

EDUCATION

Miami Dade College inducts 10 heroes to Hall of Fame, raises \$1.1 million for scholarships

BY JIMENA TAVEL

JUNE 09, 2021 09:46 PM, UPDATED 11 HOURS 37 MINUTES AGO



The Miami Dade College Alumni Hall of Fame celebrates the achievements of outstanding MDC alumni who are the civic and business leaders of our community. BY MIAMI DADE COLLEGE



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Registered nurse Caridad Cuellar spent about eight days last March, at the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic, muting herself during telehealth video calls with patients every time she needed to puke in the bucket she had set by her small desk.

Cuellar experienced the classic array of COVID-19 symptoms: a fever, shortness of breath, loss of taste and smell and body aches. But she powered through it until a test confirmed the diagnosis. That's when she finally went to her supervisor to request time off to recover.

“I told her, ‘I don't think I can do this anymore,’ ” said Cuellar, 38. “And she was like ‘What! You have been working sick all this time?’

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“But that's how important I knew my role was,” Cuellar added. “I kept working because I'm a nurse, and I knew this pandemic

was our fight as nurses. It is.”

Cuellar, the daughter of Cuban immigrants and a Miami local, is one of 10 graduates inducted Wednesday night into the Miami Dade College Alumni Hall of Fame. They joined a group of fewer than 400 inductees, out of a pool of nearly 2 million who have graduated from the college since its inception in 1959.

This year, the inducted class featured the heroes edition, nominees who played important roles during this past year’s crisis in areas like education, emergency management, fire rescue, health care, law enforcement and logistics.

“While so many retreated to their homes, there were some who went out and continued to make our community run,” said MDC President Madeline Pumariega. “We wanted to recognize those courageous heroes.”



From left to right: Teresa Ellen Murphy, Brandon Webb, Sheila Jones-Coakley, Brian Rafky, Cesar F. Larancuent, Caridad Cuellar, Betsy Godoy-Rosado, Jessica Gutierrez-Castillo, Pete Gomez and Shirley N. Codada celebrate after being inducted in Miami Dade College's Alumni Hall of Fame at the school's Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami on Wednesday, June 9, 2021. MDC recognized ten alumni on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic in a special heroes edition of the annual Alumni Hall of Fame induction ceremony. [MATIAS J. OCNER](mailto:MATIAS.J.OCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)
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RAISING MORE THAN \$1 MILLION FOR MDC STUDENTS

Since 2003, the Hall of Fame induction ceremony has become a signature event for the Miami Dade College Foundation to raise funds for student scholarships.

Traditionally, the gala attracts about 1,000 guests for a sit-down dinner at a fancy ballroom.

This year, however, the college scaled down the celebration to about 200 people, limited the food to hors d'oeuvres and held it

on its own Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami.

“Fortunately, with vaccines we see our positivity rate going down, but we didn’t know that in February or March when we decided to hold the event so we were organizing it a bit smaller,” said Pumariega, herself inducted into the Alumni Hall of Fame in 2018, when she served as chancellor of the Florida College System.

The pandemic changed the festivities but didn’t affect the community’s willingness to give to the college, Pumariega said. Donors and sponsors still opened their wallets and checkbooks, even though they couldn’t buy seats at the tables for the feast.

“I think its a recognition that they believe in our students,” she said. “They believe in MDC and in the scholarship program.”

That allowed the MDC Foundation to pass its \$1 million goal. As of Wednesday night, the college had already raised \$1.1 million, but that number will likely rise as alumni continue to give before this drive closes out in the next 30 days or so, Pumariega said. But anyone interested can donate anytime to the foundation.



Awards are on display before the start of Miami Dade College's 2021 Alumni Hall of Fame Ceremony at the school's Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami on Wednesday, June 9, 2021. MDC recognized ten alumni on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic in a special heroes edition of the annual Alumni Hall of Fame induction ceremony. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM

'IT ALL STARTED AT MIAMI DADE'

Inductee Cuellar graduated with her associate's degree and her bachelor of science in nursing from MDC. She's now pursuing a master's at St. Thomas University to become a family nurse practitioner next summer.

Eventually, she would like to return to MDC as a professor.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuellar worked for Borinquen Medical Centers, stationed as a nurse at Palm Springs Middle School in Hialeah. When both schools shut down, she transitioned to virtual care.

But when the institutions partially reopened, her job had drastically changed. Instead of directly interacting with students and parents through cooking classes and health fairs, she now had to deal with isolation and manage other security measures.

She sought a career change and found it at Baptist Health. In November 2020, she started as an urgent care nurse.

“And it all started at Miami Dade,” she said. “The college has been pivotal and monumental in me being where I am today.”

Cuellar, a single mother of an 8-year-old and a 12-year-old, told the Herald she felt humbled and honored to become a member of such a prestigious group. But what she considers the best part is setting an example for her two boys, who accompanied her to the ceremony Wednesday.

“Being able to leave this part of my legacy to my kids is amazing,” she said. “They get to see what hard work and humility brings you, and, to me, that’s the biggest accomplishment, that I get to experience this with my kids.”



South Operations Division Chief for the Miami-Dade Police Department Brian Rafky is honored by Miami Dade College President Madeline Pumariega during the 2021 Alumni Hall of Fame Ceremony at MDC's Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami on Wednesday, June 9, 2021. MDC recognized ten alumni on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic in a special heroes edition of the annual Alumni Hall of Fame induction ceremony. *MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM*

'SUPER HONORED'

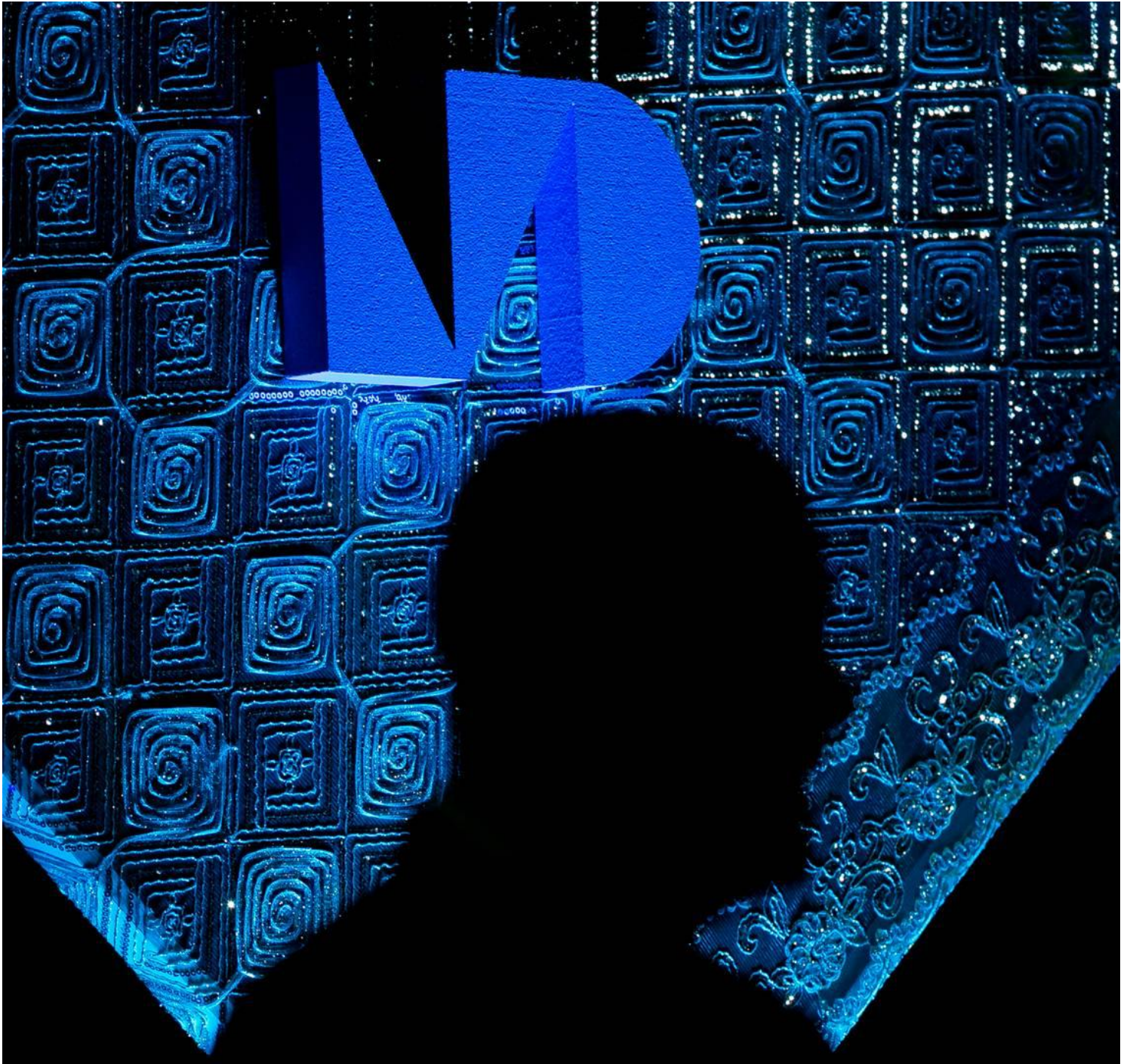
Another Hall of Famer, Miami Dade Police Department Chief Brian Rafky, said he feels “super honored and humbled.”

Rafky started at MDC in 1996, when he enrolled in the college's nine-month night Police Academy. Throughout more than 20 decades in the county's police department, Rafky worked for the Special Victims Bureau, leading investigations into crimes involving sexual and domestic violence, child and elderly abuse and missing persons.

During the pandemic, Rafky made sure he kept everyone safe from the virus — his own team, victims and suspects. He also

focused on encouraging people to ask for help despite the COVID-19 chaos.

“During times of quarantine, our greatest fear is that there’s less reporting, because the victims can essentially be captured by their abusers. We always wanted to push the message out that regardless of what’s happening with the pandemic, we’re still up and running,” he said.



About a month ago, Rafky, 48, got promoted to chief of the South Operations Division, overseeing districts like Cutler Bay, Kendall and Palmetto Bay.

Born in New Orleans and raised in Miami, Rafky said he has always been connected to MDC because the college employed both of his parents at one point. His brother and daughter also attended.

As a law enforcement officer, he has also seen over the years the impact the college has had on thousands of Floridians, who use it as the first rung of the ladder to improve.

“It really goes back to giving people the skill set to better their lives and put them on the path to success,” he said.

To see a full list of the 10 inductees, [click here](#).



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Jimena Tavel es una reportera bilingüe de triple nacionalidad: hondureña, cubana y costarricense. Nació y creció en Tegucigalpa, Honduras, y se mudó a la Florida a los 17 años. Obtuvo su título en periodismo de la Universidad de Florida en 2018, y se unió al Herald poco después. Jimena Tavel is a Honduran, Cuban and Costa Rican journalist who writes in both English and Spanish. She was born and raised in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, but moved to Florida at age 17. She earned her journalism degree from the University of Florida in 2018, and joined the Herald soon after.

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EDUCATION

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BY MICHELLE MARCHANTE

JUNE 09, 2021 08:48 PM, UPDATED 4 HOURS 25 MINUTES AGO



Students, parents and teachers across Miami-Dade County on Wednesday celebrated the last day of a challenging and disruptive school year that began with a rocky start to online classes and ended with mask-wearing students graduating in socially distanced ceremonies.

For Aranxta Llamas and Maria Luiza Cunha, they never thought their first year of high school at iPrep Academy, a K-12 school in downtown