

GERARDO M. GONZÁLEZ

A fearless education activist, Gerardo M. González was named dean of the IU School of Education in July 2000 and, as he has noted, this appointment was the pinnacle of his career. Gerardo served as dean for 15 years and then continued as professor of higher education and student affairs, consistently modeling what it meant to be engaged in activist education. Literature surrounding education reform defines activist education as “an intentional educational practice in which participants engage in guided learning activities that help them understand themselves as capable of effecting change for social and ecological justice.” Throughout his professional and personal life, Gerardo has been a model for how to intentionally create conditions for change that are centered on effecting social justice through the power of education. In 2018, Gerardo M. González authored his memoir, *A Cuban Refugee’s Journey to the American Dream: The Power of Education*. This heart-warming memoir captures the life-long educational journey of a respected mentor, colleague, and friend.

In his own words, “I am a Cuban refugee who arrived in the United States shortly after Fidel Castro came to power. We fled a regime we wanted no part of, whose economics and ideology we distrusted. But in the United States my father, mother, sister, and I suffered dislocation, isolation, and fear.” Anyone who knows Gerardo knows that the support, love, and guidance that come from family are at the core of his anecdotes about how to use the power of education to be an education activist. Gerardo, born on September 24, 1950, in Placetas, Cuba, is one of two children of Elio Angel González and Armantina González Torres. His sister, Maritza, keeps the family’s photographic history. His parents believed education was a path to a better life, with his father often saying, “*Mira, Gera, mira a mis manos. Quiero que estudies para que cuando tú tengas mi edad tus manos no estén como las mías*” (Gera, look at my hands. I want you to get an education so that when you’re my age your hands don’t look like mine).”

Gerardo began his higher education journey at Miami Dade Junior College in



1969, where he became enthralled with psychology, and specifically Eastern philosophy courses. It was during this time that he met and fell in love with his wife, Marjorie Ann Reilly, whom he married on April 10, 1976. He graduated from the University of Florida (UF) in 1973 with a B.A. in psychology and received a Ph.D. in counseling and higher education administration in 1978. It was clear that Gerardo was going to be a change agent in higher education. During his doctoral studies at UF he founded Boost Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students (BACCHUS) in 1977, as a peer education program. BACCHUS became a national not-for-profit corporation in 1980, and Gerardo was named president and CEO. In 1986, when Gerardo announced he would be stepping down from his role, he received a letter from President Ronald Reagan that acknowledged his commitment to BACCHUS. The accolades were incredible, but what resonated with Gerardo the most was the following: “Nancy and I are proud of the work you have done to help make a safe and healthy tomorrow for our nation’s young people. That’s a fine contribution to your adopted homeland.” Again in his own words, Gerardo notes, “He acknowledged I was an immigrant, a refugee in an adopted homeland. He praised my contribution. I’d overcome my difficult beginnings, and done something meaningful. Again,

I reflected on my parents’ sacrifices and their words about the importance of education.” BACCHUS has chapters on college campuses across the county and continues to be active as the BACCHUS Initiatives of NASPA.

Gerardo accepted his first faculty appointment in 1987 at the University of Florida as an associate professor without tenure. His leadership and commitment to education activism propelled him into being appointed interim department chair in 1989. It didn’t take the faculty long to recognize that Gerardo was the ideal colleague to lead them into the future, and he became the permanent department chair of counselor education as a full professor with tenure in 1990. Continuing to advocate for social justice on campus, he was appointed to associate dean. In 1999, the UF provost asked Gerardo to serve as interim dean of the college. It was at this point that IU made the call to ask Gerardo to consider the deanship.

As dean, Gerardo was a tireless advocate for the values of public education and the need to prepare highly qualified teachers. The culmination of his role as an education activist happened while he served in this role. During his deanship, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked the IU School of Education as one of the nation’s best education schools for 15 consecutive years. In 2012, *Hispanic Business* named him one of the 50 most influential Hispanics in the United States. In 2015, Memorex listed him among 30 highly influential deans of education in America. In 2018, he received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from UF.

During retirement Gerardo looks forward to spending time with Margie, his children, Justin, Jarrett, Ian, and Julie, and his grandchildren. Margie and Gerardo are building their dream retirement home in Florida. We will miss his insight and guidance into navigating complex issues, but most of all his infectious laughter and warm collegiality.

Danielle DeSawal