

30 Years MIAMI TODAY

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SERVING SOUTH FLORIDA'S MOST IMPORTANT AUDIENCE

Nelson Bellido, chair of the Miami-Dade County Commission on Ethics & Public Trust, somehow finds time in the day to be a full-time attorney at his Coral Gables-based firm, dedicate his time to the Commission on Ethics, work with the Miami-Dade County Fair & Exposition, and host incoming Duke University freshmen at his home. He also manages to get six to seven hours of sleep.

When your personal philosophy is "there's no substitute for hard work," it's a little more understandable – if only a bit – how Mr. Bellido does what he does.

Miami Today reporter Nina Lincoff interviewed Mr. Bellido at Concepción Martinez & Bellido.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in Chicago, right near Wrigley Field. Well, I wasn't born there, but perhaps I was conceived there... That's where I grew up in the first four years of my life.

My parents emigrated back in 1960 from Cuba during the Cuban Revolution. They arrived in Miami. They found it difficult to find a job and there were factory jobs up North, so they traveled to Chicago, where we had some family.

They were there about eight years.

I was born halfway through. Then my father said, "I'm leaving this cold weather." They had a brutal winter and soon after, 1971, they came to Florida.

We briefly stopped in Tampa where we had family, but then we came to Hialeah.

Q: Where in Hialeah?

A: There is a shopping center

THE ACHIEVER



Nelson Bellido

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Chairman, Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics & Public Trust

Attorney, Concepción Martinez & Bellido
255 Aragon Ave.

Coral Gables 33134

(305) 444-6669

nbellido@cfclaw.com

Age: 47

Born: Chicago

Education: Duke University; University of Florida College of Law

Personal Philosophy: There's no substitute for hard work.

on West 12th Avenue and 29th Street called Porto Fino. We lived in an apartment right behind it. I attended kindergarten at James H. Bright Elementary and soon after we moved to the northwest portion of Hialeah, where I attended North Twin Lakes Elementary. We moved there about 1974. To this day my mom lives in the same home.

Q: It's atypical after living in Cuba to skip over Miami, no?

A: Well, my dad was a commercial pilot in Cuba. He landed his plane in Marathon in 1961. He was with a copilot and that copilot told him that he was going to seek asylum in the US. My dad literally came with nothing. He had a family member in Hialeah, so he moved to Hialeah.

My parents weren't married, they were just dating, so it was a bold move, but he wasn't able to transfer his pilot's license. At that time you needed to learn English, and my dad was 40. It's difficult for someone who's lived their entire life in another country to suddenly find themselves in a different culture with a different language.

A lot of people have a different image of Hialeah, but Hialeah was very Anglo when I grew up, and it was our dream to eat at McDonald's. English was the language that we spoke to all our friends. At home was when we spoke Spanish.

Q: You went to Duke. Do you get back to North Carolina?

A: I'm going to be there a week from today, at the Duke vs. the University of North Carolina basketball game. I am very partial to Duke basketball. Some people

Miami Beach Mayor Philip Levine sees city as exchange...

bleed blue. I do bleed Duke blue.

I'm a big advocate of Duke, but it's not so much for that aspect of it that I'm involved. I'm very involved with the university in different aspects, chairman of the Duke University Hispanic/ Latino Alumni Association. I've served on their board of directors for the Duke Alumni Association.

I've been president of the Duke Alumni Association of South Florida for 11 years.

Q: Are you involved with current students?

A: My wife and I have hosted incoming freshmen. We throw a party every summer right before they go to Duke. We introduce them to their classmates. Part of the reason is for them to feel comfortable going up there... Some of my close friends were those from the Miami area who went to Duke.

Q: What was your major?

A: Political science and history. I had the emphasis on Latin American history. I realized some of the discrepancies in how our history books portrayed [history], from native Americans to African Americans to other minorities.

I really became an advocate for diversity and minority rights at Duke and have subsequently made a big portion of my role as chairman of the Duke University Hispanic/ Latino Alumni Association to promote diversity both in faculty and for the students. I think Duke is well on its way to improving.

Q: What is the importance of having, or being, a mentor?

A: I've been very fortunate: at different periods of my life I've had mentors, people who made a big difference in my life having come from a low-middle class background. My parents not having much and sacrificing a lot, I had a great appreciation to learn.

My mother in particular always encouraged me to do the best I can in school. Today I share that with my kids.

In school I got to know my teachers, and until this day, like my mentor at Duke, Dr. David Malone, we still keep in touch. He's somebody who helped



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Nelson Bellido has been a mentor for young persons in many situations, saying "It's so important to share one's life experiences with the younger generation and give back."

me get through the difficult times at Duke.

In turn, I've been a mentor for the Cuban American Bar Association, for the Hispanic National Bar Association, I've mentored University of Miami law school students. I've also mentored FIU law school students, and I've also taught. I was an adjunct professor of business law at Florida Memorial College.

It's so important to share one's life experiences with the younger generation and give back and let them know 'You can do it.' Our community is very diverse. Most people focus on the diversity of cultures, but it's also economically diverse.

I think I'm a good example of somebody who came from very humble beginnings, who worked hard to get to where he is. A lot of individuals have natural talent.

I'm a big believer, and a good example is my brother, a very smart guy. I always felt that he didn't have to work as hard as I did to get the great grades. I had to work harder, and to this day I try to work harder than my adversary in court. I think that's what led to some of the success that I've had.

Q: When did you decide to go into law?

A: As far as that one moment, the epiphany, I can't say. I think in large part my mother was interested in the

law field when Fidel Castro came to Cuba and the Cuban Revolution, so I grew up with my mom saying that she wanted to estudiar derecho, or study law.

Her father, my grandfather, who I never met, was a lawyer in Cuba, an employment lawyer, so it was engrained that would be a possibility.

I knew where my passion was, and after getting a degree at the University of Florida College of Law and having a great experience there I had an opportunity to go into a private law firm or take position with the Miami State Attorney's office.

After interviewing with Janet Reno, who was the state attorney, that decision became so clear because Janet Reno was, just is, an inspirational woman.

As far as US Attorney General, others may have reservations about how she served, but I can tell you as the Miami-Dade State Attorney she was excellent.

Subsequently Kathy Fernandez-Rundle has done a great job. To me there wasn't a better job that I had than being an assistant state attorney.

Q: What was working with Ms. Reno like?

A: Ms. Reno treated individuals very special at the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office. She knew everyone's name.

...for creative ideas, seeks to ‘manage the growth properly’

She had a way of making you feel very special, but she also had a way of instilling her view, which is that it's a lot better to let one guilty person go than to prosecute an innocent person.

She gave us a lot of leeway when it came to our judgment, and that shows in the number of individuals that hold leadership positions now in our community. A lot of them were prosecutors with her, from some excellent judges to Inspector General [Mary Cagle] to the executive director of the Commission on Ethics & Public Trust, Joe Centorino.

I didn't work with Joe when he was there, but certainly he was well respected there.

Q: How do you view your position on the ethics commission working with Mr. Centorino and Ms. Cagle?

A: I've been on the [ethics commission] since 2010, when I was appointed by the chief judge at the time, Joel Brown.

We serve four-year terms, which can be renewed. I'm hopeful mine will be renewed, especially in light of the fact that I was selected by my other commissioners as chairman, which I find quite an honor.

As far as working with the executive director, Mr. Centorino, I think my role is to be an independent voice. I don't see my role to be a rubber stamp.

I want the commission on ethics to be an example for the country of what a commission on ethics should be.

I take my position on the commission very seriously. I'm honored to have been selected by the chief judge and it's probably the position that I feel is the most important as far as my community service.

I want the people of Miami-Dade County to feel they have a voice and they have an open door at the commission on ethics. I want there to be transparency.

Perhaps some have felt that there wasn't in the past, but my goal is to be transparent and [to] also let the people of this great county know that we are trying to change things and hold public officials, county employees, whether they're municipalities or the county, accountable.

We don't want the perception that there often is in major cities that there is corruption in government.

A lot of people think that in every major city, whether Chicago, New York or Miami, that there's corruption in government. It does exist, but that's a very small percentage.

In Miami the vast majority of elected officials are great public servants. What happens is that the small percentage are the ones that are in newspapers, in the media. My goal is to make sure that we at the commission on ethics are doing everything we can, including educating the public, when it comes to ethics.

Q: How is the commission on ethics moving more towards being transparent instead of just disclosing what is happening?

A: One thing they've imposed is having meetings on the second Thursday of every month so that if you're interested in attending, every second Thursday at 10 a.m. [there is] a commission on ethics meeting.

If they get the opportunity to attend one, they'll see that it's something very serious. There are subpoenas that we discuss, there are complaints that we review, there are formal investigations that are taking place that we take very seriously. Beyond monthly meetings, we've gone [farther] to educate public officials.

We educated the 26,000 employees of Miami-Dade County. We gave them ethics training. They're required to take a seminar online, and we've also done ethical governance day.

In Miami Beach we've done 12.5 hours of ethics training for officials, because there were some issues.

We're happy to see that the municipalities and county government are very welcoming of us. I've got to give a lot of credit to Executive Director Joe Centorino in implementing this because we're certainly moving in the right direction, and I find the commission on ethics to be committed to doing the right thing.

Q: How do you explain “ethics” to a public servant?

A: Public servants realize that there's deterrence to unethical behavior.

They could be shamed publically if they don't follow certain ethical codes and standards.

It's not like we beat them or threaten them, but the deterrent that you're going to be exposed if you violate the county ethics code serves as a deterrent. They also realize that it's the right thing to do, that you're part of the governed and you don't want your elected official to cross that line, to seek favors or hire people to seek favors when they shouldn't.

You don't want a county employee to leave their position and turn around and work for somebody who's going to propose a bid for a contract and gain an unfair advantage because they know an individual in that department. There's a two-year cooling-off period for county employees.

It is really important for politicians and government workers to realize they serve the public, and by serving the public they need to be held to a higher standard. If they wish not to be held to that higher standard, that's what the private sector is for.

Q: Are county employees beholden to voters?

A: Ultimately, they are beholden to the public. Ultimately the 26,000 employees of Miami-Dade County hold that position because it's our tax money that's paying their salary.

They have a responsibility to be held to that higher standard. There are some great public servants in this county, and you see the great work that they do.

It's unfortunate that if you open up the newspaper on any given week there's a mayor, there's an employee, there's somebody who is being accused of violating some kind of law or code and, again, that's the vast minority.

What we're trying to do at the commission on ethics is educate and change the perception that it is an acceptable practice to do certain things that have been done in the past.

Q: What does your day-to-day look like as chair?

A: This is my day to day. I'm in my law office because this is my primary job.

I should say my primary job is being a husband and being a parent and being a son, and then being a partner in this law firm. That's my priority, and then community service, and that's where the commission on ethics fits in.

Q: How do you manage those two roles?

A: I've been blessed with a lot of energy. I'm always going to be involved in this community because I love Miami. I don't think there's a better place in this country.

Q: How many hours of sleep do you get?

A: It varies depending on what's going on in my life but I try to get 6 to 7 hours.

Q: What's a monthly ethics commission meeting look like?

A: Meetings start at 10, they usually go to about 12:30, but they can go much more into the afternoon. There are also trials, or quasi-trials. We're having one next week, for example, and that's separate and apart from the monthly meetings.

As the ethics chair I communicate with the executive director and review orders. I'm basically available any time for the executive director to call me if there are any issues that come up for me to address. There's no day-to-day, but probably weekly issues come

up, and we get packages in advance of our monthly meetings that we review.

On a month-to-month it may vary, but for the most part the vast majority of what we do is address complaints that citizens have about public officials.

We have probable cause hearings to determine whether there's probable cause that the ethics code has been violated. There are subpoenas that we are asked to approve so that investigations can continue, and then there's formal hearings that we have subsequently to make a determination as to whether someone has violated the ethics code.

I've been a proponent – and I've discussed this with the executive director – [that] we need to have harsher penalties, financial penalties. Our penalties are usually limited [to a] \$500 penalty. It's not to shame the person, but sometimes a larger penalty, a larger fine would send a message.

As far as the commission on ethics, it's very much focused on a civil penalty for a violation of the ethic code.

The ethics code is very clear, and that's what we're focused on. We don't look at other laws of the State of Florida, criminal laws, to see if that's been violated. That would be something that would be referred to the

State Attorney's Office to do their own investigation.

Q: What about your family?

A: I have my son, who is 9, and my daughter, who is 13. They grow quickly. I want to be the best father. My father was absent for many years in my life because he worked hard.

I was raised by my grandmother, so I want to be there for my son. I try to be there as much as possible for him and for my daughter Gaby.

My wife is the one that deserves a lot of credit, because she's been a star. I've been very fortunate to have a great wife who puts up with me being involved in so much. My wife Paola is my rock.

Q: What do you like doing with your kids?

A: Traveling They've traveled more than I've traveled. My son will be there at the Duke vs. North Carolina basketball game.

Q: Sounds like you're grooming him.

A: I am grooming both of them. My daughter told me the other day she wants to go to Stanford, though, which breaks my heart. But then she asked me for the pictures of our visit to Duke, so I think slowly but surely she'll one day become a Blue Devil.

