“The Origins and Early History of the Dade County Community Relations Board to 1968”
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Wednesday, March 6, 2013, 6:00 pm, Jorge M. Perez Architecture Center
Glasgow Lecture Hall, 1215 Dickinson Drive, Coral Gables, FL 33146

On the domestic front, World War II generated a human relations agenda, which asserted that the strength of the nation lay in its diversity. It held that people of different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds could work together to achieve the civic and national unity required for the war effort. Those efforts persisted into the postwar era.

In metropolitan Miami, which experienced a rising level of racial and ethnic strife, the human relations agenda found expression in the work of Seymour Samet of the American Jewish Committee (AJC). The national AJC sent Samet to Miami to establish a branch of the organization after multiple bombings of Miami synagogues, Jewish schools, a Catholic church, and an apartment complex undergoing transition from white to black occupancy. Samet pursued the human relations agenda through the racially charged 1950s, but only in 1963 was he able to bring together Miami’s key religious and educational leaders, who called for a community forum to improve community relations.

Following this suggestion, in June 1963 the Dade County Commission established the Community Relations Board (CRB) and appointed Samet as its executive director. Henry King Stanford, president of the University of Miami played a key role as head of the CRB board of Directors. Stanford had only recently arrived in Miami from Birmingham, Alabama, where he headed Birmingham Southern College and developed some expertise on race relations. Mr. Samet remained at the CRB until the end of 1964, when he left Miami to join former Florida Governor LeRoy Collins in President Lyndon Johnson’s newly created Community Relations Service in the U.S. Department of Justice. Ben Sissel, who had been Samet’s assistant, took over as director of the CRB, followed in January 1968 by Robert Simms, a black civil rights activist from Arkansas.

The CRB still functions today, but it faced some of its toughest challenges in the 1960s. These included: promoting school desegregation, eliminating discriminatory practices in employment and public accommodations, improving police-community relations, expanding housing opportunities for blacks, mediating on-going conflicts among blacks and Cubans, cooling off black militant organizations, and addressing the causes of a Liberty City racial “disorder” in August 1968. Visiting Miami in 1972, Seymour Samet noted the “polarization” of the city’s racial and ethnic groups, but he maintained that the Community Relations Board was “Miami’s most significant weapon” in achieving the goals of the human relations agenda—the belief that a true democracy embraced diversity and tolerance and supported equal rights and justice.