

## HORACIO AGUIRRE

### BIOGRAPHY

Horacio Aguirre was born in New Orleans, Louisiana to Nicaraguan parents and holds law and political science degrees from the University of Panama. He began his career in journalism as an editorial writer for *El Panama America* in 1948, then became a founding editor and editorial writer for *Diario Las Americas* in 1953. In the course of his career he has held various leadership positions in the Inter-American Press Association, including a term as president from 1983-1984. He has served on the executive committee of the World Press Freedom Committee, and is a member of the Association of Cuban Journalists in Exile and the World Association of Newspapers. He is also a member of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the International Press Institute. Aguirre is active in the community of Miami, serving as the vice-president of the board of directors of the Florida Grand Opera and as a member of the board of trustees of the Miami Art Museum. He was also named an honorary president of the Latin Chamber of Commerce. He has received several honorary degrees and awards, including honorary doctoral degrees from St. Thomas University (1976) and Barry University (1997) in Miami, the Good News Award from the Miami International Press Club (1999) and the Great Floridian Award (2001).

SUMMARY

Horacio Aguirre begins by describing the beginnings of *Diarios Las Americas*, the current competition with other Spanish-language newspapers and the target audience of the newspaper. He discusses various topics covered in editorials, including Fidel Castro and Elian Gonzalez and the 2000 Presidential election. He also gives his impression of the future of newspapers. He talks at length about the Hispanic community in Miami and the Mariel Boat Lift incident and analyzes the United States government's position on immigration. He also describes the relationship between various Hispanic groups living in Miami. He tells why his editorials are printed in both English and Spanish. He describes his paper's endorsement of candidates and the impact endorsements have on voters. He concludes the interview with the contributions of *Diarios Las Americas* to the Hispanic community.

Horacio Aguirre was interviewed by Julian M. Pleasants In Miami, Florida on August 22, 2002.

P: Why did you decide to start a newspaper in Miami?

A: ... Miami,... in that time, almost half a century [ago], was a great inter-American city, and now is more than that. We considered that the era of the jet... [was] almost coming immediately, and if we print the newspaper in Spanish in Miami, we can use the airlines... to [have the newspaper] two hours and a half later in New York, two hours and a half later in Panama, four hours and a half or, at the

maximum, five in California, two hours and a half or something like that in Puerto Rico, and in many cities of the United States.... Also the cities in this hemisphere where they would have interest in a type of paper that is concentrat[ing] on all the news about the world, more especially inter-American news, including news of the United States, local news of the state of Florida and metropolitan area of Miami, and news of all the Latin American countries. It's a paper of general information about the world, not only about Miami or only about the Latin American countries. Our slogan is, since the first day, "For liberty, culture, and hemispheric solidarity." But after the hemispheric solidarity, we can include and we include always the human solidarity in all the world....

P: Is *El Nuevo Herald* your main competitor for circulation or is it a different kind of paper?

A: I consider *El Neuvo Herald* competition because they start[ed] fifteen years ago and they follow, not the policy, but the idea of *Diarios Las Americas*. We create[d] *Diario las Americas* because we knew at that time that Miami was not only a city with people who speak Spanish because they come here as tourist[s]. Miami used to have a permanent population [of] about 125,000 to 150,000 persons, but the idea was not only to cover them, [but] to use them as a base to send the paper to other places, and the qualities of those inhabitants who spoke Spanish at that time was a very high quality. That means [they] could speak perfect English... but they need[ed] to view more information about the Latin American countries or about the Latin culture....

P: So this was originally directed to the more educated Spanish speakers in Miami?

A: In certain aspects yes, but in other aspects, to try to educate people who [have no] education. In other words, in one way we reflect the public opinion that exists, and in other aspects we create public opinion through the quality of our news and our orientation. We used the [educated] people as permanent reader[s] from the beginning, and also we started to educate persons that for one or another reason were not well educated, and because [of] the prestige of our paper, they were reading the paper, they were learning through the paper about many things that perhaps they [did] not know before.

P: Where did you get the capital, the money, to start the paper?

A: It's the capital of the family.

P: When you started it, what was your initial newspaper like? How many pages? What was your circulation?

A: We start[ed] with eight pages, trying to concentrate in eight pages on the different aspects of the information that was necessary to offer to our readers.... But always we start[ed] with news, first of all, about the countries well represented in the community because it's logical that they [would] like to know what [is] happening in their own countries, but not only in their own countries, in the other countries neighbor[ing] them....

P: I noticed that in today's paper you had news items from Panama and Honduras and Nicaragua. I also noticed an article about President Vicente Fox [President

of Mexico, 2000-present] who had cancelled his visit to the United States because a Mexican citizen had been executed in Texas.

A: Yes. We have to offer this information as news to the people.

P: But by and large you put your paper to bed in the early afternoon?

A: No, no, no. Later than that. We finish with the paper about 3:00. Immediately, we send the paper to the airport to [put it on] the airplanes to [go to] the cities... and immediately to the stands and drug stores, and immediately to home delivery.... If you are a subscriber, you'll receive the paper in your home always about 7:00 p.m....

P: What is your circulation today?

A: Our circulation today is about 65,000 to 70,000.

P: How much of that is in the United states?

A: I can say about 90 percent because out[side] of the United States, you can buy this paper in the more popular and well known streets of Buenos Aires, but it's not for everybody – they have good newspapers over there.... But the majority of our readers are in the United States and naturally, in the south part of Florida....

P: When you started out, what were the ultimate goals for your newspaper?

A: The normal aspirations. Our purpose was to establish a permanent newspaper in order to inform, to reflect public opinion, and to create public opinion in accordance with our ideas, which are our ideas in the political field, democracy, in the civic field, in the moral field. We have without any doubt the purpose of defend[ing] the morality of our society....

P: What do you chose to write about in your editorials?

A: Many topics. For instance, the... visit of the Pope in Toronto or the visit of the Pope in [Poland], his home country, or it could be about the elections, the civic obligations of the people to read about the candidates, to ask about the candidates in order to be ready to vote for the proper persons. All the things that represent human interests, we cover in the paper.

P: Did you write an editorial about the Pope's John Paul's visit to Cuba?

A: ...I said that he represent[s] a lot for humanity, not only for the Catholic people, for humanity. He is [an] exceptional person.... We consider that he could influence, not in the government, but...the people [of Cuba], to show them the support of the Vatican and also the lessons that they could learn from his speeches, his homilies.... We were not against his trip, we did not criticize him for [this]. I criticize[d] Castro when Castro almost insult[ed] him in the first speech....

P: How many people work at the newspaper?

A: In all the departments? Probably about 200, including the circulation department and advertising department, shop and so on and so forth....

P: I noticed in the paper today there was a letter extolling Evita Peron [wife and political partner of President Juan Peron, Argentina] as a great woman.

A: Yes. That, I think, was written by somebody who wrote a book about her. And I will tell you something. I was the editorial writer of *El Panama America* at that time and I was not in favor of the policy of Peron against the democratic

concepts and against... the freedom of expression. In his administration, with the cooperation or inspiration of his wife, [they] only were publishing things in favor of the government. But that [does] not mean that if this gentleman sent us a letter or [wrote] an article about Mrs. Peron [that] we will not use it. We give the opportunity [to] him and the opportunity to our readers to see the other [side of the issue]....

P: Would you have any negative response if you wrote an editorial that might be critical of the Cubans in Miami?

A: The only thing that I can tell you this. I will write any editorial that I consider proper in accordance with our ideas and our philosophical concepts of the situation. If we [are not] accepted by all the Cuban readers, that will not be the argument... to change our position.... In connection with the embargo [U.S. embargo against Fidel Castro], I am in favor of the embargo and I know that... the majority of the Cubans are in favor of the embargo, but [there] could be important [people] that are against the embargo. As a matter of fact, we have, on certain occasions, people who write articles... with a high sense of responsibility that [do] not necessarily coincide with the editorial position of the newspaper....

P: What was your editorial position on Elian Gonzalez?

A: In favor of Elian Gonzalez under the concept that Elian Gonzalez was supposed to be in the United States where his mother brought [him] from Cuba. I wrote several articles about this because it's a matter of my professional [opinion] – I'm

a lawyer – the *patria potestas*, which is a concept of Roman law, is in favor of the boy, of children, not in favor of the father of the children. The government of the United States decide[d] in favor of the father, not in favor of the children, and really was in favor of Castro. That transformed this case in[to] a political case....

P: Do you see having Elian Gonzalez back in Cuba under a dictator as violating his rights?

A: Yes.... Cuba, [which was] obligate[d] to educate this boy under the communist doctrine where they do not have any civic rights, civil rights, democratic rights.... That is a matter of the constitution. When they put him in the hands of Fidel Castro, [they] are obligating to him to become a communist....

P: Since you can now get newspapers on the Internet, do you think there will be a time when we will no longer have a physical newspaper?

A: That is a matter of great discussion. I personally feel that there are many persons that will use the Internet, but will [not] accept the Internet as a monopoly.... There are concepts, traditions, including the new generations that will like to read a book and a newspaper. In many aspects, you can possibly feel, at least I consider... that the paper, the newsprint... has a soul....

P: You're saying it's tangible, you can touch it, you can hold it and therefore...

A: You have the impression that [it] has a soul.

P: There's a connection when you hold it.

A: ...You remember when radio start[ed]. Many people think when the radio start[ed] with a program of news, that [meant] that [it] probably [would] reduce or eliminate the newspaper.... They offer very, very good information in capsules, but they don't kill the newspaper. They use the newspaper, in many occasions, to include in their program.

P: I was talking with Tom Fiedler, of the *Miami Herald*, about the 2000 presidential election and an observer could find out exactly what was happening on CNN, but it took a newspaper to interpret those events and organize the information for the reader. You couldn't get that depth and analysis on television. Do you feel like that's one of the purposes of your paper?

A: I agree with it. In some occasions, the television and the radio stations are very good for certain types of information, but for instance in television, they only have three seconds, five seconds, [if] it's something large. In a newspaper you [get] more information....

P: How has the Hispanic community changed since you've been at the newspaper?

A: There is no [doubt] that the presence of the Cubans in this community have transform[ed] substantially the physical and cultural aspects of this great city of Miami, which was a great city before then, too.... At the beginning, half a million Cubans [came] over here under very well-organized systems with the coordination with the [federal] government, Freedom Flights and so on.... They contributed enormously to change...the physical and cultural and human activities of this community because Miami did not have [that] in that time. At the

beginning, in a few years they have [Cuban refugees] who were working in [in jobs like] elevator [attendants]. I remember... this case in the Columbus Hotel downtown.... I saw somebody opening the door, closing the door, and reading something.... I saw what he was reading in Spanish, a great thinker, Ortega y Gasset [Spanish philosopher, author of Revolt of the Masses].... Normally, the person who is reading will not be working in [an elevator], will not be reading Emerson too. Could be a nice person, but [he] not would be doing that. These half a million persons that come were the best type of persons in each social level, the best manicurist, the best barber, the best physician, the best lawyer, the best teacher, the best in each aspect of the social organization of the country.

P: You're talking about the Cuban exiles, 1960 and 1961?

A: The first half a million, but not only them. For instance in the Mariel [incident], Castro sent some delinquent persons, but [in the] many people that [came] in the Mariel Boat Lift, you found sopranos, lawyers, very, very good persons, high quality persons with good manners and so on and so forth, and they continued their studies over here and [were] part of Mariel. Many people think because Castro sent, infiltrated, people that he took from the jail and sent over here in order to discredit the community, despite that, they are very, very nice persons.... In my opinion... they were persons that – criminals were in the jail and Castro put [them] out in order to send [them] here with the honest people – but the majority of the people were honest people.

P: But there were criminals and people who had been in insane asylums, as well, in that group?

A: Very, very small proportion... I am one of the persons that know these exiles, you know. Including because I am not a member of the exile. I have more opportunities to identify them. The great majority of them are nice persons maybe could be a modest person, decent person, and good workers and so on and so forth.

P: That's very interesting because the general impression has been, even in the history books, that Castro really fooled Jimmy Carter [U.S. President, 1977-1981] and dumped all of his undesirables on Miami.

A: That happened, but not in [great] proportion.... [B]ut the majority, 98 percent were nice persons. That do not means that they were the best doctors, but decent persons.

P: What is your editorial position toward the United States government position on immigration into the United States?

I: There are many aspects [to] this problem. The inter-American solidarity, in [a] certain way, obligates the United States to open the door to the good people that are suffering tremendous tyranny or bad situations in their countries. We have to take into consideration that the United States [became] a great country through immigration, through Ellis Island in New York. Naturally, the circumstances change in accordance with the time..., but the immigration authorities have to be careful in order to investigate who is coming... to the United States.... But in general terms, I am in favor [of] the

United States, through special [well-thought] methods, permit[ting] people [to come] who will be important for this community.... If we don't have in this country people who like to go to certain places to [harvest] tomato, and you have to send somebody with a master's degree to cut the tomato [off the vine], the tomato will cost fifteen dollars apiece because you don't have people who like to do something like that.... Who will be in the tomato area doing this work if they don't bring the people from there to here?

P: So you would encourage what we would call guest workers who come over here and work and return to Mexico or their home country.

A: That has to be studied carefully because [it] could destroy the family solidarity of the people and the use of the human being like an instrument....

P: Do you think the federal government gives enough assistance to both the state of Florida and to Dade County to take care of immigrants? Because when they come there are schools, there's housing.

A: Absolutely no[t], and I will tell you something. The people come to this area, come to the United States and the United States has to assume the responsibility [for] them.... The responsibility for school, for medicines, and for everything is [an] American problem. It's not only Miami problem or Miami-Dade County problem. The government of the United States, [on] many occasions, [does] not help in accordance with the best tradition of this country to these people who are living here, organizing a new life without the support of the federal government. At the beginning on the Cuban exile, I will say that the federal government helped, [gave] important help....

P: Are there any political or economic conflicts between the Cubans, who apparently have both political and economic power in Miami, and other Hispanics?

A: No, in my opinion there is no conflict... If you have many Cubans, the many Cubans are together between them[selves] more than [they are] with the Nicaraguans. I am a Nicaraguan and in many occasions they consider me [to be] a Cuban because I coincide with them in many things. First of all, the solidarity of the Latin American people exists particularly through the language and the concepts of life. There was a great poet and philosopher of Spain, Miguel de Unamuno, who wrote a poem about the language that says: "The blood of my spirit is my tongue (my language), [and my country] is there [where Spanish is spoken]." He was a Basque from a Spain, but he considered that any country [whose] official language is Spanish and the people speak Spanish [to be] part of his home, part of his family. It's a very, very beautiful poem and something that you can hear in any Latin American country.... In the case of Elian Gonzalez, the... great majority of the Cubans considered immediately that they, as Cuban[s], were obligated, so to speak, coinciding with the feeling to be in favor of the status of Elian Gonzalez in order to [allow him to] permanent[ly] live in the United States where his mother brought, [with] tremendous sacrifice, from Cuba to here in order to live in a freedom country. They immediately thought, I am a Cuban, he is a Cuban and everybody [felt] Cuban, despite... the love to the United States and the recognition that they are a citizen of the United States. But in this moment they consider[ed], I am a Cuban from this aspect, for this purpose....

P: Why are your editorials in both English and Spanish?

A: Since the beginning, since the first edition, the paper has the editorial[s] in English and in Spanish. The great majority, very great majority of the readers [of the paper] are using the Spanish text, but we have the English text for the schools in the United States or Americans who [want] to know the point of view of a paper [which] is printed in Spanish under Spanish speaking direction and [we] suppose that you like to know the position of [a] certain segment of this community represented in *Diario Las Americas*..... The translation will permit you to know our philosophical position or logical position about certain problems. Even though you [do] not agree, you like to know the reasons....

P: In the election of 2000, did you endorse a presidential candidate?

A: Yes.

P: Who and why?

A: We endorsed Mr. [George W.] Bush [U.S. President, 2001-present]. The other question, why, [is] because we considered that was the person more identified with the ideals and interests in the field of ideas... with our community and his point of view [coincides] with our point of view. We recommend[ed] to our readers to vote for him, but that [does] not mean that we eliminate all the information about the others or [did]not use the space if they [want] to put in advertising or something like that from the other party.

P: Do you also make recommendations about local elections for mayors, for judges?

A: Yes, in the majority of the cases. When we have doubts about who is the best... maybe in some occasions we only say, every citizen has to study carefully the conditions of each candidate and vote in accordance with their opinion and don't forget the importance of the vote, even though the law [does] not obligate. We consider it a civic, moral

obligation to vote. It's not because the law requests this, but not to use the democratic instruments is a tremendous mistake because you have to exercise [them]....

P: What impact or influence does your editorial position have on voters? Do you think that you persuade them?

A: ... I don't like to be arrogant, but because the trajectory of our newspaper, our readers are extremely well-identified with the moral, civic, and philosophical position and social position of this paper. That represents an important opportunity in the sense that the people believe in the newspaper. If somebody [does] not have [the] opportunity to study all the cases, or has doubts, and we recommend, due to the moral prestige that we have, we consider that could help this candidate. We administer it in the best way possible, our moral and civic influence [over] the people. In which way? In the way not to recommend persons that we consider dangerous for the community or without enough merit to be mayor or to be a representative or to be a senator.

P: Looking back on forty-nine years as publisher and editor of this paper, what would you say have been your greatest contributions to the Hispanic community?

A: ... First of all, we have been developing the spiritual solidarity of them, not against other communit[ies], but in favor of their community from the base of culture, from the base of language, and from the aspect of traditions, always indicating that we have to serve the United States as a nation, [which] has been receiving us with great generosity typical of this country. This is a country of the opportunities for the fallen people in the world. Naturally, we were interest[ed] in cultivat[ing] in our readers and in our community the spirit of solidarity, the interest in our culture....

[End of interview]