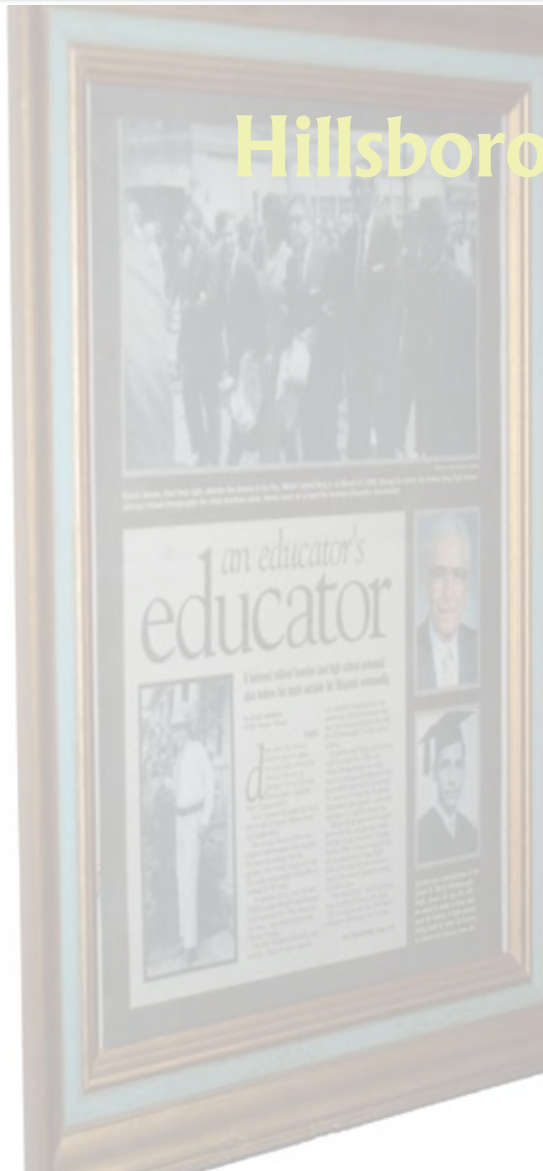




*Braulio Alonso*

## Hillsborough Remembers

Distinguished administrator and educator, Braulio Alonso has roots in Ybor City and presents us with a unique perspective of growing up in the Spanish-American community and its impact on his life in education. Alonso was interviewed by Angela Reeder on July 17, 2001.



*My name is Angela Reeder (AR) and I will be interviewing Braulio Alonso (BA) on July 17, 2001 in Tampa, Fl, at Jan Kaminis Platt Regional Library.*

**Angela Reeder:** *Braulio Alonso, tell us little about yourself?*

**Braulio Alonso:** I was born in Tampa, Florida eighty-four years ago and my father was born in Spain and my mother was born here of Spanish parents. My grandparents had settled in Thomasville, Georgia and then moved to Tampa, and that's my mother side. So that uh, all of my ancestors are Spanish and I grew up in Ybor City. I was born in Ybor City, which was a community of great uniqueness.

***It made it a unique, very unique community***

This is the only community in the entire United States with three or four different ethnic groups lived next door to each other. The pattern in the rest of the United States is that the Irish settled one place, the Italians settled in another, the Jews settled in another, the Russians settled in another. In Ybor City, the Cubans, the Spaniards, the Italians, Sicilians and some Romanian Jews settled in Ybor City and they lived next door to each other. It made it a unique, very unique community, because it afforded us to learn other languages as the same time we were growing up.

**AR:** *Can you talk about, more about the Spanish like you have people, there are people that don't want to be classified as Hispanics, Latinos, or Spanish?*

**BA:** When I grew up, we did not classify ourselves as Latinos or Hispanic or anything else. We grew up in a community where we considered

ourselves as the children of immigrants. We considered ourselves Spanish Americans. The Cubans considered themselves Cuban Americans. The Italians considered themselves as Italian Americans. It was not until lately, way back in the '70s that the term "Hispanic" had become so overwhelming, that it took in different ethnic groups that really had no little relationship to each other, enabling all under one label simply because they came from the language of Spanish.

When I was president of the National Education Association, the term Hispanic became into effect and the organization felt, "Gee, we'll be the largest organization in the world, or

rather in the United States, that has a Hispanic leader. I didn't qualify because my father was born in Spain. The Hispanic designation that this government has is for those that of Latin American origins. Isn't it amazing that those who came from Spain are not Hispanic, can't be classified as Hispanic, but those who came from Latin America do. Now the term Hispanic is all-encompassing. And uh, experience throughout the country is that people from Columbia would like to be called Columbia Americans, people from Argentina, Argentinean Americans, people from Cuba, Cuban Americans. But the term is of such great use today that it's pretty difficult to eliminate it and classify people according to their points of origins.

**AR:** *You mention that you were uh, you came from Ybor and that's where you lived. Did your parents work in the cigar factory?*

**BA:** My, my parents worked in the cigar industry. And, uh, they thought that the best way to succeed in this country was to learn the language of the country and, secondly, to go as far one could go in school. And my father emigrated from Spain, not because of political reasons, but because of economic conditions and this country offered the economic ladder for ascent. And so they felt very, very, my parents felt very, very strongly that we should learn the language of the country and that we should also do everything we could to succeed in school. If I were to come home and say that some teacher, uh, didn't like me or didn't treat me well, the question would be, "When you go out to work and your boss doesn't like you, doesn't treat you well, what are you going to do? Quit?" These are lesson in life that one must appreciate. I'm very thankful for my parents for that.

English, Spanish, and Italian, which has been of great benefit to us.

**AR:** *You mentioned that your parents, that education was a very important foundation in your family? Did they believe in education?*

**BA:** My family, my family had great belief in education. You remember that my father and my mother's parents came from Spain and they came because of economic conditions, not because they were dissatisfied with the Spanish government or the Spanish people. But this was, to them, the land of opportunity and they realized that the only way to succeed is to be educated. That the way to climb up the ladder of economic success is education and they stressed it very, very, very much. And I, I grew up with the idea that I had to complete school no matter what. There was no

***the way to climb up  
the ladder of economic  
success is education***

Another uniqueness is that we belonged to the Centro Asturiano. The ethnic groups here formed their own clubs. The Spaniards had two of these; Centro Español, the Centro Asturiano. Asturia is province of northern Spain and those from that province formed their own club, Centro Asturiano, which still exists on Palm Avenue and Nebraska. I went to school on Saturdays at Centro Asturiano at that time to learn Spanish. My friends did. I felt it just a normal thing if we went to school on Saturdays to learn about Spanish. I'm thankful we did, because I became fluent in Spanish. But you need, Ybor City offered another unique opportunity. While the lingua franca on the street was Spanish, there were a lot of Italian friends who spoke Italian or Sicilian, and so we picked it up in the streets and we grew up learning

and, if or but; this was it. And, you will find that the Europeans who came to this country as different ethnic groups all, all believe in the same thing, all believe that the education was the foundation for it.

And you know, we had something in this country that is extremely unique. The greatest Affirmative Action Program this country has ever had is the public school system. People of different religions, different ethnic groups, different colors, different morés, all went to the one institution that was prepared to take them in,

regardless of where they came from, and that was the American public school system. I consider it, and it's not my phrase, I've read it several

times, that the greatest Affirmative Action Program this country has ever had, and still has, is the American public school system.

**AR:** *Considering how, how hard it was for uh, blacks or African-Americans during that time, o you think you had a hard time as well as going to school and getting your education?*

**BA:** Oh yes, we, we were generally looked upon as Latinos and, therefore, different. But the worst thing the black has is the color. The identification is immediate. When I was growing up we had blacks, Cuban blacks, and whites living more or less in the same neighborhoods. When the Cubans came here, they formed the Cuban Club, of blacks and whites, but Florida law prohibited from there, for them to belong to the same club. So they separated and they had the Cuban Club and they formed the club called Martí Maceo, named after the Thomas Paine of the Cuban Revolution, who was, of course, José Martí, and the black general named Maceo. So they formed their own club and it still exists. That club exists on 7th Avenue and 13th Street. And they had to separate because Florida Law prohibited them from being together.

You may be interested to know that um, what is now Columbus Drive and about 20th Street, the Catholic Church had started a school for black students. And they had to stop because Florida Law prohibited the white teachers from teaching all blacks students. And so, eventually they won the fight, but nonetheless, it was back in uh, 1914, 1915 when it occurred.

Uh, yes, we've had a lot of discrimination, but the discrimination we uh, we had was minor in comparison to the other. It didn't bother me. I was, uh, luckily, God favored me, that I was a good student

and so when I went to high school I was Valedictorian of the school. I had gone to a Catholic school for eight years. I was familiar in Latin. I had a lot work, so I went to high school. I decided that I would use a three-four syllabus word when, instead of one, and I would use a lot of cognitive, foreign words, like, next to last, is very common, penultimate. And I never used next to last, when penultimate would do. And it's a word, and if it's a paragraph before next to last, I would say anti-penultimate and continue that way and have people gasping. So it, I used that as a basis for, before, before, well, before the semester was over, they were all asking me for help. But the point is, yes, we were discriminated against, but it was a minor discrimination, a very minor discrimination, in comparison to the blacks.

**AR:** *Let's talk about your high school. What high school did you go to?*

**BA:** I went to Hillsborough High School.

**AR:** *Hillsborough High?*

**BA:** I graduated in 1935 as Valedictorian.

**AR:** *So when you were in school what, what was your, what did you want to go to college and become? Was it a teacher, did you know at that time--?*

**BA:** Nope, nope. I wanted to become a doctor and when I graduated from high school in '35, it was in the midst of the Depression. I got a full scholarship to the University of Tampa. It was a working scholarship and uh, I stayed there because I had a job. I was making twelve dollars a week working at an establishment in Ybor City where they had a little gambling at the back. It was different times in the '30s and so, I was able to support

myself, partially to help my parents and still go to school.

When I graduated in '39, I was gonna' go to medical school and I had been accepted by Tulane University, but they wanted twelve hundred dollars. I couldn't have raised twelve hundred dollars if I had sold everything I had and my parents had sold everything they had. That was in the midst of the Depression in the '39. Uh, but Tulane said, "We'll give you a couple of years." Remember, at that time, scholarships for Hispanics and minority groups did not exist. Uh, and the principal at Plant High School offered me a job teaching physics and chemistry. I had majored in those. Teaching physics and chemistry, had lost his physics and chemistry teacher to the University of Florida. I said I've had never had any training to teach. He said, "It doesn't matter. I'll get you started," and he did. It was extremely helpful.

But, um by the end of two years, I still haven't, hadn't saved up that much money, but something occurred that changed my entire life plan. In 1939, the war in Europe started. In early '41, Congress, by one act, by one vote, passed a draft, to draft young men into the military service for a period of six months. But in order to do that, they had everybody registered and everybody was given a number during registration and then they had a lottery. And according to your number, it indicated when you went into the service. The only lottery that I have ever won is the one that inducted me into the military service in September of 1941 [laughs] for six months. But in December 7, '41 we got into the war after the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor. So that six months turned into four and a half years. When I got out of the service, it was a different, different time entirely.

*AR: When you got out of the service, what made you want to ....?*

**BA:** When I came out of the service, the Superintendent asked me to start a program, under Federal Funds, for on-the-job training of veterans. And so I became head, under the school system, of ah, on-the-job training for veterans, in which we got establishments to accept veterans for training. They establishment was subsidized partially by the Federal Government to train these people. Um, that included the Union training for apprentices. It included uh, manufacturing places, anyone who wanted to take a veteran and train them, and possibly keep them there, if they had a job for him and succeeded.

So, hundreds were trained that way and many, many, many of 'em kept with the same company that, uh, hired them. The Tampa Electricity Company was one of them that hired a great number and kept them. The Tampa Gas Company, at the time, did the same thing. And we had a lot of organizations that, after they trained the people, kept them. And concomitant to that, what did you do with the veterans that had not finished education? So the Superintendent asked me to see if I could find out what to do about it. And to consult, with consultations with the Department of Education in Florida, and with the help of the school principals, and the school board, and the Superintendent, we established a night school for veterans. And, uh, we accepted a lot of their experiences, but certain things, they had to have a course in American History, they had to pass a basic math test. Uh, things that, those who had been in high school and gone to the service could qualify by going into classes and it was in an accelerated basis. We took, we taught the important basic things that they had to know. Remember, these people had a wealth of experience that

most teenagers did not have at that time.

And, uh, that grew and grew and grew and, it became, we had classes in various schools throughout the state, rather, throughout the county and the veterans would go in at night. We had, we hired qualified teachers that taught during the day to carry through at night. And it was agreed that if a person that had been, lets say Hillsborough High School or Plant High School and graduated from this school, then he would receive the Hillsborough or Plant diploma. And then we'd instituted the GED test ,so that they couldn't complete this, at least their experiences and others would allow them to get a GED. That grew into uh, what we now have, the non-high school education program. Then from that, I got tired of working at night and so I became President, I mean, principal at West Tampa Junior High School.

**AR:** *Talk about your experience as principal. What was, were the challenges the same or was it different.*

**BA:** What?

**AR:** *The challenges, like, you being a principal from teaching?*

**BA:** Well I had, I had taught and had been an administrator and when I went to West Tampa Junior High School, it was a different situation. But if you treat a teacher with dignity, if you become a facilitator for their teaching, if you allow, if you allow them to teach without interrupting them all the time, If you become a person that a teacher would look to for help, then you can become successful. And after that, I become principal at West Tampa Jr. High School, I mean at Jefferson High School, the old Jefferson High School and I was there

from about '57 to, uh, '63. That was the most enjoyable high school or school I've ever been in, in my life.



The students were sons of people that I grew up with, young men and young women I grew up with, and they were very cooperative. It was a school, that they all wanted to succeed. They thought that if we are going to beat the world, we got to go to school. They had the same, the same background their grandparents and the same background as my grandparents and parents had. They wanted their children to succeed and they tried, they tried hard. And if anyone did something wrong, all I had to do was pick up the phone and call the parents, and that was the end of the problem. That was the end of the problem. I had never worked at a school that was that good to mange, and were so appreciative things.

But I think greatest thing I did, I had been in the service, to go back, I had grown up in Ybor City where Cuban whites and blacks and others had treated each other as friends. We realized that there was a point in which the law wouldn't permit certain associations. But during the World War II, I remember in December of '44, the same day the Battle of the Bulge

started. The Germans had attacked in Italy where I was. We had been taken off the line for, oh, maybe two weeks before that, 'cause we'd been in the line for a long time. I was a captain, uh, artillery commander at that time.

The black troops that had been in Leghorn, Livorno, were little, had very little training, came in and took our positions. I mean, they had our artillery weapons, they had, I think and they were, I mean, they attacked in Italy just as they had in the Battle of the Bulge. It was not as massive as the Battle of the Bulge, but they, they wanted to keep the troops occupied there, so they couldn't go off to Germany to help. The black troops did well, when you consider the little training they had. They did very well. We were called out and we relieved them in about three or four days. But I thought gee, well, you know, they did, they did the same job we did.

And, when, when I become president of the local Teacher Association in the early '50s, we met at different times. I mean, we had a local black teacher's association. We had a local white teacher's association, met differently and yet, when we all met together as a group, it didn't make any difference. So, with the help of several others, we decided, "Why don't we just meet together?" and, uh, we asked them, uh, to meet with us. They meet with us and that was the end of that. I mean we then had one local mixed integrated organization.

***When I become president in the 1966, we had a million members and we represented everything***

When I become president of the Florida Education Association we had a lot of black teachers in the Florida Education Association, but they had a black organization in Miami. So we worked out an agreement, "Why don't

we just combine them both?" and there was no problem. I mean people said it can't, can't be done, but we did it, nobody protested. So that it was a question of teachers were teachers. It was a lot different than, than others and then we did the same thing in the National Educational Association. We united the American Teachers Association with the National Educational Association. So, I've been involved in that area for a long time and that's one of my probably one of my greatest achievements, that I'm familiar with. But, those are the things you do as you go along, to get along and don't think about them.

**AR:** *Let's talk about the, what is it, the NEA? How did it all get started and what...?*

**BA:** Well, the National Education Association uh, started in 1857. It started as a teachers' organization and over the years, uh, it grew stronger and stronger and began to represent teachers. When I become president in the 1966, we had a million members and we represented everything, we were in every state of the union, plus the District of Columbia. There was a rival organization called the American Federation of Teachers, that was completely unionized. But over the years, the nature of National Education Association became not only a representative of teachers, but also engaged in collective bargaining and engaged in trying to get for teachers, better working conditions, better

salaries and so forth. Today, it's two million, six hundred thousands members. It is the largest union in the United States and it is an effective speaker for teachers. It, uh, it's always lobbying for teachers in Congress. To

give you an example: when I was president of the National Education Association, like every other president of the organization, we lobbied in Congress for things for teachers.

Sometimes, Presidents proposed things that we like and we support. Sometimes they proposed things we don't like and uh, we object to by appearing in Congress and organizing, organizing our people throughout the country. We don't ever accuse a President of being bad. We don't ever accuse a President of being, doing things to destroy things. We just think that what he proposed at that time, we don't like.

And so, during the Nixon Administration, he had proposed things that would have been absolutely disastrous for teachers. He didn't want them to have the right to bargain, he didn't want them to have to certain things that we take for granted today. So, I, like other presidents before me and after me, said, "We don't like this and we urge you not to vote for this, because of the following reasons." We never attacked the President or the person proposing, we attacked the thing.

Well, later on, I found out that I, and others like me, were checked every year by the Internal Revenue Services. It became a joke. I mean, we weren't that rich and I had receipts for everything. I found out later, after the fall of Nixon, that we were on the enemy's list. My name was on the enemy's list. Why was I on the enemies list? Because I, I lobbied for things that he had proposed that he wanted, I guess things that he had supposed, he wanted passed. That was an experience of being on the enemy's list. Now I would, as a matter of pride after it came out, but the NEA is a representative of teachers, who tries everything possible to get better

working conditions for teachers, to improve education for the betterment of the children of this country.

*AR: How much do you think the education has changed. Do you think that the education is changing for the better?*

**BA:** Well, education has changed considerably 'cause, because the nature of society has changed considerably in this country. Uh you have as good of an education system as you want to pay for or agree to. Whether we have been successful, look at the achievements of this country. I don't care what you look at. Most of the people who've succeeded in doing these things have been brought up in the public education system. It used to be, when I, when I first started teaching...and let me give you an example: back in '39, just like, I didn't have the money to go to med school. I taught physics and chemistry. I had had not much experience as a teacher. In fact, the principal and others helped me a lot and taught me a lot of things, but I taught physics and chemistry.

At that time, we had the high school separated into three aspects. We had the college prep students who already had separated themselves, because they were taking the course to go on to college. They were, they had already taken the mathematics and the sciences and so forth. We had the business school. A lot of people trained business courses, and we had the general education courses for those who didn't aspire to go to college or couldn't go to college. When I started teaching physics and chemistry, I had students who were completely motivated. They were taken there courses 'cause they needed, they were gonna to school, there were gonna to go to college. I could have put

assignments on the board and gone home and they would have done them.

On the other hand, I saw teachers with enormous experience, who worked very hard at it, who were teaching, let's say, math to students who had very little background in it. They worked twice as hard as I did. They did a better job than I did. But if you checked the test scores, my students did much better than theirs 'cause they were prepared, they could do things; they were motivated. The other could not.

better, if given the resources to do it and allowed to do it.

**AR:** *Do you think teachers are given the recognition they should have? Like, look at how doctors and lawyers are given?*

**BA:** Well teachers are not given the recognition and there's several reasons for it. There are thousands of teachers and there are only few ( ).

If it's easier to become a teacher, then the profession where it's more difficult

***Teachers are not given  
the recognition***

Now we have everybody going to school, everybody going to school. We have hundreds and hundreds of children of immigrants, who have come in from Latin America whose parents are not prepared, who don't have books at home, who don't, who don't have the background and don't have the basis for learning that others have, and we put them in with the others. Of course they're not gonna to do as well; they're just not going to do as well. Not that they're not as intelligent, but, we uh, if we took the cream of the crop and put them against any others, we would do very well.

Look what we've done with computers, basic programs. Look how many Noble Prize winners; they're all products of the American public school system, or most of them are, and they do well. The thing is that we are the only ones in the world that take everybody and, of course, not everybody can be great. This is, nobody, not everybody's at the bottom, but if you put them all together, you get an average and the average is not high enough. We've done a great job and, and we will do

to get into, gets higher respect. And when public funds are used to pay people, then the salaries aren't nearly as great as when an individual can go out on his own and establish his own fee. I don't ever envision the place or the time in this country when teachers would make as much as other special professionals, because the use of public funds will not permit it, and secondly, there's so many involved as against just a few of the others in comparison.

**AR:** *How much of an impact do you think you've had on teachers of the Hispanic community, of the Latin community? Like, do you think you've had an impact?*

**BA:** I don't, I don't know whether I've had an impact on the Latin community or the non-Latin community. I grew up within the Latin community, I had a lot of friends. I have had a lot of people who've said, "Gee, I'm, I'm so glad you were my son's teacher," or, "You did so much for me," and it's very difficult to judge impact. Maybe later on, but uh, you just hope that you did the right thing and will continue to do the right thing.

**AR:** *So do you think you've helped a lot?*

**BA:** Oh, I'm sure I did help a lot of them. I'm sure, but uh, whether it was enough of not is for someone else to judge.

**AR:** *Okay. Let's talk about some of awards that you were given: the Favorite Sons and Daughters' Award.*

**BA:** I have been involved in many activities. I, I was lucky enough to be able to help the Hillel school, during it's time of formation and they've developed into a wonderful school. I was lucky enough to be President of St. Vincent DePaul Society of our parish, which helped the poor and indigent, who came for help, bar-none, as long as they lived in our parish area. And, by the way, only one out of fifteen that we helped was a member of our parish. But as long as they were living in a parish area we helped them with paying for electricity, paying for water, paying for rent, providing food, providing clothes and so forth. And uh, I also, for twelve years, headed our parish Meals-on-Wheels program. So I've been involved in that area for years and I guess somebody recognized it and the County Commissioners gave me an award for that.

**AR:** *It says you were Chair of the USF Latino Advisory Committee?*

**BA:** Well, yes, the USF Latino Advisory Committee of South Florida has been a very unique thing and it has been a great help to the University of South Florida. Uh, I was it's second Chair and chaired for, for a while. Uh, our job was to introduce the Latino community to the University and the University to the Latino community. We had a President by the name of Borkowski, that came in and found out the University had no relationship with the

community. He said, "I see that you have judges and doctors, and mayors, and so forth, who are Latinos, and we don't have any connection with them. What could we do?" So a group of Latinos were gotten together to see if we could help. A survey at the University, for instance, showed us that in the College of Education, with is 154 full-time faculty and students, they were teaching about ethnic problems, but they didn't have a single Latino teacher. The same way to the entire University. They had no role models. We found that uh, scholarships didn't, they weren't considered for scholarships. So what we did, among other things, getting people involved with the community and now they're deeply involved.

We had great Latino groups involved the community and helping them in all sort of things. Uh, we established a scholarship program. We started with one program eight years ago. One, we decided that we all band together and provide one full scholarship. Suffice to say, that this past year, we had 85 full scholars. A person commits himself to four years of scholarship, to pay for four years of scholarship, but we also have a Latin groups, that is rotary clubs, Santiago, Columbians, others, sponsoring students. And we already have an endowment of about \$800,000 to use to carry through. And the only reason we don't have more than eighty-five students because it's difficult to get, to find that many and it's difficult to mentor them. Because one of the things we did, too, is to get people to mentor these students when they need help.

And that program has grown into the most distinguished program of scholarships we had. We have banks, and telephone companies, and Latin clubs, and the Latin individuals contributing money to this. And we could make it bigger, but eighty-five is a lot of people to find and to monitor,

but we're trying to raise money to raise an endowment of more than a million dollars to, in case somebody drops out, we'll still have money to support students. That's been a great achievement and I'm very proud of the role I played even though I played a minor part in it.

But involvement in the community is great And now there's another program that starting called Enlace, in which the Kellogg Foundation is supplying money, and the University of South Florida, the Community College and the school system are gonna get Latino students where they're concentrated in three schools, a high school, a feeder school in Tampa and in Plant City. And help students and parents understand why an education is important, have members of the community go in and talk to the students and their parents and be on call to help them with homework, uh, be on the call to help the parents understand what it means, help 'em select the courses that they need, and that's about to get started. And I'm involved with that as with several others. We have doctors and lawyers and retired teachers, retired principals, and others who are ready to participate and become mentors and helpers with...now these are the community involvement.

***AR:** How do you feel about statistics like CNN and MSNBC and the media saying that the Hispanic population is on the rise, and that they will be the majority in the year 2025?*

***BA:** I watch very little TV, but, uh, if the Hispanic group is going to be the majority, then that's an accomplished thing. If that's what the statistics show, that's it. Now, whether it will be useful for political power, for good or for bad is another factor. Whether it will be exploited or not exploited is another factor. But it's not that simple.*

They're not unified. Most of the Spaniards, in general, don't, that is the Spanish, don't associate too well with others. The Columbians feel themselves very important and don't associate with others. So, we have a great, and they all have an Hispanic name or they almost, all may have come from Latin American countries. But there's a difference between a Cuban and a Mexican and a Puerto Rican and an Argentinian. The only thing that ties them together is the fact they speak the language. But they're a lot different in the culture, in the way they approach things and so forth. So that, while people think of a monolithic Hispanic group. It isn't monolithic at all. It's very divided and one sector is vying with another sector. So, I don't consider it a threat to the country at all. It's not a monolithic group.

***AR:** Okay, thanks.*