

RON BERGERON

ENTREPRENEUR ... RODEO MAN ... EVERGLADES CHAMPION

By Ann Page



“I have been on a long journey ...” says Ronald M. Bergeron Sr., 65, successful engineering contractor, real estate developer and rodeo competitor. Bergeron is the sixth generation of his family to be raised in Florida. His ancestors lived and breathed a culture within the elements of nature that continues to influence him to this day.

Back in the days before water management, living off the land in old Cracker houses on the banks of Lake Okeechobee, Bergeron’s family built their own boats and traps. They primarily caught catfish and traveled up Taylor Creek to the old ice plant where the railroad shipped their catch all over America. His ancestors were independent and totally self-sufficient people, not tied to the world economy. Reminiscing recently, Bergeron says, “I was so blessed to be raised in a small town community with a bunch of Cracker families. It was just such a beautiful way of life because those kinds of families are honorable; they loved the land, lived in the country and their whole culture and heritage dealt with living within the environment.”

Growing up in Davie, with a population of about 500, Bergeron would spend time with his dad who owned a small grocery store in town. “There were more places to tie your horse up in front

than there were to park your car,” says Bergeron, who played football at Stranahan High School in Fort Lauderdale. “My parents expected respect, discipline, responsibility and kindness.” His mother always taught him, “Kindness is free.”

AUTHENTIC COWBOY

Despite living just a short distance from Fort Lauderdale, Ron was disconnected from city life. “There was one single-lane turntable bridge over the New River on SR 84 that connected us,” Bergeron recalls. “Our tradition was the country. All we had was a rodeo arena. Cowboys became our heroes and naturally I took this culture up, ultimately riding rodeo professionally for 30-plus years.” A real cowboy, Bergeron rode a nine-state rodeo circuit and achieved moderate success in that sport.

Percy Bergeron, Ron’s father, was one of the original Davie rodeo ground’s founders. Ron made substantial donations in the mid-1990s to purchase land and pave it over for parking at the rodeo site. In 1996, Davie graciously renamed their rodeo grounds, Bergeron Rodeo Grounds, to honor the contributions the Bergeron family made to this sport.

ENTREPRENEUR EXTRAORDINAIRE

In addition to his rodeo success, Bergeron started

his own business in 1963 which has evolved into a family of companies headquartered in Pembroke Pines, including Glades Cattle Co., Bergeron Sand and Rock Mining, Bergeron Properties & Investment Corp. and Bergeron Land Development, the largest road contracting and site development business in Florida.

Regarding his enormous business success, the multi-millionaire says, “I left home with \$235.12 in my pocket. I started with a little farm tractor mowing pastures. At night I bused tables. I bought my first bulldozer and went from building a driveway to building the I-95, I-595 and Sawgrass Expressway Interchanges. It was quite a journey. I was disciplined,” says Bergeron, who built his company into one of the most successful empires in the state. In addition to preparing the site for the local highway interchanges, Bergeron Land Development provided site preparation for the sprawling S.R. 84-Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport road project. At a cost of \$120 million, it was the largest road project ever undertaken in the state at the time.

“When I get up in the morning, I work out with every cell in my body. I learned this from my high school football coach Dana Wallace. Now I run multiple diversified companies – from the little farm tractor to building interchanges, rock pits

and quarries, real estate, communication and agriculture," says Bergeron who also is one of the largest landowners in South Florida with a 5,000-acre ranch near the Seminole reservation and Big Cypress State Preserve and 82-acre Green Glades West ranch off U.S. 27, among other properties in Broward County.

"For over 44 years, I have built great relationships. I have many of the same customers and they only hire me because I sit down and do value engineering, cost vs. benefit and recommend things to save them money. It doesn't cost me anything to do this, I enjoy it," says Bergeron, proud father of six, who also is active in the Boys and Girls Club of Broward County, the Broward Partnership for the Homeless and Children's Harbor.

"In my 20s, I met a guy who was in the last regiment of the Mounted Calvary. He was building a city. I told him, 'I want to build your city.' He said, 'Well, what kind of equipment you got?' I said, 'I have a dump truck and a bulldozer.' He looked at me and said, 'Son, I am building a city, not a driveway.' I said, 'I know that, but I can do it. I'll get all the equipment I need.' He said, 'I'd like to help you out, but I can't.'"

"As I was leaving, he saw my rodeo belt buckle, and said, 'Do you ride horses?' I said, 'Yeah, I ride rodeo professionally.' Well, he happened to be a horseman. His dad had thousands of horses that he would sell to the City of New York to pull milk wagons. Before you knew it, we were talking horses and when we finished he looked at me and said, 'OK, I'm going to give you a chance.' I built his whole city. To this day, at age 88, he is still one of my closest friends."

The current economy has affected his business somewhat, but the ever-practical Bergeron remains unfazed. "People are going to see more tough times and they are going to have to learn to live within their means. They are going to have to satisfy their needs and not their wants."

TIRELESS EVERGLADES ADVOCATE

In August 2007, Bergeron was appointed by Florida Gov. Charlie Crist to a five-year term on the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. When talking about the Florida Everglades, Bergeron's eyes alight with passion. "The Everglades is one of the largest contiguous habitats in the lower 48 states and one of the

10 natural wonders of the world. Everglades restoration is all about water, its management and water levels that are compatible for the environment. My granddad, a game warden, took me out there in his airboat when I was four years old and I fell in love. He taught me how to respect and enjoy it. If my granddad hadn't put me in that airboat, I wouldn't be spending half my time today trying to save the Everglades. I am very fortunate."

Bergeron, an avid Crist supporter, took the future governor out and introduced him to the Everglades before he was elected. "I only had one issue: the Everglades and all natural resources in Florida. He (Crist) spent several days with me, stayed overnight and really was a very good student. He understood all the issues and once he got elected, he appointed me to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, an overwhelming responsibility," says Bergeron, who works with all of the departments and agencies responsible for managing water levels for the benefit of people, wildlife, ecology and the environment.

"I am greatly honored, too, that the commission placed me as the Point Commissioner over the entire Everglades. With my 60 years of real-life experience and my engineering contractor's experience by trade, I know how to correct the problems in the Everglades and I can make a difference," he says.

"I have tried to bring leadership to all federal

and state agencies and bring everyone together to form a consensus of shared adversity and impacts to the global Everglades and equalization of water levels amongst four little jurisdictions out there: the state Everglades, which is about 750,000 acres, the Miccosukee Reservation (82,000 acres), the Big Cypress Preserve of 800,000 acres, contiguous to the River of Grass, and the Everglades National Park south of the Tamiami Trail, about 1.5 million acres. All of that combined is about 3 million acres, which our forefathers set aside in 1949 when they drew the line and said, 'Inside these levees will be preserved forever and outside will be drained for agricultural development and safety and welfare to the general public.'"

So will Bergeron do what he says he will do? You can bet the farm on it. He is quick to give credit to others, gracious, humble and kind, a true philanthropist for the homeless and children's rights and a role model. "You can't buy respect," Bergeron adds. "You either have or you do not have honesty and business ethics. Success isn't just all the money you have made. It comes with respect in relationships."

Bergeron is cut from the cloth of the old Florida Cracker heritage and Gladesman culture. He once finished in the top 15 in the I.R.A. World Finals for roping, yet he never traded his rodeo horse for a thoroughbred; never traded his airboat for a yacht. "My true success is that I never lost who I am through the process." ▼

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