

Pedro Pan Refugee Who Became Miami Dade College's President To Get Medal Of Freedom

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MIAMI (CBSMiami) – Martin Luther King, Jr., astronaut Neal Armstrong, the first man on the moon, and Gloria and Emilio Estefan, entertainers and [human rights](#) activists, are among those who have received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Next week, Miami Dade College [President](#) Eduardo Padron will join those who have received the nation's highest civilian honor.

"Only in America, this could happen to a guy like me," said the Cuba-born Padron in an [interview](#) Friday with CBS4's Gary Nelson.

Padron was asked how he [manages](#) to get his head around such tremendous recognition.

"I don't," he replied with a chuckle. "It's very difficult. I [feel](#) so humble."

Padron transformed a two year school into a full-blown college with more undergraduate students than any other university or college in the nation – 165,000 students to be exact.

He credits his "passion" for his work for his successes but, to others, he gives the bulk of the glory.

"To the people who have been next to me all the way along," he said. "The way" has been a run of more than 20 years.

Some to be honored with Padron include Kareem Abdul-Jabar, champion of basketball and social justice, Ellen Degeneres, comedienne and gay rights advocate, Tom Hanks, actor and environmentalist, and Robert Redford, actor and promoter of motion picture arts.

Padron is a rock star in his own right.

He has presided over millions of students getting degrees at a school that now leads every college and university in the country in Hispanic and African American graduates.

He has transformed Miami Dade College into an institution that accepts all comers, who “have the desire and determination to succeed.”

Padron has held key education advisory positions to six presidents of the United States, and has received countless awards, honorary degrees and recognition – not just across America, but around the world.

Padron could not have achieved what he has at MDC, and continue to offer low-cost, high-quality education, without federal help. President-Elect Donald Trump, however, has vowed to abolish the Department of Education.

To what extent will Padron oppose a President Trump?

“I’m not sure that the rhetoric of the campaign will become part of the strategy of the new president,” Padron said. “I believe that education is the most important factor in the future of this country. When the dust settles, common sense will prevail.”

Padron believes he and others can persuade Trump to change his mind. The future of the **economy** and employment, Padron said, depends on a well-educated generation with solid skills.

Padron can be persuasive.

Julio Iglesias, Robert Redford and David Beckham are among just a few of the **celebrities** who have visited MDC.

But never mind the Entertainment Tonight crowd, Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell have spoken at the campus, as have First Lady Michelle Obama, **President** Obama, President George W. Bush, President George Herbert Walker Bush, President Clinton and President Carter.

MDC this year hosted a nationally-televised Democratic party presidential debate.

Padron, again, was humble.

“I think presidents of the United States come to Miami Dade College, not to see Eduardo Padron,” he said. “They come here to see this great experiment.”

The “great experiment” was achieved by a kid who came to America, alone, at the age of 15, part of the Pedro Pan program that brought children from Fidel Castro’s Cuba.

He arrived with nothing, said MDC spokesman Juan Mendieta, and instantly was “forced to become a man,” who cared for his younger brother. His parents would join them several years later.

Padron went to the University of Florida where he graduated in economics. When asked about his academic history, Padron didn’t hesitate.

“I’m a Gator,” Padron said, adding that, yes, he does bleed Gator orange and blue.

“I’m also a Shark,” he quickly added. “Shark is the mascot of Miami Dade College.” Padron’s accomplishments are too broad to be listed.

Among them: He co-founded the hugely successful Miami Book Fair which continues through this weekend, and where else? MDC’s downtown Wolfson campus.

Padron will receive the Medal of Freedom from President Obama in a White House ceremony Tuesday.