

VEGAS

December 2005

OSCAR'S WAY THE MAYOR YOU CAN'T REFUSE

Las Vegas' always colorful, controversial mayor has some big ideas about downtown

BY **JACQUELYNN D. POWERS**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **FRANCIS GEORGE**

Two terms in office haven't tamed Oscar Goodman, the self-proclaimed "happiest mayor" in the country. He courts controversy wherever he goes (like when he told a class of fourth graders that he likes to drink gin), still jokes about "whacking" people (a reference to his colorful past as the biggest Mafia lawyer in town), and raised some ire when he suggested that those who deface freeways with graffiti should have their thumbs cut off on live television. Foremost on his mind, however, is the redevelopment of downtown Las Vegas—and he is just as ruthless and determined about this project as his former clients once were about crime. "I want downtown to be urbanized and Manhattanized," Goodman, 66, says. "I want to see it go vertical rather than horizontal. I want us to be an intellectual center with an emphasis on performing arts and academic medicine. I want this to be the intellectual core of the whole valley."

While rumblings about the 61-acre parcel, to be called Union Park, have been marinating for years, there are some concrete features of the plan, such as the Alzheimer's center being designed by Frank Gehry, which is slated to break ground next October, and the performing-arts center, which has a \$50 million endowment from the Reynolds Foundation. Less certain is the scope of the entire development now that The Related Companies has pulled out of the partnership. "We're in great shape," Goodman shares. "We were dealing with The Related Companies, and I'm very ambitious, and they are perhaps more circumspect than I. I asked them for a guarantee to have residential in the ground in two years. They said they were not in a position to make that commitment. I appreciate their candor. But I want to see that, so we parted friends."

All is not lost, however. The mayor and Related's Jorge Perez are still talking about downtown. "They will be a part of this," Goodman asserts. "This is not

VEGAS

December 2005



"I want to be remembered for the revitalization of downtown, that it happened under my watch."

icians and doctors did their shopping. Everybody knew each other, at least by face. I went to the Liston-Patterson fight and sitting in front of me was a United States Senator and behind me was a mobster. Everything was done on a handshake. I'm old-fashioned; I still do everything on a handshake. Now you need corporate lawyers to go to the toilet."

This close proximity to contentious characters tempted Goodman into leaving the D.A.'s office, where he was a clerk. A defining moment happened over a blackjack table at the Hacienda (where Mandalay Bay now stands). "My wife and I went out once a month for dinner," Oscar remembers. "We'd go the Charcoal Room and, after dinner, she would play \$10 worth of blackjack. I would stand behind her but never play. One of the dealers asked me to handle a bankruptcy for him, which I did. One day, there's a phone call into the pit at the Hacienda, and the fellow at the other end of the line said, 'Who's the best criminal lawyer in Las Vegas?' The guy I did the bankruptcy for—I charged him \$250, including costs—said, 'Call Oscar.' The fellow who called was a big gangster from the Northeast. His stepbrother was in trouble, and I represented the young man. It was an impossible case, but I won it. From that point on, I got phone calls from reputed crime figures from all over the land."

During his versatile law career, Goodman successfully represented the rich and infamous such as Frank "Lefty" Rosenthal, Tony "the Ant" Spilotro, Meyer Lansky, Jimmy Chagra, Phil Leonetti, Jay Sarno and Harry Claiborne. "I always said that the mob could afford the very best. I took it as a compliment." Oscar's notoriety was forever immortalized in celluloid when he appeared as himself in the movie *Casino*. During filming of Martin Scorsese's gangster flick, the Goodmans often had cast members over to their house for dinner parties and barbecues, including Robert De Niro (in the Rosenthal role), Joe Pesci (playing the Spilotro character), Sharon Stone and Don Rickles. "Stevie Wynn even begged me to come over, and we let him," he gleefully divulges.



But despite the fame, acquittals and money that seemed to be pouring in, Oscar began to search for something more. "I'd done everything that a criminal lawyer could ever do," he notes. "I was beginning to dislike myself, because the only thing that was of foremost importance in my mind was how much I could charge a client. That's not a reason to be a lawyer. I said to my wife and four kids that I'd like to do something different. I was making a couple million dollars a year practicing law and the mayor's job paid \$48,000. We had a vote; my wife abstained and my kids voted four to nothing against me. It broke my heart because I thought they were selfish. They said, 'No, dad. There's no way you could win. You have more baggage than the skycaps out at the airport.' With my personality, that's all I had to hear."

Needless to say, once Goodman put his mind to the task, the position as mayor was within reach—despite the fact that he says he didn't know where City Hall was prior to announcing his candidacy. Oscar won his first election in 1999 by a handy 63-percent margin. Four years later, 86 percent of the community voted for him. ("I'm looking for the other 14 percent," he jokes. "I'm going to have them whacked when I find them.") Although he is only eligible to sit for one more term, rumors are swirling that he has his eye on the governor's job next year. "People want me to run," he admits. "You never say no, but I'm the happiest mayor in the universe. I don't say this arrogantly—and I have a big ego—but I'm treated like a king. No other mayor in the world is treated the way I am."

In return, Goodman is very approachable: "I am accessible to my constituents, which sets a terrific example for politicians elsewhere. I have a press conference every week where I stand up there naked in

"I answer questions honestly and am taken to task for it. But I don't apologize."

Downtown Las Vegas has proceeded beautifully since Goodman took office, as evidenced by planned large-scale residential towers such as, top row from left, Juhl, Allure and Soho Lofts, and the success of the Fremont Street Experience, bottom, which had 20 million visitors last year.

front of some pretty mean-spirited people and answer every question that is thrown at me. No holds are barred. Very few politicians will do that. They usually have layers of protection in front of them." He also hosts a monthly Coffee With the Mayor in one of the six wards he represents as well as opening his door to his constituents the third Thursday of every month. "I'm honest to a fault, and I get into trouble," he continues. "My wife says she never saw a fish get caught that didn't open its mouth. I am constantly giving my opinion. I answer questions honestly and am taken to task for it. But I don't apologize for anything."

Last March, Goodman caused an uproar when he spoke of his love of gin to a fourth-grade class (interestingly, Oscar is also a spokesperson for Bombay Sapphire). "I read stories for 45 minutes," he recalls. "As I always do, I answered any questions that the kids asked. Usually, they are. 'How did you become the mayor?', 'Do you have a dog?', 'What kind of car do you drive?' This little girl in the back raised her hand and said, 'What would you want to bring with you if you were on a deserted island in the middle of an ocean?' I said, 'A bottle of gin.' And I'd say it again and again. There's always a group that objects to that being said in front of kids, but it went right over their heads. They had no idea about the difference between gin and ginger ale. Actually, the reaction, at least from the polls, was that my ratings went up, because people know I'm honest."

So, whether Goodman runs for governor or ends his public service with a third, and final, term as mayor, his legacy will be his candor, humor and ability to get it done. "I'd like to be remembered for the revitalization of downtown, that it happened under my watch," he says. "And it *is* happening. We make incremental progress every day. I'm the perfect representative," he declares. "I am the quintessential Las Vegas: I span the Old Las Vegas and the New Las Vegas. I know what they are both about. I'd like to see a combination of the two, which will never happen because the Old Las

Vegas was more intimate. Nevertheless, I wouldn't want to be mayor of any other city." ♠