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## COVER STORY

### ★ 60TH ANNIVERSARY SOUTH FLORIDA PBA GALA



On the 60th anniversary of the South Florida PBA, more than 1,000 people came to Trump National in Doral for a Law Enforcement Awards Gala unlike any other. This celebration of the profession included many memorable moments and honored members whose efforts have gone above and beyond going above and beyond the call of duty. A look back at the event spotlights all the award winners, from investigations to patrol to corrections, and those officers who were simply the best of the best during the past year.

**14 pages of coverage of all the awards begins on page 16**

COVER DESIGN BY GINA CROTCHFELT

### SPECIAL REPORT: NATIONAL POLICE WEEK 2023



## Seeing the Light

More than 30 members from the Miami-Dade Police Department came to Washington, D.C., to honor and remember Cesar "Echy" Echaverry Jr. They accompanied Echy's family to view his name on the wall at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, as well as rising to hear his name during the Roll Call of Heroes at the Candlelight Vigil and National Peace Officers' Memorial Service. Several other agencies from South Florida also came to D.C. to honor fallen officers from across the country.

**National Police Week coverage begins on page 36**

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## THE PRES SAYS

# This year's gala was the best of the best



STEADMAN STAHL

Looking out from the podium at our 2023 South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards Gala, I saw everything that is great about our union, our profession and the people who work so hard to serve, protect, defend and support it. If you could sum up what I saw in one word, it would have to be “overwhelming.”

I even said that during my closing remarks, noting to the more than 1,000 people who attended: “You could have been anywhere tonight, but you chose to be here.” There were other events going on. They could have stayed home with their families. They could have gone to a movie. But they chose to be there in the great city of Doral on this night to recognize the best of the best.

Maybe you heard the story I told at the gala about the old cover of *Life* magazine I showed in a slide during my opening remarks. My son and I found it at an antique shop in North Carolina. It was from before the 1968 Democratic National Convention being held in Chicago, with the headline about law and order being a volatile campaign issue.



I thought it was kind of ironic, because next year's Democratic convention is going to be in Chicago. And I have a funny feeling that the theme of that is going to be law and order because the last two elections, we have seen that what's moved the needle is law and order. But when you read the *Life* magazine article, it is absolutely on point with what we're seeing today. One of the lines rings true more than ever, even 55 years later: “The foundation, the cornerstone of any civilization is law and order.”

We saw plenty of evidence at the gala how that is the case in South Florida. Looking out from the podium, I'm thinking that I wish we could bottle what happens here in our Miami-Dade County and Monroe County and sprinkle it around the country. I think we saw so many examples at the gala about how the needle is turning back in our direction.

The needle is turning back because of people like MDPD RID Detective Ricaurte Lugo, North Miami Officer Nickerline Montina, North Bay Village Sergeant Norlan Benitez and K9 Officer Marcel Ascaino, Aventura Detective Kenneth Sealy, MDC&R Officer Diana

Banegas and Bay Harbor Islands Officer Mirtha Ortega. Our award winners this year truly represent what is best about South Florida law enforcement.

And these are just the ones who emerged from the hundreds of responses our member agencies submitted from the past year that were also worthy of being honored.

Just a couple of weeks ago, for example, we had a Miami-Dade County fire truck stolen, and the guy goes on a multi-county car chase with the firetruck. It's not something we see every day. But we have officers going into burning cars with heat as intense as a bonfire to try to rescue victims. And we have officers saving a 14-year-old boy who was inches from jumping off a building.

So when I look out at the people gathered for the gala, I feel like this is what we are celebrating. Although I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that the gala is really two parts.

The first part is first and foremost. It's about honoring the fallen with the Rhett McGregor Memorial. In honor of the first Miami-Dade officer to be lost in the line of duty in 1895, we have that creed that we will never forget. And that's always going to be incorporated in every one of our galas, as we did this year culminating with presenting the McGregor honor to the family of Cesar “Echy” Echaverry Jr.

I am also so proud that we are celebrating that in one night, we encapsulated the great work from all of our law enforcement community, our dispatchers, our corrections officers and everybody that we represent.

So much to celebrate in one night: One of the largest honor guards we've ever had representing 28 agencies. And what we had more than I have seen in the past is a lot of elected officials from a lot of cities that we represent.

Sometimes, they'll buy a table, and they'll send people in their place. But they were there this year. County commissioners went out of their way to be there. And the state's attorney from both Miami-Dade and Monroe counties attended.

Also, Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava really went out of her way to be part of the gala.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



### SOUTH FLORIDA PBA

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She came to the first part but had to go to another event. You know what, though. She came back. She wanted to reinforce her commitment to public safety, which she did by taking a few moments to address the crowd and tell us in her own words about the great work our members are doing every day.

So standing up there looking out, it's a feeling of great pride. You see the different agencies we represent. You have officers who have great pride in coming to work. And even the rhetoric we hear, they put it behind them and move forward.

And the jails are full because we're not backing down. We are not going to give these streets back to the bad guys. The message is loud and clear here that if you're a bad guy, head out to San Francisco, stay out there in Portland, stay in New York. Don't bring that nonsense to South Florida, because it's going to be stopped at the border.

It takes a long time to put these events together. And you want to make sure you're putting on a program that your members will be proud of. And you want to make sure that it's worthy of what they do. Not just a night when you pass out some plaques and say, "See you guys next year."

It has turned into the type of event that gives us a couple things. For those officers sitting in that ballroom, seeing that many people from the community who have come there to support them, it's a morale booster. Those officers seeing their elected officials sitting there and gushing over them, I think that's so meaningful.

So as we come away from the event, we have reinforced that the purpose of the gala is to honor our fallen, honor our heroes out there and highlight what they do. We also reconnect the community with us and get away from the us-against-them mentality, which I think we accomplished on this night. And we made sure that the elected officials know when they allocate money to different programs, they are getting the best of the best. Not just in South Florida, but the entire country.



At the gala with, from left, Master of Ceremonies Alvaro Zabaleta from MDPD, Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava and South Florida PBA Executive Vice President David Greenwell.

It's one thing for them to allocate the money and hope it's for the right reasons. But when they see that stuff on TV going on in other cities and then see what the officers being honored at our gala have done, I think they feel better about what they're allocating to. And when they have choices between needing to buy more flowerpots or investing in some training for our officers, the scale's going to tilt our way for the officers.

Listen, it's nerve-racking for me to put on this gala because there are many moving parts. But it's a great team effort from everybody at the PBA to make sure I don't drop a trophy, miss a cue or do something to mess it up. Our executive board, our directors and representatives and especially our staff worked tirelessly to make this gala on the 60th anniversary of the PBA our best one ever.

It's just like police work. If you don't have good road patrol officers, your detectives can't do a damn thing. If you don't have good detectives, they're not solving the crimes. If you don't have good leadership



making sure that they put the good detectives in there, it's like a game of Jenga when you pull the pieces out. If you take too many of those pieces out, the whole thing collapses.

So again, for us, that's that thing. It went flawlessly because we had a great staff in place that can make everything a great experience for our members. And it's not just this gala. We have other events. We have a magazine that we put out that from what we were putting out in the past, it has certainly improved. It's been nothing but compliments. And I think it highlights even better that we here at the PBA are moving forward.

So all that's left to say is thank you for such a great night. It truly was the best of times.

**Steadman Stahl, President**  
steadman@sflpba.org





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# Traffic crashes kill



DAVID GREENWELL  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

I have personally seen and investigated too many fatal motor vehicle crashes throughout my career, including several involving police officers. During my time as an RID sergeant in the crime-ridden 1990s, we of course focused on and stressed officer safety. And yes, defensive driving skills are officer safety skills.

Multiple RID detectives were injured in crashes, and I'll never forget Officer Robert Vargas, who was the first RID officer killed in the line of duty on Feb. 7, 1997. Officer Vargas was struck by a vehicle that ran a stop sign while he was responding to a pursuit on a code three. Robert was only 29 years old, had a wife and two young kids and was a U.S. Army veteran.

A true hero taken way too early.

Motor vehicle-related incidents are a leading cause of line-of-duty deaths for law enforcement officers in the U.S. Most are also preventable. According to the CDC (<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/leo/default.html>), from 2011-2020, 454 officers died due to motor vehicle-related incidents. This is a third of all line-of-duty deaths, excluding COVID-19 deaths. This is why I was part of a team that created the Vehicle Operation and Crash Avoidance (VOCA) course for the Miami-Dade Police Department in 2014. I proudly still teach this course today.

It is super important to teach, and require, motor vehicle safety among officers — beginning in the academy and continuing through retirement, so they can stay safe while working to make

our community safer. My objective while teaching is to get officers to realize how dangerous driving is on a normal basis. Then when you add chasing criminals or responding to emergency calls, it is instantly a lot more dangerous. During the class, I ask my students to remember these three simple things: speed is your enemy, seat-belts are your friend and never drive faster than your guardian angel can fly.

Again, per the CDC in the last 10 years, on average, one officer per week has been killed on our nation's roads (50 deaths per year from 2011-2020). According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (<https://nleomf.org/memorial/facts-figures/officer-fatality-data/causes-of-law-enforcement-deaths/>), excluding COVID-19 related deaths, there were 1,387 officer line-of-duty deaths from 2011 to 2020, and 286 officer line-of-duty deaths were due to vehicle crashes (21 percent of total) and 114 officer line-of-duty deaths were due to being struck by a vehicle (8 percent of total).

Sadly, this month we added three names to the Miami-Dade Law Enforcement Officers Memorial at Tropical Park on May 4, for a total of 168 officers killed in the line of duty in Miami-Dade's history. Unfortunately, we know that there will be more names added in the future, due to the inherent danger of police work. However, the one area where we can best help our officers stay safe is in defensive driving — because traffic crashes are preventable.

So, as always, stay safe. If you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at 305-593-0044 or [dg@sflpba.org](mailto:dg@sflpba.org).

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# Informing on INFORMS



NIZAM "ISH"  
ISHMAEL  
VICE  
PRESIDENT

INFORMS is the acronym for the INtegrated Financial Resources Management System. Back on July 7, 2015, Miami-Dade County began to obtain proposals to replace multiple legacy applications that currently support human resources, payroll, procurement, finance and accounting, and revised the applications that support budgeting. This solution implementation would eliminate processes, redundant data collection, reliance on multiple tracking mechanisms and duplicative business functions between the many departments.

In February 2017, based on the final scores, the committee recommended the award of the contract to a company called Accenture. The fiscal impact was \$48,283,000, which includes a 15 percent contingency. In March 2023, Accenture needed to complete requested enhancements, which required additional funding. The taxpayers have now paid \$66,624,080 for INFORMS. That that is not a typo — since its implementation in June 2022, we have paid more than \$66 million for a system that cannot correctly perform the basic function of paying Miami-Dade County's workforce consisting of 29,351 employees.

From June 2022 to March 2023, the system generated 8,255 overpayments, and the county had to issue a few thousand off-cycle paychecks to employees. They had to place a moratorium on the overpayments because they had to be verified. Some were sent to employees for payback when, in fact, it was not accurate. INFORMS has also identified more than 100 defects in the system.

I was very vocal about letting our members enter OT up to the last hour of the payroll cycle on Sunday night. The county insisted on the lockout, stating that they need to stabilize the system. Well, the lockout has not stabilized the system and has only inconvenienced our members by not paying their well-earned OT in a timely manner. I understand it is extremely difficult to keep track of being paid your OT hours, especially when there is a lag in receiving it and the data is not there to verify the dates and times you have worked. Trust me, the county is tired of me calling them out in the meetings and sending them numerous email correspondences.

After the kickoff of INFORMS, all the labor unions met with

the county to express our dissatisfaction with the system and all the errors that were being created. At this meeting, I volunteered to sit in on a bi-weekly meeting to identify and speak about issues that were affecting our bargaining unit members. Since then, I—along with other unions heads—have been able to recommend more than 90 enhancements that are need-

ed. I insisted on the development of the "My Employee Information" tile and having that same information duplicated on the paychecks. It's basic information that we were used to seeing, like the supplements we were receiving and how many hours we will be forfeiting (use or lose) that we have always seen on the bottom of our checks. There was some pushback but, in the end, they knew our members and county employees needed to see this information. I also pushed for the payout of compensatory time to be done on INFORMS, as in the previous year, it was done via memorandum.

Some were lost and some never made it to payroll on time. I wanted the county to use this new technology for the ease of our members. But from the beginning, there were many mistakes, including our Department Personnel Representatives not being trained in the functions of the system, how to run reports and even whom they should contact if they needed questions answered.

I believe if the county could go back and think this migration through, they would have done things much differently and could have rolled this out much slower to the Departments. They could have even run the old system and the INFORMS systems side-by-side to ensure redundancy before turning off the old system. Every time modern technology is launched, there are glitches, issues and punchlist items that need to be fixed. No one could have ever imagined how poor of a launch the INFORMS solution would have been. I am hopeful that all the glitches with INFORMS stabilize, as there is no other backup payroll system for the county to return to.

I will continue to be the voice of our membership at these meetings. Please feel free to contact me at [ish@sflpba.org](mailto:ish@sflpba.org) or 305-593-0044.





# Leadership and supervision



JERMAINE  
LAWSON  
TREASURER

Leadership and supervision have many similarities, but some important differences exist. In general, you can lead in many ways without being a supervisor, but good supervisors often have good leadership skills. Top managers often have good leadership skills and effective supervising skills. Leadership has formal and informal elements, while supervising is generally a formal rule in management.

Some leaders have formal management roles to establish company-wide goals, policies and procedures and implement initiatives for the overall organization's success. However, some leaders can emerge through informal channels. They lead by example or motivate others without formal leadership position. Supervising is a specific job function in which you monitor and provide feedback and direction on the performance of subordinate employees.

Leadership has no inherent requirement that others should follow. Leadership is the creation of positive, non-incremental change through meticulous planning, vision and strategy. Workforce empowerment and adaptive decision-making also add up to the crucial attributes of leadership. Often, people relate leadership with one's position in an organization.

But leadership has nothing to do with titles, management or one's personal agenda. And it is not restricted to personality traits such as better vision or charismatic personality. It is a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others toward the achievement of a common goal.

Supervision is an essential social work function that involves controlling, influencing and leading. Supervisors are expected to take responsibility, be held accountable for the actions of their teams and maintain discipline. People in supervisory positions mostly make operational decisions for the day-to-day functioning of their team. This involves delegating tasks, ensuring policy compliance, evaluating subordinates, improving efficiency and providing support and guidance when necessary.

Effective supervision creates a supportive and positive work environment, as it provides space for frequent communication, problem solving and increased team cooperation. Leaders focus on creating a vision, inspiring others and adapting to change, while supervisors are more likely to manage a team based on preexisting organizational goals and guidelines.

But supervisors have to show up.

In a correctional facility, supervision does not start from the top down; in my opinion, it starts from the bottom up. If corporals, sergeants and lieutenants do not closely supervise officers at first-line levels, the inmates will have a field day.

Line staff supervisors are the foundation of supervision

within the facility. Line staff supervisors play a complex yet critical role. Line supervisors walk the thin line between two areas. The first is to keep a close eye on what subordinates are doing and provide the necessary guidance when needed. The second step involves them taking a step back to give their subordinates a sense of independence, while testing them to see if they can handle the day-to-day situations when dealing with inmates. Such supervision requires a considerate and mature personality.

I would love to see all employees do well in their respective positions. However, supervisors are the only ones with tools at their disposal to set goals and measure performance (in an annual performance review). But there is no formal way for subordinates to evaluate supervisors' work performance.

As supervisors, we are responsible for creating a comfortable work climate. Your subordinates know firsthand how well you are doing, since they work closely with you. In my opinion, there should be tools in place for subordinate staff to evaluate their supervisors, and our administrators should pay attention to what is said or written about supervisors' effectiveness and work performance.

This feedback should become part of the supervisor's performance evaluation and should be used to help the supervisor set goals for the year. I know some employees may feel uncomfortable evaluating their supervisor, but this should be seen as an opportunity to give constructive feedback.

It is safe to conclude that our high turnover (outside of retirement) stems from a combination of mismanagement, poor leadership and supervision. In essence, your leadership skills and moral compass have a direct impact on subordinates' careers. This is why having a great boss is the number-one wish of most employees, and often ranks above more vacation time and bigger paychecks.

However, some managers can inadvertently destroy the confidence of their subordinates. When this happens, it can permanently damage morale. Low morale can create employee insecurity, which ultimately leads to poor employee retention. Research suggests that effective supervision generates good outcomes for our subordinate staff; experience suggests that the consequences of inadequate or negative forms of supervision may pose a threat to workforce stability, capacity, competence and morale.

Please feel free to contact me at [lawson@dcpba.org](mailto:lawson@dcpba.org) or at 305-593-0044.



# Florida State Statute Section 112 and you



MICHAEL HELLMAN  
STAFF COUNSEL

A brief intro (or refresher) into your due process rights:

Florida State Statute 112.532 is commonly referred to as the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights. This statute codifies the rights that sworn employees have when they are under investigation by their respective departments. Some of these rights deal with the time before a subject statement is given to the Internal Affairs (IA) investigator, some deal with the time that the statement is given to the IA investigator and some deal with the time after the statement is given.

**Before.** The employee and their representative (which should always be a PBA attorney) get to review the entire case file prior to giving a statement. Some examples of evidence commonly included in IA files are paperwork, audio, video and the statements of anyone interviewed during the investigation.

**During.** Only one investigator will ask questions. The entire questioning will be audio recorded, or a stenographer will create an actual transcript.

**After.** The employee can obtain the file after the investigation is over. The department will notify the employee as to whether the allegations are sustained.

The most common example of an officer's due process being violated is when the department takes too long to finish its investigation. The statute states that no disciplinary action may be taken against an employee if the department does not complete its investigation within 180 days of the department becoming aware of the complaint. The investigation is typically complete when the department gives the employee a memo that expresses that allegations have been sustained and that discipline is on its way. This paperwork is typically titled "Notice of Pending Disciplinary Action" or some similar wording. Once the department notifies the employee of this, they have satisfied their requirements under the statute.

**What circumstances allow the department to go over the 180 days?**

The statute lists several reasons that the 180-day timeline can be paused. The most common reasons for tolling the 180-day clock are the following:

- If a criminal investigation is initiated, the time that the case is under review at the State Attorney's Office does not count toward the 180 days.
- If a state of emergency is declared for the department's area of jurisdiction, due to an event like a hurricane, the time that the state of emergency covers does not count toward the 180 days.

## 2023 Pending Grievances

This list represents the pending grievances filed at the various departments represented by the South Florida Police Benevolent Association as of **April 30, 2023**. The PBA legal staff receives numerous other complaints that are resolved by other means.

<b>DEPARTMENT/DISTRICT</b>		
<b>HOMESTEAD - CORRECTIONS</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>CITY OF MIAMI POLICE</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>M-D CORRECTIONS</b>		
ASSOCIATION	2	
CSB	1	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>3</b>
<b>MIAMI-DADE POLICE</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>MIAMI GARDENS POLICE</b>		<b>5</b>
<b>MCSO (DETENTION)</b>		<b>1</b>
<b>SWEETWATER</b>		<b>3</b>
<hr/>		
<b>TOTAL GRIEVANCES</b>		<b>15</b>

- If your scheduled statement cannot take place due to you being on vacation, or no attorney being available, the time between when the IA interview is originally set until the date that the interview takes place does not count toward the 180 days.

**If the department has taken more than 180 days to interview me, do I have to give a statement to Internal Affairs?**

Yes. Florida Statute 112.532 helps protect your due process with regard to potential discipline, but the Department still has the right to conduct a thorough investigation. As an employee of the Department, you are required to answer questions if the Department calls you in as the subject of an IA investigation. The statute says that no discipline can come from this, but allegations can still be sustained.

This is a very general overview of your due process as it relates to IA investigations and is by no means a complete explanation of the statute. There are many factors that can affect this, and if you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me or any of the other attorneys here at the PBA. We have extensive experience dealing with this issue, and we fight to make sure that your due process rights are protected.



# Thanks to the many helping hands



SERGEANT  
KENNETH  
HORGAN  
POAT  
COMMITTEE  
CHAIR

The 42nd Annual Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Ceremony was held on Thursday, May 4, 2023. What an amazing event it was. I am always astonished at the way all the law enforcement departments of Miami-Dade County come together to honor our fallen officers.

A big thank-you to all who came out and assisted with the preparation of the site. If not for the many helping hands, there is no way the ceremony could happen. Also, it was the first time since COVID that the POAT prayer breakfast was held for the families — another event that could not happen without the help

from all who are involved. Thank you all for honoring these families.

The Board of Directors of the Police Officer Assistance Trust is proud to offer seven scholarships this year. We had a large number of applicants, which will be reviewed by the POAT Educational Committee and the respective families of each scholarship. The winners will be announced at our Board meeting on June 21, 2023. Thank you to all who submitted an application, and best of luck to everyone.

Thanks for your support, and stay safe.



South Florida PBA President Steadman Stahl  
and the Board of Directors  
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# Built on the strength of our membership



**JOHN FRALEY**  
RPOC  
PRESIDENT

I'm taking creative license with my thoughts and comments from things I said after my first year as president of the Retired Police Officers Council (RPOC). My thoughts haven't changed, and my dedication is greater than ever. I was proud to wear the Brown Gown and serve with so many outstanding people.

The time has come for me to express how grateful I am to serve as president of the RPOC. The RPOC is an organization built on the strength of our membership. Without the men and women who came before us, we would be like a ship with no sails. I am extremely proud to be a part of our board and the things that we do to grow the RPOC.

As chair of the Otis Chambers Scholarship Fund (OCSF), I want to remind our membership that we are receiving applications for scholarship awards. Our program is open to the children and grandchildren of members in good standing. Pass this information on to other members for the 2023 and 2024 school years.

Keep in mind that we have scholarships for vocational schools as well. They include electrical and plumbing careers. Fire and police academies are also included in our scholarship program. I want to thank all of you who have donated to the OCSF and our officer assistance fund (Love Fund) and hope that you will continue to donate to these worthwhile causes.

I just returned home from our 32nd reunion at the Lake Mary Marriott Hotel. Board members arrived on May 2 to review the menus and firm up the accommodations. I was able to firm up the golf for Friday, and 14 members participated in the event. Many thanks to Reba Miller for setting up the St. Johns River Cruise. Fifty people — members and spouses — were on board for the cruise.

I was very pleased to see that 374 members and spouses attended the reunion over a four-day period. Although I have been involved with the RPOC for many years, this was my first year as your president. As I said before, I am very proud to be a part of this organization. I will continue to serve and promote the RPOC. The OCSF has been rewarding for me. Members should go to [rpocebpa.org](http://rpocebpa.org) for additional information.

Lastly, none of this would have worked had it not been for the diligence of your Board. We put this together through hard work and endless hours and dedication, for which I am truly thankful. A big thanks to the individual efforts of our Board members and their spouses (Reba and Harriet, for merchandise sales and raffle tickets), Maggie and Penny (bartending), Jerry, Tim, Dennis and Ed (loading and unloading supplies and "floating" around the Hospitality Room seeing to guests' needs). Also the members and golfers who donated back to the RPOC all of their prize winnings, as well as Dennis Bambach, Al Briguera and Lou Wilcox, who donated all of their 50/50 winnings.

Thanks to everyone who attended and commented favorably on the food and drink. A great time was had by all! God bless you all, and remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. They shall not be forgotten.

Chaplain Reba Miller offers these thoughts:

Many thanks indeed to all the RPOC members and their families and to the entire RPOC Board for making this year's reunion a wonderful event. Special notice to all our members who were unable to be with us this year. Life happens, but you were missed. Great stories were shared and retold, and we look forward to seeing all of you in the future. Thank you to our cruise passengers. Your singing and dancing were greatly appreciated by all, especially the ship's crew and all the other passengers.

A salute to all the winners of the golf tournament and the nightly raffles. Thank you to all who donated their winnings back to the Scholarship Fund and the Love fund.

We extend our prayers and deepest sympathies to our law enforcement brothers who are missing from us:

- Jackie "Jack" Buckley, MDPD: March 2023
- Luis Antonic Pinon, MDPD/Doral PD: March 2023

Our condolences to Susan Buckley and Theresita Pinon and their families during this season of loss.

Special healing wishes to Barry and Patty Savage.

Just remember, "Do whatever you can, with whatever you've got, wherever you are."

Peace and joy to all!



Nearly 375 people attended the 32nd RPOC reunion held in early May.



# Congrats to retired members

The South Florida PBA is proud to honor retired members who have put in long hours and outstanding service for their departments and communities. Join us in honoring these great members and exceptional public servants as they celebrate their retirement.



**Cosimo Castronovo**  
Aventura Police Department



**Eduardo Quiroga**  
Miami-Dade Police Department



**Inez Dominguez**  
Miami-Dade Police Department



**John Pinera**  
Miami-Dade Police Department



**Juan C. Rodriguez**  
Miami-Dade Police Department



**Marc Pierre Louis**  
Miami-Dade Police Department



**Marlene Barreiro**  
Miami-Dade Police Department



**Ricardo Fernandez Jr.**  
Hialeah Police Department





# Best Night Ever

**South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards Gala  
an unprecedented celebration of the profession**

■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

Under radiant blue lights, honor guard members from agencies throughout South Florida paraded into the grand ballroom at Trump National in Doral. Flags from these 28 departments formed a glowing canopy, which set the stage for a one-of-a-kind South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards Gala on May 20.

A logo the size of a billboard taking up almost the entire dance floor heralded this gala as the one for the 60th anniversary of the South Florida PBA and promised an exultant celebration of law enforcement. Members, family members, friends, elected officials, business leaders and just fans of South Florida law enforcement filled the ballroom nearly beyond capacity. This was the hottest ticket in town on this night, second only perhaps to the Panthers playing Carolina in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Just seeing this scene, it was easy to discern that the 30th PBA gala was going to feature an uplifting and inspiring ride of memorable moments and crescendo with awards recognizing South Florida law enforcement as second to none.

“Together, we truly are making a huge difference in making this the best place to live, work and play anywhere in the world,” announced Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava when she was called on to render some impromptu remarks. “We’re considered one of the very safest communities in the entire nation. That’s a credit to our public safety and law enforcement throughout the county.”

At every turn, the 2023 gala seemed to provide a toast or tribute to the profession. Like the way North Miami Sergeant Ab-

## ALL THE BEST

Officer of the Year nominees and winner  
Investigator of the Year  
Correctional Officer of the Year  
Rookie Officer of the Year

**All this and more in special Law Enforcement Awards Gala coverage beginning on page 18**

igail Mary performed a rendition of the national anthem that set the evening off on a high note. Or a simple expression from MDPD Chaplain Reverend Aristidis Arizi, who accentuated his invocation by declaring, “Thank you for our warriors.”

South Florida PBA President Steadman Stahl also had a special story to offer his own homage to members during his opening address. He told of how he was in North Carolina and wandered into a vintage shop, where he saw a cover of *Life* magazine from 55 years ago. In advance of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the cover pictured two Chicago police officers with the headline “LAW and ORDER Volatile Campaign Issue.”

“Isn’t it funny how history repeats itself?” Stahl commented. “What’s the issue right now and throughout this country, throughout the communities. Law and order. I got a funny feeling that that article will be in the front page again down the road.”

He springboarded off that story to relate his feelings about the importance of the PBA providing support to enable members to maintain law and order. And within the theme of the night laid





out before him on the dance floor, the PBA president praised what has been 60 years in the making.

“Many significant milestones have occurred over the 60 years, which has helped make us the largest and most powerful union in South Florida,” he continued. “Those are things that we didn’t have back when we started in 1962. We have improved working conditions, contract negotiations, partner benefits. We have a 24/7 legal team that provides service for our members that gives us the ability to fight back against injustice.”

The gala, of course, is a night to honor South Florida law enforcement’s greatest heroes. This year, that began with the presentation of the Rhett McGregor Memorial. In 1895, McGregor became the first Dade County law enforcement officer to be lost in the line of duty.

The Rhett McGregor Memorial honored the family of MDPD Detective Cesar “Echy” Echaverry Jr. The applause for Echy’s family – father Cesar Sr., mother Sandra, sister Sandra Victoria and fiancée Stephanie – would still be going if the 1,000-plus people in the room had their way. Stahl and Miami-Dade Police Director Alfredo Ramirez engaged in a group hug with the Echy family, which will be going on physically and virtually forever.

After that, Ramirez stepped in to provide the keynote speech for the night. Those who know Freddy appreciate that when he speaks on these occasions, he doesn’t make speeches. He comes straight from the heart, and his heartfelt remarks included a message about why the future is bright for South Florida.

“Here, we don’t have transplants. We’re homegrown. We’re family. We come up the ranks together, and we know our



The family of Cesar Echaverry Jr. is honored during the Rhett McGregor Memorial at the South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards Gala.



Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava praises the work of PBA members during her remarks at the gala.

community,” Ramirez declared. “What makes me happy is when we talk about our young generation, we should be very proud, despite the narrative around the country, that our boys and girls out there got heart, got guts and are carrying their patches, no matter what that patch is, with honor and dignity and respect. So I’m closing my remarks with this: We all got to stick together. We’ve got challenging times coming ahead. But we’ve been tested already several times, and we have come out stronger on the other side.”

Based on those honored at the Law Enforcement Awards Gala, the present is bright for South Florida. The award-winning recognition only began with honoring a leader who is working to ease the most adversarial challenge between law enforcement and the community over officers’ use of force to a citizen who made a daring rescue from the air to a correctional officer, a rookie officer and a detective whose responses were so amazing that they seemed to come from across the spider-verse.

And then there were the finalists for



Finalists for Officer of the Year with PBA President Steadman Stahl include, from left, North Miami Officer Nickerline Montina, Miami-Dade PD Detective Ricarute Lugo and North Bay Village Sergeant Norlan Benitez and K-9 Officer Marcel Ascaino.

Officer of the Year. You will have to read on to see which of the officers from Miami-Dade PD, North Bay Village or North Miami was bestowed with the distinction. Suffice to say, each one shows how law enforcing makes South Florida one of the very safest communities in the entire nation.

After the awards were all said and done, Stahl had some last words about why this night was truly the best of times and the times of best.

“Look around the room,” he began. “We have the best of the best going after the worst of the worst every day. To our people managing 911 calls that dispatch response to your calls for help. To our correction officers out there who are making sure that the bad guys stay in the jail cells where they belong. To all those on the street working to make our loved ones safe. Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know about you, but I cannot be more proud to stand with you.”



# Sealed with a Kiss

Being honored as Officer of the Year enables Ricaurte Lugo to feel, and share, the love



■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

Cheers and tears filled the Trump National grand ballroom when the South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards Gala presented its three finalists for Officer of the Year. And the emotions and feelings only intensified after the announcement of Miami-Dade PD Detective Ricaurte Lugo as the award winner.

Lugo stood at attention, just like a member of MDPD's Robbery Intervention Detail (RID) would be inclined to do, while the PBA brass rallied around him for the photo op. Family, friends and fans took up positions and pointed a throng of cell phone cameras at the group, forming an illustrious Cop-arazzi.

To make the picture complete, the PBA called up MDPD Director Alfredo Ramirez. And when Freddy stepped up, the first thing he did was greet his detective with a kiss on the cheek.

"Because he reminds me of my son," Freddy later confided. "Because we love each other, and that's love."

More than anything else, honoring Lugo's renowned perseverance and courage confirmed that these law enforcement awards were filled with love. For the way Lugo survived the shooting that nearly blinded him. For the way RID has survived an unprecedented time. For the way all the Officer of the Year honorees accentuated how South Florida law enforcement continues to thrive and shine despite the tumultuous times, Freddy delivered a true kiss of life.

"I feel like as if my father was giving me a kiss," Lugo related. "So I felt the love. And I'm super grateful."

By now, what Lugo did on the first Monday in December 2022 is nationally renowned. He located a carjacked vehicle that afternoon, initiated mobile surveillance, followed the vehicle into a shopping center, and then the driver opened fire on him. One of the three rounds penetrated the windshield of Lugo's vehicle and hit him in the left side of his face.

With courage and perseverance mitigating the pain, Lugo

## OFFICER OF THE YEAR Detective Ricaurte Lugo Miami-Dade Police Department

continued after the shooter, radioing descriptions until backup arrived. Eventually, he was airlifted to Jackson Memorial, where the bullet was discovered lodged in his face. And the glass that shattered and cut him was cleaned out of his eyes.

This award-winning night was an opportunity to celebrate how Lugo walked out of the hospital that night. And an opportunity to recount what inspired his instinct to survive.

"Getting home to my boys," Lugo revealed, showing the love for his sons, Noel and Noah. "My eyes were shut, but I could see their faces. I'm thinking, 'I got to get back home to them. They can't see that I failed.' I wanted to get back to them so bad. At the same time, I wanted to get that guy, so he doesn't hurt anybody else. And if he was gonna hurt somebody, it was gonna be only me."

At the gala, Lugo expressed how he was there for his boys. Not just his sons, but all the detectives who work RID. And, of course, the one they lost in August 2022, especially with Cesar Echaverry Jr.'s family also in attendance.

With all the love and hugs and kisses, it was almost as if Lugo felt one come from Echy.

"I did. I felt I was with my brother, and I'm super happy," Lugo added.

After the awards part of the gala blended into dancing the night away, the dozen or so RID detectives who attended turned up the celebration. They took their own photos with Lugo, making even that part of the night filled with hugs.

Which gave Lugo the chance he had been waiting for to praise



the detail and the opportunity to be part of it.

"They go after the worst of the worst, and it's such a tight-knit group," he commented. "The work that they do is amazing. I was blessed to be part of it."

RID members embraced Freddy into their celebration circle, and the director appeared to be the happiest guy in the room. And he embraced the opportunity to explain how Lugo survived, how when Freddy came to see him in the hospital that night that Lugo said he wanted to go back out and get the guy.

"It's in his heart, and it's what he's been trained and raised to do," Ramirez added. "Under the moments of stress, he didn't break. That's why he's in that special unit. That's why the men and women in that unit are a cut above. When the gunfire's going, when the stress is on, they don't fold."

Sporting a resplendent tux, Lugo looked like he was feeling as good as he has during the past six months. He has a small mark on the left side of his face where the bullet hit. The swelling is all but gone, and all that is left are one or two surgeries to take out what is left of the bullet still lodged under his eye.

He can see very well out of that eye now. And he has developed illuminating hindsight about how to look at what happened that first Monday in December and what he learned from it.

"Continue to keep your head on a swivel. Continue to fight the good fight," Lugo accentuated. "The citizens need us, and we need to be that line between evil and good. And we're always going to be there. Whether it's me, someone else, or honoring our fallen brothers like Echy. That motivates us to continue to



South Florida PBA Officer of the Year Miami-Dade PD Detective Ricaurte Lugo with South Florida PBA President Steadman Stahl, left, and MDPD Director Alfredo "Freddy" Ramirez, center. Looking on is North Miami Officer Nickerline Montana, who finished runner-up for Officer of the Year.

serve and to keep fighting."

Lugo also took advantage of this opportunity to spread the love. Standing with the other finalists, he knew how much it meant just to be part of this moment, to be alive for this night.

And everything that happened after that was the icing, the cherry, the gravy.

"I didn't think I was gonna win. The [other finalists] did such an amazing job, and looking at their videos, their stories, I was like, 'Wow,'" he declared. "I was humbled just to be there with them. And I think we all won."

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# Lifesaving Grace

## North Miami officer grateful to be able to stop an active shooter

■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

Dressed in a majestic blue gown that would have fit in at the Academy Awards as much as the South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards, North Miami Officer Nickerline Montina awaited the big moment at the gala. She stood shoulder to shoulder with other nominees for Officer of the Year, a statement in itself of how proudly and proficiently law enforcement in South Florida serves and protects.

When the announcement of Officer of the Year came down to her and Miami-Dade PD Detective Ricaurte Lugo, Montina knew exactly where she stood. Certainly, there were thoughts about just being happy to be there. But she might have been even more emotional and grateful because Montina easily could not have been there.

Her response and being the first on the scene of an active shooter situation on May 19, 2022, easily could have gone the way of what happened at the Old National Bank in Louisville, Kentucky. Or the Lunar New Year dance in Monterey Park, California. Or Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas.

"The way I look back on it, at any given time, it could have went in a different direction," Montina confided after the awards presentation segued into a late-night celebration. "I praise God and thank God for it ending the way that it ended. No lives were taken. No one was harmed. A little property damage, but that can be replaced."

Montina had been heading toward the motor pool to gas up before calling it a day on May 19. She decided to clear one more call, and that dispatched her to a scene, where she heard multiple gunshots when she arrived.

She then observed a heavysset male dressed in all black, armed with an AR-15-style rifle, shooting rapid-fire into the direction of an apartment building. Whether any residents were in his sights or had even been hit was not known.

Montina advised about the shooting, then tactically proceeded in the direction of the subject, who was wielding the rifle and still actively shooting. She encountered the shooter.

Not that there's a lot of time to think in such a situation, but imagine the thoughts that must go through an officer's mind in this type of situation.

Talk about a holy-spit moment.

"Heck, yes," Montina recalled. "That moment, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. But at that time, I knew I had to take action. I was there, and I was the go-to person. And I had to do what I had to do to make sure the community was safe."

The shooter dropped his weapon to flee on foot but doubled back to grab the rifle and rearm himself. At this point, Montina established a perimeter with the assistance of other officers to contain the shooter. Shortly thereafter, the shooter was found and taken into custody.

A search of the surroundings of the residence found the AR-15-style weapon in the front yard and numerous spent casings on the roadway. There was an unoccupied vehicle located with the engine on, doors and trunk open, with an empty rifle case on the rear seat and an empty handgun holster inside a cup



North Miami Officer Nickerline Montina poses for a picture with members of the department, family and friends after being honored as Officer of the Year runner-up at the South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards Gala.

### OFFICER OF THE YEAR RUNNER-UP Nickerline Montina North Miami Police Department

holder.

The outcome of keeping any residents from being shot held a special significance for Montina. She grew up in North Miami and said she has wanted to help out in her community since she was a little girl.

That's what led her to becoming a police officer. She has now been on the job with North Miami for six years.

The city obviously appreciates her service. To honor her for this response, North Miami proclaimed May 9, 2023, as "Officer Nickerline Montina Day."

Although Montina did not add being awarded South Florida PBA Officer of the Year to her honors, she was one of those at the gala applauding the loudest when that went to Lugo. Her honor was saving her neighborhood from becoming the site of a national tragedy and being there with Lugo and the other Officer of the Year finalists to stand up for the prowess of South Florida law enforcement.

"I totally told [Detective Lugo] that he definitely deserved it. He put his life on the line, just like everybody else," Montina added. "That whole group there really tells you what's special about law enforcement here in Miami-Dade County. We're one. We're a big family, brothers and sisters who stick together."



Officer Montina receives a proclamation from North Miami Acting Chief Angel Rivera in honor of May 9, 2023, being declared "Officer Nickerline Montina Day" in North Miami.



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# Into the Fire

## North Bay Village Sergeant Norlan Benitez and K-9 Officer Marcel Ascanio honored for their daring response

■ BY ESTHER GONZALES

When nearly 1,000 people at the Law Enforcement Awards Gala began applauding and cheering for them, it was almost hard for North Bay Village Sergeant Norlan Benitez and K-9 Officer Marcel Ascanio to feel worthy of such a reception.

After the horrific events of June 22, 2022, Benitez and Ascanio said they weren't expecting such a greeting for their heroic acts that day.

"We were in disbelief. We couldn't believe it was actually really happening," Benitez described. "I was reliving most of what happened that day. What we went through, it's not easy for anybody. But I was excited, and I was motivated to continue doing my job."

So, receiving this award in a room filled with their brothers and sisters in law enforcement seemed to mean that much more to them.

"I do this job because it's always been my calling to be out there, and I try to make a difference somehow, somewhere," Ascanio remarked. "I care very little for recognitions, plaques and awards. Just the mere intricacy of the job is what is my recognition."

That June day turned out to be unlike any other he has experienced when a car actually blew up in front of them. Ascanio was the first one to see the flames and billows of smoke in the distance when the car crashed and caught fire. He quickly sent the call out over the radio.

As he got closer to the scene, Ascanio saw the vehicle engulfed in flames. And two bodies.

Benitez came on the scene and immediately secured the perimeter. Then he took in the sight before him.

"The person who crashed into this vehicle hit the gas tank," Benitez explained. "Nobody there had a chance to survive. The vehicle engulfed in flames immediately after the crash."

Suddenly, Benitez and Ascanio saw movement between some bushes and the front bumper of the car. Someone was trying to climb out of the car and escape the flames.

Without hesitation, Ascanio lunged forward to rescue the victim. But Benitez grabbed his arm.

"If we're going to do this," Benitez recalled telling Ascanio, "we're going to do this together."

Cautiously, Ascanio approached the smoldering vehicle. Suddenly, it exploded, knocking him to the ground.

"I know it's too hot, but I'm going back in," Ascanio remembers declaring to Benitez. "He followed me and told me, 'Let's go.' And we both went in together for the grab."

Approaching the flames, Ascanio could see the victim was still moving. But her skin was so hot that her arm slipped out of his grasp. And the scorching fire caused second- and third-degree burns to his hands.

But knowing that Benitez had his back spurred Ascanio on.

"It's huge knowing that you can count on an officer to go into



North Bay Village Sergeant Norlan Benitez, left, and K-9 Officer Marcel Ascanio are honored as finalists for the South Florida PBA Officer of the Year Award.

### OFFICER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS Sergeant Norlan Benitez and K-9 Officer Marcel Ascanio North Bay Village Police Department

an intense situation like this," Ascanio commented. "That's big because you know that when it gets tough, you're going to have someone right there with you."

Despite the burns to their hands, Benitez and Ascanio were able to pull the victim from the flames. Seconds later, when they were only five feet away from the wreckage, the vehicle exploded again.

The officers immediately provided first aid and wrapped the victim in a blanket. Benitez still remembers her words as he was comforting her.


"She kept saying, 'Help me. Help me,'" Benitez related. "I couldn't hear the sirens. I couldn't hear the people screaming. I couldn't hear the car burning. My main focus was, 'Let me save this person. If I'm going to do something today, let it be that I save this person.'"

Once the fire department arrived, Ascanio and Benitez began looking for the driver who had caused the crash and fled the scene. Eventually, a month later, he would be found. So there was a bit of solace, even though the crash left three victims deceased, including the woman they had pulled from the fire.

So being honored at the gala and hearing the cheers for their bravery seemed to be a bit of a boost for Ascanio and Benitez.

"We don't do it for the awards, but it's always encouraging to see the good work that the officers do and recognize them, because that will bring up the morale," Benitez added. "We are extremely grateful for the PBA and this amazing thing they did for us."





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# On the Money

**After three-year investigation, Aventura detective tracks down and apprehends career financial criminal**

■ BY DAN CAMPANA

Aventura Police Detective Ken Sealy could have settled. He could have arrested a local man for ripping off a New York school district to the tune of \$325,000 and called it a successful outcome.

Instead, Sealy — with 19 years on the job, 12 as a detective — went further. Much further. He kept digging over the course of a three-year investigation that linked a career money launderer and convicted felon to ill-gotten money. Using compromised emails, phony credit card transactions, counterfeit checks and misdirected deposits, the man had netted more than \$5 million dollars.

“Just knowing there are real live victims out there who are losing their money. They’re losing their life savings. To be able to have an impact on that and hopefully recover some of those funds is always a motivational factor,” Sealy explained.

Sealy’s dogged determination in this case earned him the South Florida PBA’s 2023 Arthur E. Felton Investigative Excellence Award, which honors detectives who excel in the pursuit of criminals through lengthy investigations. It is named for Felton, a Miami-Dade detective, who was known for his drive and tenacity on cases until his death in 1986.

During his time in gang enforcement with Aventura, Sealy noticed gangs shifting their focus to financial crimes. That got Sealy into a world filled with number crunching, intricate database and document analysis and, of course, the tried-and-true connecting the dots to find out who was doing what.

His award-winning investigation started in 2019 with a call from police detectives in South Nyack, New York, who were probing a business email compromise case that involved a school district losing out on \$325,000 in payments intended for a contractor. Instead, investigators alleged, a 71-year-old man from Aventura was the owner of an account where the money landed over the course of two months.

Sealy dug in fast, linking a Florida-based business and an associated bank account to the man. Within a month of the initial call from New York, Sealy put together enough evidence to establish probable cause to get a warrant to search the man’s residence. Investigators walked away with a trove of financial documents, various communications with victims and co-conspirators, and a variety of phones and computers that led to even more digital evidence.

By mid-2020, Sealy had partnered with several federal agencies and ended up tracking a multistate financial crime spree. According to investigators, the man set up several businesses that served as fronts to move fraudulently obtained money, including one that engaged in processing fraudulent credit card transactions using stolen credit cards. Further, Sealy de-

## ARTHUR E. FELTON INVESTIGATIVE EXCELLENCE AWARD

Detective Ken Sealy  
Aventura Police Department



Aventura Detective Ken Sealy, center, accepts the Arthur E. Felton Award from South Florida PBA President Steadman Stahl, left, alongside Aventura Chief Michael Bentolilla.

termined that the man targeted hospitals — including Veterans Administration facilities — to misdirect payments into his business accounts.

“Detective Sealy realized that there were victim businesses in several states and that the activity continued even after the



[original 2019] state search warrant was issued,” a narrative of his award-winning actions described. “Detective Sealy took what was a \$325,000 case and, instead of making the simple arrest, he did the work and managed to uncover a multi-million-dollar, multi-state money laundering operation. Thanks in no small part to Detective Sealy, over \$2 million dollars was recovered, and a major career money launderer has been brought to justice.”

For his part, Sealy took the recognition in stride, saying the result was “outstanding.”

“It brings you a lot of comfort and closure,” he said, adding that his enjoyment of financial investigations is because “you get to see the result of the work, the tangibility of the work, because you [are] hands-on with the victims, hands-on with the subject, and you can see where you’ve made that difference.

“A large chunk of the recovery was from the VA. Being a vet, that was important to me,” Sealy explained.

Whether locally, in response to other law enforcement or in collaboration with federal agencies, Sealy is always eager and ready to help track the next scammer. For him, financial crimes are his home because of the depth and meaning of his work.

“I was always a hyper, high-intensity gang guy who liked to do other, more exciting things. And here I am now. This is my niche, this is what I do ... until I retire,” Sealy said.



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# MDC&R's Wonder Woman

## Corrections Officer Diana Banegas acts heroically to prevent inmate from escaping

■ BY ESTHER GONZALES

During a shift change one evening, Miami-Dade Corrections & Rehabilitation Officer Diana Banegas noticed something out of the ordinary.

A nurse who had just walked out of the COVID housing unit was holding open a door for the other nurses. This nurse was covered from head to toe in scrubs, including three medical gowns, a hat and a mask, with white booties covering his shoes.

But then the nurse turned around and Banegas locked eyes with him.

That's when Banegas had a gut feeling something was wrong. She knew every nurse, and none of them had these piercing blue eyes.

Banegas also saw a small patch of orange peeking through the scrubs. This had to be an inmate, she thought. And Banegas knew she had mere seconds to act.

"At first, I couldn't see orange, but I knew immediately something wasn't right," Banegas recalled. "I pray every day that I stay alert in doing my job, working so many hours, and I'm thankful that I recognized the person."

Without hesitation, Banegas stepped in and displayed the prowess of correctional officers and their integral role in serving and protecting the public. This is the caliber of work the public rarely sees or even knows about. But the response by Banegas certainly kept a convicted felon off the streets.

The video chronicling Banegas' heroics brought a hush over the rowdy crowd at the South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards Gala on May 20. Banegas was joined at the gala by her 17-year-old son, Joseph. And having him there to witness her receiving this award made it even more meaningful.

"I was happy and proud there, because my son was feeling proud of me," Banegas recalled. "He was like, 'Wow, mom, you did it!' And he was like, 'Go ahead mom, go get it. This belongs to you.' Just to see that he was proud of me, that made everything change."

Banegas, who has been on the job for nearly 12 years, is well known for working long hours and overtime. She often does double duty, putting in 16-hour days at the Intake and Release Bureau. That is just how much she loves her job. She has even earned the nickname 'Wonder Woman,' which is inscribed on the mask she wears on the job.

"I feel proud that I did something good, that I did my job and I went above and beyond," Banegas shared. "I tell myself every day to stay awake, stay alert and do your job. I love what I do, and I always thank the Lord."

She was more than alert to spot this inmate trying to make an escape. After Banegas locked eyes with the inmate, she ordered him to stop.

"You are not a nurse," she said she yelled out. "You're an inmate!"

Suddenly, he put his back against the wall and didn't say a word, as if he were frozen in place. Banegas commanded him to put his hands behind his back, pulled out her pepper spray in case the incident escalated, and called for backup. As she waited



Miami-Dade Corrections & Rehabilitation Officer Diana Banegas, second from left, who received the Correctional Officer of the Year Award, with MDC&R Director James Reyes, left, and her son, Joseph, second from right.

### CORRECTIONAL OFFICER OF THE YEAR Officer Diana Banegas Miami-Dade Corrections & Rehabilitation

for backup, Banegas remembers just staring at those blue eyes, wondering what his next move would be.

And that's when the inmate recounted to Banegas his entire plan to escape. And how he had saved the medical gowns he was dressed in. Banegas remembers him saying he had seemed to fool everyone, but not her.

As he was talking, Banegas could only think about one thing:

"I was listening to him, and I wasn't showing any emotion because I was like, 'Oh my God, he was about to escape. Oh my God, that was an inmate,'" Banegas commented. "This man almost walked out in front of me. Thank God I paid attention and that I stopped this man from escaping."

After Banegas apprehended the inmate and he was returned to lockup, several inmates in surrounding cells erupted with applause and cheers.

It was a moment Banegas said she would never forget.

"The inmates started clapping and saying, 'You're the real Wonder Woman. Ms. Banegas, you're the real Wonder Woman,'" Banegas added. "I'll never forget that part. It makes you feel good, like you're doing your job."



The mask MDC&R officer Diana Banegas wears on the job describes how she responded to thwart an escape.



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# Above and Beyond Her Years

## Rookie Officer of the Year praised for two heroic responses

■ BY BRITTANY KRUGEL

Bay Harbor Islands Officer Mirtha Ortega knew she had to act fast when she saw a 14-year-old boy on the ledge of an upper level of a parking structure. Because she has her own 14-year-old son, this response hit close to home.

Fortunately, her maternal instincts kicked in. Ortega had been on with Bay Harbor Islands less than a year when she put herself in harm's way to save the life of the child.

On Dec. 9, 2022, she was called to the scene of a child threatening to jump off a building. Ortega found him on the fourth floor of the parking garage, intent on ending his life. But as he was about to jump, she came to his rescue.

"I was driving, I was taking the curb, and I saw him," she explained. "I stopped, and for a second, it seemed like he was about to jump. I'm like, 'I have to do something now. If I try to go to him, then he's going to jump.'"

Even when the child did jump and tried to get away from Ortega, she caught him and brought him to safety.

Ortega knew she had to do something, not just as a law enforcement officer, but also as a mom of two. In fact, a few weeks prior to receiving the Rookie Officer of the Year Award, she gave birth to a baby boy, Sebastien.

With her 14-year-old son Kayli at home, Ortega admits she wouldn't have been able to handle the repercussions if she hadn't been able to save the boy in the parking garage. And she did so while pregnant, perhaps another reason she was so quick to react.

"As you saw, it was pretty high, so I just went with my instinct again, and I just ran," Ortega detailed. "I grabbed him, I threw him on the floor, and thank God, he didn't jump."

By that December, Ortega was already a pro at saving lives. On Aug. 24, 2022, she responded to a domestic incident where the suspect was abusing his elderly parents.

Once she arrived, Ortega attempted to make contact with the suspect while he was fleeing the scene. Another officer had already tried to de-escalate the situation, but the suspect attempted to attack that officer. Ortega put herself between the two men. Eventually, she was able to break away and

### ROOKIE OFFICER OF THE YEAR Mirtha Ortega Bay Harbor Islands Police Department



Bay Harbor Islands Officer Mirtha Ortega, center, receives the Rookie Officer of the Year Award with her chief, Raul Diaz, right, standing with her.

subdue the suspect with her Taser.

In a situation like that, Ortega, who worked for the Florida Highway Patrol for a year and a half prior to coming to Bay Harbor Islands, says there was no time to overthink it. Instead, she just had to go with it.

"A lot of things went through my mind. It's like tunnel vision," she said. "Somehow, you find a way, and you get through it. It's very hard and weird to explain. I just go with the flow."

Two instances of bravery less than six months apart. Some may think rookies get to where they are with luck, but more than anything, Ortega trusts herself.

"You know what? I always go with my gut feeling, and I do things from the heart," she added. "I also feel very comfortable doing my job, because I trust in my squad 100 percent."

With such an exemplary performance in her first year on the job with Bay Harbor Islands, it's easy to wonder what she will do for an encore. The answer is simple: She's going to continue to protect and serve.

"I'll give my 100 percent, I promise you



Bay Harbor Islands Officer Mirtha Ortega was pregnant with her son, Sebastien, when she saved a boy from jumping off a parking structure.

that," she said. "I love my job. I love what I do... and I'm always going to give my 100 percent."



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# Leading by Example

**FDLE Special Agent Troy Walker has been out front on many challenges that have helped local law enforcement officers better perform their duties**

■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

Troy Walker tried to step out of the ballroom at Trump National in Doral after being honored with the Fred Maas Leadership Award at the South Florida PBA Law Enforcement Awards Gala. He made it about 10 feet past the doorway when officers and community members stopped him for a celebratory handshake or to give him a pat on the back.

Walker couldn't get to the bathroom or even the bar to share a well-earned toast with all of those who are grateful for his leadership. The congratulations humbled Walker for many reasons, but especially because of how he has handled one of the most potentially adversarial relationships in all of law enforcing and has built more bridges than there are on the Venetian Causeway.

Serving as the special agent in charge (SAC) for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Miami Regional Operations Center (MROC), Walker is charged with administering policies and orders from FDLE. Some of these, like FDLE's handling of investigations of all use-of-force incidents, can make officers, the community – or both – hot and bothered over the outcomes.

So receiving the PBA's leadership award can be taken as a nod to how Walker has led not only from the front, but also side by side with all law enforcement agencies in the Miami Region, as well as the community and other stakeholders.

"Partnerships. Partnerships," Walker emphasized when asked about what he is most proud of in leading the MROC. While acknowledging the many leaders in the ballroom who he has learned from – standing on their shoulders, as he calls it – Walker has established the necessary type of path to navigate through the demands of 2023 law enforcement.

"I'm somewhat unconventional in this role. One of the things that I wanted to do was get very, very community-oriented and be in the fight with my partners," Walker added. "I don't mind having those hard conversations. And sometimes it may not be the most popular position that I may take on some of these issues. But you know what? We can work through it. You need to have a listening ear and give feedback. I think we do that well here in South Florida."

Walker has been leading FDLE operations in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties since 2014. After settling in as the new chief, he began setting his sights on networking strategies to unite the law enforcement community in his region.

He has become renowned by officers in so many agencies because he works tirelessly to visit local law enforcement agencies from Key West to North Palm Beach to discuss ways to improve services. Much of this has been done by identifying and defining common goals and standard practices. He has also established a record for meeting with community groups to close the gap between law enforcement and the people they serve.

When FDLE took over the investigation of officer-involved use of force for all of the local agencies, the idea was initially rejected by the majority of officers and agencies. But by maintaining open lines of communication, Walker has mitigated opportunities for missteps and misperception.

"I wanted to take the burden off local and county law enforcement as it relates to dealing directly with the community on this



FDLE Special Agent Troy Walker, center, is honored as the South Florida PBA's Fred Maas Leadership Award winner. Alongside Walker are Dave Kerner, left, executive director of the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles and South Florida PBA President Steadman Stahl.

**FRED MAAS LEADERSHIP AWARD**  
**Troy Walker**  
**Special Agent In Charge**  
**FDLE – Miami Regional Operations Center**

particular critical issue," he explained. "We're not afraid of having those courageous conversations. That's what we do down here in South Florida. And I think that pays tremendous dividends."

Such leading by example has enabled Walker to bring all sides together in something like a use-of-force incident. He has been exceptionally successful in helping community members understand that just like they have lost a loved one, there's a law enforcement agency that was also impacted. And there was a police officer who was forced to do something that he or she didn't want to do.

Walker seems destined to be in this leadership role. At the gala, he accepted the award alongside his boss, Dave Kerner, the newly named executive director of the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. FDLE falls under the authority of Kerner, a former Florida State rep, Palm Beach County commissioner and police officer in Palm Beach County. Ironically, Kerner's father, Marty, was Walker's major when he first came on the job with the Lake Worth Police Department in 1992.

From both Kerners and every other leader he has encountered during his 30-plus years on the job, Walker has developed a way of running MROC that makes agencies throughout South Florida greet him with a pat on the back when he shows up.

"I've been in rooms where there have been a couple of hundred people, and they're all angry, and they don't want to hear what I have to say, or anyone else," he related. "So having that sensitivity to deal with all aspects of the issue, to me is really important. The reason those things don't occur here. Because we work well together."



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# Heroic Flight

## South Florida PBA honors Citizen of the Year for daring rescue

■ BY DAN CAMPANA

Cristiano Piquet made it clear: “I’m no hero.”

The woman whose life he saved and the South Florida PBA respectfully disagree.

Piquet received the South Florida PBA’s Citizen of the Year Award for his quick work to help rescue a woman after her car went into a canal northwest of Homestead on Oct. 30, 2022.

Encountering the woman was, as Piquet put it, an act of God. He spotted her on a Sunday morning while paramotoring before heading to church, as he does frequently.

About 200 feet above the ground, Piquet, wearing a 360-degree camera that captured the situation as it unfolded, turned to check out what he thought was an alligator when he spotted a car underwater in the canal. Realizing how unusual a sight it was, he moved in for a closer look and saw a stranded woman with her head barely above water next to the vehicle.

“It was crazy. It was the first, the very first and only time I flew on that canal,” Piquet explained. “I was flying, cruising along, having fun on a Sunday before church. I was only a little tool God used to save that lady.”

With that divine guidance, Piquet managed to carefully weave through a narrow stretch of power lines to literally hit the ground running — he described the personal flying device as a parachute with a fan and an engine attached — near where the car had entered the canal. He called out to the woman.

An alert neighbor quickly arrived on the canal’s shore with a rope, which was used to pull the woman to safety. Six units responded to the incident, which occurred near the 20400 block of Southwest 192nd Street just after 8:30 a.m.

Piquet learned of the PBA award earlier this year and modestly downplayed his role while praising God’s intervention. His decision to do what he could for the woman was rooted in thoughts of another important part of his life.

“I thought about my mother when I saw that lady. I said, ‘Wow, that’s someone’s mother,’” said Piquet, who brought his mother to the awards gala. “Right away, God took over, because I don’t know in normal circumstances if I would be able to do the same landing between power lines, between trees and the rotors.

“It was a terrible landing spot, but for some reason, I landed safely. Credit to a neighbor who saw the commotion. He threw the rope to her, and we helped take her out of the water,” he explained, noting that he never met the woman after the incident.

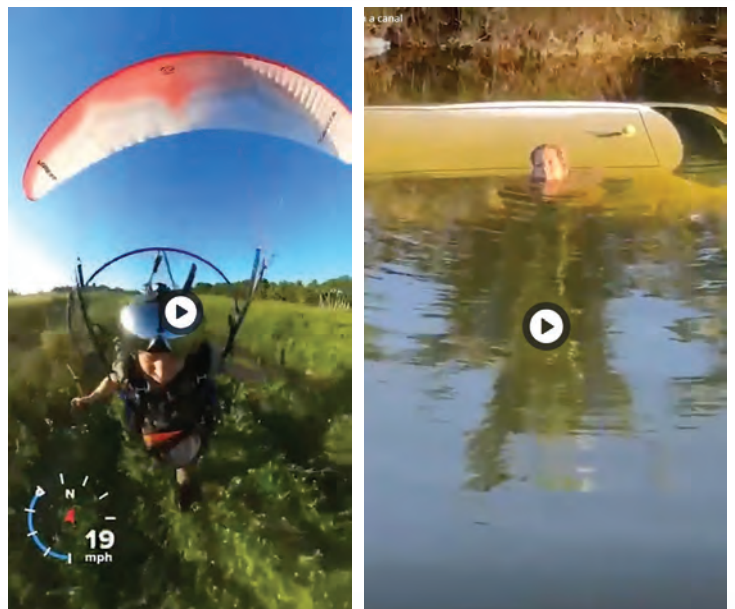
The video highlighting key moments of Piquet’s lifesaving chance encounter along the canal has been viewed approximately 100,000 times on YouTube. Piquet didn’t think about cameras or anything else once the dangerous situation unfolded before him. Seeing the footage, Piquet can only call what happened “evidence of God.”

Piquet has been skydiving since 2010 and piloting paramotors for the last eight years, and he says they’re not dangerous with proper training. You can still find him in the air for his Sunday flights — including the morning after being honored as the South Florida PBA’s Citizen of the Year.



Cristiano Piquet, left, celebrates receiving the Citizen of the Year Award from South Florida PBA President Steadman Stahl.

### CITIZEN OF THE YEAR Cristiano Piquet



Excerpts from the YouTube video show Cristiano Piquet saving a woman who went into a canal in her car.





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# Labor of Love

## Credit union president saluted for unconditional support to the PBA

South Florida PBA Executive Vice President David Greenwell began his description of Special Recognition Award honoree George Joseph of Dade County Federal Credit Union by detailing many of his accomplishments as the organization's president and CEO. But not far into his presentation, Greenwell flipped the script.

This was an opportunity to show some love to a man who has always brought the love to the PBA. Greenwell explained how Joseph has been an ongoing, relentless supporter and fundraiser for the South Florida PBA Love Fund, which supports the families of fallen officers.

"Mr. Joseph, you are always the first to call when there is bad news about an officer being hurt or killed," Greenwell announced as he continued the narrative. "He calls and says, 'What I can do for those officers, and what can I do for their families?' So for that, we honor you. For your commitment, your dedication, your generosity to law enforcement officers, Mr. Joseph, my friend, we honor you."

When Joseph stepped up to accept the award, he immediately deflected the recognition to those he felt deserved it more than he did. Even though he also contributes to many other charitable organizations, Joseph was pointed about where the praise should be directed.

"Thank you all very much," Joseph began his brief acceptance remarks. "Thank you all for the service and the safety that you bring to this community. And Dade County Federal Credit Union will always be here to support you all."

Greenwell then added how Dade County Federal Credit Union is also the official credit union for the Miami Dolphins. Which obviously drew a big round of applause. But this was an opportunity Joseph had earned to be in the spotlight.

For more than 23 years, Joseph has served Dade County Federal Credit Union as president and CEO, overseeing a period of tremendous growth and prosperity for the credit union and its members.

Since joining Dade County Federal, Joseph has overseen all aspects of the credit union's management as the financial institution has grown by more than 500 percent, with more than \$1.2 billion in assets, and expanded from four to 11 branches.

Today, the credit union serves members who live and work throughout Miami-Dade County, offering a wide array of financial services. Under Joseph's leadership, the credit union has added automobile-buying services, investment products, insurance services and business loans, among other offerings.

More importantly, Dade County Federal Credit Union has joined in advancement of the technological age under Joseph's guidance, adding web-based services, online banking, mobile banking and paperless transactions – all of which add value to members by reducing the credit union's carbon footprint. And Joseph continues to look for better ways to serve Dade County Federal's more than 100,000 members.

In addition to his financial and management acumen, Joseph has inspired a culture of giving back to Miami-Dade County. He has chaired annual fundraising efforts for worthy organizations

### SPECIAL RECOGNITION AWARD

George Joseph  
President and CEO

Dade County Federal Credit Union



Dade County Federal Credit Union President and CEO George Joseph, center, receives the PBA's Special Recognition Award from President Steadman Stahl, left, and Executive Vice President David Greenwell.

such as the March of Dimes and Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. Credit union members and employees have raised and donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to these and other efforts.

Communitywide fundraising campaigns chaired by Joseph have accounted for millions of dollars donated to enhance the South Florida community. The credit union also supports students at the elementary, secondary and collegiate levels by offering financial literacy programs to schools throughout the county and annually providing scholarships to college-bound students.

Joseph is a member of the Credit Union Executive Society and Credit Union President's Association. He attended the Directors Leadership Institute at the London School of Business, where he received the Certified Credit Union Director designation in 2001. He is a graduate of Andrews University with a BBA degree in accounting and currently resides in South Miami-Dade. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, volunteering with his church and spending time with his wife, Nyurca, and his family.



# The Best of Healthcare

## PBA takes pride in recognizing some 'real heroes'

The Special Recognition Award given to Jackson Health System began with actual recognition. Before reading the accomplishments that led to honoring Jackson Health System Chief Executive Officer Carlos Migoya and his staff, South Florida PBA Executive Vice President David Greenwell asked all those sitting at table 49 to stand up.

Seated there were trauma doctors and trauma nurses from Jackson Memorial Hospital and other facilities within the system. Jackson Memorial Hospital is where Miami-Dade PD Detective Ricaurte Lugo, who would be honored later in the evening as Officer of the Year, was taken after getting hit in the face with a bullet. That was the staff that helped Lugo walk out of the hospital after being shot that day.

"Please stand up. You doctors and nurses are the real heroes today," Greenwell proclaimed. "You save lives every day, and because of you and your dedication, you make our community a safer place. Thank you."

Migoya was not able to attend the gala because it was his birthday. In his place, Dr. Nicholas Namias, chief of trauma and surgical critical care at Jackson Memorial Hospital, Vice President Tony Gomez and Vice President Eric Mendez stepped up to accept the award.

Dr. Namias took the opportunity to give recognition to all those who handle trauma and treat police officers, who come there knowing they will get the best care possible.

"On behalf of the doctors, the nurses, the technicians, the service workers and the executive office that organizes it all, we thank you for the honor and privilege of being able to be there to take care of you in your time of need," Dr. Namias said. "And we thank you for all you do."

Migoya has served as president and CEO of Jackson Health System since May 2011, overseeing one of the nation's largest and most respected public healthcare networks. Jackson has the distinction of bringing world-class medical care, including the medical school faculty and students from the University of Miami and Florida International University, to a taxpayer-owned system that guarantees a single high standard of care for all residents of Miami-Dade County.

The system is anchored by Jackson Memorial Hospital, one of the most respected hospitals in Florida. The system also includes two neighborhood community hospitals, Holtz Children's Hospital, Jackson Behavioral Health Hospital, Jackson Rehabilitation Hospital, two nursing homes and a network of urgent care centers, physician practices and clinics.

In his first year at Jackson, Migoya led a transformation that reversed years of massive losses, including an \$82 million loss in the prior year, and produced a surplus of more than \$8 million. It was the first time Jackson had produced a surplus since 2006, and the system has earned an annual surplus every year since. At the same time, key indicators of healthcare quality and patient satisfaction improved, proving that public hospital systems need not choose between medical excellence and operational sustainability.

In November 2013, Migoya led a successful campaign in which 65 percent of Miami-Dade voters approved the \$830 million Jack-



Leaders from the Jackson Health System accept the Special Recognition Award from the South Florida PBA.

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Jackson Health System

son Miracle-Building Bond program, which is the cornerstone of a 10-year, \$1.7 billion capital plan to renovate, modernize and expand Jackson's facilities.

Prior to joining Jackson, Migoya served as city manager in Miami, successfully tackling the city's ailing budget issues. Most of Migoya's professional life was spent in the banking industry, rising through the ranks during more than 40 years, from part-time teller to regional president and CEO at Wachovia and its predecessors. He then served as the regional president of Wachovia in North Carolina and the CEO for the Atlantic region, responsible for banking in New Jersey, Connecticut and New York.

He is actively involved in several community organizations, including having served as the foundation chair of Florida International University and as a member of the university's Dean's Council and the College of Business Administration's principal advisory board.

For nine years, Migoya served as a director of AutoNation, the largest auto retailer in the U.S., and he is a past chair of the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida. He currently chairs the United Way of Miami-Dade, and he sits on the boards of the Florida Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Miami Charter School and the Beacon Council. He is a member of the Florida Council of 100, an organization of business leaders that promotes the economic growth of Florida and the economic well-being of Floridians.



Jackson Health System CEO Carlos Migoya.



An MDPD RID officer hugs Cesar Echaverry Sr. after the Candlelight Vigil during National Police Week in Washington, D.C.

# Coming Out of the Dark

**MDPD officers accompany Echaverry family to Washington, D.C., and feel the monumental light of National Police Week**

■ BY MITCHELL KRUGEL

The neon glow in the dark at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., had burned off just a few moments before. More than 20,000 people who attended the Candlelight Vigil of National Police Week on May 13 extinguished their flames and began to exit this shimmering lawn between the U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument.

Among them were family members and colleagues of the 556 law enforcement officers who were honored and remembered at the Vigil for being lost in the line of duty during 2022. One of those, of course, was Cesar “Echy” Echaverry Jr., the Miami-Dade PD Robbery Intervention Detail (RID) detective who died on Aug. 17, 2022, from injuries sustained in a shooting. Echy’s dad, Cesar Sr., mom Sandra, sister Sandra Virginia and fiancée Stephanie Vargas sat with survivors between Miami-Dade Police Director Alfredo Ramirez and a couple of department leaders.

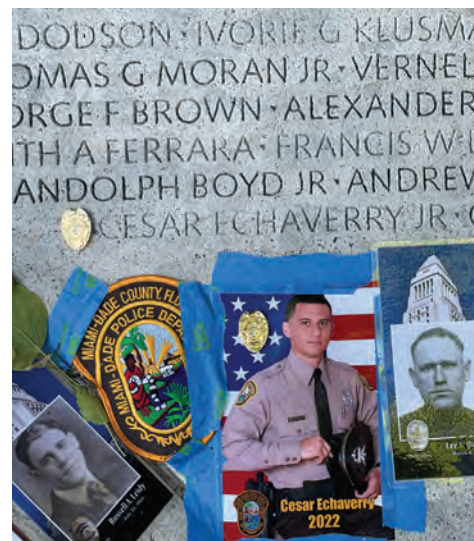
Amid the darkness, moonlight reflected off faces, rendering what you might see in a black light show. But it served as the perfect way to illuminate one of the most emotional and touching honors for Echy and his department.

More than a dozen RID detectives had been sitting in the row behind the Echy family, ironically dressed in their signature black shirts with the big “Miami-Dade Police” in white letters on the back. One by one, they stepped up to Cesar to wrap him up in big hugs. And like a proud papa who did not want to let go, he held on tight to each officer.

“It was super special that the director OK’d it for us to be in our blacks for that roll call,” noted RID Detective John Childress, a PBA representative who made his first visit to Police Week. “And we were able to greet Echy’s family like we always do. Each one of us paid our respects. And it was, I think unless you’ve been there and you’ve done that, it’s very hard to describe.”

Between RID, the honor guard and officers who just wanted to be there, the MDPD ranks who came to National Police Week to honor Brother Echy from May 11 to 15 numbered more than 30. They accompanied Echy’s family to the wall at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, where his name was inscribed.

They gathered with the family for a photo op in front of the White House. They brought the brown and the black



Cesar Echaverry Jr.’s name inscribed on the wall at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial.

to the Vigil and then culminated Police Week by massing at the U.S. Capitol on May 15 for the annual National Peace Officers’ Memorial Service.

It turned out to be a five-day-long group hug to give Echy, his family, RID and the department a tribute that was so richly fitting and deserved.

“Seeing the family here and seeing their suffering, but yet their relief to see



that we're with them, if it doesn't bring tears to your eye, I don't know how you're human," commented Bridget Sanchez, a sergeant at Midwest, as she walked into the National Peace Officers' Memorial Service. "It's career-changing, life-changing and memory-making. It is definitely something that is unforgettable and unimaginable. You can't put it into perspective when you try to describe it."

The sun had not yet begun to set when members of the MDPD Honor Guard took up a position at the Candlelight Vigil on May 13. For those who have never seen it, honor guard members from around the world muster at the National Mall in one of the many life-changing moments during Police Week.

Impeccably dressed in their Class A uniforms, they form parallel lines at three entrances, standing at attention while family members of fallen officers – survivors, as they are known – walk through to specially reserved seats. Honor guard members also take turns escorting survivors from the buses that drop them at the Mall to their seats.

Imagine what goes through an officer's mind when serving with that detail.

"Touching. I mean...I'm really...it's emotional for me," expressed MDPD Sergeant Framis Ramos, who has been on the job for 19 years, with the honor guard for five, and made his first visit to National Police Week this year.

Nine members of the MDPD Honor Guard served in this capacity at the Vigil. They then replicated that presence at the National Peace Officers' Memorial Service.

Doing so can be so emotional that it leaves officers doing it at a loss for words. Several MDPD officers, however, did come up with words to relate the eloquence of being there.

"I'm feeling a love. Yeah, love and togetherness. You can feel it when you're there. Everybody, no matter where in the state they come from, we all are one," commented Joyce Williams, who has been on since 2007 and with the honor guard for four years. "When you see someone that lost a family member and then they can stand beside you, that gives you more strength than you could ever imagine."

Honor guard member Alexandra Jordan made her second visit to Po-

lice Week, along with Williams. Clearly, there's a feeling that brings officers back.

"Making sure that the families see why we're here and giving them the honors that they deserve," she began. "For us, it's very personal. We do this from the bottom of our heart. It's an honor for us to be here. We're going to continue attending, and we're going to continue honoring the fallen and their families."

No doubt, MDPD officers who attend National Police Week will forever feel the emotion when seeing Echy's name inscribed on the wall like they were able to do this year. Many were able to do so with the Echaverry family.

"I saw his name there. We all had our moments of our own condolences and our own wishes and warm thoughts that we've all gone through," confirmed Officer Mwana Pierre-Louis, who has been on for 25 years and served with the honor guard for 22. "It's very heart-wrenching because when you lose one of your own, it's very close to home."

RID members had the opportunity to commune with Echy like never before. Because he was buried in Nicaragua, there has been little chance to visit him at his grave.

When Childress went to the wall, he said he felt the presence of his brother. Along with being there for Echy's family, that was another overwhelming moment of attending Police Week for the first time.

"To see his name on the wall with all the other names, it was very, very moving," he shared. "I think all of us being together there, we all said that it brought us even closer than we've already become. To see the Candlelight Vigil, to be on the lawn of the Capitol, to see Echy's name on that wall, to be there with his family, to take a picture with them in front of the White House, it's something that I'll forever hold near and dear to my heart."

Officer Joe Naranjo has made several visits to Police Week during his 29 years with MDPD and 12 with the honor guard. So he recognizes the distinct reverence of being there, honoring one of their own and comforting their family in one of their darkest hours.

But he has been there enough to know what visiting the wall and seeing that name can do for the family and



MDPD officers light candles with Cesar Echaverry Sr. at the Vigil.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 38



**COMING** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37

Echy's sisters and brothers in law enforcement.

"It shows that you still carry on," Naranjo said. "He may no longer be here physically, but the spirit and the legacy carry on. The spirit of a warrior never dies."

Perhaps the spirit made its presence felt as the Vigil came to an end. Perhaps that was at the root of the hugs Cesar shared with the RID detectives.

Perhaps it was a grand moment – another one – of Echy lifting up RID while they were lifting up his family. The Echaverry family now knows each of these officers by name, and that special bond keeps everybody going, all the while glowing like it did at the Candlelight Vigil.

"To know that in this instance they want to make sure that we are loved, that we are taken care of, and to be taken in by the Echaverry family is an amazing feeling," Sanchez reiterated. "Cesar gives the best hugs, and he's like a dad to us. He may have lost his own son, but he's gained a whole family of kids."



MDPD officers enter the National Peace Officers' Memorial Service at the U.S. Capitol on May 15.



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# For Real and Surreal

## Miami Gardens Honor Guard members among South Florida officers who experienced the power of National Police Week

■ BY ESTHER GONZALES

Dressed in their black-and-gold Class A uniforms, Miami Gardens Honor Guard members Miguel Irizarry and Doretha Hall stood on the lawn of the U.S. Capitol. Beside them, law enforcement officers from Miami-Dade joined them in conversation.

The South Florida officers had gathered with thousands of their brothers and sisters from across the country for the 42nd Annual National Peace Officers' Memorial Service on May 15, during National Police Week.

It was the first time Irizarry had attended National Police Week and all its events that led up to this moment, including visiting the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial the day before. Seeing the more than 20,000 names of fallen officers inscribed on the wall at the Memorial and all the tributes to them was more emotional and memorable than he had expected.

"I had a different mindset and thought of how it was going to be," Irizarry explained. "Actually going to see the wall, it became a real somber reality check of how it really is. Especially being part of the honor guard team. It really resonated deep inside my heart to reevaluate the value of the fallen heroes that we've had in our police departments."

This is the power of National Police Week, seen through the eyes of Irizarry and Hall, who were among several South Florida PBA members who made the trek to Washington, D.C., including those from the Homestead and Doral police departments.

As the National Peace Officers' Memorial Service began, buses arrived with family members of fallen officers. Law enforcement officers escorted them past a long row of mounted units and through a line, stretching the entire width of the lawn of the Capitol, of officers who stood at attention and saluted. All the while, the melancholy echo of bagpipes and drums reverberated in the distance.

Although Hall had attended National Police Week several years ago, she expressed just how much it meant to her to be here again.

"It's a great honor to be a part of this," Hall declared. "It's amazing. It just makes us realize this career isn't for everyone. You have to be a special type of person to stay in this career, work this career, and to be a part of the brotherhood. It's pretty amazing because we get to make a difference in people's lives."

Somewhere in the sea of blue also stood three honor guard members from the Doral Police Department.

"This week, honor guard members join law enforcement from around the country," the Doral Police Department wrote on its social media, along with a photo of the members. "To honor all those who have made the ultimate sacrifice and lost their lives in the line of duty."

Unlike on any other days of the year, during National Police Week, the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial is adorned with heartfelt tributes. Countless red roses, dozens of flower bouquets, handwritten notes, etchings and drawings line



Law enforcement officers from the City of Homestead Police Department kneel together at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial.



Miami Gardens Honor Guard members Doretha Hall, left, and Miguel Irizarry attend the 42nd Annual National Peace Officers' Memorial Service in Washington, D.C.

the stone walls of the Memorial, which are etched with rows upon rows of the names of fallen officers.

Photos are taped to the walls in honor of those who were lost in the line of duty. Family members and loved ones kneel at a name, leave a memento or reflect in a moment of silence.

Among those who paid tribute during National Police Week were law enforcement officers from the Homestead Police Department. Together, they knelt at the Memorial and placed a hand on one another's shoulders.



“We pay tribute to the law enforcement officers who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country,” shared the Homestead Police Department on social media. “And show our appreciation for all those who currently serve on the front lines of the battle against crime.”

Irizarry witnessed the emotional scene at the Memorial during National Police Week for the first time on May 14. He said it was something he would never forget.

“Out of all the events in every place I’ve been to, the thing that will always stand out in my mind the most is the wall,” Irizarry remarked. “The wall with all the names from years past. It’s just really, really somber and surreal.”

Hall shared Irizarry’s sentiment of the surrealness of that moment at the Memorial. And how it reminded her of her calling.

“We saw people that were on the ground sobbing, still grieving for their loved ones,” Hall added. “It was very touching, and it makes me remember why I chose this career. We want to help people, but at the same time we have to realize the ultimate sacrifice may happen. It’s a reality.”



Law enforcement officers from the Doral Police Department pose for a picture in front of the U.S. Capitol before the National Peace Officers’ Memorial service.

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# REFLECTIONS

Catching up with a renowned South Florida PBA Member

## A Match Made in MDPD

Miami-Dade sergeants Patty and Chris Bimonte each made a great impact on the job

■ BY ESTHER GONZALES

Miami-Dade PD Sergeant Patty Bimonte's phone rang at 12:30 p.m. on Feb. 11, 2013. It was the kind of call nobody wants to receive on the job.

Patty learned that only a few hours earlier, one of her fellow officers had been stabbed several times in the back and neck by a convicted felon he was transporting across Texas. Patty was already on her way to Texas to help with the extradition, so when she heard the news, she immediately went to the hospital.

While she was there, officers began the manhunt for the suspect, who had fled on foot. Patty, who was a sergeant at the time, waited to see if the officer would pull through his life-threatening injuries.

Waiting and hoping that he would survive, Patty stayed with his wife and daughter. A week later, the suspect was finally apprehended, and the officer made a miraculous recovery.

It was one of the toughest moments in Patty's career. And even after retiring in 2016, every February 11, she thinks back to that day 10 years ago.

"It was very emotional, because it's hard to see that your officer may not make it," Patty explained. "Looking at his daughter, I was thinking that she might lose her father, and it was like I was looking at my own children and thinking, 'Oh my God, this just can't happen.'"

Pursuing a career in law enforcement was never a lifelong dream for Patty. It simply seemed like a good career option at the time. And it was the best decision she has ever made, she explained.

She started out as the youngest in her academy class and came on the job when she was only 20 years old.

"I graduated, and I still couldn't buy my own bullets," Patty quipped. "But I absolutely loved every day."

While on the job for 27 years, Patty served in the Intergovernmental Bureau and the undercover Medical Crimes Unit. After being promoted to sergeant in 2001, she ran the False Alarm Unit for the department for five years. By the end of her career, Patty had six officers working under her, serving felony charges throughout the south end of the county and working extradition trips.

But the best part of the job might have been being married to Miami-Dade PD Sergeant Chris Bimonte, whom she had met when they both worked the same shift.

Having someone who understood the difficulty of the job inspired and motivated Patty to continue to pursue their calling together. Even when they had to juggle their time for one of them to be home with their children.

"It definitely helps to be married to somebody who understands what it's like to be a cop," Patty explained. "I think the hardest part was having two kids, but the department was very understanding and accommodating. We worked opposite shifts, so we never had a problem with that. It kind of balanced itself out."

Chris always aspired to pursue a career in law enforcement. After countless riots broke out in the '80s, Chris applied to the department and was working patrol by the end of 1982.

After six years on the job, Chris moved to the Federal Investigation Unit as a detective. Then, as a sergeant, he trained new law enforcement officers before moving to general investigations.

The highlight of Chris's career, which came to an end in 2013



### Patty Bimonte's Record:

- Served for 27 years
- Became a PBA member in 1989
- Served in the Intergovernmental Bureau
- Served undercover with Medical Crimes and Felony Warrants units

### Chris Bimonte's Record:

- Served for 31 years
- Became a PBA member in 1982
- Served on the Federal Investigation Unit
- Became a training sergeant
- Served on the auto theft task force in the Economic Crimes Bureau

when he retired, came during the 19 years he worked on the Auto Theft Task Force in the Economic Crimes Bureau.

At one point, Chris recounted, Miami-Dade was No. 1 in the country for auto theft. According to statistics at the time, many vehicles were being lost out of the Port of Miami. When he became the head of the task force, Chris helped establish a surveillance mechanism to allow law enforcement officers to check inside crates. Within the first week of its implementation, Chris and his team, which included U.S., Canadian and Mexican law enforcement officers, discovered six stolen cars in containers that would be shipped to South America.

"It just goes to show you how many cars we were losing going out," Chris related. "It was a very successful program. The [suspects] didn't know when we were running and when we weren't. It shut down the traffic of stolen cars, and we promoted this program throughout the entire country."

During the next 12 years, Miami-Dade's statistics for stolen cars significantly decreased because of the program, which is still being implemented, Chris submitted.

"It's an amazing feeling," Chris added. "And it's just not me, but it's the entire task force. We were definitely instrumental in putting these ordinances in place and keeping them in place. It's a good feeling that your legacy lives on."





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# Members Only Section

Celebrating South Florida PBA members and the way they serve every day

## Never Forget, Ever Honor

### South Florida members honor fallen officers at the 42nd Annual Miami-Dade Law Enforcement Officers Memorial

Hundreds of South Florida law enforcement officers lined the stands at Tropical Park in Miami on May 4 for the 42nd Annual Miami-Dade Law Enforcement Officers Memorial. Agencies from across Florida attended the memorial service with family members of their fallen officers and members of their Police Explorers program.

And as night fell, blue lights lit up the darkness, each light signifying a brother or sister who made the ultimate sacrifice. "It was a powerful reminder of the bravery and sacrifice of the men and women who have dedicated their lives to protecting their communities," the Medley Police Department said on social media. "We will never forget their service and commitment."



Homestead

Law enforcement officers from the City of Homestead Police Department attended the memorial in honor of their fallen brothers and sisters from Dade County.



Medley



Standing among hundreds of family members and Police Explorers, law enforcement officers from Medley Police Department lit their blue glow sticks to commemorate those who made the ultimate sacrifice.



North Miami

On May 4, law enforcement officers from North Miami rode through Dade County for their Positive Impact Bike Ride and paid a visit to the Veterans Tower at Griffing Park to pay tribute to their fallen heroes.



Sunny Isles

Fellow law enforcement officers from Sunny Isles Beach Police Department joined their brothers and sisters at the 42nd Annual Miami-Dade Law Enforcement Officers Memorial.



Key West

On May 19, law enforcement officers from the Key West Police Department paid tribute to their fallen brothers and sisters who were lost in the line of duty. The annual Law Enforcement Memorial Service was held at Bayview Park in Key West.



# Aventura and FIU members show support for National Autism Acceptance Month

In honor of National Autism Acceptance Month in April, numerous agencies unveiled newly wrapped patrol vehicles featuring colorful puzzle pieces, and even created new colorful badges to raise awareness in the community. From participating in local events to decorating their patrol vehicles, here is a glance at how Aventura Police Department and FIU helped raise awareness for autism acceptance.



Aventura

The Aventura Police Department designed a blue, yellow, green and red badge for the month of April to promote autism acceptance. Officers from Aventura displayed their Autism Awareness vehicle, which featured a design of large yellow, blue and green puzzle pieces to promote acceptance.



FIU

On April 1, members of the FIU Police Bike Unit participated with the Medley Police Department Bike Unit and other local agencies for a Riding for a Cause bike ride to support and increase awareness of autism.

## Members go the distance for the Law Enforcement Torch Run

More than 5,000 law enforcement officers ran the 1,500-mile relay through 67 counties in the state for the annual Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics Florida. And Pinecrest Police Department and Bal Harbour Police Department were among the countless agencies supporting the cause for Special Olympics athletes.

Hosted by North Bay Village Police Department, members

carried the torch, known as the Flame of Hope, from county to county from March 27 to May 19 until it arrived at the opening ceremony of the Special Olympics Florida State Games in Orlando. There, the Flame of Hope was carried to the center of the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex, where it lit a large cauldron to signify the start of the Summer Games.



Participants from the Pinecrest Police Department run together in the Law Enforcement Torch Run and carry the Flame of Hope for Special Olympics Florida.



Law enforcement officers from Bal Harbour Police Department gather for the start of the annual Law Enforcement Torch Run.



# MDPD walks to raise awareness for mental health

May marks Mental Health Awareness Month, and Miami-Dade police worked to bring more awareness to members about mental health and wellness. On May 21, the department participated in the 2023 Walk for Mental Health Awareness, hosted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in Miami-Dade County.

NAMI Miami-Dade County serves local residents by providing free mental health support, online support groups, resources and education. To learn more, go to [namimiami.org](http://namimiami.org).



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# Dreaming big: South Florida PBA members celebrate Take Your Child to Work Day

Kids often dream about what they want to be when they grow up. Maybe it's a doctor, an actor, an astronaut or even a first responder.

On National Take Your Child to Work Day, April 27, children in South Florida got a taste of what it's like to be a law enforcement officer.

Kids in Doral had the chance to watch their parents in action as Doral police officers made a presentation.

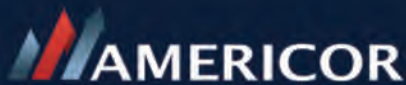
In Sunny Isles Beach, the police department started recruiting some little ones to join the team, with a few kids even getting to put on SWAT gear.



Students take part in Take Your Child to Work Day with members at the Doral Police Department.



Members at the Sunny Isles Beach Police Department enjoy Take Your Child to Work Day.



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# Pinecrest members Kickin' It with the kids

Field day is always a day students look forward to. They get out of the classroom to enjoy the fresh air, play some games, have special treats and celebrate the end of the school year.

On May 21, members at the Pinecrest Police Department enjoyed a Kickin' It event with the kids of Genesis Hopeful Haven at Flagler Grove Park for their annual field day and graduation ceremony. Genesis Hopeful Haven works with local foster kids to prepare them for adulthood, giving them the resources they need to be successful.

In addition to Pinecrest PD, the event sponsors included the Voices for Children Foundation, Citrus Family Network, HV Designs, United Superheroes for Kids and RPAC.

Law enforcement partners who also helped with the event included Coral Gables Sergeant Alex Escobar, Opa-Locka Captain Alvin Rogers, Delray Beach Lieutenant Danny Pacheco and Pinecrest Police Chief Jason Cohen. Pinecrest Village Council member Shannon Del Prado also helped make the event successful.



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NICOLÁS VALDÉS-FAULI  
CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™

Over the years, I have introduced the pillow factor as an important measurement for clients to consider when making financial decisions and hiring an advisor. You cannot assign a number to it, nor can you demonstrate it with a fancy chart, but the pillow factor can generally be described as your level of comfort with what your money and your financial professional are doing for you. A gut feeling, if you will.

As a group, law enforcement professionals are skeptical and suspicious. Therefore, the greatest privilege I have earned working with law enforcement officers is their trust.

Trust is the basis of all successful plans and the foundation on which your financial plan and future are built. When something does not sound or feel right, then it probably isn't. For example, when commissions or charges haven't been fully explained, you can be left feeling uneasy or confused.

Here are some important considerations as you make important decisions towards retirement.

**Confidence and peace of mind.** Trust in your financial advi-

sor brings confidence and peace of mind. It allows you to delegate complex financial decisions to a professional, knowing that they have your best interests at heart. With trust, you can approach your financial matters with less stress and anxiety, knowing that you have a knowledgeable and reliable advisor by your side.

**Long-term financial planning.** Trust is especially critical for long-term financial planning and investments. Trustworthy financial advisors develop comprehensive financial plans, allocate resources, and make prudent investment choices aligned with your goals. This trust will allow you to navigate and chart your future.

**Expertise and knowledge.** Trusting your financial advisor's expertise and knowledge is crucial when seeking guidance and advice on complex financial matters. Whether it be income considerations, tax implications or beneficiary planning, make certain to choose an advisor who is credentialed. Not some random alphabet soup of letters behind their name, but a CFP, as they have the necessary qualifications, certifications and experience to provide sound financial advice tailored to your specific needs and goals. Trust allows you to rely on their expertise and make informed decisions.

**Fiduciary duty.** Trustworthy advisors are held to a fiduciary duty, meaning they are legally and ethically obligated to act in your best interests. A nuanced consideration is that not all fiduciary standards hold the same weight — which makes things more confusing. However, CFPs are held to the highest standard. They must put your needs before their own and disclose any conflicts of interest that may arise. Trust ensures that your advisor will always act in a fiduciary capacity, minimizing the risk of misconduct or inappropriate actions.

**Confidentiality and privacy.** When working with a financial advisor, you may need to disclose sensitive financial information. Trust is crucial in ensuring that your advisor maintains the highest level of confidentiality and privacy regarding your personal and financial details. A trusted advisor respects your privacy and takes the necessary steps to safeguard your information.

In summary, trust is crucial when hiring a financial advisor as it ensures their expertise, objectivity, integrity, confidentiality and transparency. Trust enables a long-term relationship built on mutual understanding and provides you with confidence and peace of mind in your financial decisions. Take the time to carefully evaluate and select a trusted financial advisor to secure your financial future.

*Nicolás Valdés-Fauli is the founder and CEO of Thin Blue Line Financial ([www.tblfinancial.com](http://www.tblfinancial.com)). Call or text 305-798-1842 or email [nvf@tblfinancial.com](mailto:nvf@tblfinancial.com). Nicolás has served the LEO community in South Florida for 20 years and is dedicated to helping his clients make sound decisions before and during retirement. He is an expert in all matters related to the FRS, deferred compensation and local municipal retirement plans.*

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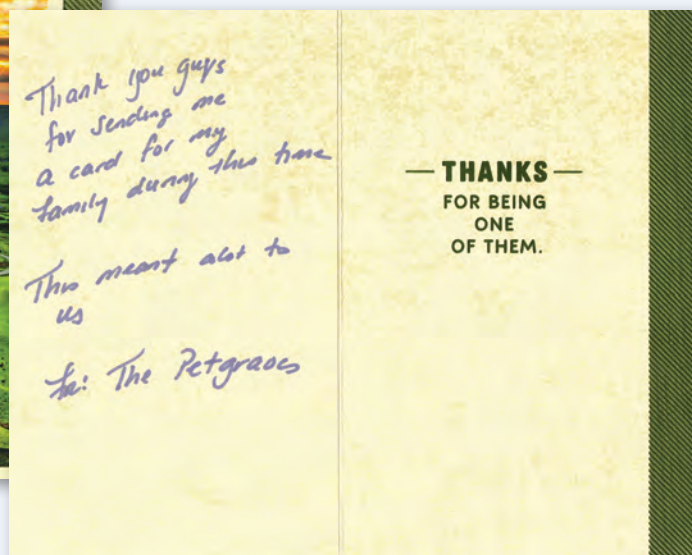
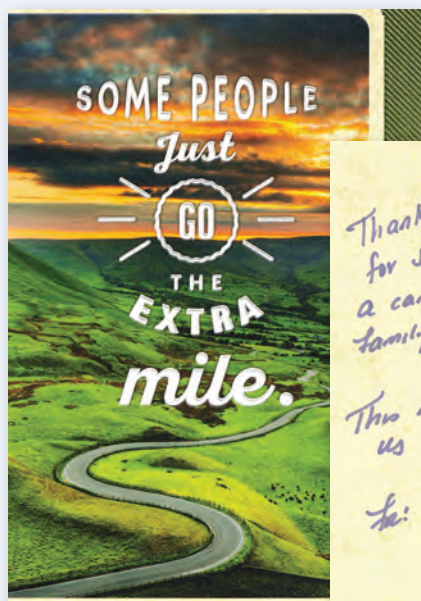
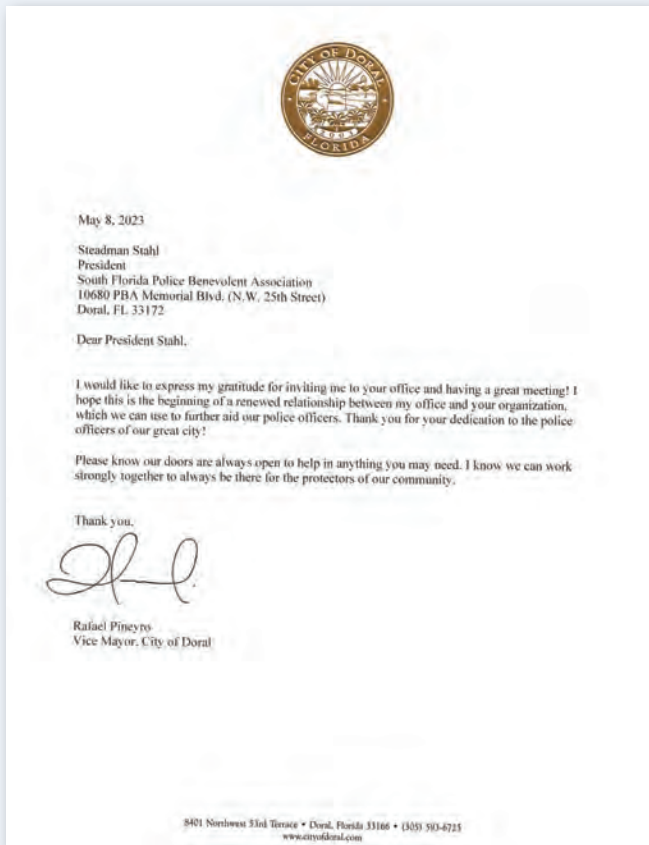
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# Thank-You Notes TO THE PBA





# ATTENTION PBA MEMBERS

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- Security of Principle**  
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- Positive Growth (Secure Gains)?**  
*Gains are Locked in Annually...*
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