



PHOTOGRAPHS: J. SAVAGE GREGSON, SYLVIA MARTIN

Food and Friendship

Cuban-born Frank Gonzalez brings more than just the taste of home to his Hispanic neighbors in North Carolina.

It must have looked like all the colors of the world to the young boys. Having recently landed at the Miami airport after leaving their Cuban homeland, Frank Gonzalez and his brother stared at hundreds of gum balls in the glass-and-metal machine. "The streets are paved with gold," the people back in Cuba said in praise of America. Frank dismissed this myth, but the promise before him of never-ending bubblegum captivated his 9-year-old soul.

Unfortunately, gaining freedom from Fidel Castro's regime meant forsaking all the family's worldly belongings. Cuban authorities even confiscated the last remaining pocketful of coins from Frank's father. There was no money to feed a frivolous, if miraculous, gum-ball machine.

Then two blond-haired, blue-eyed boys, about the age of the Gonzalez siblings, appeared by their side. Neither duo, blond or brown, spoke the other's language, yet the children in-

"Food was something I missed when we moved here from New Jersey," says Frank Gonzalez, with wife Valerie. A growing Hispanic population in North Carolina promises customers for the grocer.

stantly bonded. The American boys gave the Cuban brothers their first sweet taste in the land of opportunity.

From Gum Balls to Groceries

"It was like, 'Welcome!'" Frank recalls about that gentle gesture. Now 41, he smiles as he inspects one of the colorful displays at his grocery store in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina. Fiesta International is one in a chain of grocery stores Frank owns in the state; others are in Angier, Smithfield, and Oxford. Across the room, his wife, Valerie, helps a customer. Their children, Eric, 15, and Arinna, 7, are off at school.

Each store offers goods for distinctive Hispanic cultures. "We are homogenous in our speech but not in our diets," Frank says of the wide-ranging ethnic community. "We eat very differently." For example, he says, "Both Cubans and Mexicans love rice and beans, but we cook them differently." To emphasize this, he points to different brands—La Costeña from Mexico, Ducal from Central America, and pigeon peas from Puerto Rico. Although many Hispanics try American food, Frank's research indicates the majority return to more familiar brands.

From New Jersey to the New South

Frank's parents settled in New Jersey, where Frank and his five brothers taught themselves English. After only three years in this country, he remembers placing second in a schoolwide spelling bee.

He taught himself computers, too, and served as a computer programmer for Jersey Bell for a time. Then he started a limousine business, quickly growing from 3 cars to a fleet of 12. Along the way, he married Valerie, a second-generation Puerto Rican. ▶

Frank knew many considered the South the newest land of opportunity. So in 1988, the growing family moved to Fuquay-Varina, near the Triangle cities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill. North Carolina offered Frank a ready-made customer base, boasting one of the fastest growing Hispanic populations in the country.

"North Carolina is the newest melting pot of Hispanics," Frank says. Unlike large cities such as San



above: Frank serves on the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce (with president Harvey Schmitt) and founded the state's Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. **above, right:** Frank and son Eric participate in community sports.

Antonio and Miami where the influx is limited to a particular group, he says, "here you have the entire [Hispanic] community represented: South America, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Honduras."

The entrepreneur met with resistance when he tried to win banking support for his first grocery store. "There was a lack of respect for the Hispanic businessman," he recalls. "The Hispanic was the guy who came to pick tobacco. I was educated. I would go to the banks and do a Power-Point presentation with charts and graphs. They kind of looked at me



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Frank Gonzalez

like, 'You're not supposed to be here doing this.' One man pretty much just outright said that to me." Frank also encountered arrogance when he served as a marketing consultant for well-established American businesses.

He offers a ready answer for dealing with discrimination: "Don't become bitter. Fight racism with love because once you do, it's a win/win situation."

All for One and One for All

"When I came here, I had in mind that we—all communities—should work together," Frank says. Toward that end, he's formed an alliance with Willie Snead, an African American, nondenominational minister. The religious leader works with programs that help train and find jobs for people, address transportation needs, and provide daycare.

Frank also serves on the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, and

he founded the statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Through their grocery business, Frank and Valerie offer hands-on help to bewildered, homesick newcomers. "Our stores are a community hub," he explains. "They're not just grocery stores where you buy your goods and leave," Frank emphasizes. On payday, people far from their native lands line up to wire money home. The couple takes newcomers to area banks to help them open accounts. They wade through paperwork with people trying to buy cars. They contact real estate agents to find decent housing. They help set up phone services. And they work with local police to serve as translators when needed.

Frank's commitment to community comes naturally. "My mom and dad had to do so much to bring us here so we could have freedom and be able to live the American dream," he says. "We received so much help—I just have this thing in me to give back."

Perhaps Frank's generosity goes back to that day when a magical gumball machine touting all the colors of the world tantalized yet remained firmly out of reach—until a simple act of kindness by strangers made a sweet reward possible.

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