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THE CLOSING WITH DON PEEBLES

Since launching Peebles Corp. nearly three decades ago, Don Peebles has developed six million square feet of real estate in Florida, California, Washington, D.C., and, for the past three years, New York. The author of "The Peebles Principles: Tales and Tactics from an Entrepreneur's Life," Peebles was a major developer in Miami before he scooped up a Tribeca development site in 2013. Today, he is partnering with the Elad Group on the nearly \$500 million conversion of 108 Leonard Street. In all, Peebles has approximately \$2 billion of active development projects nationwide, and a pipeline of around \$1.7 billion of future projects in the works.

NAME: ROY DONAHUE PEEBLES JR.

BORN: MARCH 2, 1960

HOMETOWN: WASHINGTON, D.C.

MARITAL STATUS: MARRIED 22 YEARS

CHILDREN: SON AND DAUGHTER



How did you end up being called Don?

My grandfather's name was Royal Peebles. My grandmother didn't want to name her son Royal, so she named him Roy Donahue Peebles. I was named after my father. My son Donahue, [20], who's a junior at Columbia University and works here part time, is Roy Donahue Peebles III. My daughter, Chloe, is 12. Same wife, by the way, unlike most real estate developers.

How many homes do you have?

I have a home in Washington, D.C., but I spend very little time there, not enough to justify having a house there. We have a home in Bridgehampton, a small beach house in Sag Harbor, a [penthouse] apartment at the Setai [in the Financial District] and then our home in Coral Gables in Florida.

I hear you're grooming your son to run the business?

I thought it was important for him to get some exposure early. The last two summers, he's worked for me full-time. Part of that is he wanted to earn money to live off campus, and I was [only] prepared to pay for living in a dorm. Anything after that, I thought it was important for him to earn.

You were pre-med at Rutgers University before dropping out. What would you think if your children did the same?

They have a luxury I didn't have. It was an economic decision for me. Education for Chloe and Donahue gives them the freedom to choose. I would be disappointed if they didn't finish.

Why did you drop out?

Going to college was a step down for me, to a degree. My last two years of high school, I was working on Capitol Hill. My senior year, I was making the equivalent of \$45,000 to \$50,000 a year. I was standing in the House chamber when the president would give the State of the Union address. At Rutgers, I took a political science class, and the professor would have these lectures on how laws are made in Washington ... and he was so wrong. So I said, 'OK, I'll go back to Washington, D.C., and I will figure it out.'

And that's when you got into real estate?

I became a sales agent. But interest rates were 20-plus percent then, so I had to figure out how to earn a living. I started appraising properties. At 24, I was named chair of the Property Tax Appeals Board in Washington.

You were appointed by Mayor Marion Barry, right?

It was Marion Barry who appointed me. I met him when I was 14 years old at a 'meet the candidate' event I attended with my mother. He was then a candidate for the first elected City Council. That summer, I volunteered for his campaign. He was a political mentor to me. I went to his funeral, which I spoke at.

You fundraised for former President Clinton and President Obama. Are you still a big fundraiser?

Yes. You can't complain ... if you're not going to engage.

In 2010, you almost ran for mayor of Washington, D.C.

Do you think you'll ever run, there or somewhere else? Absolutely. I would look [to run for mayor in] New York. There's something to be said for having somebody who understands business, politics and also has a social agenda that is looking to change the status quo.

Did your parents have a plan like that for you?

My paternal grandfather was a farmer and janitor in rural Virginia. My maternal grandfather was a hotel doorman at the Wardman Park Marriott for 41 years. They had high expectations of me. When I quit college, other than my mother, they pretty much lost confidence in me. One of the disappointments for me was that my grandfather wasn't alive to see that I had gone the right way.

Forbes has called you one of the wealthiest African-Americans in the country, and I hear your net worth is approaching \$1 billion. Is that a lot of responsibility?

As an African-American businessperson, there's a greater level of expectation of me. I can't just be a businessperson

and I don't want to just be a businessperson. The system is operating unfairly and that is not an Al Sharpton problem. That's a business opportunity problem. Business people have to be part of the solution.

Did you face those challenges when you were younger?

Yes and no. When I got to be appointed chairman of the Property Tax Appeals Board at 24, I was appointed by a mayor who was part of the Civil Rights movement. He was elected for the purpose of opening and expanding rights for minorities. There was a door that the residents of the city wanted opened. They wanted people like me to walk through. If I had been born in New York, I'd be struggling.

That's a pretty damning indictment for this city.

I can go through a typical day in New York and not interact in business with a minority or a woman. In Washington, I have multiple meetings involving banking with other developers, and there's diversity across the board. New York in that one measure is a generation behind D.C.

Do you have vices?

I tend to buy a lot of homes. It can be expensive and my wife begs me, 'Don't buy any more houses.'

I'm told you make your employees read your book. Can you give me the crib notes version?

Each setback is an opportunity in disguise.

What's something most people don't know about you?

I used to have a big Afro when I was 13 and 14. As big as de Blasio's son [Dante].

In 25 years, what do you want people to say about you?

I want my family to say I was a good father and a good husband. When they're lowering me into the ground, I don't want my kids and grandkids to say, 'There goes the guy who made all the money.'

By E.B. Solomont