



Eduardo Padrón

UPFRONT

LOST IN THE SOARING SHEEN OF HIGH RISES IN downtown Miami, the city's Freedom Tower appears out of time and place. In truth, it is a vision of the Spanish Renaissance reminiscent of old Seville.

Despite being overwhelmed by the looming glass and concrete, the Tower holds its own, a dignified beacon for those who journeyed here to start new lives. What we care about was on all our minds as we traveled the hallways of the Freedom Tower.

At the age of 15 my parents launched me across a 90-mile strait, a mythical divide between worlds. The Freedom Tower was my welcome wagon, my Statue of Liberty. Originally home to the now defunct *Miami News*, it was the first terra firma for thousands of Cubans following the revolution in 1959. I, like so many,

ber that there is life is beyond confiscation.

My mother always cared about education, and she made sure that I cared. So it was that I crossed the real threshold of my life in America when I passed through the open door of the local community college. What I cared about in those days was finding a home, defeating this feeling of being alien. Miami Dade College became my home away from home, as it did for thousands of homesick Cubans. The college's message to us was that we were free to learn what we wanted to learn, to discover what we cared about.

The arc of my life never ceases to amaze me. From those halting early attempts at English to the first time

I raised my hand in class—to the delight in my own abilities—these were the inestimable fruits of a sympathetic learning environment. Today, not a professional's calm exists in this international

metropolis that isn't led by those first pioneers or, perhaps, their children. The doctors and nurses, fire and police chiefs, engineers and architects—you name it—all of them blossomed in the brightly lit shelter of Miami Dade College's classrooms.

But the statistics that flash across my desk confirm my worst fears; namely, that far too many of our children are missing the chance that changed my life. Across the country, fewer than 70 percent of high school students are gaining a diploma. In our cities the number of graduates barely reaches 50 percent, and far fewer are crossing the threshold of higher education. Hispanics are fairing poorly; high school graduation rates lag 30 percentage points behind white students, and fewer than 13 percent have earned a bachelor's degree, compared to almost 19 percent of blacks and 32 percent of whites. This is happening at a time when 90 percent of new jobs created in the country require post-secondary learning.

What I cared about came true. And what came true



spawned deeper and broader visions of what was possible for this man's life, in this generous country. But the wants of my time now turn to the needs of those who will come after me. Regardless of the remarkable changes in our society, the perennial hopes of generation after generation remain the same. Will our children and grandchildren have the same opportunities we have had? Will they have the privilege of a learning environment that encourages them to ask, "What is possible in my life? What do I care about?" **H**

Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the nation.

WILL OUR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN HAVE THE SAME GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES WE HAD?

was the picture of turmoil. My comfort zone was on the other side of the strait. Now, dependent on the kindness of strangers, what we cared about in those first American moments was a place to stand, to remem-