

Maurice Ferré for the U.S. Senate



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

More years ago than I can remember, I said goodbye on behalf of our grade school class in Ponce to Maurice Ferré, who was leaving us to continue his studies in the United States. Little did I know that several decades later I would be a

former island governor and would find myself in Florida campaigning for him as the first Puerto Rican to run for the U.S. Senate.

“It is a tough race,” Maurice acknowledges, adding it is “uphill all the way with limited money.” Yet, he feels that he is the only candidate running in the Democratic primary who can win the seat for the Democratic Party. Having been a state legislator in Florida and mayor of Miami for 12 consecutive years, Maurice is well-known in South Florida. He has to work hard to gain ground in the northern part of the state and in Central Florida where there is a heavy concentration of Puerto Ricans.

Political analysts expect that 1,100,000 Democrats will turn out to vote in the primaries on August 24, 2010. There are five candidates in the race. Three of them, including Maurice, are the stronger candidates. In order to win in this type of race a candidate needs 350,000 votes. Maurice understands that he can get 200,000 votes in South Florida and 150,000 in the central and northern parts of the state. There are some 600,000 Democratic Latinos. If just one-third of them turn out to vote and 90% of those turning out vote for Maurice, this would represent the margin of victory. Should that happen, and should he go on to victory in the general election in November, the U.S. would have the first Puerto Rican senator in its history.

The importance of this would be comparable to the appointment of Sonia Sotomayor to the U.S. Supreme Court. It would open many doors for the advancement of Puerto Ricans at the highest levels of the state and federal government. And, I have no doubt that Maurice would be a highly respected and effective member in the U.S. Senate and that in addition to his primary responsibilities for the state of Florida, he would be there for us in Puerto Rico when we needed him.

So I went to Florida to campaign for him in the Orlando area, home to the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the state. The Ferré campaign organized a luncheon with the leaders and many of the members of the Puerto Rican community in the Centro Borinqueño. Former Gov. Carlos Romero Barceló, who also went up to campaign for Maurice, participated in the event as did, of course, Maurice himself. The Centro Borinqueño is an impressive two-story building situated on



one of the main thoroughfares of Orlando. A life-size *garita*, or guard tower, protrudes from the façade on the second floor of the building, giving it the unmistakable sign of identity of the Puerto Rican community in Orlando.

Contrary to the widespread belief that the Puerto Rican community in Orlando is mostly for statehood, I found plenty of *Populares* attending the event. As I worked the crowd shaking hands in the room, some of the *Populares* approached me worried by the fact that Maurice is a known supporter of statehood. They were uncomfortable with voting for him because they thought that he would go on to the Senate to seek statehood for Puerto Rico. I decided to address the issue in my speech to them, which took place after lunch was served.

Maurice, I told them, had been and still is a statehood supporter. But, he is also a Democrat. That meant something beyond the fact that he was a member of the Democratic Party of the United States. It meant that he was committed to the values of representative government. In order to get elected to the Senate to represent the citizens of the state of Florida, he needs the vote of both the Puerto Rican statehooders and the Puerto Rican commonwealthers. If elected he would represent all of them and, therefore, when addressing the status issue, he would have to protect the rights of all of them to participate in the democratic process to decide our future status. The principle of representation requires that he should protect the interests—the right to vote—of all of his constituents. So independently of his personal preference for statehood in the status issue, he was committed to a fair process and to the protection of the right of all Puerto Ricans to vote for commonwealth or their preferred status.

In his remarks, Maurice agreed with these

principles. Many years before, he had shown that his belief in statehood as the best status for Puerto Rico did not govern his political behavior. Other principles carried weight. In the 1976 gubernatorial campaign in Puerto Rico, while mayor of Miami and a statehooder, he came down to Puerto Rico to support my candidacy for governor.

After the luncheon we went on to the Ocoela Performing Arts Center in Kissimmee where Maurice sponsored a testimonial event dedicated to Rafael Hernández. *Homenaje a un Jibarito: la música de Rafael Hernández* it was called. The theater of the performing arts center is large and it was not full to capacity but there was a very respectable crowd of at least 600 persons, all from the Puerto Rican community.

The event was an outstanding success. The main participants were Rafi Escudero and Prodigio Claudio and his group. They provided us with a wonderful afternoon with the melodies of

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Rafael Hernández. The audience was enthralled with the music. *Campanitas de Cristal*, *Silencio*, *Cachita*, *Lamento Borincano*, *Preciosa*, *El Cumbanchero*, and other songs by Rafael hit a chord of what it is to be Puerto Rican that binds all of us together defining our identity. Rafael's music speaks to what it is to be a Puerto Rican. No matter if we are in Orlando or in San Juan or Ponce, if you hear these songs you feel very Puerto Rican.

I felt that the concert was better than our speeches and that the crowd went home with Puerto Rico in their hearts and a vote for their fellow Puerto Rican, Maurice, in their minds for the upcoming primary in August. ■

*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 caribbeanbusinesspr.com. Go to **Sign in** link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com.*