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Hispanic Chamber's chief takes inclusive approach

Ramon Cisneros has a long history in Tennessee, dating to his days as a college student. Trained as an environmental engineer and in marketing, Cisneros first came to the state in the mid-1970s as an international student, attracted to the undergraduate programs at the University of Tennessee at Martin.

Cisneros met his future wife there but returned to his native Venezuela to start a career in the oil industry. Since then, he has dabbled in retail, computers and newspaper publishing. He also has signed on as president of the freshly reorganized Tennessee Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, a group of 65 Hispanic-owned businesses that hopes to foster understanding among cultures and spur business ownership among new immigrants.

The chamber hopes to mend fences at a time when the national debate over immigration and homeland security is at a fever pitch. Cisneros discussed his career and the chamber's plans with Business Editor Randy McClain.

You're a native of Venezuela who attended UT-Martin and later graduated from the University of Central Florida. Describe your American college experience.

In 1975, I came here to attend college. I was fresh out of high school. I stayed at UT-Martin for a couple of years, and then in 1977 I moved to Orlando, Florida, and graduated in environmental engineering from Central Florida.

I was in a very small town at UT-Martin. But because they had a big English as a second language program at the time, there were about 600 international students there, about 120 of them from Venezuela. At first, it was a pretty big cultural shock, because it's a rural area there, and the people weren't used to having foreigners around. But when we started buying in the stores, and things like that, the businesses started realizing this was an interesting group of people.

Right after graduation, or a couple of weeks later, I moved back to Venezuela and worked there for 11 years, until 1991. I started working with Exxon in the area of oil spills and environmental issues. I also attended college in Venezuela and got a master's degree in marketing during that time.

When did you return to the United States?

I came back in 1991, and after spending some time trying to find a suitable job I started work at the headquarters of Service Merchandise in Brentwood. I was import manager in the international department. I spent six years with Service Merchandise, until they went out of business. I was one of the last ones to leave in 1999.

It personally affected me. I was used to my work, but I was also ready for a change in my life. I was always one of those guys thinking of new opportunities, and how could I start a business of my own. That was always in my mind.

What is your profession today?

I came up with the idea of starting a newspaper to serve the Hispanic community. I started La Campana del Sur (The Southern Bell). I am president and CEO. We started with the mission of serving as a communications tool to the Hispanic community here, especially to help the people new to this country.

We started trying to get advertisers from among Hispanic businesses, because at the beginning the Hispanic community was doing a lot of business just with itself. We started trying to promote Hispanic grocery stores, restaurants and things like that.

The Hispanic community is just like any other one. It has needs to buy automobiles and housing and all kinds of goods and services.

It wasn't long, though, before non-Hispanic organizations — the banks, the car dealers and furniture stores — wanted to get a little piece of the Hispanic market. In Nashville, Hispanics are easily 6 percent to 8 percent of the population, or about 80,000 people.

That's probably larger than the population of Franklin and Brentwood put together.

Did your role as newspaper publisher lead to your involvement with the Tennessee Hispanic Chamber of Commerce?

That's basically true. Because of the newspaper, you have to be with the people and attend basically every Hispanic event and meeting. By doing this, I got a great knowledge of all the people in the Hispanic business community, the faith community and the nonprofits.

And the way we deliver the newspaper is through Hispanic businesses ... the grocery stores and restaurants and other places like that. So, I had, because of my work, the chance to meet all those business owners.

Somewhere in 2006 Hispanic business owners felt a need to come together and somehow work out something to make sure that relations between Hispanics and the non-Hispanic people in Nashville would not deteriorate.

That motivated many of us to get into the Chamber of Commerce.

How many members are in the Hispanic Chamber?

We have approximately 65 Hispanic businesses and a few more non-Hispanic businesses.

Most of our efforts to grow have been in the last eight months. I became president of the chamber last June, and we have gotten organized properly as a not-for-profit.

We also have developed new financial methods to make sure that we have control of our finances and all the members know how their money is being spent.

How have attitudes toward Hispanics changed since you returned to the U.S. in the early 1990s?

For many years, being Hispanic was no different than being German or being from Belgium; always somebody had some connection to the Hispanic community, and people in Nashville are very friendly. Whenever I'd say I am from Venezuela, I had people say, "Oh yeah, I used to work there or I visited there two times." There was always a connection.

After September 2001, people became more concerned about foreigners, initially Middle Easterners, but then it started expanding to other minority groups, including the Latin Americans. And then in 2005, it started with people talking more about the immigration issue and especially the undocumented immigrants.

It started to snowball from the talk shows on radio, and as it evolved, the politicians started using that as a campaign issue. Life here is still great, but it's not as wonderful as it was a few years ago.

What is your vision for the newly reorganized Hispanic Chamber?

Our mission is to be the leading voice in business issues affecting the Hispanic community of Tennessee.

What are some of your initiatives, the key programs?

We want to take Hispanic businesses and entrepreneurs and help them develop. At the same time, we want to help non-Hispanic businesses and ... provide them with a channel to serve our market.

For the Hispanic corporations, we are providing a lot of training and education in terms of how to start a business and promote it. However, we don't have the resources to have those programs done by the chamber. So, we use programs that already exist in the community.

For instance, in terms of training, we have come together with an organization called the Tennessee Small Business Development Centers. They have an entire assortment of training for small businesses. Some of our members have language limitations.

So, the chamber is providing simultaneous translation. If a Hispanic person who wants to start a restaurant goes to a small-business training class, we will provide the translation for them. The chamber pays for the service.

What about reaching out to non-Hispanic local businesses?

We are also working with the Tennessee Minority Supplier Development Council, which is basically an organization that helps businesses register as a minority company to pursue government contracts and learn how to bid on those.

We have to make sure government contracts come down to the size that small businesses and our Hispanic businesses can do it. When you contract the entire convention center ... Hispanic companies won't have the opportunity to do that. But if you set apart the building of the parking lot or the green areas or the maintenance, well, smaller companies will have an opportunity.

What else is coming up to create links between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic communities?

The voices of the anti-immigration forces are a lot louder. We want to give an opportunity to people to understand the other side of the story.

One thing we'll do as a chamber is provide mixers and social gatherings that create an opportunity for networking between Hispanic and non-Hispanic businesses and owners. We'll also get involved in major events that can be sponsored by non-Hispanic companies to get face to face with the Hispanic community.

For instance, on May 3 we are going to have the Latin Street Festival, a program we are putting together in partnership with Belmont University. We expect 3,000 or 4,000 Hispanic people to attend, so that's a great chance for these corporations to have a booth, a banner, or to be the sponsor of that event and to have that relationship.

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