

VICTOR M. DIAZ, JR., ESQ.

Miami, Florida *The Tobias Simon Pro Bono Service Award Recipient -2000*

Victor M. Diaz, Jr., was born November 14, 1960, in Camagüey, Cuba. His family emigrated to the United States in 1962, fleeing communist repression. Like many other immigrant families before them, the Diaz family struggled to establish themselves in a new country. His immigrant roots left a lasting impression on Diaz: "My parents' sacrifice and hard work has always been the inspiration for my drive to succeed. My gratitude to this great country for the opportunity afforded my family is the source of my commitment to community and public service. Not only do I owe a great debt to my adopted homeland, but also I want to ensure that the same opportunity for advancement afforded me and my parents is afforded to others in need."

Diaz' family has always played an important role in his life. His father, Victor, Sr., and mother, Nallibe, are his most important role models. "My parents, like so many other first generation immigrants, will never receive any award or recognition for their quiet service as honest, hard working, middle class citizens. But it is on their shoulders that I stand." Diaz is equally proud of his extended family. "Growing up in a family that cared for one another made caring for other people seem obvious and easy."

Academic excellence has always been a constant in Diaz' life. An honor student in high school, Diaz was the Salutatorian of his graduating class. Awarded a full academic scholarship, Diaz began his undergraduate studies at Duke University in 1978. He received his B.A. Degree with a double major in business and accounting (summa cum laude) from Duke in 1982, where he graduated first in his class. Victor also attended Oxford University, New College in Oxford, England, where he spent a term in residence as an Angier Biddle Duke Scholar. In 1985, Diaz graduated from the Yale Law School, where he served as Editor-in-Chief of the Yale Law & Policy Review. During law school, he was elected by the Yale faculty to serve as Assistant in instruction for the 1984-85 school year, teaching Torts and legal process.

Diaz was admitted to the Florida Bar in 1985, and then joined the Miami law firm of Podhurst Orseck Josefsberg Eaton Meadow Olin & Perwin, P.A., where he is now a partner. His professional memberships include: Dade County and American Bar Associations; Academy of Florida Trial Lawyers; The Association of Trial Lawyers of America and the Hispanic National and Cuban-American Bar Associations.

Diaz has devoted countless hours serving the legal needs of the poor through several pro bono programs in South Florida, including Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc., UNIDAD/Miami Beach Hispanic Community Center and the Cuban-American Bar Association.

Diaz' unwavering commitment to his community was recognized by Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc. ("LSGMI"), which honored him with its Outstanding Service Award in 1994. Diaz served as President of the LSGMI Board of Directors in 1996 and 1997, critical years for that organization as it faced steep federal cuts, including the loss of one million dollars in federal grant money. His leadership lifted the organization out of a crisis by developing a unique approach to improve and streamline the delivery of volunteer legal services.

Diaz helped conceptualize the Chesterfield Smith Center for Equal Justice, a center which offers "one-stop shopping" for the legal and social service needs of the poor. He diligently worked with others to raise more than one million dollars to make the Center a reality, housing the offices of Legal Services as well as several other non-profit agencies targeting the needs of low income persons. "My work at Legal Services was always as part of a team. Many others deserve credit for their work in defense of equal access to justice for the poor."

A resident of Miami Beach, Diaz has also been recognized for his leadership in identifying and shaping the legal and social service needs of that city's indigent community. In 1997, Diaz was honored by the Mayor of Miami Beach with the *Shining Light Award* that recognized him as a citizen volunteer "who single-handedly brought about major change in our community."

Diaz efforts to make a difference in that city began as he recognized the needs of immigrants in Miami-Dade County, who desperately needed legal information in their own language. Diaz became aware that many did not know their rights or even understand how to access the judicial system, education, health care or housing and welfare.

In 1993, Diaz responded by founding UNIDAD/Miami Beach Hispanic Community Center. As president of this one-stop social service agency, Diaz has embraced those who are in desperate need of legal help but have no resources to pay for it. Begun with a seed grant of \$50,000.00 just five years ago, the Hispanic Community Center has grown to a \$1-million dollar annual budget with a full and part time staff of thirteen, offering a full menu of social services, including job training and placement, youth counseling, programs for the elderly and immigration and citizenship services. The Hispanic Community Center was utilized to such an extent that in 1997 there was a need to expand. Realizing this, Diaz spearheaded the drive to raise \$600,000 to purchase, relocate and renovate a historic coral rock house which became the new permanent headquarters of the Hispanic Community Center.

In conjunction with County Judge Beth Bloom, Diaz acted on his concern for youth in the community by assisting in the launch of an innovative Gang Intervention Program for indigent young adults, ages 18 through 21, who are convicted of gang-related offenses. The young adults are sent to this unique program instead of jail or can be assigned as a condition of probation. Funded through grants and staffed by volunteers, the program has since expanded to include indigent juveniles.

His commitment to proactively help young people in need has continued as Diaz helped to develop and secure funding for a teen life skills program, which works with at-risk youth to reduce teen delinquency through recreation and counseling programs. Funded in partnership with the Miami Beach Police Department, this program has been highly successful in creating a positive alternative for Hispanic youth on Miami Beach. "Because of others who preceded me that cared about poor and middle class youth, I was afforded the opportunities for a quality education and a chance to succeed. I want to inspire other young people to believe in themselves and work for a better future for themselves and their families" said Diaz.

Among his other civic endeavors for the City of Miami Beach, Diaz serves on the Executive Committees of the Miami Beach Community Development Corporation and the Miami Design Preservation League. He is also a member of the City of Miami Beach's Historic Preservation and Joint Design Review Boards.

However, Diaz's effort to impact lives has stretched far beyond the city limits of Miami Beach. Diaz is also Vice-Chairman of the Spanish American League Against Discrimination and of the Miami Dade Community College Foundation and serves on the Board of a half-dozen other civic organizations.

When the welfare crisis in the 1990s brought about new legislation adversely affecting many immigrants in South Florida, Diaz coordinated private lawyers to participate in regular legal aid clinics which resulted in more than 1,500 immigrants becoming U.S. citizens. "I am most proud of my work in helping so many other immigrants to this country become American citizens. Citizenship is the most precious legal privilege we enjoy as Americans.

Diaz is also President of the Cuban-American Bar Association, where he worked with a legal team on a pro bono basis representing Guantanamo Bay detainees. The team devoted over six-months of time to a lawsuit against the United States regarding the deteriorating conditions at the detention camps and the U.S. policy of interdiction at sea. As a direct result of the lawsuit, living conditions improved significantly for the detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, applications for political asylum were finally processed and the U.S. Coast Guard modified its interdiction policy. The legal team, including Diaz, received an award from the Florida Supreme Court that recognized their volunteer efforts.

Despite his youth, Diaz already has established himself a prominent and able legal voice for those who would otherwise have none, in his community and beyond. His passionate leadership and unwavering commitment to protect the rights of the poor and disadvantaged has had a profound impact on numerous lives and will continue to do so for years to come.
