been more pleased. Jonathan Plutzik, a former investment banker, bought the Betsy a few years ago with his business partner, the global philanthropist Bobby Sager. While they had never ventured into hospitality before, they felt this too could be a vehicle for local change. And while Plutzik is quick to note that it is a business first and foremost, he becomes most animated when discussing the various causes—from inviting writers and artists to stay at the hotel and work to helping fund charities for causes including gay rights and helping AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe. This month, the Betsy will honor American war veterans through an extensive program focused on preserving the memory of those who've defended the United States on the battlefield. "This place is a living, breathing thing, and we are intentional about everything we do," Plutzik says.

It was just back in April that he and his team unveiled the renovation on the classic South Beach property formerly known as the Betsy Ross, built by legendary architect L. Murray Dixon in 1942. It's a homey space, with a lobby that boasts an outpost of Laurent Tourondel's BLT Steak, and interior design throughout by Diamante Pedersoli and Carmelina Santoro, who brought a colonial flair that juxtaposes with the surrounding glitz of Ocean Drive.

From the time it started accepting guests, the Betsy began hosting community functions, book readings, town hall meetings, fundraisers and receptions. Plutzik and his sister, the Betsy's Vice President of Marketing and Philanthropy, Deborah Plutzik-Briggs, also began incorporating the hotel into charities related to their PG Family Foundation, and partnered with the Matthew Shepard Foundation, which fights hate crime. The



A SHORE THING From top: Jonathan Plutzik of the revamped Betsy hotel. The hotel's colonial facade juxtaposes with glitzy Ocean Drive. The hotel lounge at the Betsy.

siblings also established the first Florida chapter of the Human Rights Committee through the hotel.

While charity will likely become the most recognizable part of the Betsy's outreach, the Plutziks also pay homage to their father, a poet, through a variety of literary programs. They've partnered with Books & Books to host readings and place novels in rooms and common areas; they're establishing a writing room in the hotel, where guests can pen letters or work on a draft of a novel; and they've started an outreach program with local schools, reading to students and leaving behind eco-friendly biodegradable bookmarks that can be planted in reading gardens. The Veteran's Day program also has roots in words: the Betsy will host the John Lennon Education Tour Bus, which will park outside the hotel for a weekend and bring relatives of veterans into the roving recording studio to read letters from World War II soldiers who wrote home during the conflict.

Oral histories, human rights and charities helping African causes aren't things you normally associate with South Beach boutique hotels, and that's exactly the point. "We are committed to both inner and outer beauty," Plutzik says. ■