

Fired Up for Good

Written by Caitlin Granfield, BT Contributor
March 2017

Gas leak was behind Torch of Friendship flame issues



On January 21, when Coconut Grove resident Harry Gottlieb attended the Women's March at Bayfront Park, he noticed something amiss with the Torch of Friendship. The flame was out.

"I thought, this is bizarre," says Gottlieb. "How could it be out if this is supposed to be an eternal flame?"

The Torch is meant to burn continually, as it signifies Miami's perpetual friendship with Latin American and Caribbean countries, notes historian and *BT* columnist Paul George, in this issue's "[Picture Story](#)."

Turns out, the problem with the flame has been ongoing for decades.

"The flame has been an issue since the Sixties," says Tim Schmand, who oversees the Torch, Bayfront Park, and Museum Park in his role as the executive director of the Bayfront Park Management Trust.

In a manila folder containing historical documents about the Torch, he flips to a photocopy of a

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article dated 1961, about the torch that “won’t stay lit.” Written by the late Gene Miller (who won two Pulitzer Prizes during his tenure at the

Herald

), it revealed a solution: a \$200 automatic ignition system that “shoots sparks, sparkplug style,” every time the wind blows it out.

If the flame did extinguish, a light on the city’s switchboard system would turn on, alerting operators. “It worked great 20 times,” wrote Miller.

Natural gas, provided for free from TECO Peoples Gas, fuels the Torch. Maintenance workers from Bayfront Park check it regularly and relight it with a long painting stick when it’s out, which usually happens after heavy winds or rain, says Schmand.



Just behind the Torch, at the edge of Bayside Marketplace, sits a small red kiosk, where Marlene Krisman of Kendall sells tour packages for the City Sightseeing bus company. She says the flame had been out for two weeks, since the beginning of February, though Gottlieb noticed had been extinguished during January’s Women’s March.

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“There were people working on it, going up and down the ladder,” says Krisman. “Luckily, they fixed it.”

“It’s not the flame, it’s the idea behind it,” says her husband Ed Krisman, a tour guide with CitySightseeing. “That’s a mechanical thing. You can’t put out what it actually means,” he says.

Construction of the Torch began in August 1960 and was completed that October. Miami’s then mayor Robert King High hoped it would have the same significance as the Statue of Liberty, and position Miami as a gateway to the Americas, as Paul George points out in the second installment of his Torch history in this issue’s “Picture Story.”

For some like Krisman, the Torch brings to mind John F. Kennedy, in whose honor the Torch was dedicated in 1964, following his assassination. When he was running for president, Kennedy gave a campaign speech at the site during its construction.

“To me,” Krisman says, “it means through Kennedy’s friendship with other countries that we’re here today. With the Cuban Missile Crisis, we were this close to nuclear war,” he says, bringing his index finger an inch away from his thumb. “Because of his friendship with other countries, we averted nuclear disaster.”

Around the same time the Torch was erected, waves of Cuban immigrants started arriving in Miami.

“When you talk about Latin countries, [Kennedy] was the guy that basically invited the exiles to our country in the Sixties,” Krisman adds. “It’s because of him that we have such a large Cuban community in South Florida.”

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