

Remembering Willie Miranda Marín



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

We recently observed the anniversary of the death of one of the best public servants in Puerto Rico's history, William Miranda Marín.

Willie, as all his friends and the people called him, belonged to an exceptional class of young Puerto Ricans who were inspired by Luis Muñoz Marín to devote their lives to public service with no other rewards than the personal satisfaction and pride of having contributed to raising the people of Puerto Rico from extreme poverty into higher standards of living that increased year after year.

He started public service in the Government Development Bank and became vice president of the bank during my first administration. When the executive director of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, then called Fuentes Fluviales, retired, I appointed Willie to that position, where he served exceptionally well. When the Popular Democratic Party lost the 1976 elections, he went on to head San Juan Cement, but when we came back into government, he answered my call to head the National Guard as adjutant general.

But the most important mission I gave him during my last tenure as governor was not of a military nature. We had come into some dollars through the sale of our long-distance telephone company to Telefónica Española, and our public schools—hundreds of them throughout the island—were in disrepair. I gave him the task of rehabilitating these schools, which he undertook with military zeal and efficiency. In record time, he came back to me with the statement, "Mission accomplished."

I ended my tenure on Jan. 2, 1993, and Willie went on to serve first as secretary general of the Popular Democratic Party, and later as mayor of Caguas. We had passed a law during my administration providing municipalities with powers over land use and planning, other powers from central government through delegation by compact, and taxing powers. This law motivated professionals like Willie to run for office at the municipal level.

Caguas, along with Ponce, Carolina, Guaynabo and Bayamón were frontrunners in assuming land use and planning powers. Willie courageously took the lead in Puerto Rico in using the power of taxation to create the sales tax, which came to be known as the Willie tax.

Using the powers vested in the municipalities, he transformed that city into what he called "el nuevo país," the new country. He wasn't one to complain about problems. He faced them and solved them. His initiatives went beyond Caguas

to the region. He was the driving force in the corridor that extends from Caguas to Humacao.

Within months of his death, the United Nations recognized his accomplishments, presenting Caguas, under the administration of his son Wilito, with the "International Livable Communities Award" as one of the 50 most livable cities in the world. The citation recognized the improvements in the city's historic center, the environmental initiatives throughout, but especially alongside the river that runs across the urban sector and the world-class park on the road to Aguas Buenas, plus Willie's strong defense of the arts and culture in the municipality.

This award is given by the U.N. to stimulate better environmental-protection practices and improved quality of life by developing livable communities. Along with Caguas, the cities of Norwich, England, Wicklow, Ireland and Chicago were recognized.

I remember Willie today, when Puerto Rico finds itself amid the longest and most painful recession, or rather depression, that we have suffered in my lifetime of 74 years. I remember him because of his spirit and determination to face any challenge, overcome any obstacle, to accomplish his mission.

I remember him, ravaged by cancer, during the last days of his life, when I visited him at his home. He received me not laying in bed as I expected, but in his living room, sharply dressed, and there he maintained a conversation, not in despair or anger over his affliction, but over important matters for Puerto Rico. This conversation went on for over an hour.

I remember that when I was preparing to leave, he—with obvious pain, but ramrod straight, and with a smile—walked me to my car, and after I took my seat in the car, came to attention on the sidewalk and saluted militarily, like the general he was. We both knew this was goodbye, that this would be the last time we would see each other. But old soldiers never die, they just fade away.

It is quite clear that the difficulties we are facing today in Puerto Rico aren't going to miraculously disappear. Nobody has the magic wand. There are no easy solutions to complex problems. But we must react and respond as Willie did—quickly—to our problems.

Behind any economic crisis, there is a crisis of confidence, of trust. Such a crisis needs to be overcome by forging a will to generate investment in the island and become the productive people that we can and need to be, and a strong determination by government, citizens, businessmen, workers, media, thinkers and civil society to pursue a strategy with creative arrangements with

the U.S. for going forward. A broad consensus as to this strategy is necessary.

But that isn't enough if we lack the example of leaders such as Willie to strengthen the will of those who suffer doubt when facing our challenges.

In order to go forward, the time has come to change the culture of victimhood that has come upon this island to a culture of self-empowerment. We have done this before, in the days when young men like Willie graduated from the universities with a sense of purpose, with a zeal for progress and social justice. We can do it again.

We must change from a culture of conspiracy, blaming a supposedly colonial situation, to one of exercising our powers to construct a future that is within our potential and capabilities as a people. We must change a culture of finger pointing to one of responsibility. The blame game is destructive, and we must become constructive.

To be Puerto Rican is to continue to reinvent oneself. It is to face challenges, such as the one we are facing, with creativity. It is to believe in dreams and what seems impossible. It is to discover in our hearts the means to realize those dreams. "*Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*" This is advice to the traveler in life written a long time ago by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado. I would translate it as, "Traveler, there is no course; you make the course as you walk." These verses seem written for us Puerto Ricans today.

To stand still is to go backward; to head in opposing directions generates tensions that result in standing still. This must be overcome by policies that can construct an enduring political, economic and social consensus so that we can go forward together instead of tearing ourselves apart.

In order to get this country moving again, in order to strike the forward course for our economy, Puerto Rico needs policies that will bring political and social cohesion to a broad spectrum of our people, so as to form the political will necessary to take our place in the competitive, globalized environment of today.

"*Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*" ■



William Miranda Marín

Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-76 and 1985-92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-67) and Senate president (1969-72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at caribbeanbusiness.pr. Go to [Sign in](#) link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com.