

MR. PALM BEACH

BY AVA ROOSEVELT



Rodney Dillard (center) and friends at Coconuts, New Year's Eve, 2014

Rodney Dillard isn't a movie star or a billionaire. He doesn't live in a mansion or drive a Rolls-Royce. Yet I am proud to call him my wealthiest friend. His eyes spell trust and fairness, his heart is filled with goodwill. I haven't known anyone in Palm Beach who is more universally loved. At a recent luncheon at the Bath and Tennis Club, Rodney's presence provoked a queue of friends, eager to greet him. Being the Chairman of the Coconuts, the New Year's Eve fête for three consecutive years, didn't hurt his celebrity status either.

Ava: Rodney, please tell us one of your fondest memories of the early Coconuts.

Rodney: When I first went to the Coconuts, it was a small party, very elegant at Ta-boo.

Reminiscent of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* era, this private party initiated by a small group of friends 78 years ago, grew into a Palm Beach tradition with 25 Coconuts. It has become the most coveted invitation of the season with the tightest and uber-prestigious guest list on the island. To be there,

you have to be like-minded, well-liked, well-mannered and a friend. Having begun at Ta-boo, the party moved to The Colony, The Breakers Beach Club, then to The Gulf Club and more recently to the Henry Morrison Flagler Museum Pavilion. Guests are greeted by a receiving line of 25 dashing Coconuts sporting white dinner jackets, red carnation boutonnieres, black ties and Stubbs & Wooten velvet slippers in a setting oozing with elegance resembling the 'old world.' The gentlemen hosts, some with household names such as Wilbur Ross, David Koch, Christopher Meigher, Michael McCarty and Alexander Fanjul, handpick friends to celebrate New Year's Eve. At midnight, thanks to David Koch's generosity, skies explode with a discharge of fireworks worthy of Monte Carlo. To me, being there is more about celebrating long-lasting friendships and remembering those who are gone, like long-time Chairman the late Bob Liedy and many who became woven into a tapestry of life in Palm Beach. Luckily, like a good stock or a membership in a prestigious private club, invitations to become a Coconut are passed to the young generation of well-born Palm Beachers like Kane Baker, Jack Grace, Piper Quinn and Jon Ylvisaker. The grand life promises to go on!

My friendship with Rodney dates back to our real estate years in New York and in Palm Beach where Rodney is still active. The decades have passed swiftly, yet I have never heard him say a derogatory word about anyone, not even once. Trust me, a tall order where too often character assassination is a pastime during countless cocktail receptions and balls.

Ava: How do you manage to always stay positive and find it in your heart to be so kind while avoiding the pitfalls of party chatter?

Rodney: It keeps me alive.

Ava: What advice on how to handle gossip would you give a young person debuting on a social scene?

Rodney: Stay positive, never complain or criticize.

Ava: Palm Beach has been your home for years. What prompted you to move here?

Rodney: When I went to Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, I had several friends who lived in Palm Beach and Hobe Sound. I was often invited to visit and fell in love with the architectural splendor of Palm Beach. I moved here in 1962 and never ceased to admire the beauty of my surroundings, the generosity of my friends and the quality of life here.

Ava: What are your favorite spots?

Rodney: The Bath and Tennis Club and my home at El Dorado Way. Michael McCarty's and Buccan are my preferred restaurants.

Ava: As one of the wealthiest towns per capita in the nation, Palm Beach draws both envy and awe. Its deep-pocketed residents are well-known for their charitable giving. Which charity do you personally support?

Rodney: Community Foundation of Palm Beach, Animal Rescue, Boys and Girls Club of Palm Beach and The Everglades Foundation.

Ava: If you could, is there anything you would change about Palm Beach and why?

Rodney: Not a thing! 🍷



Chris Twardy and Ava Roosevelt at Coconuts 2014