

Activists target a Brickell neighbor to put a local face on a hot issue



For all the days they could have chosen to hang out on their bay-facing balconies, it certainly was one of the least pleasant. Temperatures in the low 60s, basically freezing in Miami-adjusted terms, combined with wind and rain to deliver a soggy, miserable Sunday afternoon.

Yet wondering what the racket going on below was about, the neighbors of Brickell Bay Drive's Yacht Club Apartments ignored the weather to crowd onto their balconies.

As the curious would soon find out, the noise was all about one of their neighbors, Robert DiCrisci. Armed with songs, posters, and a marine bullhorn, a group of about 20 protesters, including this reporter, had apparently decided it was time to let everyone within earshot know all about "Bob."

A resident of the 19th floor, DiCrisci and NextSource Pharmaceuticals, the Miami company of which he's the CEO, had recently been the subject of reporting by the *Wall Street Journal* for engaging in what experts described as classic price gouging. As his neighbors and those of two nearby towers were to find out from the people below, in 2013 DiCrisci's company bought the patent from Bristol-Myers Squibb for a chemotherapy medication meant to treat a specific kind of brain cancer. The company then raised the price of the drug nine times, or by 1400 percent.

Politics Made Personal

Written by Eleazar David Meléndez, BT Contributor
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Other media reports relayed by the protesters over the megaphone noted that DiCrisci is being sued by his business partners. And that he has allegedly raised the ire of investors with his lavish spending of company funds at New York strip clubs, and for misrepresenting his credentials.

Rounding out his résumé as a real charmer, he was arrested in 2016 on a domestic violence charge that the police claim involved the pharmaceutical executive throwing a dog at his girlfriend in the middle of a drunken rage.

The protesters wanted Bob's neighbors to know about all that, and for them to knock on his door and do something about it, especially regarding the price gouging.

"Think of your family, and think of the real hurt, and then go to that person's apartment and tell them he's wrong and this is evil," yelled Nicole Rodriguez over a loudspeaker that carried her voice across the waterfront condo canyon. A progressive activist, she said she had trekked all the way from Doral for the event.

It was, needless to say, an unusual scene for a Sunday afternoon in Brickell, where street-level political activism tends to be about as common as street-level parking. The high rates of absentee ownership, coupled with a resident profile that skews younger, busier, and more transient than the rest of Miami, can make the dense neighborhood of high-rises a relatively disengaged place.

And just like rapidly gentrifying urban cores in other cities, it's not unusual for people to spend years living there without getting to know their neighbors.

Pulling back that urban anonymity was exactly the point for those who showed up at the event, advertised as a "Die-In Against Big Pharma." The group of about 20 at one point lay on the ground to illustrate in dramatic fashion the people who may die as a result of the price hikes.

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William Byatt, who works in Brickell at a software company and led in organizing and promoting the event, said that the day was “more about raw accountability.”

“We’re making it clear to him that we know who he is and we’re not going to let him off the hook,” said Byatt, “and that there will be a personal component to this -- that he is personally going to have to look us in the eye and deal with this.”

And just as he predicted, the protesters ended the event with the crowd chanting, “We’ll be back!”

Taking notice of a destructive national trend, personalizing it by putting a human face to it, and showing people that it’s happening in their own neighborhoods is of course hardly new -- though in this particular instance, “putting a face on the problem” was fairly literal, as this writer’s participation included holding up to curious neighbors an oversize mugshot from DiCrisci’s domestic violence arrest.

But the tactic appears to have worked. Bringing attention to the issue prompted action from Miami City Commissioner Ken Russell, who represents Brickell and who is now running for Congress. Russell says that following the action of the activists, he asked the State Attorney’s Office to look into the possibility that DiCrisci’s actions constitute unlawful price gouging. Russell says he has been told that an investigator has been assigned to the case.

Byatt, the event organizer, tells the *BT* that other elected officials have since also become open to putting their weight behind policy ideas that would prevent similar abuses.

“From now on, the idea is to continue to raise awareness that this is happening,” he says, “and continue to work with legislators to find policy solutions.”

Back on the streets of Brickell, some of those who participated in the “die-in” reported that they saw hope for other events of this kind to make people more engaged -- perhaps in other areas, where it’s important for people to be plugged in to what’s happening in their community.

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Gail Paris, who participated in the protests with her husband, Hank, moved to Brickell in 2014 from Manhattan, where she was active with the local Democratic club, and had at one point been a member of the community board for her slice of that city. While she remains active in Democratic politics and in engaging local officials, she notes that things in Miami are obviously different.

“You don’t see people marching down the streets here to protest things,” she says, “especially in Brickell.”

But she hopes that taking on big topics like this can show residents that there is a path toward engagement with direct action to solve issues big and small in their communities.

“I think people do get more involved when there’s a direct link and it’s something that’s not just against a corporation, but a person who’s living in our community,” says Paris. “The more you make things personal, the more people get involved. It’s good to be involved in politics, but as I know from my experience, it’s good to be involved in community issues, too, because then you become a real person, an authentic person who people can relate to, and not just someone who’s involved in politics.”

Byatt says he agrees with that approach: “This left me with the sense that my community and my town were not going to just let this happen.”

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com