



Zack Bush

Miami, Florida

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Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Zack Bush:

Within a few minutes of speaking with Zack Bush, co-founder of Ball & Chain and Mad Room Hospitality, it's abundantly clear the passion he has for revitalizing some of Miami's most iconic establishments. Bush's zest for breathing new life into legendary landmarks, while maintaining authenticity and creating a place for locals and tourists to enjoy, is the secret sauce that fuels his success.

From years in the family recycling business and hosting world-class parties to sharing the love and joy he has for his hometown, Bush's entrepreneurial journey demonstrates the importance of following your passion, staying true to your core beliefs and building a business that makes you happy.

“Before I even graduated from high school, I started working for my family’s waste and recycling business,” Bush said. “My brother, Ben, and I learned a lot about the business at a young age. When I graduated from Emory, I was conflicted on whether or not I wanted to get back into the family business. Ultimately, I decided that a chance to build something that belonged to my family was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.”

Bush, along with his brother Ben, spent over a decade in the family business. Despite finding success and having a unique opportunity to work alongside his family, for Bush, something was missing.

“I had a great financial opportunity and was able to build something really special, but I never found myself personally satisfied,” Bush said. “The work was very labor intensive, we worked from sun up to sun down and it just wasn’t fulfilling. That’s when I decided to do something that made me happy.”

Bush taught himself to DJ and, before he knew it, new and unexpected doors opened. Through a combination of passion and excitement for entertainment and the strong work ethic he developed while working in the family business, Bush successfully built a side business he was proud of. It was also one that laid the foundation and set the stage for much bigger things to come.

“We used to promote some of the best parties on Miami Beach,” Bush said. “From Townhouse Hotel Fridays to Skybar Thursdays and Sundays at the Delano, it was socially and financially rewarding. However, at

some point, it became impossible to burn the candle from both ends. I was burnt out.”

Bush continued, “Everything came full circle when, in 2011, we were presented with an opportunity to exit the family business. A buyer made us an offer we couldn’t refuse. After we sold the business, Ben and I were left searching for something else to do.”

Bush shared that what came next was the result of a conversation he had in 2000 with his best friend and co-founder, Bill Fuller. Dr. Paul George, a local historian, uncovered the history of the original Ball & Chain and Bill took an interest in his findings.

“Bill knew about my background and said, ‘Let’s bring this place back to life,’” Bush said. “He had this incredible dream and invited us to pursue it with him. It sounded like a great idea, but we were in our early 20s and, at the time, we didn’t really have the financial capabilities. We decided to put the idea on ice until the appropriate time presented itself.”

That appropriate time was approximately 12 years later when Zack and Ben, following the sale of their family business, were debating their next move. According to Bush, when they discovered that the previous tenant had vacated the space, it was now or never.

“We were now closer to 40 and more financially capable,” Bush said. “After walking the neighborhood, where you can truly feel the heartbeat of Miami and the rich history that surrounds you, we decided to dedicate ourselves to this project. It was, however, a risk. At the time, all night life was centered on South Beach. Some of the biggest people in the night life industry thought we were nuts, but we sensed a shift.”

Bush continued, “From the very beginning, we focused on how to bring this amazing brand back to life in the same building where Chet Baker and Billie Holiday once performed. We concentrated on creating a space that looked as if it never closed. Our motto then and now is to be authentic, affordable and accessible. With these qualities in mind, we set out to enhance a place that was magical long before we opened our doors.”

Making decisions with the three As (Authenticity, Affordability and Accessibility) in mind, Zack, Ben and Bill, worked on developing an iconic brand that would stand the test of time and be recognized worldwide. One of the biggest challenges, according to Bush, was investing in day and night music and live entertainment.

“Aside from the challenge associated with getting some people to check out a new area they’re not familiar with, investing in good live music is not cheap,” Bush said. “People in Miami love live music, but they don’t want to pay a cover. A lot of venues open and close for this very reason.

We committed to a model where no one has to pay a cover and one where velvet ropes and VIP sections don’t exist. We wanted an inclusive environment where everyone feels welcomed. We also introduced ‘Brickell quality’ cocktails for half the price. In the Food & Beverage industry, a lot of places open with one idea and quickly shift course when things don’t go as planned. We’re committed to our vision.”

Whether it’s live Cuban Jazz, Salsa, karaoke, dominos, themed events or performances by artists like Tito Puente, Jr. and Tony Succar, Ball & Chain provides 100 hours a week of music and entertainment with no

cover or minimums. They also feature specialty cocktails and dishes such as the Calle Ocho Burger, an aged angus burger topped with Tillamook cheddar and grilled pineapple slaw, and Conch Ceviche, made with pineapple, heirloom tomato, fresh cilantro and red onion.

While Bush and his partners took the risk and executed on an idea many thought wouldn't work, he's quick to give praise to his team and thanks the community for embracing the vision.

"I truly believe we have the best team in the business," he said. "None of this would be possible without them. From our bussers and servers to our management team and our Director of Operations, we truly have an A+ team that's dedicated to honing in on the guest experience. It's an exciting time to be in the food & beverage industry, but it's also challenging. With all these neighborhoods being redeveloped, there are more options than just your typical downtown centers. It's critical that you're able to stand out from the competition. Between the locals embracing us and our team member's focus on 'wowing' our customers enough so they continue to come back, I'm very proud of what we've accomplished."

Following the success of Ball & Chain, Mad Room Hospitality recently acquired another landmark business on Calle Ocho. The purchase of Taquerias el Mexicano, a Mexican restaurant with a 30 year history of serving authentic Mexican food, was seen as a perfect opportunity to preserve a piece of history while adding a modern twist. According to Bush, the new project provided the partners with a chance to put their "stamp" on yet another historic venue.

"We didn't announce we took over Taquerias el Mexicano until we had it

in our possession for two years,” Bush said. “We wanted to learn about the heritage, the food, the guests and how to improve the overall experience. We also turned the restaurant into a scratch kitchen and started making our own tortillas and chips. We wanted people to know that it was something special.”

When asked about future goals, Bush was quick to point out that he and his partners always have their eyes on new ventures in the neighborhood. “I think we’re just now seeing the tip of the iceberg for what the Little Havana neighborhood can look like,” Bush said. “There are no substantial hotels in this area. Most tourists are daily visitors. There’s value in getting them to stay overnight.” Bush also shared that Mad Room Hospitality inked a deal with one of the largest hostel operators in South America to provide food and beverage to a hotel space they acquired across the street from Ball & Chain.

Bush offered some great advice, not only for aspiring entrepreneurs, but also for new business owners. “I speak to a group of Florida International University Hospitality students every semester,” he said. “I always tell them, the only thing in life stopping you is you. You’re capable of incredible things. However, you have to be willing to lay it all on the line. It’s hard to bring an idea to life, but if you do something every day, whether it’s a tiny step or something big, you’ll get closer to your goal. Also, remember to follow a path that excites you.”

Bush continued, “The hardest thing I ever did in my life was getting my children’s book published. Even with the connections I have, it’s not easy to publish a book. However, I was determined and, despite it taking almost three years, I did it. I pushed through doubt and non-believers to

make it happen. Today my book, 'Made For Me', is an International Best Seller with over 80,000 copies sold.

In regards to advice for new business owners, I think it's important to be honest with yourself. One thing I learned from Jeff Bezos is that it's okay to fail, but you want to fail fast. Once you commit to a path, stick to your guns and dig your heels in. Along the way, learn from and listen to other people's perspectives. Lastly, be tireless of your goal, remain true to your core values and mission and stay up on the times as it relates to new technologies. You never really clock out as a business owner, but the reward is that you get to wake up every day and do what you love."

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