

Spanish royalty in Miami to celebrate 500-year link to Florida

By Maria Perez

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Miami welcomed Spanish royalty two days in a row as Prince of Asturias Felipe de Borbón and Princess Letizia Ortiz basked in the recognition that began on Sunday at the opening of the Miami Book Fair International and culminated Monday with dinner, speeches and awards.

During a gathering Monday at the Freedom Tower, the royal visitors talked about ongoing ties that have linked Spain to Florida for more than 500 years.

They also gave a special award to Eduardo J. Padrón, president of Miami-Dade College. The award, from the Spain Florida Foundation, was for Padrón contribution to the preservation of the Hispanic legacy in Florida and the United States and for his championing education.

“Dr. Padrón has been a model of the virtues represented in this award: an outstanding contribution to the development of the Spanish heritage in Florida,” said Prince Felipe de Borbón in a speech given both in Spanish and English.

“Without the Spanish presence, we could not understand today’s Florida,” said the heir to the Spanish throne. “And we cannot imagine today’s United States without its Spanish legacy.”

Their Royal Highnesses, the Prince and Princess of Asturias, were in town as guests of the Spain-Florida Foundation to help commemorate the 500 years of Spanish legacy in Florida. The event marked the anniversary of Ponce de León’s first arrival in Florida.

In the first event on Monday’s agenda, Mayor Tomás Regalado gave the royals keys to the City of Miami, at a ceremony at the Mandarin Hotel of Miami, facing Biscayne Bay, where Juan Ponce de León arrived in South Florida more than 500 years ago

Regalado told the prince “you don’t need a key to open Miami’s heart,” following Sunday’s scene where crowds gathered downtown to welcome them.

Regalado spoke of collaboration between Miami and the Spanish region of Cantabria, as well as the cities of Santander and Alcobendas. More than 60 percent of Miami residents were born abroad and most are Spanish descendants, he said, adding that the Spanish community in Miami continues to grow.

The number of Spaniards living in Miami has doubled in the last five years, according to figures from the Spanish Consulate.

In 2013 there were 17,892 people registered at the consulate, though the real number is considered higher because many Spaniards do not register when they arrive in Miami.

Part of this growth comes from Cubans and Venezuelans living in Florida, who are descendants of Spaniards and have requested the Spanish citizenship under Spain's Law of Historic Memory.

Many others are Spanish professionals who seek to escape from unemployment and the country's economic crisis.

Prince Felipe said that Florida "is a land that invites optimism through its people's hospitality, its climate and its economic strength."

"Spain is committed to the future of Florida," said the prince, who added that he hopes this trip will serve to strengthen commercial, cultural and social relations between Spain and Florida.