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LEADERSHIP

Three lifelong friends at the helm of three of Miami's oldest and most respected organizations

Bernie Navarro - Latin Builders Association

Vivian de las Cuevas-Diaz - Cuban American Bar Association

Henry Jimenez - Kiwanis of Little Havana



Miami's New Breed of Leaders

Young business leaders Bernie Navarro, Vivian de las Cuevas-Diaz and Henry Jimenez grew up together. Now, the first-generation Cuban-Americans are focused on growing Miami together.

By Jennifer LeClaire

The new generation of business leaders is rising in South Florida. It's a generation that respects the frontrunners of the past, understands the challenges of the present, and is determined to help Miami take its place among the great global cities of the future.

Three of those young leaders are first-generation Cuban-Americans who met in high school more than 20 years ago. These aggressive, civic-minded leaders bring new synergies to the top three Hispanic organizations in South Florida: the Latin Builders Association (LBA), Kiwanis Club of Little Havana and the Cuban American Bar Association (CABA).

Indeed, Bernie Navarro, 38, founder and president of Benworth Capital Partners, a Coral Gables-based private equity firm focused on asset-based real estate finance and ancillary services and one of South Florida's largest private mortgage lenders, Henry Jimenez, 36, senior vice president of Benworth Capital Partners, and Vivian de las Cuevas-Diaz, 36, a partner at the law firm Broad and Cassel and head of the firm's Real Estate Practice Group in Miami, represent a new breed of business leaders who are helping build on Miami's reputation as the Gateway to Latin America and beyond.



“This synergy is great for the community. We are on the front lines of what’s going on and we see that Miami is coming of age every day,” says Navarro, president of the Latin Builders Association (LBA), the largest Hispanic construction association in the United States. “We have a longer-term perspective about Miami’s future than we did ten years ago. We recognize it’s best not to make any quick, knee-jerk decisions because a short-term gain could be a long-term detriment to our community.”

Navarro is especially active in the community, serving in various organizations. He led a grassroots movement called “Citizens for Property Tax Reform” in 2007 and previously served as chairman of the West Dade Community Council, the most dynamic zoning board in Miami-Dade County. Now, he’s got a close eye on the flood of casino proposals and how gaming expansion could impact the Magic City’s future.

For his part, Jimenez, who is currently president of the Kiwanis Club of Little Havana and a board member of the Mercy Foundation, sees challenges on the immigration front. Being in tune with his heritage and traditions, Jimenez understands the importance of integrating immigrants and offering them a solid education.

“All three of our organizations were started by Cuban exiles ten years after they came to this country. They did not even know the language when they got here,” Jimenez says. “It’s our job to continue that legacy and build upon it. It’s up to us to get the next generation of young professionals involved in the community.”

Navarro and Jimenez point to T.D. Allman’s 1987 book *Miami: City of the Future*, which portends that Miami represents what the United States will look like in the future. With this belief, the next generation of leaders must be mindful to consider the entire melting pot that is Miami with every community decision.

“The old guard has put a lot of trust into the young generation to take Miami to the next level,” says CABA president de las Cuevas-Diaz, who was recently appointed by Senators Bill Nelson and Marco Rubio to the Florida Judicial Nomination Commission. “The older generation worked together regardless of race, ethnicity, heritage or religion—the Jews and Cubans had a very dynamic relationship. It wasn’t about Hispanic or Anglo or Jewish. The older generation had unified goals for the community and we have to do the same because Miami is more of a melting pot today than it was 30 years ago.”

Miami's New Breed of Leaders



Henry Jimenez
Kiwanis



Bernie Navarro
LBA



Vivian de las Cuevas-Diaz
CABA

The trio of leaders feels the weight of the responsibility that rests on their young shoulders. With naysayers questioning the presence of leadership in Miami, the three long-time friends are working together to demonstrate that leadership not only exists—it is making an impact on the community.

At the Kiwanis Club of Little Havana, one of the organization's priorities is child literacy. "The need is so great and we don't have enough money to do everything we want to do, but we're attacking literacy problems. We're teaching parents English so they can help their kids with homework. Our goal is to help underprivileged children in this community better their lives," Jimenez says of his work with the Kiwanis. "Our foundation, which has provided college scholarships for more than 200 students to date, is currently funding the education of 46 students on four-year scholarships."

The Kiwanis Club of Little Havana is also part of a new pediatric cancer initiative, an element of South Florida's medical community that is absent. The Kiwanis is working with Baptist Health to raise funds for a Children's Cancer Caring Center.

CABA continues to focus on promoting legal education. The organization currently has at least one scholarship at every law school in Florida and is working to fund CABA's own scholarship of \$100,000 that will fund an education anywhere in the U.S. Already, the group's support has empowered more than 1,000 students to attend law school. CABA also has a separate 501(C)(3) called CABA pro bono, which operates a legal clinic that provides free services for people in the community who would otherwise go unrepresented due to cost. Many of the cases that CABA pro bono takes on involve bilingual attorneys working with people who do not speak English.

Meanwhile, the Latin Builders Association Children & Families Foundation supports various South Florida philanthropic activities.

"All three of us came from humble beginnings," Navarro says. "We believe that since this great country of ours has always given to our families, we have a civic duty to give back to the community. Early on, the three of us took different paths in three different community organizations but now we've all met again as top business leaders and we're committed to working together to serve the community."

Beyond their community activism, Navarro, Jimenez and de las Cuevas-Diaz also contribute to Miami's future as a global city via their respective career contributions in real estate, finance and law, three sectors that drive South Florida's economy. Through Benworth, Navarro and Jimenez offer asset-based private lending through non-traditional and traditional financing. De las Cuevas-Diaz is a member of her firm's Banking and Institutional Lending, Real Estate and Special Assets Practice Groups.

The young generation of rising leaders is a generation whose time has come. As de las Cuevas-Diaz sees it, the appointments of three high school friends to top positions in top Hispanic organizations may not have been as significant before the economic downturn. Everyone was succeeding in the boom times.

"Now we see that South Florida needs us. Our economy needs us. People are relying on what we do with these organizations for their livelihood," de las Cuevas-Diaz says. "The fact that we have these relationships with each other and share some common views is unique. It's unfortunate that it took a downturn for us to realize just how unique it was and how much of a positive impact we can make by joining forces on the issues that affect our community. But here we are."