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## ISLAND PLAYER

Anna Maria restaurateur and political native son Ed Chiles jumps into residential development.

Molly Sinclair McCartney

Like the Sandbar, his flagship restaurant on the north end of Anna Maria Island, Ed Chiles is an institution.

First there's his pedigree. As the son of the late Gov. "Walkin' Lawton" Chiles Jr., Ed Chiles has what one admirer calls a "magical name." That, combined with his entrepreneurial savvy and deep pockets, have helped make him an economic force on this tiny island of under 1,900 people and the man to call if you plan to run for public office in Manatee County and beyond. (Chiles is a Democrat but has supported Republican candidates as well; right now he is the treasurer of Democrat Christine Jennings' campaign for Congress.)

An imposing figure who stands six feet two inches tall, Chiles stays in shape with regular workouts and has a full head of dark hair. He is island casual. No ties, no socks. His office occupies the corner of a battered yellow beach house overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. On the worn plank floor by his desk sits a cardboard box with hand lettering that reads, "Ed's mail." A table holds photographs of his two daughters, both students at his alma mater, the University of Florida.

At 53, he is about to embark on his riskiest ventures to date. In addition to owning and running three restaurants, he's in the beginning phases of two big development projects.

The first is a \$7 million housing project called Willow Pond Development, which aims to provide 29 new energy-efficient, affordable (\$129,000 to \$189,000) townhouses near downtown Bradenton—ideal for workers like teachers and fire fighters and for retirees. Chiles admits he's flying blind. "We have been told this kind of housing is needed, but I don't have the expertise here," he says. "I

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have not done housing, much less workforce housing. I am a restaurant entrepreneur. But it makes sense to me, and I am putting money in it.”

Ed's older brother, Lawton “Bud” Chiles III, a Tallahassee developer and chief executive officer of GreenSteel Homes, is a key player in this project. GreenSteel is a new company that uses light-gauge steel to build small homes “for the working man,” says Ed Chiles. The homes are both eco-friendly and built to withstand winds of 150 mph. If Willow Pond succeeds, Chiles says he will do more affordable housing projects in Manatee and the region.

Chiles' other big venture is a \$20 million project to restore Anna Maria's Pine Avenue and to help preserve the island's unique Old Florida character. Pine Avenue, which is about five blocks long, runs from the City Pier on Tampa Bay to the Gulf of Mexico beaches. After the pier was built in 1911, visitors arriving by steamer would stroll down Pine Avenue to a bathhouse where the Sandbar Restaurant stands today. He plans to construct cottage-style, two-story buildings with boutiques on the first floor and residences on the second floor along the avenue.

The project “doesn't have to make a lot of money, although I don't want to lose any money either,” Chiles says. “But I am committed to doing it one way or the other.”

Chiles has two partners in the Pine Avenue and Willow Pond projects. One of them is Holmes Beach retired businessman and investor Ted LaRoche. The other is Mike Coleman, a Pine Avenue resident who helped engineer the acquisition of 20 properties for the Pine Avenue project and who is responsible for supervising the restoration.

“It just excites the heck out of me,” Chiles says. “You are looking at the old front door to the City of Anna Maria with this plan. I don't know where you would have the opportunity to do something like this in a place as unique as Anna Maria, which has low density, village character, incredible beaches and this linear straight shot along Pine Avenue from Tampa Bay to the Gulf of Mexico, with the City Pier on one side and these great anchors on the other side: the Sandbar, the Studio, Island Players, City Hall, Ginny's and Jane E's, the White Egret. All the top things that people want to do when they visit—shop, go to the beach, eat out.”

His mother, Rhea Chiles, who lives on Anna Maria Island near Ed, says the Pine Avenue project “spins” into her son's sense of history. “He grew up on this island and he has a feeling for its history,” she says. “He was concerned that it would just disappear and lose the picturesque quality. He loves the architecture, too. And nothing pleases him more than to sit down and show you the latest plan.”

Chiles has a knack for seeing potential. He recognized the gold in waterfront dining years ago and invested in three unique restaurants: the historic Sandbar and the BeachHouse, both on Anna Maria Island, and MarVista on north Longboat Key. His recent addition of a wedding pavilion to the Sandbar has helped make the restaurant and the island a major wedding destination.

Today his Chiles Group restaurants employ 300 people full- and part-time, ring up annual sales of about \$17 million and win high praise from other business leaders.

“He is one of the most influential businessmen on the island, and has the respect of all the people I know in Manatee County,” says Bob Bartz, president of the Manatee County Chamber of Commerce.

That influence reflects more than Chiles' success in business and political mentoring. It's also a measure of his deep involvement in a wide range of civic and community affairs. Name a good cause or a nonprofit group in Manatee County, and Ed Chiles has probably chaired it, contributed to it or offered some other kind of support. He is past chairman

of the \$16 million, four-county Goodwill Industries and former chair of the Manatee Community Foundation.

“He is a big thinker and very passionate about the causes he supports,” says Barbara Kirkpatrick, a Mote Marine senior scientist who has worked with Chiles for years on the grassroots initiative he helped organize in the 1990s to combat red tide. The initiative was named START—Solutions to Avoid Red Tide—and Chiles served as its chairman for 10 years.

“He knows everybody in Bradenton and beyond, so if we need him to make a contact, he will do it,” Kirkpatrick says.

Not everyone loves Chiles, however. Residents who live near the Sandbar have complained to the city about loud music, traffic congestion and even the location of the Sandbar’s dumpster. And some feel he has too much political power, whether he’s supporting a high bridge to the island or a candidate for office.

But hardly anyone doubts his impact on the island, its culture and economy.

“Ed doesn’t sit back and wait for things to happen,” says longtime friend Jim Boyd, chief executive officer of Boyd Insurance. “He comes from a political family that has deep roots and service in the country, not just the state. Ed is plugged in politically and socially with the agendas he wants to promote.”

Born May 15, 1955, Edward Grafton Chiles is the third of four children. His father, Lawton Chiles Jr., was a Lakeland lawyer and one of the initial investors in the Red Lobster restaurant chain. “He and one of his law partners borrowed \$15,000 to build the first Red Lobster, which was in Lakeland,” Chiles says. “They leased that building to Red Lobster under pretty favorable terms. Then they built three more and leased them to Red Lobster.” Chiles says the money from the Red Lobster leasing helped enable his father to go into politics.

In 1970, Lawton Chiles Jr. decided to run for the U.S. Senate. He had served in the Florida House and Senate but was not well known outside the Lakeland area. To publicize his campaign, he announced he would walk from Pensacola to Key West. He covered 1,003 miles in 91 days, winning the election and earning the nickname, “Walkin’ Lawton.”

Ed was 15 years old, and his brother Bud was 17. Did they join their father for any part of that walk? “We did,” Ed says. “If you screwed up at home, you went out on the road with Dad.” How many miles did he walk? “Not as many as my brother.”

With his father serving in the U.S. Senate, Ed was able to attend the Watergate hearings. He worked one summer for the National Park Service, and spent his freshman college year in Washington at American University.

Then he got a chance to work with wild animals in a New Jersey adventure safari park. “My dad knew the guy who was opening the park,” Ed says. He started as a gate guard in the monkey jungle and then was named warden in charge of 140 baboons. “It was an incredibly exhilarating experience,” he says.

To survive in the monkey jungle, he learned that “you had to understand the dynamics and the hierarchy. You had to know the monkeys—who was dangerous, who were the dominant males. You had to respect the monkeys and you had to have their respect to get along.”

Much as Chiles liked his job, it wasn’t what he wanted as a career. He went back to college and graduated in 1978 from the University of Florida with a degree in political science but no clear idea of how he might earn his living.

Then his father approached him with a suggestion: How about the two of them go into the restaurant business? Ed agreed. But there was a problem—he had no food service experience. One of his father's friends suggested that he get a job at a restaurant where he could learn the basics and also demonstrate that he was up to the job of running a restaurant. With the friend's help, Ed landed a spot at Joe's Stone Crab, a famous Miami Beach dining spot.

"I started as a dishwasher," Chiles says. "Then I worked my way over to the area behind where they crack the stone crabs. I did the clams and oysters and stuffed tomatoes. It was a great place to do an apprenticeship." To master the financial side of food service, he signed up for accounting courses at Miami's Florida International University. "I got to where I could do operating statements in my sleep," he said.

He also found his calling.

In July 1979, Ed Chiles teamed up with his father and two other men to buy an old rundown waterfront restaurant on the north end of Anna Maria Island. The name of the place was the Sandbar. "It was the proverbial sow's ear, but you could see the potential because it was on this fabulous piece of beach," he says. The four partners made the purchase with the understanding that Ed would be responsible for day-to-day management and improvements. One of the first decisions was to build a deck on the asphalt where cars had been parking.

"The asphalt parking lot was the best part of the real estate," Chiles says, so parking was moved to another area to make room for the new waterfront dining deck. That turned out to be a stroke of genius.

Chiles bought out his partners long ago. Under his direction, the Sandbar has been transformed into an island landmark. Customers wait for hours to get deck seats where they can watch the sunset while dining and drinking. There is also inside seating with water views. And thanks to the new wedding pavilion, the restaurant has become a matrimonial mecca. *The Knot*, a national bridal magazine, included the Sandbar in its 2008 "Best of Weddings" issue.

In recognition of his success, the Manatee Chamber of Commerce named him and the restaurant the Manatee County Small Business of 2008.

"I want to run places that people are happy to work in and that provide a good atmosphere for people to come and enjoy," Chiles says. "I have been very fortunate to have the family that I was born into and to have the opportunities I have had. I feel this community has given me a lot and I want to give something back."

That philosophy is a way to honor his father's principles and legacy, Chiles says. "We were very close, and I admired him more than any other person I have ever known. He was such a different breed of cat in how he conducted himself politically and in the principles he lived by. He spoke for people who didn't have a voice."

## **On Politics**

Ed Chiles did run for public office once. "I was upset about what was going on in Tallahassee. I was feeling a lot of guilt for complaining about the problem and not being willing to put myself forward and be part of the solution," he says.

He entered the 1990 race for the Florida State Senate from District 21, which includes parts of Manatee, running

as a Democrat. His Republican opponent was Bradenton businessman John McKay. It was a close race, but McKay won.

That was the same year Lawton Chiles won his campaign for governor. One of Ed Chiles' prized pictures shows Ed marching down the street with his father surrounded by supporters carrying Chiles' campaign signs.

Ed says he was glad to have had the experience even though he lost his election. "Afterward, I felt like I had been let out of school," he says.

His brother Bud is another story. Bud Chiles campaigned for several months in 2005 as a candidate for governor. Bud, who looks like his father, dropped out of the race after learning of a constitutional provision requiring that a governor be a Florida resident for seven years. Bud was ineligible at the time because he had moved back to Florida in 2003 after living for a decade in New York and New Jersey. Bud would be an eligible candidate for governor in 2010.

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