

### After nasty breakup, North Miami's Urban Night Market rebuilds



ack on Friday, November 3, the NoMi Night Market opened at 12302 NE 13th Ave. as North Miami's first farmers market in four years, with ten vendors, a respectable crowd, and solid buzz.

Yet almost as soon as the market opened, everything blew up in an acrimonious split between Howard Tonkin, the main tenant on the land and owner of Urban Habitat, a sustainable plants business, and Laura Hill, a well-known community activist and organizer. Rise News reported on the opening, including ten vendors selling organic soaps, chimes, wine bottles, and the blowup.

Almost right away, Tonkin dropped plans for further farmers market associations and rebranded the event as Urban Habitat Night Market.

Three months on, the Night Market remains, and Hill is taking her vendor connections elsewhere, to create a farmers market elsewhere in North Miami. Stay tuned.

The Night Market is open from 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. every Friday with flagship vendor Bianca Pratorius, professional artist, amateur beekeeper, and sustainable grower, who sells her prize-winning honey, fresh herbal vegan cheese, homemade sauerkraut, and other comestibles

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there.

Aside from that, it is now primarily a nursery and hub for Tonkin's sustainable plant business, with hours from noon to dusk Wednesday through Sunday.

If you want to attract atala butterflies to your yard with Florida coonties or beach verbenas, or hummingbirds with a coral bean plant, this is the place to find out. Ask the nursery's horticulturalist, Alexandra Ramos, or Tonkin himself.

"I'm an environmental capitalist," Tonkin says. "I want to engage a capitalist business model for an environmental business product. Urban Habitat is a lifestyle concept for the body, the soul, the planet."



Hill says she's closing in on her space for a farmers market, and has formed alliances with some preservationists. She won't discuss the breakup and is hesitant to discuss her plans, other than to say that she envisions her farmers market with an assortment of sustainable products, produce, and artists.

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“I wish Howard well,” she says. “I have great relationships with vendors and artists. My plans will speak for themselves when they’re ready.”

What is clear is that Hill and Tonkin, good friends before the breakup, are both walking human force fields with shared habits, beliefs, and passions for sustainability -- but with radically different styles.

Both are prodigious workers. Tonkin, 47 years old, puts in 12- and 14-hour workdays and is often on the road, moving boulders and digging ditches well past dark, when not spreading the gospel of sustainable plants as protection against the forces of climate change.

Hill, age 37, is a trained paralegal, mother of two, and an activist. She is channeling the energy from the market to the Biscayne River Alliance, a consortium of residents along the Biscayne Canal from northwest Miami-Dade to Biscayne Bay.

Tonkin is voluble and can be as prickly as a native Florida cactus -- just get him going on Home Depot and Monsanto. He’s also comfortable as a visionary and inspirer. Hill is less volatile and seems more methodical and process-oriented.

Tonkin says he was inspired by the Mindil Beach Sunset Market in Darwin, on the northern coast of his native Australia. “Darwin is to Asia as Miami is to the Caribbean and Latin America, he says.

That carries over to Tonkin’s plants. He believes the area may be saturated with farmers markets and for now is sticking mostly to his plant business, though he’s aiming to open a café in April and talks about getting a beer and wine permit for special events, such as weddings. For now, on Friday night, entertainment consists of a boom box, with occasional live ukulele from Night Market manager Rudolf Pecjak or clarinet from Pratorius’s husband.

“The nursery makes a lot of sense,” says Claire Tomlin, head of the Market Company, a consortium that operates about a dozen markets in South Florida. “There are too many farmers markets for the pool of vendors. There’s a wholesome demand, but not enough farmers to go

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around. You also need good visibility and good parking. People don't pay to park."

Urban Habitat is two blocks south of 125th Street, across from warehouse bays and a big self-storage facility to the east, and about 300 feet south of the shuttered Spotmaster dry cleaners. In other words, the site has almost no pedestrian traffic and parking is free, if not plentiful.

Tonkin rents his quarter acre from North Miami City Councilwoman Carol Keys, a North Miami native and veteran title lawyer who bought the half-acre, industrially zoned property last year for \$350,000. The north side includes a shuttered 3,000-square-foot 1929 house that Keys plans to bring up to code.

Until Tonkin rented his property from Keys, he had based his plant business out of his house on Griffing Boulevard, where he sometimes ran afoul of city code enforcement officials. Since his market and nursery opened on Keys's property, he says, his relations with North Miami officials have been "nothing but positive."

Says Keys, "Howard's got a bona fide sustainable nursery. It's such a beautiful property, and it's definitely an asset to the City of North Miami."

North Miami had its own farmers market on Thursday afternoons at MOCA Plaza until 2014, when then Mayor Lucie Tondreau shut it down. Tonkin sold plants both there and at the Saturday afternoon farmers market on Biscayne Boulevard and 64th Street at Legion Park.

"I made the most money I ever made at the farmers market in North Miami," Tonkin says. "That was before the field got saturated."

Tomlin says new farmers markets like the one Hill envisions can work with proper planning.

As a success story, Tomlin cites her very popular market in Miami Shores that has run every

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Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. since October in the city park on the east side of NE 2nd Avenue and 94th Street.

That market works so well, she says, because residents nearby like to make the outing, sometimes by foot, and enjoy mingling and picking out produce on a Sunday. Tomlin says she plans to run the market year round. After the winter crops subside in late April, she plans to sell summer avocados and mangoes in the shade of oak trees.

Brickell, she says, was less successful because she found that the young professionals living in the urban canyons would rather eat out or call in than cook.

Today's upcoming "farmers" are more like Bianca Pastorius, who keeps bees and grows superfood moringa trees and herbs for her moringa powder and vegan cheese on her family's property just north of Miami Shores and east of the tracks.

Since this is a North Miami story, of course there is intrigue and drama.

The nursery is not unanimously popular with the neighbors, notably Hector Medina, a retired doctor and medical administrator who ran and lost for mayor last year. Tonkin and Hill both supported Medina for mayor and organized a fundraiser for him, but all three have since had a falling out.

Medina jumped into politics after galvanizing the neighborhood a few years back to fight Spotmaster dry cleaner at 1290 NE 125th St., which was emitting fumes and sounds of heavy machinery around the clock, and racking up a list of violations with the city.

Medina accuses Keys of betraying the neighborhood by failing to create a park, and suspects she has long-term intentions for the neighborhood so close to a planned transit station.

Keys says her intent is to enhance the property, not to flip it, and is armed by ethics decisions

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on her purchase from the city attorney and Joseph Centorino, executive director of the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and the Public Trust.

“I don’t have time for this parochial drama,” says Tonkin. “It’s abhorrent that these neighborhood people are trying to trash my business. I’m trying to make air safer to breathe and more pleasant. I’ll stay open. It’s a lot of work, but I’m creating a nursery to create plants that are going extinct where butterflies can live. My nursery is a bridge between endangered plants and the consumer.”

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