

BUSINESS PROFILE

Airport chief Bob Ball never gave up on his dream

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
ewilliams@florida-weekly.com

Bob Ball, executive director of the Lee County Port Authority and chief of the Southwest Florida International Airport and Page Field, caught up with his childhood dream in Florida, eventually. Growing up in the 1960s and 70s, Ball said he was inspired both by air shows in his hometown of Buffalo, N.Y. and family trips to Sanibel Island. Although vision problems disqualified him from becoming a professional pilot (his original dream), the rugged, adaptable Ball learned to love the administration side of airports as well.

"What I find so exiting about the job is I have to be an engineer, a lawyer, a head of potential emergency disasters," he said. "Every single day, we have people with heart attacks, trips and falls, people coming in sick on airplanes. Everything you'd expect to occur in a city of 12 million."

Much of the population at the SWFIA "city" are on the way to other final destinations, but not Ball. Having his wife, his planes and Florida all in one place is, for him, perfection.

But it was a long road before he made it back to that dream where aviation, family and warm weather intersect (Ball also has two grown sons). After graduating with a bachelor's degree in air commerce from The Florida Institute of Technology in 1975, he spent the next summer collecting unemployment in his hometown, and through a government assisted program, landed a position at the local hospital as a clerk. It led to more.

"One day I was summoned by the medical director of the hospital, a super guy," Ball said. "He was a 70 year old pediatrician, there

for 40 years. He was a tremendous medical doctor, but he didn't know a whole lot about accounts receivable, so they made me assistant to the medical director."

He spent four years in the huge, old county hospital, which had a six floor psychiatric ward and served many patients from nearby Attica prison.

"I learned an awful lot there," he said. "That's where I pretty much got my values. It was life, death and everything in between. People that work in hospitals are very unique. Nurses make the place run; doctors are brilliant. In order to survive and be productive, you really get a dark sense of humor, and you have to have it to survive, because while it's a very tragic place sometimes, you have to make light of it, or you can't get the job done."

Ball loved the job, he said, but airplanes still flew somewhere in the back of his mind. He met his wife, Susan, while working at the hospital and she encouraged him to send over 2,000 copies of his resume to airports around the world; Ball's mother was paid to stamp and stuff the envelopes.

"I think I received 1,199 rejection letters," he said. "Some of them in languages I couldn't understand."

However, the result was a job interview in South Bend, Ind., for which Ball attempted to drive his 1972 Chevy station wagon from Buffalo to South Bend. It broke down within three miles of Cleveland, Ohio. Ball hitchhiked the remaining distance, then bought a bus ticket to South Bend, where he completed the interview. Upon returning to his car, which had been abandoned roadside, he had it towed to a gas station. Soon after getting on the road again with a rebuilt radiator and a new battery, his transmission melted down; Susan wired cash for the repair and a few



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTOS EVAN WILLIAMS

Bob Ball has been executive director of the Lee County Port Authority and head of the Southwest Florida International Airport and Page Field since 1996.

days later he arrived back in Buffalo, where he learned the job was his.

Ball won't give up, and never stops working. "Sometimes it drives my wife crazy," he said.

Ball's hallmark, it seems, is to create major expansions at the airports he has run. In 1985, when Ball was 29 years old, making him the youngest airport director in the country, he built a new terminal in Jacksonville. He did the same thing in Charlotte, N.C. and it's no different at SWFIA.

He joined the Lee County Port Authority in 1993 and was promoted to the top position in 1996. Since then, passenger traffic has increased at SWFIA from 4.3 million to nearly 8 million per year; Ball also saw through the \$428 million dollar SWFIA expansion in

2005, which created new terminals that feel light and airy, have plenty of parking and a new entry point for drivers. He also spent \$14 million buying 7,000 acres east of the airport, which it now maintains as a natural preserve, as compensation for land destroyed or animals displaced as the airport expands.

Now he's planning more: a ramp with direct access to I-75, a bio-medical technical park, and a \$500 million parallel runway (now in the process of being built).

"The number one priority is out there," he said, pointing towards an enormous jet parked outside his office window. "It's that runway, and it's the safety of eight million people that take off (here every year)...it all happens out there on a 12,000 foot strip of concrete." ■

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION



Move in today!

We have brand new office space ranging from 1500 up to 11000 SQ FT. The spaces are totally built out and ready for immediate occupancy. The offices are located on the intersection of Summerlin and Boyscout - the best location in Fort Myers!

For more information, please contact Tom Daugherty at (239) 277-7707.

Daugherty & Carr

Commercial Real Estate Brokerage
Buy • Sell • Lease



Tom Daugherty

Ph: 239-277-7707 • Fax: 239-277-7187
Cell: 239-851-5000

Web: www.DandCRealty.com
Email: Tom@DandCRealty.com

5252 Summerlin Commons Blvd., Suite 101
Fort Myers, FL 33907