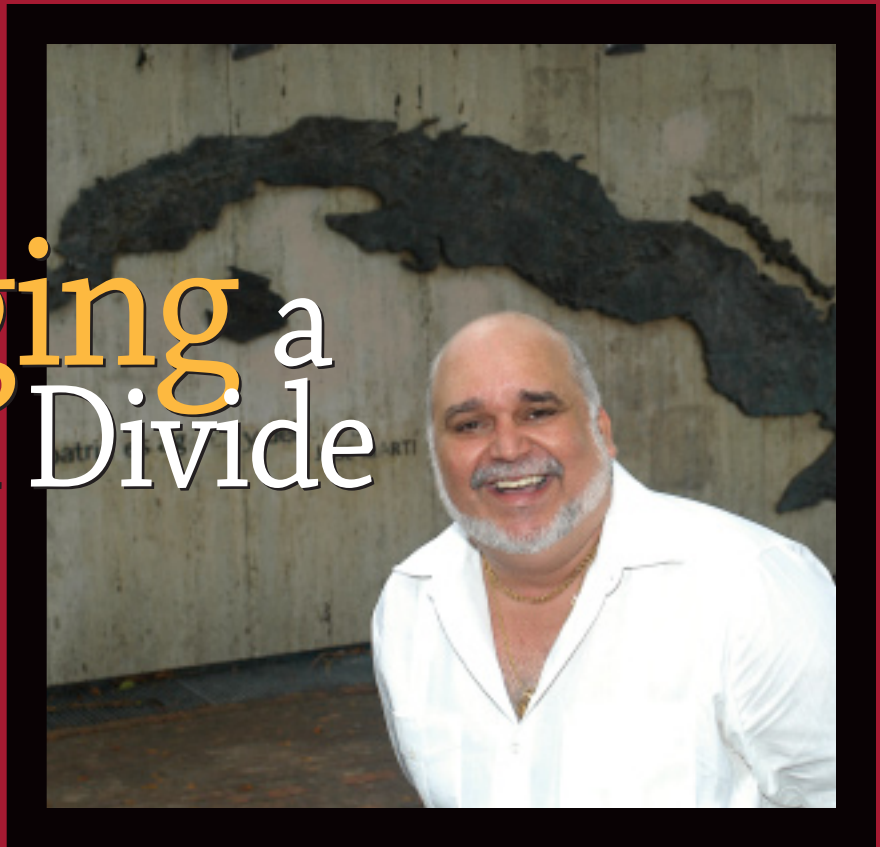


Bridging a Cultural Divide

Gus Garcia sees a market for helping US businesses and Cubans profitably interact.



Meet and talk to Agustin “Gus” Garcia, and you would think that he has spent most of his life in Cuba instead of New Jersey.

Garcia, president of Garcorp International Inc., a Coral Gables-based communications, government relations, security and consulting firm, is fluent in Spanish and English. He loves to wear guayabera shirts and a gold medallion of Saint Lazaro; his e-mail address ends in 17, the number which Cubans associate with the revered saint.

Garcia says he will return to a democratic Cuba and offer his company's services – which range from international investigative work to motivational speaking seminars – to Cubans who are interested in starting businesses but do not know how to deal with US companies, and to US companies that want to market to Cubans.

Garcia expects an influx of US investment capital into Cuba, much of it from firms with no current Cuban or Cuban-American connections or experience. In order to be successful doing business in Cuba, he says US firms will need to understand the business, cultural, and social aspects of Cuban society. That is where Garcorp comes in: Garcia has built Garcorp around the idea of helping businesses from different cultures communicate, and also believes he under-

stands Cubans and Cuban culture better than other US firms.

For instance, Garcia sees his firm training a US-based company's Cuban employees on the concept of respecting corporate authority – something he says does not exist in today's communist system – while using his “Cuban-to-Cuban” manner to not come across as condescending or overbearing.

“Some businesses know what they want to say but don't how to say it because they don't understand the culture,” he says. “People don't understand unless they're bicultural.”

Garcia also expects to perform risk management duties such as finding safe places on the island to locate a business or doing background checks on potential business partners.

Pent-up entrepreneurial drive in Cuba will also offer opportunities for Garcorp, according to Garcia. Once current Cuban government restrictions on owning private businesses are removed and foreign capital flows into the nation, he expects the number of start-up businesses to surge. He feels he can help Cuban entrepreneurs who want to reach out to US businesses, or simply learn to take advantage of capitalism's funding mechanisms.

“There are Cuban natives who don't understand the international workplace,” Garcia says. “Cubans from

there are trying to expand their marketplace outside Cuba. There's no real understanding of credit, collateral, or set economic values.”

Garcorp has helped US companies and politicians bridge cultural divides before. His clients have included Miami-based Spanish Broadcasting Systems Inc. and former Miami mayor Maurice Ferré. Garcia helped found Lambda Theta Phi, the nation's first Latin fraternity, at Kean College in Union, N.J. in 1975.

His affinity for everything Cuban may stem from the fact that he and his family fled the island on Jan. 1, 1959 – the same day Fidel Castro and his guerrillas triumphantly marched into Havana and seized control of the nation. Garcia feels as if he was cheated of the opportunity to know, live and grow in his homeland.

“My dad died [when I was] 11. My only experience in Cuba was through my dad,” says Garcia, 50. “My dream in returning is not economic as much as it is knowing two worlds.”

As for his Saint Lazaro medallion, he plans to have it with him when he takes a tour of the island shortly after democracy arrives.

“At six months, I want to tour the island with a Jeep and a duffel bag [full of clothes],” he says. “I want to experience the Cuba of the Cubans.” – JH