

Miami Dade College president sees opportunity for one and all

By MYRIAM MARQUEZ
mmarquez@MiamiHerald.com

We're at a bakery on Coral Way in The Roads, having a morning *cafecito*, when a poised young Caribbean woman comes to our table. "Sorry to interrupt," she says. "But I have to shake your hand and thank you, Dr. Padrón."

On a crisp Sunday afternoon at the Miami Book Fair International, a group of giggly college students run up to him as if this professorial bespectacled grandfather were a rock star. They give him a peck on the cheek, chat for a bit about the fair's offerings, then one pleads, "Would you take a picture with us?"

Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón isn't just our local educational star with friends in high places -- from five U.S. presidents to such MDC alums as Emilio Estefan and Andy Garcia. He's also an international celeb of sorts, bestowed the title of *Commandeur* in the *Ordre des Palmes Académiques* in France, tapped as an honorary soldier for the poor in San Martin's order in Argentina and knighted by Spain as a foreign diplomat of sorts in Queen Isabella's order. This year he was named among the "10 Best College Presidents" by Time magazine and Floridian of the Year by Florida Trend magazine.

Not bad for a Cuban refugee who arrived via the Pedro Pan program at age 15 and after graduating high school in 1963 couldn't find a college that would take him except for the "Chicken Coop College," as MDC's first buildings were dubbed.

"I am who I am because of this place," Padrón likes to say.

So am I and hundreds of thousands of other graduates of Miami Dade College and all the other Miami-Dade residents who learned English and received job training there without being harassed for their accents. Few South Florida residents haven't been touched by MDC.

It opened as Dade County Junior College in 1960, just as America's civil rights battles were brewing and an island 90 miles from U.S. shores was combusting. Thanks to Padrón's belief in the American dream and on civic leaders like Mitchell Wolfson, who had the vision for the "people's college" in downtown Miami, and the college presidents who came before Padrón, MDC has earned the reputation of a nimble

urban college.

Its administrators track workforce trends in finite detail to ensure that local kids are trained for the jobs of the future, and each year MDC's eight campuses graduate more black and Hispanic students than any other institution of higher learning. Under Padrón's leadership, MDC has become a four-year college in several fields, including education and nursing.

In many ways MDC is a template for other places grappling with America's changing demographics. It has charted a road to opportunity that others can follow to energize students to succeed.

Those energized students of long ago were on display Thursday night, as the college celebrated its 50th anniversary at a star-studded gala attended by more than 1,000 community leaders appropriately held at downtown Miami's Freedom Tower. Among the attendees: Emilio and Gloria Estefan, Hialeah Mayor Julio Robaina, Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado, condo king and MDC alum Jorge Perez and too many others to list here.

The gala raised more than \$5 million for scholarships -- an astounding amount for one evening of artwork, opera, salsa and jazz in the Magic City. The draw, of course, was Dr. Padrón. In his tireless efforts to give a chance to every young person with a dream, South Florida's knight of the Order of Opportunity has never diluted standards but always raised expectations -- MDC's formula for success.