

Thank you so much, Clemmer. And here I was, thinking I was just writing about real estate!

I can't tell you how honored – and surprised – I am to be here. When Jeremy called me to tell me I would receive this award, I remember asking him: Are you sure you have the right guy?

I guess was just fact-checking. Journalists learn early on not to trust anyone!

I already knew about the Judge Knott Award, of course, and how it recognizes contributions to the preservation, promotion, or enrichment of Palm Beach County history. The official description also says the contribution “should enrich Palm Beach County residents for generations to come.”

I was struck by that idea, because those of us who make a living from journalism – and I use the term “make a living” pretty loosely – well, those of us who are professional journalists know that we do more than just write about the news.

We also document history every day, helping preserve what happened here for future generations.

I look at the list of the folks who have earned this honor before me, and I remain dumbfounded that I'm in their company. Among them, Mr. Mayhew knows more about the history of Palm Beach than anyone I know – and has always been happy to share his knowledge with me.

And, of course, an early honoree was the late, great Jim Ponce, who began the history tours of Worth Avenue and was the official historian of The Breakers.

I met Mr. Ponce just a few weeks after I moved to Palm Beach County from my native Texas back in 1991 to edit Boca Raton Magazine. He was one of my first interviews. From him, I learned that Lake Worth Beach, Worth Avenue the Lake Worth Lagoon are all named after the same guy, who also is the namesake of Fort Worth, my hometown. That's Gen. William Jenkins Worth, an officer who served in the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War and the Second Seminole War.

I didn't know about the Gen. Worth connection when I moved here. In fact, I didn't know much about about Florida at all, except what I'd seen on Flipper and I Dream of Jeannie. Remember -- I'm not from New York. I didn't know from Florida.

But I did bring with me a love of history, as most native Texans do. When I was growing up, the history of Texas was so important that if they could have bottled it, they would have fed it to infants.

So once I moved to Palm Beach County, I set about learning as much as I could about local history. So of course I visited Palm Beach on my first weekend here. I couldn't have guessed then that I much later in my career I would celebrate 22 years of working at the historic newspaper that covers the island – the Palm Beach Daily News, better known as the Shiny Sheet, where I write about real estate.

But more on that in a minute.

Over the years, as I worked as a journalist in South Florida, I covered plenty of county history – including the 75th anniversary celebration of what was then called the Boca Raton Resort & Club. Next year the resort will mark its 100th birthday.

I’ve always enjoyed writing about local history. I still remember, back at the old Boca Raton News, covering the efforts to restore the historic courthouse where we stand today

Later I always tried to weave history into my articles about Palm Beach real estate whenever it was appropriate. Providing the history of a landmarked home on the island or even where Flagler’s Royal Poinciana Hotel once stood – that information can be helpful, not only to newcomers but to put historic places and people in context for future generations.

Some stories I’ve covered transcend others in terms of historical importance, of course.

When I was at the Boca Raton News, I helped direct the team that covered the 9/11 attacks, which had so many connections to South Florida, including the shocking fact that several of the terrorists who flew those planes into the World Trade Center had lived in Delray Beach. I’m very proud that our tiny staff won a special first-place award from Florida Press Club for our in-depth coverage of the tragedy.

And on a recent trip to the Boca Raton Historical Society’s museum, I was fascinated to see a prominently displayed front cover of the Boca Raton News -- with a story about the Anthrax attack of October 2001, at the building where the National Enquirer was published. The building was literally less than half a block from the Boca Raton News. I even remember editing the story that is on that front page at the museum.

I’ve been covering news of a very different sort at the Shiny Sheet – real estate, the town Palm Beach’s biggest industry.

Anyone who knows Palm Beach knows it has always considered itself to be the absolute center of the universe.

In fact, for the special section I edited for the paper when the town celebrated its centennial in 2011, I wrote what I consider one of the best sentences of my career: **“First-time visitors sometimes find it hard to believe that Palm Beach is such a small town, so large is its international reputation as a winter playground of the rich and famous.”**

Of course, some of Palm Beach’s rich and famous don’t want their names in the paper when they are buying and selling real estate. I often have to dig deep – and sometimes very deep -- into public records to report the identity of home buyers in a town where real estate purchases are often hidden behind trusts and shell companies.

In fact, when I’m writing about multi-million-dollar deals in Palm Beach, I get so many “no comments” that I have a running joke: I’m the only reporter in the newsroom who has never actually used the quotation key on his computer.

Yet Palm Beach is a real estate town – and has been since the Flagler era.

And I can tell you from experience: Everyone in town wants to know who bought that house – unless, of course, THEY bought that house, then it's the less said the better.

But here's the main reason that I cover real estate and the people who buy it in such detail: I firmly believe that Americans have a fundamental right to know who their neighbors are.

And when I report a buyer whose identity would otherwise stay hidden, the Shiny Sheet adds one more piece to the historical fabric of a town where the WHO can be far more important than the WHAT, the WHEN, the WHERE and the WHY.

Oh, and here's a piece of advice is you're ever going to write about real estate in Palm Beach: Never underestimate the value of the pool boy – who actually has eyes and ears, believe it or not. And if you need confirmation about buyer's identity, drive the house and look for a personalized license plate on the Bentley or the Rolls parked in the driveway.

So I've learned a lot about Palm Beach, real estate and history during my time at the Shiny Sheet. But let me tell you, nothing prepared me for the transformation of the island over the past few years.

I can sum it all up in three words.

Trump. Covid. Trump.

President Trump's first win in 2016 thrust Palm Beach, home to his winter White House at Mar-a-Lago, into the international glare.

I figured that covering the town's ties to the Trump administration – and the effects on local real estate – would be the biggest story of my career.

That didn't turn out to be the case. The pandemic arrived in early 2020 and sparked once-in-a-generation real estate boom that launched property values into the stratosphere. People flocked to Palm Beach in search of havens to weather the pandemic while taking advantage of Florida's friendlier tax laws. Havens, as it turned out, come in many forms – including the tax ones.

Over the past five years, we've seen home values double – and even triple. I even ran out of adjectives to describe the boom – it “launched prices into the stratosphere,” it “hit the ozone layer,” it was “a bottle rocket,” it was “a Lamborghini in full throttle.”

Things have slowed since the height of the pandemic but property values and price expectations remain high.

I'm proud that the Shiny Sheet's in-depth real estate coverage will preserve the details of the COVID boom that literally upended the landscape of Palm Beach. The only thing I've ever been able to compare it to is the real estate mania that completely transformed the town in the mid 1920s.

Which brings me back to history.

I consider the Judge Knott Award to be a career milestone, and I am so grateful to the Historical Society of Palm Beach County for the award. The staff has always been so helpful to me, including former curator Debbie Murray.

I'd also like to thank the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach, which has also supported me in my work, particularly its former leaders, Alexander Ives and Amanda Skier, along with current chairwoman Betsy Shiverick.

So many people who have helped me in my journalism career, including my colleagues at the Boca Raton News and at the Palm Beach Post and, of course, the Shiny Sheet.

I've been blessed to have three remarkable editors at the Shiny Sheet -- Joyce Reingold, Elizabeth Clarke and my current editor, Carol Rose.

In the same way, the real estate community of Palm Beach has been remarkably helpful to me.

And, of course, I must thank my husband, Jeff Chaussee, for his support over the past 32 years.

Thank you, to all, and especially to the Historical Society of Palm Beach County for this award.

I will keep on writing. And I hope you will keep on reading.