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QUIEN ES QUIEN (WHO'S WHO)

Hispanic Business Leaders Low-Key but Influential

By PETER BRENNAN

When members of the Orange County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce looked at ways to raise funds, president Ralph Puga thought a mariachi festival would be fun. He asked Manuel Ramirez, president of the Irvine-based accounting firm of Strabala, Ramirez & Associates, to be festival chairman.

Ramirez didn't even know much about mariachis. "I grew up in Texas listening to Western music," he said.

But Ramirez and Puga knew how to get things done. The pair solicited Jose Hernandez, a new resident of Lido Isle, Newport Beach and owner of the most famous mariachi group in the United States, Mariachis Sol de Mexico, to perform.

Thus was born the Hispanic Chamber's First Annual Mariachi Festival. By the end of the festival, held on a Saturday afternoon in September in Irvine, the Chamber had raised \$5,000 for scholarships, with a goal of \$20,000 for next year's festival.

Ramirez said he's talking to Disneyland officials about next year's event.

"They said they'd love to host the event. They want it to kick off Hispanic Heritage Month," said Ramirez.

Ramirez, Puga and Hernandez are three of the prominent Hispanic business people in Orange County.

More than three dozen such folks are listed in a Who's Who of OC Hispanic Business compiled for this story. It's a loose-knit group (mostly men) who share their Hispanic heritage and ties to business, but often little else. Most are of Mexican descent. Many are immigrants or the children of immigrants, but not all speak Spanish.

As a group, they are the Horatio Alger stories of today. They brought themselves up by their bootstraps, going to night school, pulling weeds and changing mufflers.

They can tell you about starting enterprises that now measure their worth in the tens of million of dollars. One can tell you about the Harvard MBAs who messed up his company. Another can talk about Richard Nixon holding court in his restaurant. And another can say famous authors like



Manuel Ramirez, majority owner of 31-person accounting firm Strabala & Ramirez: He's talking to Disney

Isabelle Allende come to his business. These players can introduce you to everybody from George W. Bush to Vicente Fox, a presidential candidate for PAN in Mexico.

Some are Democrats, not so much because they like the Democrats' business policies but because of the lingering resentment of Hispanics, even Hispanic businesspeople, over Republican support for Prop. 187 and similar measures targeting immigrants.

Still, the Republicans claim a significant number of these businesspeople. Perhaps the best example is none other than Tom Fuentes, a sixth

generation Californian who is chairman of the Orange County Republican Party, senior VP of Tait & Associates and a director of giant RV manufacturer Fleetwood Enterprises.

These Hispanic businesspeople are often the backbone of Hispanic organizations in Orange County but unlike Fuentes, they don't often make headlines or garner acclaim. In fact, neither Fuentes nor another politically influential member of this Who's Who, Democrat Congressman Loretta Sanchez, recognized many of the other names on this list. But both said they would like to see the list when it's completed.