Nos Mantenemos Unidos

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How the Association of Hispanic Alumni's Gator Guayabera Guateque helps UF's La Casita.

By April Frawley-Birdwell *(BSJ '02)*

In the 1960s, UF's Hispanic student population was just beginning to grow as Cuban exiles flocked to universities in search of opportunities in their new country.

Now in its sixth year, Gator Guayabera Guateque weekend includes music and dancing, cigar rolling and a silent auction for Gator memorabilia. Photo by Steve Johnson* (3JM)

"I was one of them," says Ignacio Abella*, a board member of UF's Association of Hispanic Alumni. "Hispanic life at UF goes back to then. We didn't have anything as organized as the Institute of Hispanic-Latino Cultures. Things have changed from when I was going to school, for the better."

Abella (BSA '69, MBA '70) and his fellow AHA members are part of why things are better for Hispanic students at UF these days. In 2004, the association established the Gator Gauyabera Guateque, an event that brings alumni and students together during a warm May Miami weekend to celebrate their culture … and raise money.

During the past six years, the association has raised more than $200,000 for UF's Institute of Hispanic-Latino Cultures, which the group nicknamed La Casita. The money supports two scholarship funds, helps maintain the two-story gray house on University

Avenue that serves as La Casita's home and allows the institute to offer dozens of programs and events for students each year.

This year's Guateque raised more than $21,000 for La Casita, Abella says. The money will help establish a new leadership program for UF students that aims to encourage and prepare Latino students to be activists and leaders for their communities. It also will allow the institute to sponsor the Florida Hispanic-Latino Conference, which brings together student leaders from all different regions of Florida.

"We don't have a very large budget [from] the university, so it is really through the money alumni raise for us that we are able to do these programs," says Natalia Leal (MEd '06), director of the Institute of Hispanic-Latino Cultures. "The work they do for us is invaluable."

The arrival of funds from the AHA could not come at a better time, Leal says. The number of Hispanic students at UF is booming. Nearly 14 percent identify themselves as Hispanic. With many of these students coming to UF from South Florida, where the Hispanic population is large, the move to small town Gainesville can be a jarring one, Leal says.

"They have a culture shock," Leal says. "La Casita helps them get connected and feel a part of the UF community. It really helps them flourish."

*UF Alumni Association member