

Alumni profile: Fifth-generation lawyer and former mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli (A&S '65)

January 6, 2025

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The story of Raul Valdes-Fauli (A&S '65) is one of resilience and transformation, with Tulane playing a pivotal role along his journey. Exiled from Cuba as a teenager after Fidel Castro's takeover, he faced the daunting challenge of starting over in a new country.

Yet, through determination and the opportunities afforded to him — including a life-changing scholarship to Tulane — Valdes-Fauli went on to become an internationally recognized lawyer and the longest-serving mayor of Coral Gables, Florida.

Valdes-Fauli, born in Cuba, came from a family who owned a bank and was one of the most prosperous in the country. But his high school education was marked by upheaval. When his parents deemed Cuba unsafe, they sent him to a prep school in New York. However, when Castro halted the purchase of dollars, his family could no longer pay the tuition, and he was forced to return to Cuba. Soon after, businesses were confiscated and private schools were shut down entirely, prompting his family to flee the country when he was 17. Valdes-Fauli ultimately completed his schooling in Miami, where the family resettled.

“It was a total change of life,” he recalls. His father, a lawyer in Cuba, became a delivery man, and his mother took a job at a toy store.

Despite these upheavals, Valdes-Fauli’s path led him to Tulane, where a full scholarship covering tuition, room and board made higher education possible. “I’ve always been grateful to Tulane because of that,” he says.

His college years were transformative. While he enjoyed his time in New Orleans, it was his junior year abroad in Paris that left an indelible mark on his life. “I discovered a different culture and embraced it, from the museums and churches and sitting in outdoor cafes, it was fascinating, and it changed my life. It gave me a new perspective.”

After graduating from Tulane in 1965, Valdes-Fauli attended Harvard Law School, continuing a proud family tradition as a fifth-generation lawyer. His office walls today showcase diplomas from those five generations, from his great-great-grandfather (dating back to 1830), to his own degree earned in 1968. “I never thought of being anything other than a lawyer. It wasn’t even a decision,” he reflects.

Valdes-Fauli’s career as a lawyer specializing in banking and international law was complemented by his extensive community involvement. He has held a variety of roles such as serving on the University of Miami’s Board of Trustees and chairing the Florida Board of Medicine, where he made history as the first non-MD to hold the position. He was also chair of the International Law Section of the Florida Bar for two years.

His journey into public office began in 1985 when a friend suggested he run for city

commissioner of Coral Gables. He won the election, later serving as vice mayor, and in 1993, he was elected mayor.

“I’ve been mayor for six terms, the longest-serving mayor,” he says. From 1993 to 2001 and again from 2017 to 2021, Valdes-Fauli led Coral Gables, a picturesque, planned community near Miami with about 50,000 residents.

The mayoral post was part-time, so he continued practicing law throughout his tenure, balancing his thriving legal career with public service.

During his time as mayor, he spearheaded projects such as transforming a garbage-truck parking lot into a luxury shopping center, developing a world-class youth center and caring for 30,000 trees across the city. He also championed efforts to internationalize Coral Gables, fostering connections with 150 multinational companies headquartered there during his tenure.

“I did a lot for the city, and I’m very proud of it,” he recalls. “I brought Coral Gables into the twenty-first century.”

His contributions earned him prestigious international honors, including the Chevalier of the Legion of Honor and Officer of the Order of National Merit (France), Ufficiale nell’Ordine Al Merito della Repubblica Italiana (Italy), the Orden del Libertador San Martin Gran Oficial (Argentina) and from Spain the highest honors, the Encomienda al Merito Civil and Encomienda Orden de Isabel la Catolica.

Valdes-Fauli’s connection to Tulane runs deep. His son, Michael Valdes-Fauli (TC ’01), also attended the university and now serves as chief operating officer of advertising giant Chemistry and president of its multicultural division, Chemistry Cultura.

At 81, Raul Valdes-Fauli continues to practice law, guided by the values of hard work, public service and gratitude. Reflecting on the full scholarship to Tulane that changed his life, Valdes-Fauli emphasizes the importance of alumni staying connected to the university: “We can contribute, we can pay back what Tulane has done for us and we can contribute to the furtherance of Tulane’s presence and excellence. I think that’s very important.”