

Interview with Art Levy
author of

Made in Florida: Artists, Celebrities, Activists, Educators, and Other Icons in the Sunshine State

You are currently associate editor of *Florida Trend* and have previously written for the *St. Petersburg Times* and *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. Were you always interested in going into journalism?

When I was young, I stuttered severely, so the idea of being a writer was attractive. It was always easier for me to communicate through writing than through talking. When I became a newspaper reporter, though, I realized that journalists have to talk a lot! It's not just all the questions you have to ask. It's also having to talk people into talking to you in the first place. But I've loved being a journalist and I'm privileged to have been one for 35 years. The talking thing also worked out. Eventually, I gained more confidence in my speech and, although I still consider myself a stutterer, I get by pretty well now. Some people can't even tell I have a speech impediment.

With such a diverse range of people interviewed in your book, what qualities do they all possess that make them icons?

First, they're all interesting people. That's really why I picked them. They're also accomplished, and they've had an impact on Florida. It's also worth noting that none of them approached me first. They all had to be convinced. For some, it took years.

Florida is the third most populous state in the nation, and an estimated 1,000 people are moving to the Sunshine State every day. In such a crowded field, how can people stand out as accomplished individuals?

Some people stand out because they're just really good people. Greg Asbed, the co-founder of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and Bud Adams, a rancher who died in 2017, are two examples of that. Really talented people stand out, too. James Rosenquist, the pop artist who lived in Aripeka, was intimidating to interview, but he was an important artist. I think focus is important, too. The accomplished people I've spoken to tend to focus on what they're good at and work really hard at it, rather than wasting time on seeking attention and recognition.

Who are some young, up-and-coming Floridians you think will be widely recognized for their work in the future?

That's a tough one. Can I say my son, Andy Levy, who is studying biology at New College of Florida? He wants to be an entomologist. My younger son, Zach, goes to high school and he wants to be an architect. I'm proud of my kids!

In your interviews, which single question tends to give you the most insight into your subject?

There are a couple of questions that I ask everyone, but the questions that seem to elicit the most telling responses are based on the research I do beforehand. Often, questions about childhood years—growing up where they did, early influences, family dynamics, the sort of kid they were—result in interesting answers.

***Florida Trend's* interview format, described by one of your interviewees as similar to "dropping in from time to time on a conversation while wandering through a party," is an unconventional one. In your opinion, what makes it more successful than the standard, back-and-forth session?**

When I read a question-and-answer formatted interview, I'm usually amazed because people don't talk that way to me. My interviewees are often all over the place, stopping mid-sentence, changing the subject, talking and talking but not answering the question. I usually have to ask questions multiple ways

to get a true answer. The magazine's Florida Icon format allows me to pick out the best stuff and arrange it in a way that best tells the story.

If you could speak with a famous Floridian from any time period, who would it be and why?

When I interviewed novelist Harry Crews in 2012, it was a disaster—the most awkward and difficult interview I've ever had. Crews was sick when I met him at his home in Gainesville and he was mostly incoherent. He was the only person I ever interviewed, for example, who sat across from me naked from the waist down. About a half hour in, I told him I'd come back another day, when he felt better, but he died before a second interview could be arranged. Another interview that I regret not doing was with television pitchman Billy Mays, who died in 2009, less than a week before our scheduled interview. My dad was a salesman, so I really wanted to talk to Mays about the art of selling. On the other side of the death equation, I interviewed Sam Gibbons, a former congressman and D-Day vet—and someone everyone who cares about Florida should learn about—just three days before he died. I was lucky to meet him.

What advice would you give to journalism students or other individuals who are interested in conducting interviews not simply to gather information, but to really learn about people and what makes them tick?

Originally, I thought the book should be called "Listening Tour," because, really, the most important thing I do is listen. It's crucial to research your subject, which allows for good questions, but I have to remind myself constantly to listen to the answers, really focus on what they're saying, and don't interrupt. Interviews aren't about the interviewer. They're about the interviewee.

What do you hope readers will enjoy most about *Made in Florida*?

I really think all of the interviews are interesting and fun to read. Some of them are kind of funny and some are sad. There are lessons to be learned from each of these people. Many overcame incredible adversity. Many did incredible things, like Joe Kittinger, who literally parachuted to Earth from space. There are surprises. The interviews will make you think about your own life.

What are you working on next?

I'm still an associate editor at *Florida Trend*, so I'll continue interviewing prominent Floridians for the magazine. The book includes 90, but the number of interviews I've done for *Trend* is now up to 100 and rising. There are many interviews still to do.