

Leadership: A Personal Journey

I'm not a doctor, but a trip to the Rippe Health Center and Disney's Animal Kingdom did make me a little smarter.

By Chip Colandreo, Managing Editor, *FirstMonday*

You feel better just walking into Celebration Health. It's one part tourist attraction, one part conference center, and I'm pretty sure there's a world-class hospital in there somewhere. Our first "classroom" session of Leadership Orlando Class 59 began there, although the classroom environment was certainly improved with continental breakfast and casual six-to-a-table conversation.



Chip Colandreo

Day three of my Leadership Orlando experience was a day of presentations — and we started strong. Doctor Stacy Nelson, a former college basketball coach and resident professor of health, physical education and recreation at Rippe Health Center, taught the roomful of managers, executives, CEOs, husbands, wives, parents, sons and daughters how to handle the *Crucial Conversations* that touch each of those roles. Dr. Nelson's theories about improved health through relationship management and communications skill were innovative and eye opening.

What followed was a crash course in Central Florida biology. What makes this region tick? Where's the heart-beat and how do we take the pulse? What does its DNA look like? How do we know if it's sick, and what can we do to make it all better?

CVB President Bill Peeper, Daisy Staniszki from Orlando's Downtown Development Board, EDC Vice President Allan Jones and his colleague in the EDC's Film and TV Office, Jennifer Fuller Pennypacker, were our regional doctors for the day.

The highlight of the afternoon was a tour of Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge. You can talk about Central Florida tourism all you want, but only by seeing it in action do you appreciate the tremendous costs and benefits of our region's defining industry. Our group of 60+ professionals admired the exquisite architectural detail of this hotel/animal refuge and raised our eyebrows at the cost of a single room. Between visits to various exotic animal pens, we stopped at the pool.

Like I'd just done with the Giraffe and the African Flamingos, I threw my arms over the rail and watched. These animals — human beings — will always be the most fascinating. And these specimens, in particular, had each paid a handsome price for the privilege to stay and play in our own backyard. Why? I don't really know, but it's making me feel better already.

Living the American Dream

Leadership Orlando provides further insight to a community leader.

Imagine leaving the only home you've ever known and moving to a foreign county. Imagine first touching down at a foreign airport, not speaking a word of the local language, and being forced to fend for yourself.

Now imagine that you are doing this at 9 years old. Al Sarabasa Jr. doesn't have to imagine; he need only remember.

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— Al Sarabasa Jr.,
D&A Building Services, Inc.

Sarabasa came to the United States from Cuba in 1961. His parents, unable to obtain visas for themselves, sent him to America knowing they might never see him again. They wanted him to grow up in freedom. The priest that was supposed to meet him at the Miami airport never showed up, but a woman from the plane saw the little boy sitting alone. After talking to him for a while she took him in. Fortunately, his parents were able to come to the United States several months later, and the family was once again reunited.

Today, Sarabasa is certainly living the American dream. He is the president & CEO of D&A Building Services, Inc., the company he founded in 1985. He knew at an early age that he wanted to be an entrepreneur. After serving four years in the U.S. Navy he earned a business degree from the University of Central Florida and

started D&A. What began as a two-man operation has grown into a company employing 500 people and generating revenues exceeding \$8 million. D&A has been recognized as one of the top 100 Fastest Growing Hispanic Businesses, and *Hispanic Business Magazine* named D&A one of the top 500 largest Hispanic owned businesses in the United States.

Sarabasa is deeply committed to his family and community. He and his wife, Kathy, have three daughters ages 18, 13, and 8, and a 6-year-old son. Sarabasa has served his community as past president of the Latin Chamber of Commerce, which merged in 1991 with the Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce, and is today known as the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. He remains an active member.

When asked why he chose to participate in Leadership Orlando, Sarabasa candidly responded that he did so because a friend told him to do it. "I came to Leadership Orlando because George Hernando asked me to take the class with him," he said. "I wasn't sure what to expect and my expectations weren't very high. But I trusted George, and now that I've graduated I can honestly say it was one of the best experiences of my professional career."

Sarabasa says that he learned things about the Central Florida region that he never knew, even after living and working here for more than 20 years. The "hands-on" activities, the insights of fellow class members, varied class locations and excellent speakers combined to make the experience an outstanding one for Sarabasa.

i The next Leadership Orlando class begins on February 18, 2003. Please contact Shelly Davis at 407-835-2487 or shelly.davis@orlando.org. Applications and class schedules are available at www.orlando.org.



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