

Empowering new generation of leaders for Miami

BY JAVIER ALBERTO SOTO

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Last Sunday, The Miami Herald asked a question that comes at a defining moment in our history and will determine whether our community meets the challenges of the future in a way that ensures our place among the great global cities: Where are our leaders?

Each and every day we work with a wide variety of philanthropists to make our community a better place through focused grant-making and charitable giving. We are keenly aware, however, that philanthropy alone cannot create the kind of community we aspire to be. To be effective and make significant, lasting change, thoughtful leadership must be exerted to make a positive impact on our daily lives.

Thus, strengthening leadership in the private, nonprofit, civic and public sectors becomes as central to our community-building strategy as the investments we make in organizations and programs working to improve our neighborhoods. The Miami Foundation has a long history of supporting and fostering leaders. In fact, our new brand is built on three pillars that allow us to continue that legacy: leadership, community and philanthropy. The first pillar intentionally is leadership. This is because we firmly believe that in order to have a lasting impact — to achieve social change in our community — ethical and effective leadership is required.

For us, this leadership focus means identifying and empowering the next generation of leaders. Our Miami Fellows program is an excellent model for building this next wave of leaders. Through five classes, close to 100 professionals, ages 25-35, from diverse professional and personal backgrounds have graduated.

Thanks in large part to support from the Kellogg Foundation and the Knight Foundation, there is no cost to the Fellow to participate in this unique, 15-month program that combines leadership-skills building with hands-on community engagement. There is, however, an expectation that each Fellow will put the knowledge acquired in the program to work in a manner that has a significant impact on the lives of Miamians. To date, nearly every Fellow has given back to our community by working on a policy issue, assisting a nonprofit or serving in public office. They are exerting leadership.

Some of these extraordinary graduates include Marlon Hill (Class 1), an attorney and civic leader who is involved in numerous charitable and civic causes; Jose Felix Diaz (Class 5), a newly elected state representative and land-use lawyer; and Gloria Romero-Roses, a management consultant, active in many education and community development issues. We believe that there are many emerging leaders like Marlon, Jose and Gloria in our midst. We are committed to identifying and empowering them and giving them a platform from which to exert leadership.

Additionally this year, The Miami Foundation is awarding grants to young nonprofit executives who demonstrate exemplary leadership so they may take part in world-class executive development programs of their choosing. Similar to the MacArthur Fellows, participants will be

chosen based on their body of work, their commitment to leadership and their dedication to build a greater Miami. By strengthening the knowledge and skills of the people running our nonprofit institutions, we believe we can make a deep impact on those organizations doing the most to improve the quality of life for residents of Miami.

We see first-hand the remarkably talented young professionals leading some of our most valued organizations. People like Saif Ishaq (City Year Miami), Rebecca Fishman Lipsey (Teach for America) and Alex Rodriguez-Roig (Boys and Girls Clubs) are providing effective leadership and shaping the lives of thousands of kids in Miami-Dade every day. Our goal is to support those who, like them, have chosen to take their talents to the nonprofit sector.

Encouragingly, we are only one of several groups that have identified the need to develop our next generation of leaders as a core area of attention. Leadership Miami, Leadership Florida, the Good Government Initiative at the University of Miami, Florida International University's Center for Leadership and others are working to train future leaders of Miami. We will soon be convening the heads of these leadership programs, elected officials, business leaders and students to develop a community-wide Agenda for Leadership.

By stitching together a shared vision and platform on this core issue of leadership development, we seek to provide a clear path for those who are inspired to help lead this special place that we have chosen to call home and instill confidence in the community that our future leaders have the ethical core and professional competence to lead and inspire.

As The Herald so succinctly put it — Miami's promise is in the air. By empowering a new generation of leaders, our community stands poised to seize it.

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