



TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

Robert Collada

NOVURANIA PRESIDENT ROBERT COLLADA WAS BORN ON HIS FAMILY'S ESTATE, A SPRAWLING HACIENDA IN VICTORIA DE LAS TUNAS, CUBA, IN 1955. ONE OF TWO CHILDREN AND THE ONLY SON OF MELBA AND ROBERTO COLLADA—A SCHOOLTEACHER AND SUCCESSFUL RANCHER—ROBERT REMEMBERS THE DAY HIS LIFE CHANGED AT AGE 5, WHEN THE FAMILY WAS THROWN OFF THEIR LAND AND HIS FATHER BECAME A POLITICAL PRISONER. Story and Photo Jamie Welch

It was 1961, long before the U.S. gave Cuban refugees political asylum, when the Catholic church put Robert and his sister Teresa on a Pan Am flight to Florida, where they were taken to Freedom Tower in downtown Miami.

"My mother couldn't come, so a friend of the family who was fourteen years old became our temporary guardian," Robert says. "I still remember the chaos. A nun handed me a winter coat and I couldn't understand why, until we were put onto another flight to New York, where we landed one dark and cold November night."

For three months they lived with another uncle on 42nd Street. His new guardian worked in a steak house and a bakery, where Robert and Teresa would go with him at 4:00 in the morning. Without their parents, money or a word of English in their vocabulary, they had obvious difficulties fitting in at their new school.

"I remember my St. James uniform, which was navy, was covered with white flour every day," he says. "I wrote my name, Roberto, on all my papers but they would come back with the 'o' crossed off—I wasn't welcomed by anyone at first, not even the school teachers."

Seven months later his mother made it to New York and moved her children to a tiny Manhattan apartment, where she raised her two kids alone while working two and three jobs at a time as a seamstress and a maid. Melba Collada was emboldened by the Cuban community that gathered outside of Mass every Sunday, a support network that helped each other find jobs, cheap milk, whatever.

"The apartment was so small the bathtub was in the kitchen, and a hinged board came down over it to become our dining room table," Robert says. "We were as poor as you could get, yet my mother

never complained about money. Here was a woman who had lived in a huge five-bedroom house with servants, yet she never was bitter."

A sturdy rancher who had an army of employees before the coup, Melba's husband Roberto showed the same steely determination as his wife. "Dad was in prison for 8 years, and it must have been a living hell," Robert says. "But he was a quick thinker, he had charisma and he had been very well liked by all his employees—from the slaughterhouse to the board room. Those same people became his captors and prison mates, and

to this day he only talks about the fun stories, about the tricks he would play on the guards."

Once Roberto Collada reunited with his family, he wasted no time starting a meat delivery business and, not surprisingly, success came quickly; his one truck soon became 14. Robert started working at his dad's butcher shop during High School, where he played basketball and football. Following his father's lead, Robert started his own butcher shop and delivery business at just 17. He sold that successful endeavour in 1978, when he started a designer clothing business that he owned until 1987, when he cashed out and headed to Florida, far away from the chilly winters.

In Florida he bought a 41' Rhodes sailboat that he lived on in the Miami River. He sailed the Islands, and worked for a man named Graeme Rowley, who had the biggest inflatable boat shop in the world. Shortly after he got married in 1988 to his wife Sylvia, Robert bought Novurania USA, and moved the factory from California to Miami. Since then he's turned it into a \$15 million business with two factories in Vero Beach, FL.

"We sold 24 boats the first year, when I used to drive around a Peugeot 504 with a trailer hitch selling boats door-to-door," he says. "Now we're selling about 700 a year." A true family business, at Novurania he's joined each morning by his wife, sister and father, who's now 82. It's clear to see on a visit that the cleverness and friendliness of the Collada family trickles down to all the Novurania employees. A tireless worker who never forgets his upbringing, Robert finds time to cook for his entire family almost every Sunday, joined by his parents Melba and Roberto, his wife Sylvia, their two children, friends and relatives. The conversation around the dinner table is upbeat, and the *asado* is superb.

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