

# Bill Philby

Fort Lauderdale, Florida



Island City Traders

## *Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Bill Philby:*

Originally from Wisconsin, Bill Philby, like many college students before him, visited Ft. Lauderdale on spring break and fell in love with the town and the weather. A month after graduating from the University of Wisconsin, he officially made the move. Once in South Florida, he continued to work in the furniture business and never looked back. Philby shared the story behind his entrepreneurial journey – a story that exemplifies the importance of working hard, being open to new opportunities, treating others with respect and always doing the right thing.

“I first dipped my toes in the furniture business during my first year of college,” Philby said. “I was originally hired as a delivery man. However, a few months into the job, I was asked by the owner to greet a customer while everyone else was busy. I sold her, from what I remember, an

extremely expensive set of upholstery for her living room. I was told to wear a tie the next day and, while my college curriculum was for a BFA in design, my career path would change overnight without me even knowing it. During the next five years they honed my sales skills, took me to the furniture markets and taught me the bookkeeping and back-end business of a retail operation.”

When Philby arrived in South Florida, he brought with him more experience than most people had coming out of college. He worked for a couple different furniture companies before joining a family-owned operation based in South Florida. He spent about 10 years with that company and gained even more experience along the way. As Philby shared, it was a great time, but he reached a point where his dream of owning his own business could no longer be ignored.

“They treated me like family,” he said, referring to the family-owned furniture business. “Those were good years because I only had to worry about my clients while they handled all the business and finance part of it. It was a wonderful relationship and to this day, I have nothing but respect and admiration for them personally and as a business. However, I reached the decision that I needed to follow my dream of owning my own business and knew that Fort Lauderdale, with its incredible weather and beaches, would provide a continuous supply of potential clients who wanted to live here in beautiful homes and condos.”

In 1994, Philby started Retro Interiors along with his business partner and long-time contractor friend, Mitchell Bloch. In the beginning, the business operated out of a single bay in a shopping center on US1. Two years and four more employees later, they took over the space next

door. From there, the business experienced steady growth.

“In the early stages, the only focus was staying in the black,” Philby shared. “If I was going to build a solid business, I wanted my reputation to be trusted so like all small businesses starting up, everyone else gets paid before you do. I think it was about nine months before I took my first paycheck. So while it seemed tough at the time, looking back I know I was one of the fortunate few to make it through.”

Philby continued, “Since we were working on limited resources, we got very creative with inventory and store display. Even when we only had one small showroom bay rented, it always had to look amazing. Many customers commented about how unique it was which usually led to discussions about design, which many times led to invitations to come to their home and help them. One by one, we built our customer base. Working nights and weekends came with the territory. When word got around, things started to take off. We built the business by word of mouth, one by one, and clients were almost entirely by referral.”

By 1998, Philby had hired four more designers and additional support staff and took over the next two retail spaces and a second floor set of offices, where they moved their design studio. For the next nine years that location proved to be an excellent choice. In 2001, Philby and Bloch opened a second retail location specializing in contemporary, moderately priced furnishings called Island City Traders in Wilton Manors, Florida. In 2007, with the ownership of the shopping center along US1 changing hands, and the downgrading of tenants, Retro Interiors made the decision to combine their interior design business into the same location as their Island City Traders showroom. What

seemed like a big risk at the time, to move a high-end interior design firm into what was then an area of town that was just undergoing the beginning stages of what would become the heart of the entertainment and arts district, quite possibly turned out to be their best decision.

Philby was also undeterred by competition and used his passion and business model to set himself apart. “Competing against other businesses sounded scarier than it was,” he said. “Most other businesses didn’t have the passion that clients found with us. Most designers were charging commissions on top of everything they sold their clients. Since we had a showroom, and established relationships as a dealer with many of the best brands, we eliminated the third party – saving our clients quite a bit of money. They got the best of both worlds.”

When it comes to enjoyment and the rewarding aspect of owning and running a business, Philby is proud of his impact on customers and employees. “The biggest enjoyment I get out of the business now, besides seeing clients being thrilled with their new home, is the reward of helping the people who work for us,” he said. “We’re giving them the chance to succeed and be part of the organization in every way. Most everyone who works for us has been with us a long time. It might sound cliché but it really is like a family. It’s actually pretty remarkable.”

What advice does Philby have for aspiring entrepreneurs? “Giving advice to future entrepreneurs sounds easy once you’ve gotten over the hurdles and challenges that make up everyday life in the beginning years,” he said. “But my advice is to embrace those challenges. They will be what you remember. They are what will define you. But if I were to break it down to one thing I would say ‘just do the right thing by your employees

and customers. It's simple. In the end you'll sleep better at night and know you've made a difference in people's lives."

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