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Humanities commission focuses on arts in education

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From left- Donna E. Shalala, University of Miami President; Dr. Eduardo Padron, Miami Dade College President; Cuban music icon Gloria Estefan, and Leslie C. Berlowitz, with the American Academy of Arts and Science, during The Humanities and Civil Society Forum on Sept. 14. This event presentation will promote that Miami has a voice in the national arts conversation and landscape.

The first word Gloria Estefan said she ever learned in English was “stupid.”

It was more than four decades ago when Estefan — now known around the world for her music — began first grade in San Antonio, Texas, and she didn’t speak a word of English.

Stupid, she said was “what the kid next to me called me because I couldn’t communicate in his language.”

“Needless to say, six months later, I wrestled away the reading award from his hot little hands,” she said, because of her teacher’s dedication.

Estefan, who has been an advocate for music in schools, told the story of her

educational background — including the importance of music and humanities courses and teachers — as part of her testimony to the American Academy Commission on the Humanities & Social Science at Miami Dade College on Friday.

Estefan was one of 12 local educational, cultural, business and philanthropic leaders to testify in front of the national commission about the importance of humanities and social sciences in education.

Estefan stressed the need to fund art and music and classes that “make students think,” including history and civics.

“I don’t know where I would be without music,” she said after the meeting. “Music and humanities make us people, separate and apart from facts and figures.”

The commission, charged by Congress to come up with recommendations, includes Eduardo Padron, president of Miami Dade College; Donna Shalala, president of the University of Miami; Leslie C. Berlowitz, president of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences; Philip Bredesen, former governor of Tennessee, and David Skorton, president of Cornell University.

The commission has held a series of forums across the country to gather testimony and suggestions that will eventually be presented in a report to Congress in hopes of better funding and support for arts and cultural inclusion in education. The idea is for the commission to recommend specific steps that government, schools, universities and communities across the nation can take to promote humanities.

The commission was formed at a time when school districts across the nation are struggling to balance their budgets, and many arts and music programs have suffered.

Padron, who said the commission hopes to have a report by the beginning of the new year, said Miami is a great example of how arts and culture have become a huge part of the community from museums to performing arts to the Knight Foundation that helps fund arts and cultural programs. He called Friday's discussion "provocative and thoughtful."

"These are the people that make a difference in our community every day," he said.

In addition to Estefan, the panel included Raul Rodriguez, the founding partner of Rodriguez and Quiroga Architects; Faith Mesnekoff, attorney and board chair of History Miami; Arva Moore Parks, historian and director of Coral Gables Museum; Matt Haggman, Miami program director for the Knight Foundation; Ann Henderson, president and CEO of the Collins Center for Public Policy; Regina Bailey, assistant director of special projects for the Wolfsonian Museum; Mitchell Kaplan, founder of Books and Books; Michael Spring, the director of cultural affairs for Miami-Dade County; Alina Interian, executive director for the center for theater and literature at Miami Dade College; John Richard, president and CEO of the Adrienne Arsht Center; and Mihoko Suzuki, director of the Center for Humanities at UM.

Kaplan, who has owned Books and Books for 30 years, said he was concerned with "the denigrating of public education."

"It's really, really dangerous," he said.

And while, the speakers represented different facets of humanities and social sciences, all of the speakers urged the commission to advocate for more money for humanities and social sciences in public schools and universities.

"The best investment we can make is to expand education," said Estefan, who studied psychology and communications at Miami Dade College. "Not reduce it."