

The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel®

www.metrocorpcounsel.com

Volume 19, No. 2

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February 2011

Diversity – Law Firms

DuPont Firm Reaps The Rewards Of Diversity

The Editor interviews George R. Diaz-Arrastia, Partner, Schirrmeister Diaz-Arrastia Brem LLP. The firm is a DuPont Primary Law Firm (PLF).

Editor: Tell us about your background, your firm's practice and the diversity of its lawyers and staff.

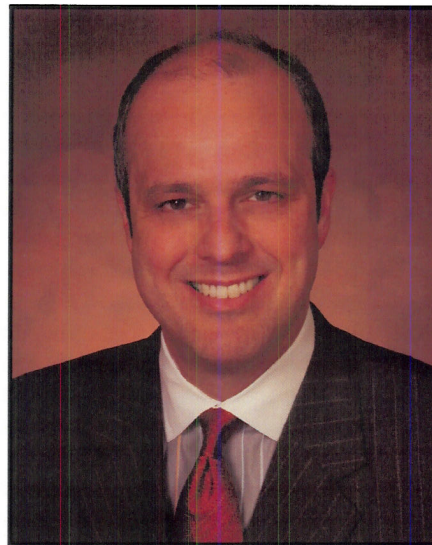
Diaz-Arrastia: I was born in Havana, Cuba in 1959, the year when Castro seized power. My family left Cuba and came to the U.S. by way of Spain in 1969. So I grew up speaking Spanish, and that's still the language that I speak with my parents. That has turned out to have had great influence on the development of our firm's practice.

I've been practicing law for 27 years, and for the first 17 of them, I did not use Spanish at all in my practice. For the past 10 years, I spend half of my day using Spanish because some of our clients are from Latin America. It's a unique aspect of our firm and our practice.

In our firm, we have four bilingual attorneys, including myself. We are a small firm –16 lawyers total – so that's a fairly high percentage. And, enough members of our staff are bilingual to provide us with the support we need. We recently hired a Korean-American lawyer, who will help us expand our work for Asian clients.

Although we are a DuPont PLF, our client base includes many other companies. Many of our clients are companies based in either Latin America or having significant activities in Latin America. Ours is a story of a firm where there is a direct relationship between our diversity and the growth of our business.

Editor: Describe how your firm's role



George R. Diaz-Arrastia

representing DuPont triggered your international practice.

Diaz-Arrastia: We represent DuPont in a wide variety of litigation matters. By volume, the predominant work the firm does for DuPont is toxic tort defense, where Andrew Schirrmeister is the lead attorney.

When our firm first became a PLF, DuPont's PLF program had more of a geographical focus. At that time, DuPont Mexico had some lawsuits pending in Brownsville, Texas; and our firm was assigned by DuPont to handle that litigation. Our international litigation practice started from that seed from which grew the firm's relationships with Mexico, other Latin-American countries and with clients throughout Latin America.

Editor: Describe the situation in South Texas with its bilingual population. Is

fluency in Spanish an asset for lawyers who practice there?

Diaz-Arrastia: South Texas is a very interesting part of the country. There is a lot of Spanish spoken in South Texas, but in my view, it is primarily a bilingual culture. You will not find many people there who do not speak English at all. The few you find are probably very recent arrivals, who are probably not from the border region but rather from farther inside Mexico.

One of the things about South Texas that has always amazed me is that the communities on both sides of the border are so physically close to each other. If you stand in downtown Brownsville, in the old part of town, you can look across the Rio Grande and see downtown Matamoros. They are so close that you can easily walk across the bridge from one to the other – people make that walk all the time in both directions.

There are a great many similarities between the two. Yet, Brownsville is very clearly an American town. When you are there, you would never think of it as anything else. Similarly, Matamoros is very clearly a Mexican town. It is remarkable to me that notwithstanding the constant contact between the two cultures, they have still maintained their separate identities. That is not to say that having lawyers who are fluent in Spanish is not a huge advantage, because it is. The ability to understand that bilingual culture is very important if you are going to handle lawsuits in that part of the country.

Editor: Has DuPont's diversity program helped your firm attract clients from Latin America?

Please email the interviewee at gdarrastia@sdablaw.com with questions about this interview.

