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Sand and rhythm in our shoes

Every city has its personality. Chamber of commerce marketing gurus will give it a name and a colorful face, and then pump it through today's amazing multimedia thoroughfare. Places with names like the Big Apple, Tinseltown, The Windy City and more need no explanation. And, of course, we have our nicknames — The Magic City, SoBe, Gateway to the Americas, to name a few.

The driving force for any great city or region is its people, the famous and the unseen, and well beyond nicknames and logos, they give the city a feeling. From the day I set foot in Miami, I've been surrounded by people who were reaching for something new and better — for themselves and their families. I know that we've grown up as a region, but scratch below the surface and Miami is still aspiration, longing and hope.

The Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce Sand in My Shoes award on Wednesday will honor two of our hometown heroes, Gloria and Emilio Estefan, who embraced this community as few ever have, and the sand in their shoes — and ours — began to dance.

I spend my days amid dreamers young and not so young at Miami Dade College, but the reality is that most dreams come with obstacles to spare. Gloria, a graduate of UM, and Emilio, a MDC alum, knew the same challenges of big dreams and small pocketbooks that our students face today. When they talk with students, as they have on countless occasions, their lives become the music, the reminder to every eager listener to keep going, to never give up.

The Estefans have helped scores of South Floridians to find their economic footing through jobs and careers in their many business enterprises. They may be international stars in the entertainment industry but their roots are here, feet firmly planted in the sandy ground of South Florida.

For all the international acclaim that this wonderful pair has earned, there's truly nothing to compare to the moment when your friends and neighbors acknowledge how much you mean at home. The Sand in My Shoes awards gala honoring Gloria and Emilio Estefan promises to be a heartfelt and joyous celebration of two who have helped us all celebrate our vitality and pursue our dreams. It will be our chance to once again get on our feet to honor two of our own.

Eduardo J. Padrón, president and 2012 Sand in My Shoes honoree, Miami Dade College

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