

Remembering Ramón Luis Lugo



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

On May 5, we gathered with sadness in a Guaynabo cemetery near Suchville to say goodbye to a dear friend and my close collaborator when I was active in politics: Ramón Luis Lugo. His legacy remains imprinted in Puerto Rico's political and economic history over the past three decades, as well as the international art world.

Ramón, who left us at the early age of 56, never ran for public office, yet he was one of the best political tacticians and strategists I have known. Few would recognize his name or the important contributions he made to Puerto Rico. Few meandered as effectively and freely in the power circles of the two major Puerto Rico political parties, and the U.S. mainland's, as Ramón did.

Ramón was instrumental in the outcome of significant events in Puerto Rico's political history, including the defeat of a controversial federal status bill by Alaska Congressman Donald "Don" Young. In 1998, he was paramount in the creation of the "Cabilderos del Pueblo" (The People's Lobbyists), the group of local citizens who personally financed and successfully lobbied against a hefty team of government-subsidized Washington lobbyists in what resulted in the Young Bill's downfall. He strategized during the mid-1990s for Puerto Rico during the ousting of the U.S. Navy from the island of Vieques and was a key pro-commonwealth strategist in the several status referenda held in recent history.

My son, José Alfredo [Hernández Mayoral], was one of the young professionals Ramón recruited for "Cabilderos del Pueblo." Noting José Alfredo's persuasive abilities on Capitol Hill, Ramón advised him to run for resident commissioner in 1999. Ramón took on the management of the campaign in an uphill primary because the Popular Democratic Party's (PDP) gubernatorial candidate, Sila Calderón, was dead set against José. One night, when he and José were coming back to San Juan from campaigning in the Humacao district, Ramón felt ill and José took him to Pavía Hospital. That was the beginning of a six-month struggle with a second encounter with necrotic pancreatitis. He was operated on, in life-or-death situations, about a dozen, eventually ending up in Mass General, where he began a slow and painful recovery.

Ramón's health had been afflicted by severe medical conditions since 1988. In 2005, Ramón suffered a massive stroke, which rendered him hemiplegic, but it never hindered his unbreakable spirit, his commitment to his family or his strength of purpose to accomplish the duties at

hand. When any one of us mere mortals would have thrown in the towel, Ramón would rise intellectually, increase his productivity, and follow up with his ideas, strategies and plans. We never saw him lose his dynamism, clarity of thought, superior intelligence or fervency with his friends and those around him. After each health setback, Ramón came back with greater energy, insurmountable evidence every day to his family, associates, clients and friends that we were going to have Ramón for a long time. When most of us would have retired from confronting a physical incapacity, Ramón, from his wheelchair, reminded us, with admirable vigor and mental strength, how to move onward and push forward.

Looking back at his life, one can't help but be impressed by his unique political abilities. The stories of his successes, accomplishments and political battles are legendary. Ramón was a person of superior intelligence, clear mind and brilliance, with an intense tenacity in negotiations and in the design of political and business strategies.

The depth of his relationships in Washington was made clear when former President Clinton and current Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Mari Olga, Ramón's widow, to personally express their condolences for the irreplaceable loss of their dear friend.

In 2005, on his 50th birthday, he proceeded to briskly amass one of Puerto Rico's most important collections of contemporary art, which for cultural, historical and market reasons centered around German Abstract Expressionists. Ramón started collecting early on with Andy Warhol's Goethe—claiming the biggest collection of his sister Nina Luis' paintings, ranging two decades of her work—and continued with artists of the category of Damien Hirst, Sigmar Polke and Anselm Kiefer, as well as Georg Baselitz and Jorg Immendorf, and such younger daredevils as Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen and Jonathan Meese—Ramón's friend and regular guest in Puerto Rico. He traveled to Berlin to purchase a painting by German superstar Neo Rauch, which was first exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, before rehanging it on the wall of his New York apartment.

Ramón also championed young Puerto Rican student artists through Amigos de la Escuela de Artes Plásticas, and actively supported the Museum of Art of Puerto Rico and the Ponce Museum of Art. He hosted numerous activities at his apartment to promote various art fairs. He strongly advocated the internationalization of the Puerto Rico art scene, which he was convinced was underexposed and underestimated.

Spurred on by his sister Elba's vision and her several proposals to the government since the early 1990s to make Puerto Rico a cultural center

through a tailored tax-incentives program—an art and film-production destination where artists and intellectuals from all over the world would set up residence in a civilizing move to enhance the local educational system—in the last six years of his life, Ramón committed to their common dream.

Pallbearers at his funeral included figures of both local political parties, such as former San Juan PDP Mayor Héctor Luis Acevedo and House Treasury Chairman Antonio "Toñito" Silva of the New Progressive Party, all his close, dear friends and, of course, his 13-year-old son, Ramón. Toñito was deeply saddened. He had worked with Ramón sorting out important legislative matters. They were always very close, but even more so during the days that followed the accident that took the life of Toñito's beloved son; a grief from which Toñito has yet to recover. Ramón was there at his side with empathy and words of wisdom. Now it was Toñito's turn to console Mari Olga and Ramón's children.

At the cathedral, my son, José Alfredo, and Marcos Rodríguez-Ema delivered farewell addresses as living proof that on this blessed island, there are more things that join us than those that divide us, and Ramón's friendship was one of them.

Ramón never lost the passion imbedded in him. The intensity with which he lived his early life flourished with more maturity and knowledge at a later stage. To spend time with Ramón was to enjoy a fun, yet stimulating experience that would turn to history, political careers, social problems, even cinema and, his great passion... contemporary art. A whirlwind of grace, creativity, good taste and intelligence, he made you lose any notion of space and time.

Passion was the engine of his life—the passion for his family, his friends and clients, the arts, knowledge, justice, equity and loyalty. Even in the throes of incessant health problems, Ramón was passionate in his desire to live and press ahead. In his book, there was no time or space for complaints or retreat. With an uncontrollable passion, Ramón engaged us all in his projects, big and small. He moved forward with his plans, always ready to fight the next battle.

It was altogether fitting that his funeral's memorial card reproduced José de Diego's poem "En la Brecha" (In the Ramparts). ■

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.