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Dan Biederman Redevelopment Manager, Chappaqua

By Martin Wilbur

Dan Biederman may not be a household name for those outside New York City government and redevelopment projects, but it's likely anyone who has visited Manhattan is familiar with his work.

The longtime Chappaqua resident has been the force behind the revitalization of some of the city's most recognizable venues and neighborhoods for 30 years. As president of New York City non-profits such as the 34th Street Partnership and the Bryant Park Corporation, during the past three decades Biederman has crafted and perfected the model of securing private money to redevelop depressed areas.

"I don't take public money ever and I don't take philanthropic money either," said Biederman, 56, between sips of coffee at the Starbucks in Chappaqua recently before catching a Manhattan-bound train. "All the money that comes from the stuff I do in New York comes from private sources, private business deals, private partnerships, private business arrangements, private events."

Biederman's first project may have been his most important personally and professionally. While still in his mid 20s and at the time the chairman of a midtown community board, the Princeton University and Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration graduate caught the eye of the Rockefeller family who, along with other influential people, were appalled at the condition of Bryant Park. It was in-

festated with drug dealers, some of whom were so brazen they were dealing on the steps of the public library.

Operating with a relatively modest \$75,000 budget in 1980--half of which was his salary--Biederman's model of using private resources and management for a public venue has transformed Bryant Park into one of the most popular public parks in the world, hosting a variety of vendors and events.

His initial charge was to make the park a self-sustaining enterprise without returning to the Rockefellers for more money. Today, nearly \$1 million is derived from sponsorships and about \$1.8 million from rent.

"It was a very difficult job to succeed at, but as my wife said--she was my fiancée then--if you succeed at this, although it seems like an odd entry into this field, people will be there, people who wanted to have you will reward you," recalled Biederman, who has lived in Chappaqua since 1991 with his wife, attorney Susan Duke, and their two children. "It didn't work out exactly that way but it was the start of my career."

Biederman, a 1971 Scarsdale High School graduate, first got the bug for working in a public setting when he interned for the New York City Council at 21 years old. He saw, however, that public life would be frustrating and sought to find another way to use his talents.

Since Bryant Park, Biederman has assisted in turning around or improving doz-



ens of areas, focusing mostly on parks and business districts. In New York, he helped clean up Grand Central Station in the 1980s, which also deteriorated into a frighteningly grungy facility. With private security and new lighting, he was able to gain the confidence of city government and the police department to focus their resources and turn Grand Central into a safe, shiny transportation and commerce hub.

About 20 years ago, he co-founded the 34th Street Partnership, which takes in the area around the Empire State Building and Madison Square Garden Investment in security, sanitation, lighting and amenities like signs and kiosks to help beautify the area has been a key part of that neighborhood's resurgence.

Despite the successes, there are those in government who have distrusted Biederman, including, he said, former Mayor Rudy Giuliani who was worried that he was becoming too powerful. It was a notion Biederman dismissed, but even under the best circumstances, dealing with government is a difficult balancing act.

"The trick is to not need government money and, in effect, not cutting them off and at the same time not being unfriendly because government, really, even Mayor

Bloomberg to a minor extent, most government people prefer if you're on the dole," he explained. "They understand the relationship. If you're independent they're a little troubled."

While having troubles with the Giuliani administration, Biederman launched his own company, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, in 1998. While still continuing to oversee his work in New York, he similarly has assisted Atlanta, Dallas, Miami, Baltimore and Newark, N.J., among other cities. Two of his major current projects are revitalizing the Commons in Boston, the nation's oldest public park, and Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia.

"Boston is more of an anti-commerce city," Biederman noted. "The (more liberal) attitudes of Cambridge and Beacon Hill kind of pervade the downtown policy making. It's finally moving in the right direction."

Although he has worked on some of the most recognizable public venues, Biederman is also a member of the Chappaqua Downtown Steering Committee. Travel has kept his attendance and involvement to a minimum, but he believes that private enterprise and the public sector can work together. He looks at the neighboring Mount Kisco, which has developed into a sort of social center. Biederman said in its own way, Chappaqua can capture some of that excitement.

"Chappaqua has trailed and I think it has been as much government as private but now government understands we need to compete for those dollars," he said.

Over the next 10 to 15 years, Biederman hopes to build up his own company while he's still young enough. But there are plenty of places throughout the world that could use his help. He's expanded his operations, producing the framework for the first Business Improvement Districts in the United Kingdom and he's headed to meet with Helsinki officials this month.

"Each one of the projects has their own difficulty," Biederman said. "That's why it's taken me 30 years to do all of this."



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