

Martin Fine, prominent lawyer, civic activist and a voice for the disenfranchised, dies at 86

By Howard Cohen

hcohen@MiamiHerald.com



Raul Rubiera / Miami Herald File

Martin Fine is considered to be the father of affordable housing in Miami-Dade. The County celebrated the 20th anniversary of a surtax program that he and Carrie P. Meek created, with a gala in 2004.

Martin Fine and his son took a trip recently from his Coconut Grove home to the Epicure market in Miami Beach.

On the drive home, as they approached downtown Miami, Fine turned to his son Rick and said:

“Look at this city! Do you know how lucky we are to live in such a beautiful city?”

“I’ll never forget that,” Rick Fine said Thursday. “His life was an enormous love affair with the city of Miami.”

Martin Fine, prominent lawyer, business leader and unabashed civic booster who helped

reshape Miami-Dade County, died Thursday. He was 86.

“Marty was one of the finest men that Miami has had in the civic world,” said former Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré, who served six terms and called Fine one of his closest confidantes. “He was a person with a firm view and who really understood the importance of the social contract.”

Fine’s health had been failing since November, but his passion for the city he helped build never dimmed, his son said.

Fine was a senior partner in Fine Jacobson Schwartz Nash Block and England. The firm that once represented a diverse client base including developers, banks and municipalities, disbanded in 1994 — squeezed out by bigger firms, boutique firms and management woes.

But its first namesake emerged unscathed.

“He is an institution in this town,” said Stanley Price, one of Fine’s colleagues at Fine Jacobson. “Everyone knew him. Everyone respected him, and he was a great mentor.”

Fine guided Miami Dade College for nine years as chairman of the board of trustees. During the mid-1980s, he was chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce.

“He really was a community treasure,” said Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón. “A gentleman in every sense of the word and someone who was a bridge-builder who made all the difference in Miami Dade College.”

His work on the New World Center Action Committee helped redraw the map of downtown Miami, a move that eventually led to the emergence of an arts district that now sees the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts as a cultural and business engine on Biscayne Boulevard.

Fine’s civic involvement began in 1955 after graduation from the University of Miami Law School, when he joined the Miami Housing Authority and served as its chair for eight years.

In 1968 he told the Miami Herald that he pushed his own “private urban renewal” program to help improve Miami’s inner city by developing public housing projects for the elderly, disabled and poor near today’s Marlins Park. Part of this work came to fruition in 1965 when he was a member of a group of developers who built the 143-unit Park Tower, a federally subsidized apartment building in downtown Miami for low-income tenants.

This passion led to the chamber’s highest honor in 1991, when Fine received the Sand in My Shoes Award, given to people who help transform South Florida. At the time, chamber President Bill Collum called Fine “the most dedicated, committed and devoted civic leader I have ever met.”

But it was Fine’s work with state Sen. Carrie Meek in 1988 on the Documentary Benevolent Aid (DBA) surtax program that he felt was his greatest professional achievement, he told his son one night during his 27-day hospitalization in November. The program helped provide zero-interest home loans to poor working families.

“I don’t think we will ever find anyone as fair-minded as Martin Fine,” said Meek. “It didn’t matter what your walk of life was. Martin was the most even-minded person you could know.”

Fine’s caring for the community “set an extraordinary example of civic giving,” said Dave Lawrence, president of The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation and retired publisher of the Miami Herald. “I’ve known him for a quarter-century, and I wish I’d known him all my life. He is one of the most remarkable people I have known ever.”

During the early 1980s, Fine flexed political muscle by successfully pushing for the defeat of Amendment One, a tax-limiting measure, by convincing the Florida Supreme Court that its provisions violated the state Constitution. Elected officials would not attach their names to Fine’s suit.

No matter. Fine went alone.

“The role of the private citizen is unique in our society,” he told the Miami Herald in 1984. “Too many of us are reluctant to take a stand as a private citizen.”

And when going public wasn’t enough to evince change, Fine went underground, joining the Non-Group, which formed in 1971. The Non-Group was the most influential, behind-the-scenes power force in the county for two decades — made up of a fraternity of businessmen and civic leaders.

Non-Group members put their considerable financial resources behind their causes and bent the ears of elected officials to influence action on numerous issues, including a bond referendum in

1972 to help raise \$553 million for public facilities. They backed the Metrorail referendum in 1978 that saved the project. They lobbied Tallahassee for a penny sales tax to rebuild riot-torn areas in Liberty City in 1980 and, having failed at that, still raised \$7 million in private contributions for a loan fund to help small, black-owned businesses.

Fine deflected attention from himself. No one single group can be all things to all people, he said at the time. A decade later he would join others in the post-Hurricane Andrew We Will Rebuild movement, and chaired its housing committee that helped re-create South Miami-Dade.

“There are no home runs. We’re gonna stay in the game,” Fine said at the time. “We’re gonna hit singles and doubles. And we’re gonna make some progress.”

Another of his great loves was his wife, Pat.

“They were quite a team for more than 60 years,” his son said. “This is a love story. That’s how I remember him.”

In addition to his wife and son, Fine is survived by a second son, Randy Fine and his wife Jeanine, Rick’s wife Carol, and grandchildren Jennie and Sarah. Services are tentatively scheduled for 12:30 p.m. Sunday at Temple Israel of Greater Miami, 137 NE 19th St., with interment to follow at Mount Nebo/Miami Memorial Gardens, 5900 SW 77th Ave.