

A 'Pachanga' With A Purpose Party shows vigor of Hispanic community

By Rona Kobell | Sun reporter
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When Enrique Carrillo and his wife moved to the area two years ago from Detroit, they had one non-negotiable requirement: Their new house had to have a backyard large enough to host the couple's Pachanga Cubana.

And so yesterday, for the second year in a row, a bit of Cuba found its place deep in the Ellicott City woods. Politicians mixed with bankers and business executives to drink mojitos and discuss how they could be of better service to the region's growing Hispanic community.

The word pachanga means "party" in Spanish, and the atmosphere was certainly festive, with guests gathered under tents on the Carrillos' verdant lawn and the smell of mint from the mojitos pervading the air. But for the Carrillos, there was another reason to invite people over on a Sunday afternoon for Cuban sandwiches and croquettes: the opportunity to make inroads in a community that is becoming economically powerful in the region. It was hard not to notice the event's sponsor, Chevy Chase Bank, where Carrillo works as the director of Hispanic banking.

"These events are a great opportunity to reach out to the Hispanic community," said Marta Brito Perez, who used to be the director of human relations for Montgomery County but now works for a Delaware-based drug company. "There is great economic potential, so understanding how to reach the community is a must."

Perez was using her time at the party to connect with some old and still-influential friends: former Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, who says he's been "a Prince George's guy" ever since taking a job at the University of Maryland, College Park a year ago, and Del. Victor R. Ramirez, a Prince George's County Democrat. Perez left Cuba when she was 14 and said she was too young to participate there in political pachangas - gatherings where candidates could make their case among friends, barbeque and salsa music. But she was happy to attend yesterday's party, if only to catch up on political gossip.

In the basement, the consul general of Bolivia, Oswaldo Cuevas Gaete, asked Terry Cole, Chevy Chase Bank's marketing director, if the bank could make it easier for natives of his country to bank there. Some suggestions included letting Bolivians use their home country's identification cards to access accounts, and making it easier to send money back to Bolivia for tuition payments and other transactions.

For the Bolivian community, which is largely based in Northern Virginia, Chevy Chase is not the primary bank, Cuevas Gaete said. But he appreciates the inroads the bank has tried to make in the community, particularly since Carrillo was hired.

Those include 26 branches where staff speaks Spanish, and Spanish literature on opening accounts is available, too.

"Enrique really is incredible at reaching out to people in the community," Cole said. "In a very short time, he's made some connections in Greater Washington."

Carrillo has an impressive group of personal friends. Among them are the head of the Greater Washington Board of Trade and the special agent in charge of the FBI in Washington. They were among the 150 or so people who dropped in to the event yesterday for traditional Cuban food, including fried plantain, slow-roasted pork, beans and rice, and shredded beef with green and red peppers.

Carrillo, who describes himself as "made in America with Cuban parts," said he works on the guest list long before the event, focusing on bringing together a mix of people and cultures. He was born in the United States to Cuban parents; his wife, Maria, grew up in Cuba.

A networking event like this one would typically be held in a conference room or hotel, but Carrillo wouldn't hear of that for his pachanga. It belongs here, with bartenders mixing mojitos poolside and everyone relaxing.

"I'm a Cuban-American, so it's important for me to invite people to my home," Carrillo said. "You want people to be comfortable. And what better setting than this?"



Natalia Pabon (left) serves Jesus Moreno (center) and Susan Aguilar during Pachanga Cubana. The event's attendees included politicians, bankers and business executives.. (Sun photo by Kenneth K. Lam / May 18, 2008)