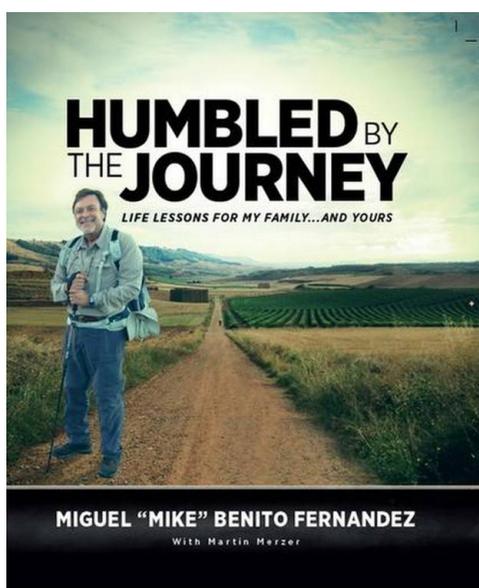


Miami Herald

Healthcare magnate's book offers advice for businesses, families

BY JANE WOOLDRIDGE - JWOOLDRIDGE@MIAMIHERALD.COM

01/12/2015 7:37 PM | Updated: 01/12/2015 7:37 PM



This is the cover of Mike Fernandez's book.

When a business partner texted Mike Fernandez suggesting he talk with Earvin "Magic" Johnson about a healthcare plan he was starting for people with HIV, the serial healthcare entrepreneur responded, "Who is Magic Johnson?"

He wasn't joking. Though Miami Heat President Pat Riley is a close friend and neighbor, Fernandez doesn't follow sports and wasn't familiar with the NBA legend who is infected with HIV. It took a while before he realized "Earvin" and "Magic" were the same person.

Five years later, Johnson and Riley are more than simply partners in Simply Healthcare Plan, which late last year agreed to be acquired by Anthem Inc. for a price estimated near \$1 billion. The two refer to each other as "family." That explains why Johnson will be on hand when

Fernandez launches his recently released book Wednesday evening at Miami Dade College.

"We both grew up poor," said Johnson in a phone interview. "We both understood you had to work hard to get where we are today. We're both about giving back.

"It's important to support him. Any time a friend is doing something for the first time, any time he's doing something outside his element, you need to be there for him."

The book — and the event promoting it — are well beyond the norm for Fernandez, 62, a billionaire who said he resisted writing it for years because it seemed egotistical. After lobbying by his wife, Constance, and several friends, he finally acquiesced, in part to ensure his children understand the family's history in Cuba. The proviso: proceeds go to charity.

Humbled by the Journey, Life Lessons for My Family ... and Yours, weaves together the two tracks of Fernandez's recent treks-turned-fundraisers along Spain's 508-mile Camino de Santiago and his life in the U.S. since the Castro regime seized his father's shops on Christmas Day in 1964. It's a book that's personal, honest and filled with advice gleaned through failure, keen observation, curiosity and an unfailingly respectful and practical approach to business and life.

Two of the three 508-mile walks along the 1,000-year-old pilgrimage route became charity fundraisers, one for United Way, another for patients at Miami Children's Hospital. A third was a gift to a friend. A fourth, this summer, will be a family trip with his wife, daughter and youngest son, Cristofer.

For many immigrants, the memoir reverberates with familiar themes of hard work, financial conservatism and gratitude. His father, one of 15 children, worked as a boy for an uncle, saving enough to open his own bakery and from there, sandwich shops and other small businesses. After the businesses were seized, the family went first to Mexico, then to New York. During his years at a Catholic high school, Fernandez worked cleaning animal cages to pay for his education.

The rest of his story twists up and around hills before coming — albeit temporarily — to a summit. After less than a year studying architecture, he quit college, joined the Army, went to jump school and was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division, where he was promoted twice and demoted twice, "essentially for asking, 'Why,' too many times." Within four years of leaving the Army, he had created and sold an insurance business for \$1.4 million. By 29, he had lost it all in another business venture and was \$600,000 in debt. He moved back in with his parents.

In his book, Fernandez details a list of shortcomings and failures, including crashing his first car the day he got it (and his second five years later), two failed marriages, millions of dollars in business losses, and health issues – including two heart attacks and cancer.

“You learn more from adversity than you do from success,” said Fernandez. “You have to accept failure as a necessary companion on the road to the end game. Embrace it because it means you’re pushing yourself. What you learn from it you won’t forget.”

His turnaround has been nothing less than phenomenal. Even before the recent Simply Healthcare sale, Fernandez’s net worth was valued in excess of \$1 billion. His Coral Gables company, MBF Healthcare Partners, owns Navarro Discount Pharmacies. He has seven homes and a fleet of exotic cars – including a Bentley, a Ferrari and an Aston Martin – that rarely go out of the garage.

“Sometimes I have to pinch myself,” he said. “How did this kid from a small town in the middle of nowhere on a dirty bay at the coast of Cuba get to be at a dinner table with Pat and Chris Riley and Earvin Johnson and [actor] Michael Douglas?”

But the most important measure of his life, he says, is what he gives to others, often anonymously. Causes have included United Way, Miami Children’s Hospital, educational expenses for high school and college students and a \$1 million gift to Perez Art Museum Miami. Proceeds from his book will go to the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation, a nonprofit focused on early childhood education, development initiative and school readiness.

Said Dave Lawrence, founder of the Early Childhood Initiative, said, “He has given away \$125 million. Most of that the world doesn’t know about. He’s a lot of fun to be around. But he’s also serious and very purposeful about what’s important in this world. It’s not about being close to big shots, his values are really fundamental.”

Fernandez claims “it’s not a very good book. I’m not a writer.”

Initial plans called for a printing of 500; Fernandez committed to buying 300 of those and figured he’d find a way to sell the other 200. He’s “shocked” that almost 20,000 copies have sold already.

Said Fernandez, “I know everyone around me is smarter than I am. I have been blessed in so many ways,” – something he says he tries never to forget. “I have more respect for someone working behind the counter [in a restaurant] taking care of my needs than the owner of the

business, because they're trying to get ahead. I've walked away from people because of the way they treated a waiter at lunch ... You've got to put yourself in someone else's shoes."

In a recent interview, Fernandez shared more tips for life and business.

How did your walks along the Camino de Santiago begin?

The first time, I did it with my daughter Michelle. It was her idea. I had always heard about that journey. There was no way I was going to let my 20-year-old daughter go alone, so I decided to go with her. It was a great trip. We talked about things we never talked about before.

She asked me questions. We would walk up a hill, then down a hill, then up more hills. She asked me why I keep building my own hills, why every time I sell a company I built another one. I didn't answer her and hoped she'd forget about it, but she asked me again the next day.

I think it was the fear of being poor again. And it was validation that I'm worth something. I didn't finish school. I wasn't the smartest kid. when I was living in New York and everyone else was going to proms, I was cleaning animal cages.

The day I sold Simply, a friend called and asked if I was at the company celebration. I was in the office, trying to figure out what to do next.

How did the walks become fundraisers?

When Michelle and I were talking, I thought how much more fun it would be if we were doing something to help other people. So I grabbed a stick and used it like a sword to challenge people, and she made a video. I didn't know what I was challenging them to do. Then it came to me. I challenged the people who worked at Simply Healthcare and Navarro and Nutriforce to contribute to United Way in support of the journey. We raised \$70,000.

After we got back, my granddaughter had to go into the hospital at Miami Children's Hospital. So I decided to walk for the hospital, but it had to be for people who needed money for surgery. I asked friends like Pat Riley, Magic Johnson, Jeb Bush, Andy Garcia and Martin Sheen to make little videos urging people to give money. We raised \$1.4 million.

Let's go back to business. It must have been hard to move back home when you were 29. How did you get through that?

Imagine me going to my father, who left everything he had to give us a new life, and tell him I'm going through a difficult time, Dad. Had I cut and run he would have been very disappointed. So would my mom.

But I had \$600,000 in debt and I had no idea how I was going to pay. I had to sell everything — my house, my car, my boat. At 29 it's like putting a stick of dynamite in your ego.

I went to see Cesar Alvarez at Greenberg Traurig. We barely knew each other. I told him I owed printers, IBM, accountants and his firm. My accountants said the best thing was to file for bankruptcy. Cesar said, "If you want to take the easy way out, that's what you should do. In seven years nobody will know. But if you want to be able to look everyone in the eye then pay them back.

So I sold everything I had. And I still do business with all the same people today.

What did you learn from failure?

Avoid debt. I don't borrow money. My house is paid for. Everything I have is paid for.

I learned to cut and turn. I have yet to start a business that was what I thought it was going to be when I sold it. There is never a linear path to the end game, react to market pressures, customer demands, your own limitations in terms of resources. You adjust and you grow but you don't quit

And I learned something more important. Those people that are really your friends will be with you whether you're up or down. A lot of people think that because they're high income they have a lot of friends but a lot of those people just want something from you. When I was living at home with my parents, only a few people came to see me. One of those was Cesar, who is still one of my best friends.

What do you think about the recent U.S. policy change toward Cuba?

It's long overdue. A Cuban friend of mine said, "How can you say that? Twenty cents of every dollar goes to the Castro brothers. I said, 38 cents of every dollar here goes to the U.S. government; what's the difference? If that is the cost of opening the lines of communication, then it's worth it. In end, it's about networking. I'd rather get to know the people and focus on helping them, not hurting the government.

Your book focuses on down-to-earth advice rather than business strategies and rules. On the list are some business basics, like “recognize your customer, don’t try to invent and identify mistakes quickly.” But others are more personal approaches, like “treat others at least as well than you would expect them to treat you,” and “never sit at the head of the table.” Why is that?

We over-complicate our lives. It’s really not a dog-eat-dog world. Success comes down to basics – showing common sweetness to people you don’t know, opening doors or saying hello. Opportunities open up. In business, 90 percent is relationships.

How does “not being the smartest guy” translate into being the guy at the head of the company?

It was always about having people go to the extra mile for you because you were willing to go the extra mile for them. You can make such a difference in somebody’s life by just asking how they are. Before I leave the office I always ask if there’s something I can do for somebody. People do things for you because they know you would do it for them.

I’m the richest guy by what I’ve been able to give and do, not by what I’ve made. What I’ve made can disappear tomorrow. But nobody can take away the girl in Argentina who can walk because of something I did for her, or the cowboy in Quincy, Fla., I’m helping to go to graduate school. I pay for school for 145 kids today. Those kids can change the world ... that makes me rich.

IF YOU GO

What: Conversation with healthcare entrepreneur Miguel “Mike” Benito Fernandez, Earvin “Magic” Johnson and Dave Lawrence about Fernandez’s new book, “Humbled by the Journey: Life Lessons for My Family and Yours,” with retired Miami Herald reporter Martin Merzer.

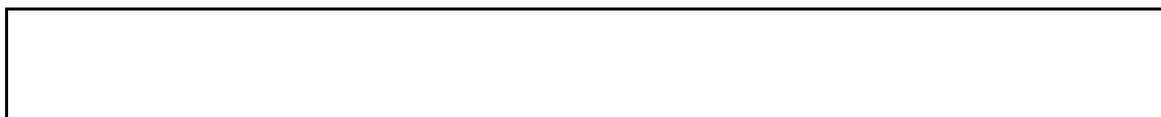
When: 6 p.m. Wednesday

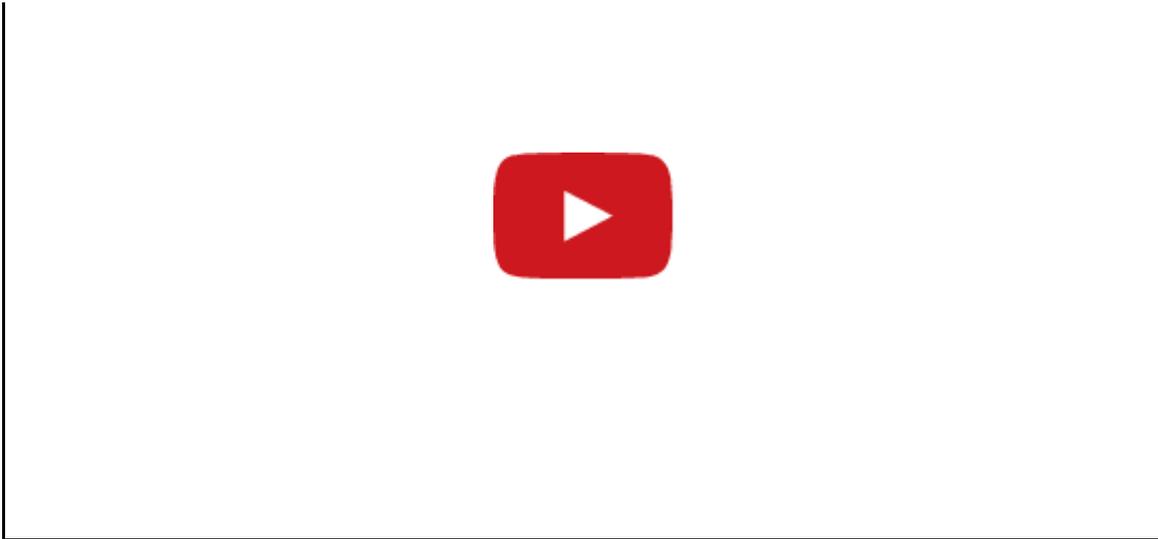
Where: Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus, Chapman Center, Building 3, 2nd floor, 300 NE Second Ave. The event is free and open to the public.

Sponsored Content  (http://c.jsrdn.com/i/1.gif?

r=1yvi&k=ZAI1cy1IYXN0LTFhCWgJaS0yMjhhkNzNjZgl1CWRiY2RkMGM3LWI1MDMtNDIkZi1iMGM

The Avenging Molar Chooses Greatness





He never wins just by the skin of his teeth – this fighter wins with a great dental plan. And you can, too. Choose greatness! <http://choosegreatdental.com> (<http://c.jsrdn.com/i/1.gif?r=85mi&k=ZAl1cy1IYXN0LTFhCWgJaS0yMjhkNzNjZgl1CWRiY2RkMGM3LWI1MDMtNDlkZi1iMGM>)

