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Behold the power of the mojito

Washington Business Journal - by [Mike Mills](#) Editor

Cuba owes a lot to the mojito. The minty rum-based cocktail, like Desi Arnaz, has done a lot to make Cuban culture cool in America. Enrique Carrillo has come to rely on the drink's magical pull -- not to mention Cuban food and music -- to bring business and political leaders together. As a bank executive in Detroit, his annual "Pachanga Cubana" backyard barbecue drew such disparate partygoers as the Republican executive of Oakland County and Detroit's now-embattled Democratic mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick.

Carrillo, who is now director of Hispanic banking for Chevy Chase Bank, brought his pachanga (Spanish for "party") to this region for the second year on the rainy Sunday afternoon of May 18. Attendees included Jim Dinegar, head of the Greater Washington Board of Trade, former Montgomery County Executive Douglas Duncan, Maryland Del. Victor Ramirez, the general consuls of Guatemala and Bolivia and lots of other business, political and media types.

Carrillo's father was a judge in Cuba who fled the Castro regime to the United States in 1961. "I'm made in America, with Cuban parts," Carrillo says. But, proud as he is of his heritage, Carrillo emphasizes that the primary goal of his annual party is not to promote Hispanic culture, but to bring together business and political leaders. "Instead of having wine and cheese parties at a conference center, why not have it in my home?" he says.

What struck me was how personal the event was: Yes, the Chevy Chase Bank logo was on the tents and a foamy debit card mascot guy was walking around. But by having it in Carrillo's home, with his wife and mother-in-law in attendance (and worrying about the weather) it had the feel of a family get-together.

There are at least a half dozen Hispanic chambers of commerce in the Washington region, all of which, I am sure, are well meaning. But none, sadly, seems able to pull off Carrillo's feat of attracting business and political players and promoting Hispanic businesses as big contributors to the local economy. Hispanic business leaders I've spoken with in recent months cite several reasons for this, including squabbles based on international rivalries, a preference for first helping families and communities back home and just plain lack of organization and funding.

Leave it to the Cubans to show how it can be done. Though they constitute just 4 percent of the nation's estimated Hispanic population, Cuban-Americans tend to have higher incomes and own disproportionately more of the nation's Hispanic businesses. Cuban immigrants and exiles fleeing Castro were, after all, the proletariat, coming largely from educated (and vigorously capitalist and entrepreneurial) middle and upper classes. Cubans also outpace other Hispanics in holding top elected and appointed positions in the federal government.

This region's Hispanic community largely consists of Central Americans and Mexicans who came here under circumstances quite different from Carrillo's family. Most Hispanics in this region, estimated at around 1 million but likely much higher if the undocumented are included, face significant employment, educational and social challenges. Let's just say business and political leaders are unlikely to network at a barbecue hosted by a Salvadoran businessperson in Prince William County any time soon.

As director of Hispanic banking at Chevy Chase Bank, Carrillo is well aware of the struggles these new immigrants face. He also knows a market opportunity when he sees one. That's why 26 of his bank's branches are now designated as Hispanic banking centers, meaning there is at least one full-time Spanish-speaking employee on duty at all times. "They're mom and pops," Carrillo says, referring to most Hispanic businesses around the region. "But if you give them a hand up now, in five years they'll be committed to you. It's relationship banking."

