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Lifetime Achievers

Our 15th annual Lifetime Achievement and Law Firm Distinguished Leader awards honor lawyers who have had an extraordinary impact on society and their profession.





BY BEN SEAL

CESAR ALVAREZ DOESN'T OFTEN STOP TO THINK ABOUT THE improbability of his journey from teenage Cuban refugee to the longtime leader and architect of one of the world's largest law firms.

The last time he did, he was walking past the White House on the way to dinner with the members of Greenberg Traurig's executive committee. He paused for a moment. "Boy, this has been a hell of a ride," he thought. When he made it to his destination, a patron handed him a \$5 bill and asked if Alvarez could call a cab for him.

Experiences like that have fueled him to always carry with him what he calls an immigrant mentality—"There was no way anybody was going to outwork me," he says. And they have also motivated him to become a force for diversity, to do whatever he can to keep others from feeling the pain of discrimination that he knows so well. Along with fellow community leaders, he lobbied in the early part of the century for the creation of two public law schools in South Florida designed to educate minority attorneys—Florida International University and Florida A&M University.

Alvarez was just the seventh attorney at Greenberg Traurig when he joined in 1973. At the time, he was worried the firm might already be too big for him. He was one of a small handful of bilingual Cuban lawyers practicing in Miami, so he was in high demand. In the early years, he says, he billed nearly 3,000 hours.

By the time he became CEO, in 1996, the industry was swept by change. Consolidation was taking hold, and Greenberg Traurig was faced with two options.

"One was to stay pat, grow where you are and hope that one of the consolidators decides you'd make a good office for South Florida. The second option was to develop your own consolidating strategy and be in charge of your own destiny," Alvarez says. "We were a little too insecure that anybody would want us, so we had to take the second choice."

Under his direction, Greenberg Traurig targeted three avenues for expansion. First, it eyed growth

states where a rising tide would carry the firm with it. As Alvarez says, "I used to run around with census data" to help determine destinations for new offices. Second, the firm looked toward financial centers where the capital buoying those growth states originated. And third, because businesses are so dependent on lobbying, the firm opened offices in key political arenas—Washington, D.C., plus the capitals of New York, Florida, Texas and California.

During his 13-year run as CEO, Greenberg Traurig went from 325 attorneys in eight offices, mostly in Florida, to more than 1,850 in 37 offices around the world.

Alvarez likes to think of the firm's lawyers as immigrants of a sort, who fled more bureaucratic firms, where decisions were made by committees and open compensation systems and origination credit created a caste system of winners and losers. And so, like him, they retain a bit of that immigrant mentality at a firm that operates a little differently.

"We wanted to be the largest small firm in the United States," Alvarez says.

Lori Cohen, a Greenberg Traurig shareholder who was drawn to the firm in 2005 in large part by the immediate trust she felt in Alvarez's leadership, says she and her colleagues had something like blind faith that he would steer them in the right direction. His personal story is reflective of the firm's, she says.

"It's intertwined with the heritage of our firm, the culture of our firm and the evolution of our firm," Cohen says. "It almost mirrors his path in a way—young and hungry, wanting to do better, striving to improve, striving to innovate."

Alvarez's career is in many ways defined by the unrelenting drive to improve.

"The road to success is dotted with a lot of comfortable parking places," Alvarez says. "I've been unwilling to take one of those comfortable parking spaces." ■



J. ALBERT DIAZ/ALM

Cesar Alvarez

Greenberg Traurig



ADVICE TO YOUNG LAWYERS:

"Young lawyers must understand that clients hire lawyers to solve problems, not just provide answers to legal issues. This requires that lawyers have an in-depth understanding of their client's business and operations. They need to be a lot more than just a technical lawyer, rather lawyers must know how to lead a multidisciplinary team to resolve major issues. In order to be a true partner, understanding a client's business is where it all starts."