



RON BERGERON

'Alligator' Ron Bergeron rode humble upbringings, his cowboy culture and an occasional alligator to become one of Broward's most respected and generous native sons, without ever losing sight of his cowboy roots.

By Jeff Zbar | Portrait Photos by Donna Victor

RON BERGERON

Ron Bergeron
on his horse Chocolate.



“A

lligator” Ron Bergeron’s office is a busy place. Papers, a few folders and a tin of Mountain Man tobacco snuff sit on his desk. The walls are cluttered with artifacts of the life of

a man born, raised, and made successful in what once were remote stretches of Broward County, but now are the cities of Davie, Weston, and Pembroke Pines.

Like many of the rooms in Bergeron Land Development’s headquarters, his office is a museum of sorts. There’s a gator skull, newspaper articles about his work, even a poster from the documentary, *Florida Crackers, The Cattlemen and Cowboys of Florida*. The building’s foyer has a large photo of Bergeron on his rodeo roping horse.

Sitting at his large wooden desk, Bergeron’s black cowboy hat hangs behind him. His black western shirt is sharp and pressed. A black scarf is tied around his neck. Atop his denim jeans is one of his silver rodeo championship belt buckles. Over the years, he said, he’s earned too many to count.

Bergeron’s talking about his life as a pioneering Gladesman, the grandson of an Everglades game warden, a commissioner with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, a philanthropist, and though he’ll never say as much, one of South Florida’s early and most successful land developers.

The flip phone on his desk rings. For this man who doesn’t text or email, his phone is as much a throwback in 2014 as its owner’s

homage to the historic cowboy ways. Still, somehow it’s not surprising that his custom ringtone is the theme from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*.

“This is Alligator Ron,” he answered. A moment passed. “How you doin’?” asked Bergeron.

Another moment passed. Bergeron continued, “I’m doing OK,” he offered, “just busy as hell—like a one-legged cowboy at an ass-kickin’ contest.”

You can’t hear details, but you quickly gather Bergeron’s negotiating style.

Continuing on his call, “I think me and you need to sit down and talk some numbers,” said Bergeron. “Why don’t you come on in here let’s me and you talk face to face and see what we can come up with.”

Bergeron, born in 1943 is a fifth-generation Floridian, in what was then a town of 300 people and who had bootstrapped his way up. In fact, in 2015 his company will celebrate 50 years in business.



Bergeron as a young child on lap of father Percy Bergeron, his older brother Lonnie Bergeron and his mother Dorothy Bergeron.

Today, his family's name is on trailers and heavy equipment at jobsites from Broward highways south to Alton Road in Miami Beach. Bergeron's rock quarries in West Palm Beach and Miami-Dade County were the source of the fill used to build Interstates 75 and 595 and the Sawgrass Expressway.

His name is also associated with more than 200 area charities Bergeron has helped along the way.

Bergeron Land Development is a family business. Although none of his four daughters, who include a missionary, a nursing student, and an aspiring country star in Nashville, are in the business, his two boys are heavily involved. Ron Jr. "J.R.," runs several of the family's companies, including Bergeron Land Development, an underground utility company in Orlando, and Bergeron Emergency Services, which dispatches heavy equipment to natural disasters nationwide. His other son, Lonnie, named for Ron's grandfather, oversees real estate leasing and various income-producing properties.

The Bergerons' holdings include the 380-acre industrial park where the corporate office is located, 500 acres in Ocala, and properties in Michigan and Kentucky. Most were purchased in the 1970s.

Bergeron, 71, started simple enough as an 18-year-old cowboy looking for work. He moved out of his parents' house with a couple hundred dollars in his pocket and took a job pumping gas at a local service station; he lived in a room in the back.

Hully Stirling, Bergeron's old scoutmaster and part of another pioneering Davie family, made Bergeron an offer. He had an old house on his coconut plantation off the south fork of the New River—Bergeron could tend the trees and live there free. Bergeron took the offer.

Soon, a neighbor asked Bergeron to mow his pasture and tend to his orange grove. He borrowed Stirling's old Ford tractor, and in time more work came. Bergeron mowed pastures, baled hay, and harvested fruit late into the night.

"A lot of times, I'd work 18 to 20 hour days, and sleep under that tractor," recalled Bergeron.

Flooded with work, Bergeron approached Stirling with an offer: "Let's buy some tractors and grow this business. You invest the money, I'll do the work." Stirling agreed. It was 1963, and Bergeron had his first real company.

The arrangement went on like that for several years, yet Bergeron couldn't help but notice the Stirling family members were wealthy landowners. So was Henry Perry, whose hay Bergeron was bailing, and who owned Perry's Dairy and the 640 acres that would become North Perry Airport in Hollywood.



The early years of Bergeron Land Development.

"I looked at all the successful people and realized they owned land," said Bergeron. "I knew right away with every damn penny I got I had to buy land."

With his sights set beyond hayfields and orange groves, Bergeron bought out Stirling in 1965 and created his first solo company, Bergeron Land Development. Then, parcel by parcel, he started buying land. One piece was on Southwest 100th Avenue, another was a seemingly remote parcel on State Road, which at the time was 84 miles from where any city folk ventured.

His big purchase was 30 acres in Davie for \$1,000 an acre. Bergeron sensed the piece would fetch a fortune one day. He hired a pilot to take him up to view the parcel and could see that University Drive would line up right along his frontage. He soon bought another 20 contiguous acres.

Between taxes and maintenance, holding land was expensive. Bergeron needed to expand his development business and

resources to compete with the two other big landowners and developers—the Griffins and the Sessas.

Broward was in a building boom. With all the construction, developers needed fill for communities and roads. Bergeron went to a local landowner and made him an offer: I'll dredge your land, sell the fill and pay you a royalty. Bergeron promised the man lakefront property, and a return five times greater than the value of the idle land.

Between two guys and a piece of paper the deal was done. Were any lawyers involved? "Aw, naw. You gotta realize that in Davie you lived by the 10 Commandments of the Cowboy," said Bergeron. "You've got to be able to shake a man's hand."

Mort Kalin first shook Bergeron's hand in 1972. Kalin was laying the infrastructure for Pembroke Lakes. Bergeron caught wind that some 2,100 acres needed to be prepped.

One day, Bergeron walked into Kalin's office. He had no appointment and no personal

RON BERGERON

“Success is in the opportunity, and learning how to do something a little better than your competition”

— Ron Bergeron



Bergeron and Brian Quail, president/chief executive officer of Boys and Girls Clubs of Broward County at Ranch Room.



2014 Boys & Girls Club Annual Ranch Room at Bergeron's Green Glades Ranch.

introduction. “It was just a cold call,” said Kalin. “This young fella walks in, a farm-type kid who wanted work. I asked him what type of equipment he had. He said a five-yard dump truck and a backhoe back on the farm.”

Kalin was impressed with Bergeron’s spirit, but told the kid he needed big equipment. But as Bergeron was walking out, Kalin, a fellow horseman and former member of the US Calvary in World War II, noticed Bergeron’s championship belt buckle. The two got to talking. By the time they were done, Bergeron had the job. He ended up renting the draglines and bulldozers to eventually move 7 million tons of muck and material.

“Let me tell you, Ronnie Bergeron wasn’t the average farm boy,” recalled Kalin. “He was aggressive and knowledgeable.”

To Bergeron, opportunities came fast, like the chance to get Kalin’s work. “Don’t jump or someone else will; just be smart about it,” he said. Burned by the 1973 oil embargo and

recession, Bergeron has learned not to over leverage. Even though he made his first million and employed more than 150 workers by the time he was 25, Bergeron was always frugal. He lived and raised some of his six children in house trailers on his various properties until he was in his 40s. He didn’t build his current home on his 80-acre Green Glades East ranch on US 27 until the 1980s.

“God gave me opportunities that I worked very hard at,” he said. “Success is in the opportunity, and learning how to do something a little better than your competition, and then living within your means until you can live anyway you want.”

It’s safe to say Bergeron is successful enough to live anyway he wants. But he hasn’t ventured far from his cowboy roots. On his ranch, where a dozen horses graze on open pastures, Bergeron has his private residence, a guesthouse, and a large stable. The spread

might be best known for Alligator Ron’s Saloon, a 6,000-square-foot bar and entertainment hall Bergeron uses for parties and charity events. One event, Ranch Room, the annual event for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Broward County, attracts 1,000 people and has raised more than \$12 million to date.

There’s even a 20-acre lake Bergeron dredged. Always an opportunist, he sold the fill to create US 27.

Bergeron is deeply connected in Tallahassee and Washington, often with the purpose of saving the Everglades, where his grandfather, Lonnie P. Harvey, would take him exploring on his airboat in the 1940s and 1950s. The family still has Lonnie’s hunting cabin 20 miles off Alligator Alley. Bergeron’s pride is Green Glades West, his 8,000-acre getaway deep in the cypress swamps, where deer, bears, and Florida panthers are common sights.

So when Everglades remediation needed a first-hand look from the politicians holding the



Bergeron's grandfather LP Harvey. He was a game warden and introduced him to the Florida Everglades.



Bergeron in the Everglades.

votes and purse strings, Bergeron personally arranged for airboat rides for governors, US senators, interior secretaries, state representatives, and even Vice President Joe Biden.

Bergeron has waded in chest-high Everglades' waters that shouldn't have touched his knees for television cameras, to show how poor

water planning is drowning native species. He's hunted pythons to highlight the invasive threat in the Everglades, which he calls "one of the natural wonders of the world."

"He's done it all on his dime and his time," said Rodney Barreto, Chairman of Florida Partners and former chairman of the Florida Fish

J.R. and Lonnie Bergeron

As far back as brothers J.R. and Lonnie Bergeron can remember, their father's business and life lessons have been part of their upbringing and education.

Maybe it was the kid-sized desk that sat beside Ron Bergeron's own desk, or riding shotgun with their dad to job sites, or the summers spent working for Bergeron Land Development.

They cleaned horse stalls at the family ranch every day after school, and ran tractors as they got older.

"My first job was cleaning survey stakes around construction sites," recalled Lonnie Bergeron, 43. "He always wanted us to work really hard for our money. There were no free rides and he wanted us to understand how the business world works."

Three decades later, the boys help run the 54 businesses that are part of the Bergeron family of companies.

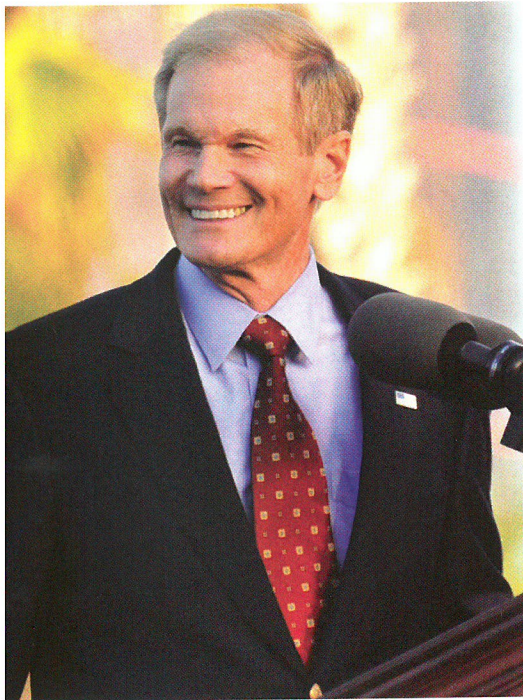
Like their father, neither was much for college. Lonnie attended Broward College before coming back to the family business. J.R. finished his formal education with his high school diploma. Both attended what J.R. called Bergeron University. There they learned about life, business, and giving back.

The boys have picked up a few of their father's business traits. They know how to tackle a task, "to get it off your plate, get it done right, and move on to the next thing," said J.R. They also learned to stick to what they do best. Lonnie is more suited to contracts, accounting and legal work, akin to his first job as project manager at 19. J.R. builds businesses. "Our skill sets were naturally on those two different career paths," said Lonnie.

Bergeron also taught his sons the formula for success. Don't dally in someone else's business, just focus on what you know, and learn from your mistakes, recalled Lonnie. "Do what you do well, do it a little better and you'll be more successful than everybody else," he summed up **E**

SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE

RON BERGERON



US Senator Bill Nelson.

and Wildlife Conservation Commission. While chair, Barreto appointed Bergeron point commissioner for Everglades preservation. "Ronnie is one of the best ambassadors for the Everglades I know," he said.

US Senator Bill Nelson has been on those airboats with Bergeron. They caught a 10-foot python in the Everglades. When Nelson wanted to bring heavy hitters like Sen. Barbara Boxer and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to tour the Everglades, he called Bergeron to line up the tours.

"Ronnie is very flamboyant in his dress," said the Senator, but "he's the real deal when it comes to outdoors, nature, and specifically the Everglades."

Meanwhile, Bergeron continues to take on new work. His company won part of the \$400 million project to lay new sewer pipes along Alton Road and install new pumps and valves in Miami Beach's effort to stave off rising waters. Bergeron has spent hours on the jobsite with Miami Beach Mayor Philip Levine, discussing the intricacies of the project and devising the

Ron Bergeron at the rodeo.



SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE



Victor Giannoble

Victor Giannoble was in his early 60s but not quite ready to settle down when he first started working for Ron Bergeron. For the next 17 years, the lifelong horseman from Chicago worked around Bergeron's ranch and office, helping with horses, the business, or just odd jobs.

Along the way, he learned a few lessons about life and business.

Giannoble and Bergeron first met when Giannoble moved to Davie in the 1970s. Though he had a family business at Port Everglades, Giannoble's passion was rodeo. He became involved in the Davie Rodeo Association and served a stint on its board with Bergeron.

The two got to talking. Giannoble's grandfather had sold mules to Bergeron's grandfather around Hammond, Louisiana. Their fathers were close. Giannoble knew Bergeron's older brother, Lonnie, from the rodeo circuit.

Somehow, the two never really knew each other, until they served on the rodeo board. "Something clicked between us and we became friends," said Giannoble, who retired a few years back to a 10-acre spread in Live Oak in North Florida.

During his time with Bergeron, Giannoble discovered a man unchanged by his success. When Davie's rodeo arena was falling apart, Bergeron rallied support to save the grounds and to help with the rebuilding effort.

"When there's something to be done, he's the first to jump up," said Giannoble. **E**

RON BERGERON

remedies. It helps that Bergeron is an environmentalist at heart.

"He has an instinctual sense and perception of his environment," said Levine. "Ronnie's an adaptive guy who understands problems and devises solutions. Entrepreneurs don't think about challenges. They think about solutions."

Most recently, Bergeron became a partner in Sun Bergeron, a start-up project between Bergeron and Southern Waste Systems. Southern sought to dethrone Waste Management from its decades-long waste disposal contract in Broward County. After years of getting nowhere in his efforts, Southern Chairman and Co-founder Anthony Lomangino in 2010 approached Bergeron, a long-time friend, with a business opportunity. If Bergeron's negotiations landed the contracts, Lomangino would run the business. Last year, the joint venture won the contracts for 18 municipalities countywide.

"This is his backyard," said Lomangino, also a fellow horseman. "No one knows the political landscape in Broward better than Ronnie."

"Ronnie Bergeron represents more than a successful entrepreneur. He's the embodiment

of the Florida cracker and cowboy creed that crosses paths with the American dream," said Dan Weekley, president of Weekley Asphalt Paving, another successful business from an old Davie family. He and Bergeron have worked together since the 1960s, and their kids have ridden rodeo together for almost as long as they have worked together to preserve the Bergeron Rodeo Grounds.

"The handshake was the way it was done in our generation," said Weekley. "You don't have a relationship that long in business with people if they can't trust your word."

Handshakes aren't taught in business school. Though Bergeron's highest formal education was a diploma from Fort Lauderdale's Stranahan High School, don't underestimate Bergeron's business skills, said Joseph Pineda, an assistant dean at the Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship at Nova Southeastern University. In 2000, Bergeron was named to the school's Entrepreneur Hall of Fame with such local luminaries as residential developer Joel Altman, car magnate Rick Case, and Citrix founder Ed Iacobucci.

Bergeron on his horse Chocolate, at the Davie Rodeo Association Jackpot, held every Wednesday night at the Bergeron Rodeo Grounds.



Billy Culligan

On a balmy Wednesday night in July, Billy Culligan took off on horseback after a steer in the Bergeron Rodeo Grounds arena in Davie. Culligan quickly chased down the animal, let loose his lasso and roped the steer around the horns.

Beside him, Ron Bergeron, the team's heeler, released his rope and lassoed the steer's rear feet.

The duo did more than bring a 500-pound steer to the dirt. They won the series team roping championship at the Davie Rodeo Association.

"We've won a bunch of 'em," said Culligan, Bergeron's long-time roping partner and field supervisor for Bergeron Properties.

Culligan was nine years old and riding motorcycles around one of Bergeron's Davie rock pits when the two first met. By the time he was 13, Culligan was on Bergeron's payroll. By high school, they were roping partners and soon were competing on the pro circuit.

Culligan went off to study animal science and agriculture at the University of Tennessee, and returned to Davie to work with Bergeron.

"I've never had another job," said Culligan, 52, who works Bergeron job sites, the Davie ranch, and hunts with Bergeron on his 8,000-acre spread in the Everglades.

Along the way, Culligan's learned a thing or two from his friend.

"He's still just a regular guy. He hasn't got too caught up in the big business. He sticks to his roots. That's something we all can learn from," said Culligan. **E**

RON BERGERON

"Ron's a world-class entrepreneur," said Pineda. "People like Ronnie and Wayne Huizenga and (Wendy's founder) Dave Thomas were founding fathers to the area, successful, and philanthropic."

"Bergeron's old-school business style doesn't go looking for spotlight or praise, and Bergeron doesn't drop names," said Happy Alter, owner and CEO of Bob's Barricades, whose traffic cones and markers have been lining Bergeron's road construction projects for more than 40 years. It is common to find Bergeron on the job

he always does, up before dawn with no alarm clock. He did 500 crunches followed by an hour on the stair stepper before he headed into the office around 8:30am, he said.

Being in shape has kept Bergeron sharp in business, on his roping horse every Wednesday, and when wrasslin' gators out at Green Glades West. Sure, Bergeron's had a few close calls. He lost part of a finger when a rope cinched it right off; several have been sewn back on from other rodeo mishaps. A highly publicized

GIVING BACK

C

hanning Crowder recalled the day he first met Ron Bergeron. The former Miami Dolphins linebacker was looking for a facility to host

the weigh-in for his charity bass fishing tournament.

One call, followed by one meeting, and Bergeron was hooked, said Crowder.

"On the spot he said, 'Sounds good.' That was the business deal," recalled Crowder. A few months later, 300 amateur and professional fishermen met at Alligator Ron's Saloon on his West Broward ranch. The event raised \$70,000.

Bergeron has made millions helping develop South Florida. And he's helped return millions to the community through philanthropy. A page in the back of the Bergeron Companies corporate calendar lists only some of the groups he supports. Even in small letters, the names of more than 200 groups fill the page.

For Bergeron, philanthropy gives him a reason to throw a party. But his parents always told him "being kind is free."

"You can be the most successful person in the world," he said. "What else are you going to do with it?"

There's a deeper reason. Bergeron is intensely proud of his cowboy upbringing; his events give him a chance to introduce others to the cowboy way of life showcased in no small part within his 6,000-square-foot saloon.

Rick Case has worked on Boys and Girls Clubs of Broward County's Ranch Roam with Bergeron for the better part of two decades. An original founder of Florida West Fair, the event that preceded Ranch Roam, Case knew the group needed a bigger home. Bergeron offered up his homestead.

"He's got a big heart," said Case, CEO of Rick Case Automotive Group. "He lives and breathes saving the Everglades. There's no person who has done more and cares more for the Everglades than Ron Bergeron," said Case. **E**



Bergeron and Channing Crowder, Miami Dolphins linebacker

site or at the table with his engineers or estimators, whose tasks he learned himself decades ago by just doing the work.

"In other companies, the owner is in some ivory tower somewhere," said Alter. "He's really a throwback. He's on the jobsite. He's determined and he does what he thinks is right. But if someone steps in his way, they'd have to go to the mat with him."

Back in his office, Bergeron is reflecting on his day and his career. He started the day as

run-in with an eight-foot gator in 2006 left Bergeron with 143 stitches in his hand. But to Bergeron, they're just stories from a life well lived. In fact, when he tells those tales, Bergeron's face lights right up.

"I go to work with every cell in my body to be the best businessman, go home to be a good dad, and go to the rodeo to kick your ass. Then I leave every Friday to be in the swamps," said Bergeron, "and nothing will interfere with that." **E**