

# The First Cuban-born President of the Florida Bar Association: Spotlight on Francisco Angones\*

By Juan Fernandez-Barquin \*\*

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## CUBA AND YOUR FAMILY

**I read that you arrived from Cuba in 1961. How old were you? Did your whole family come with you? How was their voyage to the United States?** I was a month short of being 11. I arrived in the United States on Tuesday, June 13, 1961, by myself, through a program called Pedro Pan.<sup>1</sup> As it just so happens, there were two other unaccompanied children on the flight whom I befriended. The son of one of the two other unaccompanied children has since become an attorney.

My family flew over here 4 ½ months after I arrived. It was a very difficult 4 ½ months because I had no idea when they were arriving. If anything, I was very lucky. Some children did not reunite with their parents until years after they arrived in the United States. And some other children never saw their parents again.

**Do you have any vivid memories of Cuba? If so, what is your most vivid memory? Why do you think you remember that the most?**

I have some wonderful memories with my father, and with friends from the neighborhood riding horses and going to school. But I also have some very sad, heart-wrenching memories, for instance the day I left my father, mother, and sister behind in Cuba to come to the United States. I was just eleven years old, and to this day, I still remember how much I was hoping and how hard I was praying that I would one day be reunited with them.

As for the rest of my family, my grandparents joined us much later. My grandmother on my mother's side came about five years after I arrived. My grandmother and aunt on my father's side arrived almost exactly 10 years after I arrived.

**Fidel financially crippled the vast majority of the upper and middle class Cubans after his arrival to power. Many families had to leave everything they owned and only take what they could each fit into one suitcase. What did your parents do for a living in Cuba? What did they do to make ends after your arrival in the United States? What sort of impression did this change in lifestyle leave upon you?**

In Cuba, my father was a lawyer and my mother, a school teacher. In the United States, my parents had several jobs. I remember that they once cleaned the floors in the bathrooms of Miami International Airport. My father also worked selling merchandise and other products in Hialeah. Ultimately, my parents were able to find employment with the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Florida City. Later, my mother was able to get a job teaching there. This was largely because she spoke English. My father, on the other hand, did not speak English. He also had to work odd jobs to make ends meet.

The change in lifestyle was drastic. Upon arriving in 1961, I lived in Hialeah. After my parents arrived, we moved to Florida City, a small city in South Miami-Dade County, next to

Homestead. At Florida City my parents and I lived at a camp, where my parents were placed in charge of some seven or eight other children who had arrived from Cuba via Pedro Pan and had no guardians here in the United States. While at Florida City, I felt like I was leading a double life. At school there were only two Cuban kids and four Puerto Rican kids, the rest were white. We were the only children who spoke Spanish there. While at the camp all the children were Cuban and spoke Spanish. Aside from school and basketball, I only socialized and played with other children from the camp. We were at this camp for about four years.

I noticed several differences between Cuba and the United States – for instance, the difference in the abundance of food between the local grocery store in Hialeah and the one we used to frequent in Cuba. The grocery store in Hialeah, was full of food and nicely presented. The store in Cuba was almost completely bare. Another difference was with the channels on the television sets. In the U.S. we could watch several channels, and in Cuba there were just a handful. The newspapers and the media were tightly controlled in Cuba. The Revolutionary Defense Committee had a tight grip over all things that were published and televised. Here one could pick up the newspaper and read the real news.

**Was there a sense of disadvantage amongst you in the camp?**

Among us, not really. I did not feel a sense of disadvantage

since all my friends and I were in the same situation. Overall, all of us were on the same boat. None of us had any money, and we were all trying to get ahead. Our parents got the jobs they could just to make a living, and hoped for their kids to do better. Even when it came to sports, we would take

advantage of what we had. Whether it was just a baseball, some gloves, and a bat, or simply a basketball, we would use them, have fun, and enjoy it. We kept originally to our group. But then through high school and then the university we became more integrated. Looking back it probably wasn't as hard as we probably thought it was. Yes, we worked hard and had tunnel vision composed of: we had to work hard and get ahead, and work hard and get ahead. But that was the example our parents gave us. They sometimes held two jobs. Even working after school wasn't that bad.

**Tell me about your present family? How did you meet your wife?**

I met my wife, because I danced in her fifteenth birthday party. I did not know her very well at the time, but we became friends, and I became part of her social circle. The year before I met her I had moved with my family to Miami from Florida City, and did not know anyone in Miami. We also attended high school very close to one another. She attended the sister school of my high school. Three years after meeting her, during my senior year, I asked her out, and that was the beginning of our

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relationship. On September 16, 1967 we started dating, and then we got married on August 25, 1972. We had our only child about ten years later, Francisco Angones, Jr. who recently completed his Bachelors at Columbia University, and has begun his Masters degree in Fine Arts at Columbia University.

### THE PROFESSION

**Why the law? Did you always know you wanted to be an attorney? Did anything trigger your decision to become a lawyer?**

I was always fascinated with the law. At 12 years old I remember I wanted to be a lawyer. I told my father this, and he told me that I was too introverted, not out-going enough, and not tough enough. I was greatly impacted when I started my undergraduate degree at the University of Miami. I studied Philosophy of Political Systems and History. In History I concentrated on Revolutions, in particular the American, French, Mexican, Soviet, and Cuban Revolutions. From there I learned to appreciate and admire our system of government and the Constitution.

What I admire about our Constitution the most is how it is able to evolve and how we can still resolve our problems using it. You must keep in mind that when our government was started, women, blacks, and even some white males who didn't own real property couldn't vote or serve in juries. You cannot deny the fact that our system has been able to evolve over time. The only great misfortune we've had as a country was our Civil War, which pitted brother against brother, and father against son. And I am certain nothing like that will ever happen again because of the great suffering it caused.

Women received their right to vote in 1920. Blacks in some parts of the country weren't allowed to vote until the 1960's. The Civil Rights Act, and *Brown v. Board* provided avenues of great change. Most recently, in 2000 with the voting dispute between Bush and Gore, in some other countries a General would have declared war, martial law, and decided the victor. In the United States the parties did go to war, but in the courtroom. They each filed suits all over the State of Florida, and in some other parts of the United States. Then, a final arbiter, the courts, an independent branch of government, determined the victor. And even though many thought it wasn't right, the court's decision was ultimately accepted and democracy continued.

After I earned my undergraduate degree I attended University of Miami School of Law, and graduated from there in 1976.

**I understand you served as President of the Cuban-American Bar Association in 1982. How do you feel the minority bar associations contribute to meet the needs of minorities?**

All minority bar associations are great training grounds for leadership and future involvement in state bar associations. Minority bar associations, such as the Cuban American Bar Association, are particularly suited for groups such as Cuban Americans to learn to work together and learn how the Florida Bar and American Bar Association function. Overall, through minority bar associations members are able to achieve greater leadership roles in their respective state bars and the American

Bar Association.

**The Brothers to the Rescue is an organization composed of volunteers who organize fly-bys over the Straits of Florida to look out for rafters. On February 24, 1996, three U.S. citizens and a resident of Florida were shot down over international waters by Cuban MiGs while flying a humanitarian mission for the Brothers to the Rescue. You sued the Cuban government on behalf of the families and collected on the judgment. It is very difficult and some would claim almost impossible to collect from the Cuban government. Can you speak of the difficulties you encountered in attaining the judgment and in collecting?**

We were lucky that shortly after the unfortunate tragedy and murder of four human beings, Congress passed the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death penalty Act, which essentially removed immunity from the sovereign nations who were listed on the Justice Department's list of terrorist government. Cuba was on this list. This Act allowed us to file suit against the Cuban Government and provided a method of service process. However, there was no method of collection. Even though the Cuban government failed to appear in court, we were still

required to present our case. When you sue a foreign country, even though they fail to appear in court and you file a default judgment, you still have to show some proof of their guilt. This requirement to show proof of their guilt is for the protection of their sovereignty. So we presented our case, with several witnesses in front of the Honorable Lawrence King in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida. Judge King came out with an excellent human rights opinion awarding our party \$187 Million in compensatory

damages. From there to collection was a difficult task.

Although the Cuban government did not appear at trial, they did hire lawyers when we tried to collect from their frozen assets. They hired a New York law firm to oppose us. The U.S. Justice Department also opposed the collection since they had an interest in preserving the assets of sovereign nations, including frozen assets.

Judge King's opinion came out in late 1996, and it took us until late 2001 to collect. Congress had to pass legislation to enable us to collect from the frozen assets. Passage of this act required lobbying. At about the same time we were lobbying a young woman was murdered in the Middle East by a terrorist group financially supported by Iran. This incident assisted in the passage of the act. Through a bipartisan effort led by Senator Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ), and Senator Connie Mack (R-FL), the act passed in early 2001 and we were able to partially collect on the judgment.

### FLORIDA BAR ASSOCIATION

**How does it feel to be the first Cuban born President of the Florida Bar?**

It's a wonderful honor and humbling experience. It is difficult to describe the joy I have in representing the lawyers of Florida and the citizens of Florida as the Pres of the Fl Bar.

**What goals do you have as President?**

I have a couple of things I hope to accomplish. For one thing, I would like to seek the participation of all lawyers in the

bar association, particularly minority lawyers- blacks, Hispanics, and women. I plan to accomplish this by asking them to get more involved in the bar associations events, and asking for their participation within the organization, such as participating in committees. Besides greater minority involvement, I also plan to reach out to lawyers who feel disenfranchised by the Florida Bar.

Another initiative is to increase funding to the state judiciary. To keep an independent judiciary there must be adequate funding so the justice system can perform properly. The justices of the Supreme Court of Florida have not received a standard of living raise in the last four years. We are also seeking funds to make a support staff for the judiciary from the Supreme Court to the lowest courts. Other arms of government are luring away competent members of the judiciary staff with higher pay for essentially the same type of work. Even though the members of the judiciary staff may be of the same category as the other state employees, the other state employees get paid more than those on the judiciary staff. Lastly, another initiative of mine is to create a task force to assist in the preservation of attorney client privilege. This is in response to the Justice Department recent attacks on the privilege.

**You discussed minority attorneys. Do you feel there is there a strong representation of minorities within the Florida Bar?**

If we were to take the totality of all the lawyers in Florida with an accurate statistic of the blacks, Hispanics, and women represented in the bar, and I can only say this anecdotally, I believe we are beginning to be represented in adequate numbers. Believe it or not, the problem is that the questionnaires asking your race, gender, ethnicity, are voluntary. Consequently, we only have partial numbers because reporting is not required.

This year we have the greatest amount of minorities in our 52-member Board of Governors than we have ever had in the past. For the first time ever we have five black members of the Board of Governors, the highest ever, three Hispanic members – this figure has remained consistent over the last couple of years – and 11 women, another highest ever. Representation of women and minorities in the committees is also higher than it has ever been in the past. Perhaps we are not completely there yet, but we are surely making the in roads to getting there.

**How do you plan to bolster minority attorney participation in the Florida Bar?**

The Florida Bar, with the assistance of a law firm has set up a program to study the effect of lawyers and minorities. The law firm will fund a member of the Florida Bar with a two-year fellowship to conduct these studies. And, we may also revamp our annual diversity symposium. For the last four years we have had an annual diversity symposium. We have set up a committee to study the symposium from top to bottom to see whether it needs improvement to accomplish its goal of attracting more minority attorneys.

**Does the Florida Bar have some sort of a big brother-big sister organization to assist minorities becoming attorneys?**

There are a couple of projects that involve mentoring currently taking place, and some being considered. There is a cooperation between student branches of the bar association in different universities throughout Florida, and particular sections of the bar. For instance, the real property and probate division of the Florida Bar has set up a minority outreach program for future and new members of the bar. Through this program, the attorneys of this division will introduce students and new graduates to the real property and probate sections of the Florida Bar.

The Young Lawyers Division of the Florida Bar also reaches out to the student associations to bolster interest for the students' participation after graduation. We have been doing this for some time. The present President of the Young Lawyers Division has followed through on this, and I know the incoming President plans to continue with this same plan.

The professionalism committee of the Florida Supreme Court along with the Florida Bar will be considering the possibility of a mentoring program for young lawyers who have just graduated from law school. This program would be intended for graduates who are neither in big firms nor working for a big government agency, and in general need of some necessary training to become better attorneys. Learning to be an attorney does not end with law school. This program would get these individuals more involved in the profession and further instruct them on their professional responsibilities, including quite possibly the most important one of all, ethics.

## ENDNOTES

\* See Mr. Angones' s biography on page 87.

\*\* Juan Fernandez-Barquin is a third-year law student at the American University Washington College of Law. Mr. Fernandez-Barquin is also the Managing Editor of *The Modern American*.

<sup>1</sup> Pedro Pan was a program created by the Catholic Welfare Bureau of Miami in December 1960 at the request of parents in Cuba to provide an opportunity for them to send their children to Miami to avoid Marxist-Leninist indoctrination. From December 1960 to October 1962, more than 14,000 Cuban youths arrived alone in the United States. What is now known

as Operation Pedro Pan was the largest recorded exodus of unaccompanied minors in the Western Hemisphere. While the majority was Catholic, several hundred were Protestant, Jewish or non-believers. Very few were from wealthy backgrounds. Most were of the middle class or lower middle class and included children of different racial background, Black and Chinese. Family reunions began shortly after the first arrivals of the children. About 50% were united with family members at the airport. <http://www.pedropan.org/history.html>.