

Home At Last!

Written by Margaret Griffis
December 2008

The Coppertone Girl is back on the Boulevard, and all lit up



A couple weeks ago, motorists traveling south on Biscayne Boulevard noticed workmen attaching a group of vaguely familiar, bright-yellow letters to a white building at the corner of 73rd Street. They might not have immediately worked out the significance of the letters that defiantly proclaimed “RTONE” to the world, but in the following days -- when the “COPPE” part of the message was added, followed by a pair of chubby little legs -- it became clear that the Coppertone Girl was coming home to the Boulevard.

Last year, when members of the MiMo Biscayne Association learned that a vintage Coppertone sign would be removed from its Flagler Street location, they began a difficult campaign to refurbish the sign and install it elsewhere in time for its 50th anniversary. Their exhaustive efforts have paid off, and on December 2 the sign will be illuminated during a ceremony at its new home in the MiMo Historic District.

Anyone who spent time in downtown Miami will recognize the sign instantly. It was perched for more than 30 years at the Parkleigh Building on Biscayne Boulevard near the Freedom Tower. At that time, the full sign was about seven stories of beautifully gaudy, neon glory. It was built in 1959 to introduce a new ad campaign for the Miami-born tanning product, and featured a little girl who would eventually become one of America’s favorite icons.

The Parkleigh’s razing in the early 1990s forced the sign’s relocation to the Concord Building, just across the street from the county courthouse on Flagler Street. By that time, all that was left was a three-story-tall girl, her dog, and a smattering of letters, but she was still considered historically important and given to Dade Heritage Trust for safekeeping. She flew that coop only last May, when the Trust deeded the sign to the MiMo Biscayne Association to facilitate her next journey.

Needless to say, such a daunting task often gets filed for a snowy day in Miami, but diligence and perhaps more than a bit of luck helped secure the sign’s continued existence. This past October, Miami’s Historic and Environmental Preservation Board approved the sign’s

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designation as a local historic landmark. The designation may not sound like much, but it makes the girl exempt from the many laws that could keep her off any building in the city.

In the weeks that followed, a number of people worked hard to make sure everything was set before the rapidly approaching lighting ceremony. Attorneys Barbara Gimenez and Mark L. Rivlin worked pro bono on the contracts needed to install the sign, and the City of Miami did its part by rushing through the permit approvals. Meanwhile, Alec Blotnik at Tropical Signs in Hialeah was repairing the sign under the direction of Jerry Bengis, whose father built it in 1958 and installed it on the Parkleigh.

Unfortunately the sign had some extensive damage. In particular the girl's face went missing during a hurricane. The electrical workings hidden inside the cases were also in bad shape, so she's been given a new face as well as energy-saving LED lights, which replaced the broken neon.

The Schering-Plough Corporation, which owns the Coppertone brand, helped out by contributing \$88,600 for the sign's removal, restoration, and reinstallation. Brent Saunders, president of the Consumer Healthcare division, says that "Schering-Plough is pleased to support this important preservation effort," adding that "the Coppertone Girl and dog image is part of American culture past, present, and future." He and other company executives are expected to attend the lighting ceremony.

A couple of issues remain to be resolved, though. First is this year's \$1200 insurance bill, needed just in case the city's biggest baby topples over and sits on a car or two. The MiMo Biscayne Association would like someone to step forward and cover that. Also the association hopes that further donations will pay for routine maintenance, repairs to the sign, and the electric bills.

With the final touches on the restoration completed, the sign was carefully attached to its new home on a building owned by Hye Realty. Debbie Ohanian, who is the principal at Hye, is thrilled by her new neighbor. Her years in the fashion industry have given her a slightly different angle on the Coppertone Girl. Ohanian calls her "Miami's first supermodel," and says she is "thrilled to give her a home."

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This all begs a question: Why trouble ourselves for an “outdated” corporate logo? Heck, she doesn’t even look like the kid that is on the bottle these days. Perhaps it’s best to ask the girl’s model, Cheri Brand. It was Brand’s mom, Joyce Ballantyne, who illustrated the icon 50 years ago, so Brand is very attached to her iconic twin. Deeply moved by the attention the sign is still getting, Brand says, “I want to commend the efforts of the historic preservation people and the citizens of Miami, who are looking to preserve that home feeling in their community. Miami has a certain tone to it, and [the Coppertone sign] certainly has been part of the culture there. I’m honored to be the thing they’re preserving. Miami people have always been awesome and very protective of the Americana aspect of it, and definitely have been speaking up for years, saying, ‘No, no, you’re not taking that away from us.’”

Now, when was the last time you heard an out-of-towner calling Miamians “awesome”? Enjoy it while you can by attending the formal lighting ceremony on December 2 or by simply basking in the sign’s light as you drive past it during its 50th year in Miami.

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