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I have been asked by several Saint Stephen's parishioners to describe in writing the events that led to the demolition of the Saint Stephen's 1912 chapel on Main Highway in Coconut Grove. After careful consideration, I have decided to do this as a way to help lift the burden that I have had to endure as a result of being an unwitting participant in the deceitful practices of the church that my family and I attended for twelve years. While working on the design and construction documents for the Saint Stephen's new school building, new front office, and new retail building on Main Highway, I was preoccupied with everyday life, and initially unable to recognize the unethical behavior that was occurring around me.

In 2004, I made a decision to leave my job at a prominent architectural firm where I worked as a project architect and design team member, earned a comfortable salary, and had full benefits, so that I could start my own architectural consulting business. I was immediately hired by a firm as a project manager for a New Urbanist project. I completed the project in six months and then I was hired by an architect from the University of Miami to assist with the renovation of an historic building. Word began to spread that I was working as a consultant. Because of my fifteen years working as a design team member, project manager, and project architect for various firms in Miami, I did not need to advertise. The work came to me. I incorporated — calling my company New Urban Architecture, Inc. — hired an accountant, and began working a sixty-hour week.

Early in 2006 I received a call from Jenifer Briley, whom I knew from church and from working at Arquitectonica a few years earlier. She had recently left the firm and started her own company, but she lacked the necessary technical and computer skills and she needed help. She said that she needed my assistance with a master planning project for Saint Stephen's. She hired me for a few small renovation projects for the church, and then she hired me to help her with a series of master plans for Saint Stephen's in which various options for expanding the school were explored. In each of the options, the original 1912 chapel, which I viewed as the most significant part of Saint Stephen's entire campus, was preserved.

Jenifer asked me to help her with a final version of the Saint Stephen's master plan and various schemes for the new school building, retail building, and front office building. We visited the historic chapel, which was being used to house pre-school classrooms, and the adjacent colonnade, which was being used as an art gallery for local artists to display and sell their work. We discovered that the drywall partitions, a dropped ceiling, and a raised floor, that had been added to create the classroom spaces within the historic chapel, and were not part of the original building, were in poor condition, warped, worn and moldy. However, the original exterior walls of the chapel, the original Dade County pine roof trusses, the original Dade County pine tongue-and-groove ceiling, the original cypress brackets, and portions of the original Ludowici tile roof and bell tower, were in near perfect condition. The original precast columns of the colonnade that led to the chapel were in perfect condition, as were the colonnade's original Dade County pine roof trusses, the original Dade County pine tongue-and-groove ceiling, and the tile roof.

Jenifer was allowing the master plan to be dictated by Bonnel Denton, a former church warden and long-time parishioner, who organizes the layout of artist's tents and food booths for the Saint Stephen's Arts and Crafts Show, so that he could fit as many tents and food booths as possible onto the church property, to maximize profits. He insisted that the new school building be out of the way of the tents and booths. Jenifer was eager to comply. She insisted that the footprint of the new school building overlap the existing 1912 chapel to leave room for the tents and food booths, meaning that the chapel would have to be demolished. I told her that the historic chapel was the most significant building on Main Highway and maybe in all of Coconut Grove, and that it was a vital part of the church's and Coconut Grove's history, and she couldn't just tear it down.

The first project meeting included Pastor Willie, Jenifer, myself, LEED consultant Gary Shlifer, school director Silvia Larrauri, project manager Jim Werbelow of the Related Group, and the project engineers, we went around the table and introduced ourselves and briefly spoke about our backgrounds. I mentioned the name of my consulting firm, New Urban Architecture, Inc. and that I was a consultant to Jenifer Briley. I mentioned my Bachelors of Environmental Design in Architecture Degree from North Carolina State University and I mentioned that I had previously worked on two other green building projects. I mentioned the significance of the historic chapel and about how preservation of historic buildings was recognized by United States Green Building Council as the ultimate form of recycling and was worth a lot of LEED points. After all, according to Pastor Willie, Jenifer, and Silvia Larrauri, the goal was to achieve LEED gold, one of the highest benchmarks of the USGBC, and be the first LEED gold certified school in Miami-Dade County.

I talked about my idea for a solar panel system on the roof and about how we could have metering that would enable the children at the school to actually see how much electricity the sun was providing for their classrooms. I told them that the school itself could be a learning tool for the kids. Jenifer later told me that solar panels on the roof would be visible from the street and would look tacky and would make her look bad. She scolded me for mentioning the name of my consulting firm. She told me that my presence was no longer required at the project meetings.

Since this was Jenifer's project, I felt that all I could do was argue for what I saw as the most important piece of the project, the 1912 chapel, and at least try to make her realize the importance of designing the project within the context of the existing buildings on the campus and within the context of the buildings on Main Highway, with the renovated chapel as the centerpiece of the project. I pushed the preservation issue with Jenifer, and she finally gave in and asked me to produce a set of as-built drawings of the front portion of the chapel. While she designed the retail building, which had absolutely no relationship to any buildings on Main Highway whatsoever (but I decided to choose my battles), I did a design that preserved the front portion of the chapel and colonnade and incorporated the front office of the new school into the front of the existing historic chapel.

This design preserved the original facade of the chapel, the bell tower, the front portion of the existing side walls, and the front portion of the roof of the chapel, including some of the Dade County pine trusses and a portion of the Dade County pine tongue-and-groove ceiling, and the original cypress brackets, and the entire colonnade. I showed the chapel and colonnade elevated to match the level of the center of Main Highway, to prevent flooding of the building, which had been a problem because the chapel sat below the street level since it was built before the streets. It is common practice to elevate historic buildings to bring them up to the street level. We made the new buildings match the elevation of the front portion of the preserved chapel. Jenifer designed the retail building on Main Highway so that it sat three feet away from the historic chapel and its colonnade. Her design of the retail building ignored the context of the project in every way, but at least it was out of the way of the chapel.

When I pointed out to her that the new school building had no relationship to the school building designed by Jorge Hernandez on the other side of the campus, she said that was her intention. As she neared completion of the schematic design of the school building, which was totally out of place in scale, proportion, materiality and style, I realized that there were some serious flaws in her design process. She had skipped many of the typical design stages, such as a massing model of the campus typically used to study and identify important relationships between buildings on a campus and buildings on a main corridor, such as Main Highway. When I pointed this out to her, she said that there wasn't time.

My role in the design of the new school building was to make her schematic design work, within the parameters that she set up, by organizing the spaces to make the building functional and to code. I designed many of the building's features, although given that the context of the project was being ignored, I had serious reservations about my role. But I eventually reconciled them by telling myself that as long as the historic chapel remained the centerpiece of the project, everything else was secondary.

Jenifer informed me that the church vestry, Pastor Willie and Silvia Larrauri had approved the design and that she had given it to a renderer, who used the design development elevations that I produced of the front and side of the project, to create colorful renderings. Pastor Willie and Silvia Larrauri quickly reproduced the renderings and incorporated them into their fund raising literature for the project which clearly stated that "the front portion of the historic chapel, including the facade and bell tower, would be preserved." Miami historian, Dr. Paul George, who was writing a book, "The Little School by the Sea," about Saint Stephens, included one of the renderings in his new book. Pastor Willie presented the renderings to the congregation and to the school community, and everyone was pleased to see that the front portion of 1912 chapel and the colonnade were being preserved and incorporated into the project.

In April of 2008 Jenifer asked me to submit an estimate for the Saint Stephen's project for the construction documents for the new school building, the front office building for the school and the new retail building on Main Highway. She wanted me to do all of the construction documents and she hired another consultant, Mark Compton, to do the site plan and details.

In July Jenifer informed me that she had presented the project to the City of Miami Commission and the Planning and Zoning Board and received unanimous approval and praise from both. She told me that they really liked the design that I did that preserved the front of the chapel. I spent the summer completing the construction documents.

On the last day that I was completing the final drawings, Jenifer called me and insisted that I make the retail building larger and add an exterior stair to the side of the building. I had already assumed that we would be elevating the chapel to prevent flooding. This is how we had been showing the building in all of the drawings. Moving it over a few feet in the process of elevating the historic chapel would be entirely feasible. But, according to Jenifer it couldn't be moved over because then it would be in the way of the parking lot. She insisted that I make the chapel and the colonnade narrower; meaning that it would have to be demolished, and a brand-new building, a replica, would be built in its place.

Jenifer had already received approvals for the design of the project — based on drawings and renderings that showed the front portion of the chapel being preserved — from the Saint Stephen’s congregation and church vestry, Pastor Willie, Silvia Larrauri (the director of the school), the school community, the Coconut Grove community, the City of Miami Commission, the Planning and Zoning Board, and from the Historic and Environmental Preservation Board. How could she change it now? She would not be able to get a demolition permit.

Jenifer told me that we had to make the retail building larger so that it could be leased to a major retailer like “The Gap.” It was clear that the main priority was to have a large retail building that fronted Main Highway, Coconut Grove’s high-profile main corridor. She said that the church and the school needed the money. She said that if I went along with it, it would mean a lot of work for us in the future, and Silvia Larrauri had promised her that she could lease the second floor of the retail building for use as her new architectural office, Jenifer Briley and Associates.

I told Jenifer that she could have her office in one of new units at the Lofts of Mayfair over on Virginia Street. She said, “That’s not good enough, only a hack architect would have their office over there, and I’m no hack architect!” Anxious to move on with my life and on to my next project, I made the retail building larger, added the exterior stair, and made the 1912 historic chapel and its colonnade narrower, thinking the whole time that there was no way she would ever be able to get a demolition permit, and we would have to change the drawings back to the way they were later.

The next day I prepared to begin my next project. It was time for me to leave the church projects behind. The recession was in full swing and almost every architect I knew was laid off. My next project would take six months, and after that I didn’t know if I would have any more work.

In September, one Sunday morning after church, I asked pastor Willie if she really intended to tear down the 1912 chapel. She said, “It’s moldy and it floods.” I told her that the mold was in the parts of the building that were added to create the classroom spaces, the drywall partitions, and the built-up floor — not the original structure. I told her there was a remedy for the flooding problem, and that the chapel was the most significant building on Main Highway, and one of the most important historic buildings in all of Miami. It seemed to be a conversation that she did not want to have with me and she looked at me as if she had a problem on her hands.

Joanna Lombard is an architect and an architecture professor at the University of Miami. Her son attended Saint Stephen’s school. Joanna worked on the preservation and renovation of El Jardin, the 1918 Mediterranean house that is on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, which is now used as a school building for the Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, located down the street from Saint Stephens. Joanna gave her students an assignment to produce detailed as-built drawings of Saint Stephen’s 1912 chapel to submit to the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), the Federal Government’s oldest preservation program that constitutes the nation’s largest archive of historic architectural documentation.

In early December, Joanna invited me to the final review of her student’s completed drawings that were on display in the colonnade of the 1912 chapel. I decided that Joanna was the perfect person to talk about the plight of the historic chapel. I told Jenifer that Joanna had invited me to the review of her students work. She tried to get me to promise not to tell Joanna what she, Pastor Willie and Silvia Larrauri had planned for the chapel. But I told Joanna everything, thinking that now the situation was in the hands of an expert, and the burden was no longer mine.

Jenifer had a bass wood model made of the project with the altered, narrower version of the chapel and the shortened, narrower colonnade, but because of the tiny scale of the model, the “replica” of the historic chapel and colonnade depicted in the model was indistinguishable from the actual historic chapel and colonnade. She called me over to her house to see it. When she saw the disappointed look on my face when I saw the model, she said, “Wow, you’re a tough critic.”

The model remained at her house until she took it over to the Pastor Willie’s office, where she kept it until the night of the school’s fund-raising dinner. I did not attend the dinner, but I heard from someone who did, that the model was only brought out briefly during a speech that Pastor Willie gave about the project in which she touted the LEED green building aspect of the project. She did not mention the historic chapel. I was attending church fairly regularly, and I never saw the model displayed anywhere.

As always, when parishioners were asked to volunteer for something, I did. Volunteers were needed at the annual Christmas tree sale. I was the only one to sign up to be a cashier at the sale, meaning I would be dealing with the general public. When Pastor Willie saw that I was going to be the cashier, she quickly found someone to take my place.

Over next few months I was extremely busy with my next project, and I didn't have time to think about Saint Stephen's. At a church function I overheard Jenifer tell another parishioner that I was just a draftsman. I thought this was strange. Jenifer had used my resume to submit with hers when we were trying to get hired to design a low-rise condominium in Boca Raton. My resume dated back to 1992 and listed more than thirty-five major projects for which I had served as a project-design team member, project manager or project architect. Jenifer said that she needed my resume, along with those of the other design team members, to document the project participants for the Saint Stephen's LEED certification process. She knew I had never worked as a draftsman.

In February while volunteering at the Saint Stephen's Arts and Crafts show, I ran into Pastor Willie. I asked her how the fundraising was going for the project and I asked her if she was still intending to demolish the 1912 chapel. She responded by reiterating what she must have heard from Jenifer. "So you were the d-r-a-f-t-s-m-a-n for the new buildings...." she said, drawing out the word draftsman. "No," I said, "I produced the design development and the construction document sets of drawings." She scoffed!

By now I was working seven-day work weeks, as I neared completion of my next project. At the end of April, I was finally finished with it and I had time to think about other things. I called Jenifer and I asked her about the Saint Stephen's project. She told me that she had gotten a class II permit in December, which meant that letters to the neighborhood associations in Coconut Grove letting them know about the project had been mailed out. I asked her if she had received any objections or concerns about the design. She said, "No, everybody loves it." I may have been a little slow to come around, but now I knew that something wasn't right.

On Monday, April 27th, my first day off of work in months, I went out to my hammock in my backyard to think. I hadn't been able to do that in a long time because of my crazy work schedule. But now finally I did, and so I laid there for hours.

I thought about the rendering that showed the 1912 chapel being preserved that was presented to the congregation, the vestry, the City Commission, the Historic and Environmental Preservation Board, and given to the historian, Dr. Paul George, for his book. I thought about Saint Stephen's newfound enthusiasm for everything green and about how when it really came down to it, they weren't very interested in doing what it takes to really make the buildings green. I thought about my short-lived presence at the project meetings, and I remembered reading about "greenwashing," the practice of companies disingenuously spinning their products and policies as environmentally friendly to mask their real agenda.

I thought about the fancy bass wood model that Jenifer had made and how the real purpose of having the replica of the chapel in the model of the project must be to deceive people, to make them believe that original 1912 chapel was being preserved. I thought about Pastor Willie's strange behavior toward me. Was my own pastor trying to intimidate me? I thought about the new title of "draftsman" that Jenifer had given me, and about how she had tried to get me to promise not to tell anyone what she was planning. And I finally thought about how absurd it was that Silvia Larrauri had promised Jenifer that she could have her new architectural office on top of the rubble of the historic 1912 chapel if she made room for a Gap store on the church property.

I called my dad in North Carolina. "If people I've trusted for many years and thought I knew, are lying about something that I was involved with and they're planning on doing something illegally, do you think I'm obligated to do something about it?" "Who is it?" he asked. "The church," I responded. "What?! That's terrible! Of course you are!" he said. I replied, "Okay, thanks, bye."

My next call was to the person that — if I were the lead architect for the Saint Stephen's project — would have been hired to be my very first consultant, Miami historian Arva Moore Parks. I wanted to see if Arva knew what Saint Stephen's had planned for the historic chapel. She was mortified! She asked me for Pastor Willie's telephone number. She said that she wanted to meet with her right away. I gave her the number to the church. Then she said that she wanted me to come to her house for a meeting with her and some other preservationists to tell them everything I knew about the project.

My next call was to Pastor Willie. I called her at home, at dinner time. "I've been thinking, a lot, I said. I called my dad and asked him for his advice. He said that if I've been involved with something that I know is wrong, then I'm obligated to tell the truth about it. You'll be making a big mistake if you tear down the 1912 chapel. Do you realize that there will be a serious impact on the church and on your career if you go through with this? Jenifer has a serious superiority complex that is preventing her from seeing things clearly," I told her. "Oh, and Arva Moore Parks wants to talk to you. She'll be calling you first thing in the morning." "Who is your father?" Pastor Willie demanded, "Is he an attorney?" "No, I said, he's my dad."

Two days later, on Wednesday, April 29, I received an e-mail from Saint Stephens saying that a “Say goodbye to Soper Hall (the contemporary name for the historic chapel) party had been scheduled by Pastor Willie and Silvia Larrauri for that Friday, May 1. Jenifer had told me that demolition would not occur until late in the summer, after school was out and after a lengthy asbestos removal process, leading me to believe that preservationists had plenty of time for a civil discussion with the church. This seemed hastily organized, rushed even.

On Thursday, April 30th I attended the meeting at Arva’s house. Present were the Miami Herald architecture critic, Beth Dunlop, Dolly MacIntyre, founder of the Dade Heritage Trust, Coconut Grove activist Barbara Lang, and historic preservation architect Jorge Hernandez, via speaker phone, among others. Arva called Kathleen Kauffman-Slesnick, Chief Historic Preservation Officer for Miami–Dade County. Her daughter attends Saint Stephen’s school and her husband is a teacher there. They attended the fundraising dinner. They didn’t even know about the impending demolition! Arva also called Ellen Ugucconi, the Preservation Officer for the City of Miami, who was shocked to hear about what Saint Stephen’s had planned. She was out of town and promised to look into it as soon as she returned.

First I showed them the renderings that were used to get all of the approvals, the design that I did, the scheme that I considered to be a compromise between preserving the entire chapel and complete demolition, which preserved the front portion of the chapel and adapted it for use as the school’s front office. There was a collective gasp in the room when everyone laid their eyes on it.

Arva discussed the importance of the chapel, that it was built by Coconut Grove Pioneers, Ralph and Kirk Munroe and Flora MacFarlane, which I already knew, and that it was the first church built in all of Miami, which I didn’t know. So it was even more significant than I had imagined! Arva informed us that it should be on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places, but it had fallen through the cracks because Saint Stephens belongs to a national nonprofit organization that is responsible for caring for and making good use of older and historic religious properties, called “Partners for Sacred Places,” so everyone assumed the chapel was safe from ever being demolished.

We devised a game plan which would begin with trying to get a meeting with Pastor Willie. The goal was not to stop the project; it was to find a compromise that satisfied both sides. A portion of the chapel could be restored, renovated and reused as the school’s front office, as had already been approved by the church community, by the Coconut Grove community, and by city officials, or the new school building could be pushed back towards the center of the campus, just a few feet, and that would have created enough space to preserve some or all of the chapel and still have enough room for a retail building, or the entire chapel could be moved to another location. Kathleen Kauffman-Slesnick had identified county grant money that was available immediately and was more than enough to finance any of these options.

By now the impending demolition of the historic chapel was receiving a lot of media coverage. Jenifer Briley, Pastor Willie, and Silvia Larrauri, were trying to discredit me in an attempt to take the spotlight off of them and their shenanigans, and onto me. Because of this, the preservationists told me to only talk about the importance of saving and preserving the chapel, and nothing else, when speaking to the media. Because of my respect for them, I complied.

Even after all of the unethical behavior I had witnessed from my church, I naively had faith that Pastor Willie would be rational and reasonable and would want to do the right thing. After all, she holds a bachelor’s degree in history! At this point I saw myself as a go-between between the preservationists and the church, and I wanted to be as helpful as I could to both sides. I kept each side updated and informed as to what the other wanted to achieve. I even told Pastor Willie and Jenifer that I would be speaking with the Miami Herald. I thought that by creating an open and honest dialogue, that is the Christian way, the situation could be resolved.

That night after the meeting I went home and got out my Saint Stephen’s church directory. I called the oldest church members that I knew, the ones who had been members for the longest. I couldn’t find anyone who knew that Pastor Willie, Silvia Larrauri, and Jenifer were intending to demolish the chapel. They all said that they thought that the original 1912 chapel was being preserved and incorporated into the project, as was stated in the fundraising campaign literature. They all said that they saw the 1912 chapel in the model. Now I knew everyone had been lied to. I could only find one parishioner that knew about the impending demolition, Kitty Morgan. She told me that we weren’t suppose to talk about it.

On Friday, May 1, I attended the "Say goodbye to Soper Hall" party with Dolly MacIntyre, a surreal event where the Saint Stephens school children wore little yellow hard hats to commemorate the destruction of their history. While we were there I saw Mark Compton, the consultant who was hired by Jenifer to do the site plan and details for the project. He told me that they already had the demolition permit. Pastor Willie had moved the demolition date up and called in the demo crew as Jenifer instructed the LEED consultant on the project, Gary Shlifer, to remove the planned "LEED Green Deconstruction" of the chapel from the LEED "Gold Certification" checklist.

I called Gary, who told me that a LEED deconstruction would have taken at least two weeks, plenty of time for the preservationist to reveal the church's indiscretions to city officials and have the demolition permit revoked. Gary emphasized to me that his role in the project was only to advise and keep track of the project's LEED points, and he wanted me to know that he had advised against the cancelation of the LEED deconstruction.

This prompted me to organize a candlelight vigil in front of the chapel, for that night, to raise awareness about the impending demolition, since no one knew about it. I sent out the following e-mail to everyone in my e-mail address book, which included community members, members of the congregation, and city officials:

The Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church Historical Chapel (circa 1912 - see attached photo) is in the beginning stages of demolition.

You and only you can help stop demolition and save this national treasure, one of but a few remaining historical landmarks in Coconut Grove.

Please come to an Emergency 24 Hour Vigil to save this important public institution at 3439 Main Hwy. beginning today (Friday, May 1st) at 4:00.

We need signs, candles, chairs, and most of all your presence. We will sit beside the chapel, protect it and watch over it around the clock until our demands are met.

What are our demands?

1. A letter from Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church stating that they agree to halt any and all demolition of the Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church Historical Chapel (known as Soper Hall) until a mediation meeting between church officials and local historians and preservationists occurs.

2. A letter from City of Miami Officials stating that they agree to prevent any and all demolition of the Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church Historical Chapel (known as Soper Hall) until a mediation meeting between Saint Stephen's Church officials and local historians and preservationist occurs.

Once these demands are met we can all go home wait for the mediation meeting to occur.

Thank you for your participation in this critical gathering.

That afternoon before the vigil, Pastor Willie called me and said, "how can you do this after we baptized both of your children, confirmed your son, and helped you bury your husband?!" I responded, "That is precisely why I am doing this." She put me on speaker phone and ran down a list of questions for me. "Were you not there when we unveiled the model at our fundraising event? Were you not aware that we sent out a letter to all of the neighborhood associations?" It seemed as though she was taking directions from whoever was in the room with her.

"Pastor Willie, why don't you just meet with the preservationists?" I asked. She hung up. Then Jenifer called me and said, "I paid you! How can you do this?!" Did she think that she paid me to lie for her? It was clear that I was not the person they had assumed that I was.

I stayed in touch with Arva, via cell phone during the candlelight vigil, which was attended by several Coconut Grove activists and curious on-lookers who all wanted to know how the church could destroy the most important piece of its own history. It was the eve of Saint Stephen's centennial anniversary! It was National Historic Preservation Month!

Arva was trying to organize the meeting with Pastor Willie. At some point I heard from Father Frank Corbishley, the pastor at Saint Bede at the University of Miami. He said that he and the other pastors in the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida had been required to sign off on the Saint Stephen's project, and he and the other pastors had done so based on their belief that the chapel was being preserved. The Bishop was also required to sign off on the project. Had he been lied to also? They had all been sent the drawings and renderings that had been approved by the community and the city commission, which showed that the front portion of 1912 chapel and the colonnade were being preserved and incorporated into the project.

I heard from Liz Plater-Zyberk, the University of Miami's dean of the School of Architecture. She told me to keep up the good work. I asked her to please send her students over to the candlelight vigil. Jorge Hernandez showed up with a copy of Saint Stephen's demolition permit that someone had gotten for him. We looked through the permit application carefully and found that there was no mention of the historic chapel anywhere in the application. A photo of the back of an addition of the chapel had been submitted as part of the application to identify what was going to be demolished. The original historic chapel was not in the photo. Jorge had also obtained a copy of the letter that was required by the city to be sent out to all of the Coconut Grove neighborhood associations, detailing all aspects of the project. There was no mention of the plan to demolish the historic chapel in the letter.

Arva called me while I was at the vigil to let me know that she had reached Pastor Willie, and she had agreed to meet with her and the preservationists on Tuesday, May 5th. Pastor Willie said that the meeting should be limited to four people from each side (four from the preservationists group and four from Saint Stephens). It was 9:00. I called the vigil off. We had gotten what we needed, a face to face meeting between Pastor Willie and other church officials and Miami's renowned historic preservationists. We headed to Scotty's Landing to celebrate.

The next day, Saturday, May 2nd, I happened to be walking by the 1912 Chapel on Main Highway as I did regularly on my daily walks to the waterfront. I was shocked to see a demolition crew on the roof of the chapel with sledge hammers, hacking away! Pastor Willie had just agreed to meet with the preservationists! She had picked the day and parameters for the meeting! After alerting the preservationists and the police, I ran to the Coconut Grove Bookstore to send out this e-mail:

RED ALERT!!

We have been duped by a pastor!! Demolition of the historic chapel is happening right now! Leading architects, historians, & preservationists are staging a protest in front of the chapel right now! Media is on the way. WE NEED YOUR HELP!!!

The following is an account of what happened next, that I later wrote for the Coconut Grapevine, Coconut Grove's daily blog:

Sadly, when I got to the church at about 5:00 pm (Saturday) I saw four fellow parishioners, a member of the school staff, and a five member construction crew with crow bars and sledge hammers in their hands. A locked chain link fence covered with opaque nylon to hide the chapel, surrounded the area. I walked around to the main entrance to see what was going on. Demolition was supposed to be postponed until after a mediation meeting. (scheduled by the pastor herself) between local historians and preservationists, takes place on Tuesday. Needless to say, I was quite surprised.

A member of the construction crew, who didn't know who I was, opened the locked gate at the main entrance for me. I made my way to rear of the chapel when suddenly I was grabbed with two hands by long time church member and past church vestry member, Bonnell Denten. I have known him for over 12 years. I told him I just wanted to see what was going on. He forcibly removed me from the church property. I couldn't believe it.

As I walked around to the chapel's Main Highway entrance, I made a few calls, and in a flash the dream team (Arva Moore Parks, George Hernandez, and Dolly MacIntyre), arrived. We watched as a worker took a sledge hammer to the plaque on the front of the chapel that reads "Soper Hall circa 1912." I felt sick.

The four fellow parishioners, the school employee and Bonnel Denton guarded the chain link fence. They seemed quite content with themselves. The demolition crew proceeded to hack away at the header over the front door of the chapel and then moved on to prying off one of the cypress brackets at the roof line. By then a crowd had gathered.

It's illegal to demo a building after 6:00 pm, so right after 6:00 the police were called and they eventually forced the crew to halt demolition (at about 6:20). The crew disappeared to the back of the property. We eventually left. I went back at midnight to see if they were trying to proceed with demolition and there are a couple of Vanguard security guards there guarding the chain link fence on Main Highway.

I'm not sure if they will try to demo in the middle of the night, but given what I saw this evening, I wouldn't be surprised. Church tomorrow should be interesting.

Jim Eriksen - a civil engineer and parishioner who served as the project's School Board Representative and whose children attended Saint Stephen's school, Eric Copeland - a parishioner and an attorney who offered his legal advice to the church and to Pastor Willie, Jim Werbelow - the project's construction manager who was appointed by Jorge Perez, CEO of the Related Group, who has children in Saint Stephen's school, all arrived to patrol the property around the historic chapel. Jenifer had told me that Saint Stephen's was a great place to network and make business contacts. I guessed that this is what she meant. On the other side of the wall, standing on the sidewalk on Main Highway, were myself, Arva Parks, George Hernandez, Dolly MacIntyre, and a few angry citizens.

Dolly MacIntyre and I spent the night taking turns watching over the chapel. Here are our e-mail updates from that long night. My house is just a few blocks away. I slept with my windows open so I could listen for the roar of bulldozers at the chapel.

Sat, May 2, 2009 at 9:58 PM

As of 9:15 this evening (Saturday) the demolition crew had not returned.

Dolly

Sun, May 3, 2009 at 12:55 AM

Went by at midnight. Vangaurd Security is guarding the fence. They said that they are there until 7:00 am.

Melissa

Sun, May 3, 2009 at 4:34 AM

Chapel still standing - Vangaurd security guard is asleep in his car.

Melissa

I went back to the Chapel at 7:00 am on Sunday morning, after reading an article in the Miami Herald, entitled, *Preservationists trying to save Miami's oldest church helped stop an after-hours demolition crew from destroying the building*. The article turned out to be the first in a series written about the chapel by Andres Vignucci, Charles Rabin, and Beth Dunlop that were picked up and reprinted by other publications across the country, including one put out by the Harvard Divinity School.

The demolition crew was back! They were trying to discretely dismantle the chapel with crow bars. I called the police again. I walked with the police around to the gated entrance to the church property. The gate was locked and the demolition crew ignored the police officer and would not let him in. The police officer called for backup as parishioners arrived for the 8:00 service. Threatened with arrest, church officials eventually told the demolition crew to stop. I rushed home to make this flyer:

URGENT!!



The above image gives the appearance that the Saint Stephen's Historic Chapel is going to be partially preserved. This image was presented to and approved by the Saint Stephen's Vestry last year. It was also presented to the Saint Stephen's parish and to the Coconut Grove Community last year.

This image was recently published in a book titled "The Little School by the Bay" by Dr. Paul George. The greater Miami community, including local historians, preservationists and politicians were led to believe that a portion of the chapel was being preserved based on this image that was presented to them.

Unfortunately, the entire historic chapel is being demolished today, although the pastor of Saint Stephen's made an agreement to postpone demolition until a mediation meeting with historians, preservationists, parishioners and community members could take place. The pastor scheduled the meeting for this Tuesday, yet demolition began illegally yesterday evening.

The chapel is still standing and we can still save it. Please contact Ivette Charlton of the Saint Stephen's Board of trustees at 305-██████████ or Colleen Bernuth, the Saint Stephen's Senior Warden, at 305-██████████ to express your concern. There is still time to save this significant part of Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church.

I rushed back to the church and handed out the flyers to parishioners that were arriving to church for the 10:00 service. Jenifer arrived and ran up to me in the parking lot just as I was handing a flyer to long time church member, the Honorable Judge William Hoeveler. She grabbed the flyer out of my hand and began yelling at me. His wife reached out for another flyer and I gave her one. We went into church and sat in our usual seat, two rows behind Jenifer. She began crying. The wife of Eric Copeland, the attorney who was advising Pastor Willie, comforted her. After Pastor Willie gave her sermon, she gave an angry speech at the front of the congregation admonishing the Miami Herald, saying that Viglucci's article was full of "misstatements and untruths." During the closing hymn, I stood and sang as loud as I could, as my fellow parishioners stared on with confusion.

As we were exiting the church, I realized that this might be the last chance for the preservationists to corner Pastor Willie and speak with her face to face. I called Jorge Hernandez and he rushed over immediately. He waited for Pastor Willie to exit the church, while I went across the street to wait. Two men that I did not recognize arrived and stood on the edge of the church property and glared at us. It seemed that it was their job to make sure that I did not come back onto the property, and I didn't attempt to. The situation was in Jorge's hands now. It was up to him to try to talk to Pastor Willie and I did not want to interfere with his attempt. As Pastor Willie exited the church, Jorge approached her and demanded that she keep her word and meet with him and the other preservationists. When I saw them talking, I left and went home and waited to hear back from Jorge. He called awhile later and told us that Pastor Willie had agreed (again) to meet with them at 5:00 pm that day.

Jorge, Arva, Dolly, and Barbara Lang went to the meeting. Pastor Willie, Silvia Larrauri, Jenifer Briley, Jim Eriksen, and Eric Copeland were there. The group of preservationists presented the church with the many alternatives to demolition, which included using the county grant money which was readily available, to restore or relocate the chapel. They toured the chapel and verified that it was in good condition. They asked for a one-week delay to work with Jenifer to see if they could find a solution that accomplished the schools need for additional classrooms and retail space and the communities need to preserve its heritage. They emphasized that their intent was not to stop the project. They recognized and understood that the church and school had an obligation to its donors and a timeline for completion. They wanted a chance to find a solution that would satisfy everyone, and they firmly believed that such a solution was possible. The meeting ended at 8:00pm with the understanding that the church delegation would get back to them with a decision.

At 11:00pm Pastor Willie called Jorge to say that demolition would begin the next morning, Monday, May 4th, at 7:00 am.

Arva, Dolly and I met at the chapel at 6:00am on Monday. The demolition crew showed up at 6:45. At 7:00 Silvia Larrauri promptly instructed a member of the demolition crew to remove the corner stone of the chapel, which was laid in 1912, according to a diary entry discovered by Arva, written by Mary Barr Munroe, Ralph Monroe's daughter. It turned out to be a time capsule of sorts, containing artifacts from 1912. We realized that they wanted to make sure that the chapel was destroyed by the time the building department opened at 8:00, because at 8:00 we would have been able to get the demolition permit revoked since they had lied on the demolition permit application. Arva asked me if I would be willing to climb on top of the chapel in a last-ditch effort to stall the demolition crew. I knew I could do it. I did it before when I was surveying the chapel. But who would pick my kids up from school while I sat in jail?

Next, Silvia Larrauri instructed the demolition crew to use a backhoe to pull down the chapel's facade and bell tower and then smash the colonnade. She acted as though she wanted to prove to us who was in charge. The backhoe operator complied and the raging machinery tugged and tugged at the chapel's facade and bell tower until it finally toppled what a century of hurricanes could not. Next the backhoe operator used the backhoe like a weapon to repeatedly hack away at the colonnade until the Ludowici tile was smashed, the Dade County pine trusses were shredded, and the pre-cast columns were crumbled. Tears welled up in Arva's eyes and Dolly looked as though she might go into cardiac arrest.

The media arrived and Arva told them that she felt as though she had just lost a close family member. I knew what she meant, and the consequences of my naiveté came crashing down on me. I went home and called the church secretary. She asked me to hold on and it sounded like she put me on the speaker phone. I told her to remove my family's name from their membership rolls.

My only redemption for my association with what is now referred to as the *Saint Stephen's disaster*, is that somehow, some good will come from telling the truth.