

## **BOLLES CHAIR: AN IMMIGRANT'S SON'S COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY**

**By Fernando Acosta-Rua**

In 1961, a young Cuban medical student fled Fidel Castro's oppressive regime and left behind his family to seek a new beginning in the United States. With little money but endless optimism, he eventually settled in Jacksonville with his Spanish wife and three children. While his journey is not unique, it was certainly difficult, as he experienced prejudice and other challenges along the way. But with hard work and the welcoming support of many during his journey, he became a prominent neurosurgeon, a respected humanitarian and wonderful father to my two brothers and me.

These lessons have guided me throughout my life. Last year, after the senseless deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, I wrote to the employees of my company that even as someone who has at times been a target of prejudice and discrimination, I will not claim to know what it means to be a young African American today. I emphasized that no one should be made to feel "less than" because of the color of their skin, and that respect and inclusion, core values of our company, must be at the center of every community.

These values are also central to The Bolles School. At Bolles, diversity and inclusion, and creating a sense of belonging, are important components of our strategic plan. **Recent media reports about one aspect of these efforts, our curriculum, have given the impression we are backing away from that commitment. Nothing could be further from the truth.**

Last July, we began a comprehensive program to augment the existing curriculum in our K-8 grades. The idea was not simply to use some off-the-shelf product, but to carefully add context and understanding to many different subjects. After reviewing a variety of options, we decided to use portions of a widely used curriculum known as "Pollyanna."

To give you an idea of how it would work: before teaching our eighth grade English class the classic American novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we would teach a lesson about the racial issues students will encounter in that story. It was always our plan to customize the Pollyanna curriculum for our own needs, and ensure a thoughtful and age-appropriate program. Unfortunately, rumor and misunderstanding -- perhaps magnified by the polarized political environment -- overtook events, and we decided to hit "pause."

What's next? We remain deeply committed to enhancing our curriculum. We will tailor a program that is specific to Bolles. We will proceed thoughtfully, but make no mistake: we are committed to this and we know that progress will be measured by results and not words.

Our Board, our school leaders and faculty -- and I believe our parents and our students -- are proud of what we are attempting to do. We know it isn't easy -- we are confronting an issue with a long and difficult history, one that can provoke hurtful remarks and continues to cause great pain. It is unsurprising that there are sincere and passionate disagreements over how best to teach it to our children.

It has been said that the greatness of America lies not in its perfection but in democracy's endless capacity for self-correction. It was that sense of limitless opportunity that brought my parents here and remains a beacon of hope to so many. I am proud that Bolles is playing our part in that continuous American adventure to expand its promise. I believe that Bolles will succeed in giving our students the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in a diverse society, and that by doing so, Bolles will become a model for others.

*Fernando Acosta-Rua is chair of the Board of Trustees of The Bolles School, and President and CEO of Pet Paradise.*