

Leon family donates \$5 million to Miami Dade College nursing school

By Michael Vasquez

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In the past 50 years, more than 19,000 nurses have earned their degrees from Miami Dade College, making MDC the largest local provider of nursing education.

Still, a severe nursing shortage persists in South Florida and around the nation. Thanks to a \$5 million donation to MDC's nursing school announced Tuesday, MDC administrators are confident they'll be part of the solution for the next half-century as well.

The source of the donation: Leon Medical Centers, a Miami-based chain of health clinics that caters to seniors. Company founder Benjamin Leon Jr. said he's employed plenty of MDC-educated nurses over the years, and he's come away impressed.

"We know firsthand that they produce top-notch nurses," Leon said, adding that the company has a philosophical commitment to "medical excellence."

Leon's firm also has a close relationship with MDC, with Leon's son serving on the college's board of trustees. MDC President Eduardo Padrón said the family's gift is a tremendous boost to the college, but also to the community, as the public will benefit from nurses being trained with the latest equipment and instructed by the best professors.

The nursing program, which currently includes more than 1,500 students, "is a big sacrifice for the college," Padrón said.

"It's a very expensive program," he said, pointing to the 10-to-1 student-faculty ratio and the constant need to update to the newest training equipment. With the Leon donation, MDC plans to slightly expand the number of nursing students it enrolls, but it will also use the money to add new equipment, create scholarships and "attract the best faculty to the program," Padrón said.

In recognition of the gift, the nursing school — located at MDC's Civic Center-area Medical Campus — will be renamed the Benjamin Leon School of Nursing at Miami Dade College. The donation coincides with the 50th anniversary of the school of nursing, which opened in 1962.

This is not the first sizable Leon family gift to a local college. The family in 2008 announced a \$10 million gift to Florida International University's medical school — money used to establish a center for geriatric research and education. The gift was one of the largest ever by a Cuban-American family to a U.S. university.

The Leon family fled Cuba in 1961, and their first South Florida clinic catered to recently transplanted Cubans who were having trouble accessing medical care, in part due to language barriers. Decades later, Leon Medical Centers was launched, and the family-owned company still prides itself on offering Spanish-speaking doctors and staff.

“We have been able to pursue our dreams in this community,” Leon said. The scholarships provided by the MDC donation, he added, will “help people to achieve their dreams that otherwise couldn’t.”