

## Hispanics helping lead surge in start-ups

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From a mortgage bank in Boca Raton to a chartered jet service in Hallandale Beach, Hispanic entrepreneurs are employing hundreds in flourishing ventures in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

They say they were lured by a skilled workforce and easy access to Latin America, where many of them come from, do business and have investors.

"It's easier to find educated individuals to hire," said Andreas Arboleda, one of three Colombians who started Prive Jets, a chartered jet service, in Hallandale Beach.

Hispanics like Arboleda, who lives near his company and has a second home in Boca Raton, also are part of the burgeoning number of affluent Hispanics in South Florida.

Broward had the highest rate of growth of wealthy Hispanics in the last decade — up 168 percent of Latin households making more than \$200,000 a year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The number of such affluent Hispanic households jumped from 1,531 a decade ago to 4,106 in 2010, the bureau found.

Meanwhile, Palm Beach County's number of affluent Hispanics was up 74 percent and Miami-Dade 42 percent in the last decade, the bureau found.

Some of the entrepreneurs grew up in South Florida. Others are from the Northeast or from Latin America.

Carlos Cepeda moved to Boca Raton after growing up in the Bronx. He and a co-founder are overseeing a home loan company that has become one of the largest privately-held mortgage banks in the United States

Cepeda's family is from Ecuador. Others are Latin Americans who grew up speaking English and traveling to the United States. They've launched businesses in the last decade and managed to survive — and thrive — despite the Great Recession.

"The last 48 months, it's been extremely difficult," acknowledged Cepeda, a co-founder of WCS Lending LLC. "The world started collapsing [when the housing bust hit]. You didn't know if you would have a business the next day."

But WCS stuck to its mission of providing loans to qualified buyers, he said. The company has grown to generating \$2 billion in mortgages a year and employing 300 nationwide.

He and other Hispanic entrepreneurs have become adept at running businesses here, said Eli Butnaru, a financial analyst who recently set up South Florida operations for Mora Wealth Management.

"They understand the system very well" — whether they were raised in Peru or Pembroke Pines, said Butnaru, who grew up in Venezuela's oil country and went to the University of Louisiana.

"These guys are sophisticated investors. They know how to evaluate risks," added Mike Fernandez, a Cuban-American who started CarePlus Health Plans that was later sold to Humana. Today, Fernandez heads a private equity company that invests in health care and health and wellness start-ups — including in Broward.

Mike Tomas, an entrepreneur who is now president of Bioheart, said Sunrise was chosen for his company's headquarters so it could attract lab workers and researchers. Bioheart wants to use stem cells to repair damaged hearts.

"Bioheart's leading edge cardiovascular technology using stem-cell therapies was created right here in South Florida by a team of scientists who are passionate about the treatment of chronic and acute heart damage and peripheral vascular disease," Tomas said when his company won a Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce Technology Leaders of the Year award this year.

Many of the entrepreneurs also like South Florida's calmness. Cepeda lived about a block away from the World Trade Center when the terrorists attacked in 2001. He and Eric Wallberg, who was also in the mortgage business, opted for a clean start and to open their company in Boca Raton.

"Life is so short," Cepeda said.

South Florida is also a good location because it is convenient to fly to Latin America, Bioheart's Tomas said.

Tomas has been negotiating with a Mexican firm interested in investing \$2 million in Bioheart so it can do clinical trials on an experimental treatment using stem cells to improve damaged heart muscles.

Other Hispanic entrepreneurs are attracted to South Florida for its access to Latin America. In fact, South Florida is home to six of the 10 largest Hispanic-owned companies in the United States, according to this summer's ranking from media company HispanicBusiness of Santa Barbara, Calif.

In South Florida, Tomas said, "you know you're not ever too far from home — no matter where it is."

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