

THIS MAGAZINE IS DEDICATED TO THE PROFESSIONAL MAN WHO EMBRACES EXCELLENCE

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## MEN

LOOKING AHEAD

— NEWS MAGAZINE —

A Living Legend  
Atlanta's Own  
*Ambassador Andrew Young*

A Moment in *Black History*

THE NBA Stars and  
Legends "Lend a Hand"  
to Fight *Prostate Cancer*

A professional portrait of Ralph de la Vega, a man with a mustache, wearing a blue suit, white shirt, and red tie. He is smiling and resting his chin on his hand.

# Ralph de la Vega

...is focusing on the possibilities

*Group President of Wireline Operations, AT&T*

Winter Quarter 2007 \$2.95



# Group President of Wireline Operations, AT&T RALPH de la VEGA

## is focusing on the possibilities

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Stylist: Honey Secunda/Art Director: Paul Robertson

Imagine you are leading the team that will manage a \$ 41-billion merger of two major corporations, each with 30,000 employees and each with their own unique culture, technologies and operating systems. Your mission is to help bring together all the assets of those two former competitors and create one unified marketing approach, one advertising campaign, and one brand in one of the most competitive industries in the world. And if all of that doesn't scare your pants off, now imagine you have just 19 days to do it. Is it possible? Most people would say no, it cannot be done successfully.

"Easy", says Ralph de la Vega, and he means it – at least when he compares it to other major challenges in his life. Ralph de la Vega in his role as Chief Operating Officer was in charge of the merger two years ago between Cingular Wireless and AT&T Wireless. Today, with many successful operating quarters behind him, he has been tapped to tackle an even larger merger: the wireline operations of the new AT&T which serve over 57 million customers and employ close to 130,000 people. As the company's newly appointed Group President of Wireline Operations, de la Vega will assume leadership for a huge part of the \$85 billion merger that created the U.S. largest telecommunications company – a job that can hardly be described as "easy."

From de la Vega's perspective, however, no job can ever be as difficult or daunting as some of the challenges in his earlier life. Like the day at the Ha-

vana Airport when he was 10 years old. Until that dramatic moment in 1960, de la Vega was a carefree little boy living in a nice neighborhood on the outskirts of Havana, Cuba. His father was a successful grocer and his mother stayed at home raising the children. He was surrounded by a large extended family and lots of friends. Life was good. Then, Batista was overthrown and life under Castro was not so good. Like so many Cubans who fled the country after Castro's overthrow, the de la Vega family gathered a few belongings and tried to board a plane for Miami. Instead, they were informed that they would not be allowed to leave because none of their papers were in order – that is, none except for the young de la Vega.

Through a frantic flurry of phone calls to friends in Miami, de la Vega's father arranged for his young son to continue on the flight, leaving behind everything but his suitcase and

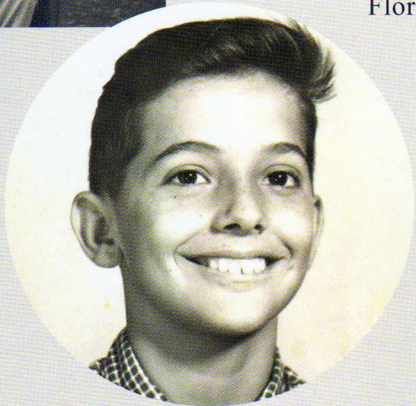
the clothes he was wearing. For the next four years, de la Vega lived in a strange new American city with people he had never met before. Back in Cuba, his new guardians and their circle of friends might have been professionals or entrepreneurs earning good incomes, but here they were forced to work menial jobs such as waiting tables, parking cars, driving taxis or washing dishes. Women who were housewives in Cuba became waitresses, maids and factory workers – just to make ends meet.

Cuban author, Miguel González-Pando, wrote that Cuban exiles were well aware that they would lose "the socioeconomic status most of them had enjoyed in Cuba" and that "most of them left empty-handed but not without human capital." Such was the case with de la Vega's new family and friends. They struggled financially but they recognized the value of education





de la Vega (above) in comfortable family life in Artemisa, Cuba, with father Rafael, mother Andrea and sister Barbara. After the Cuban revolution the de la Vega family decided to emigrate to the U.S., but red tape stranded his parents and sister. de la Vega, then 10 (right), arrived in Miami alone, without money and not speaking English. He would not see his parents for another four years.



and encouraged their young to work hard and make the necessary sacrifices to pursue a college education.

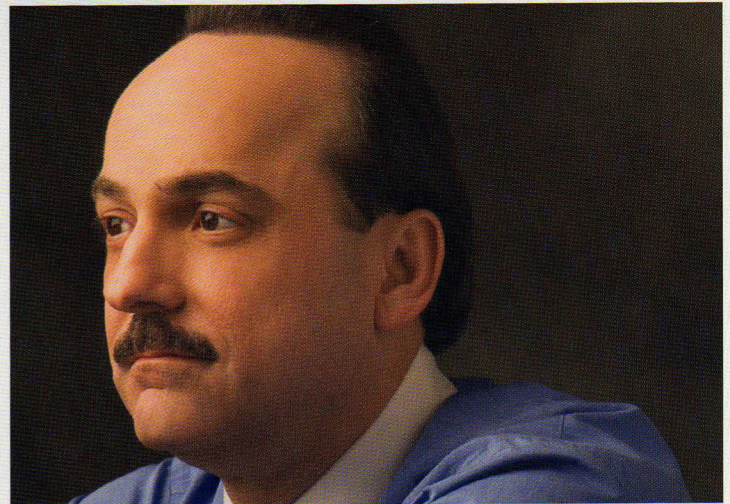
“My grandmother had already taught me the importance of education,” recalls de la Vega, who holds a B.S.M.E. Degree from Flori-

da Atlantic University and an M.B.A. from Northern Illinois University. He

also completed the Executive Program at the University of Virginia. “In the early days, I had no financial support and just about everyone said I was crazy to think I could go to college. I learned that I couldn’t let others set limitations on what I can do; if I had I would not have gotten a college education. And I don’t let others set limitations on what my business can do.”

That principle has followed de la Vega throughout his stellar career. He started with BellSouth (then Southern Bell) in 1974 and rose through the ranks in a variety of managerial then executive positions. In the early 80’s, he accepted a district manager position and moved his family (wife and two children) to Chicago to lead a team of technical experts in their transition from analog technology to digital. It was a daunting assignment, on the personal side adapting to a totally new (and very cold) environment and on the business side convincing the team that change was inevitable and necessary for long-term survival. There was resistance, of course, and his challenge was to help the team members see that all the training and hard work would lead them to a better place.

“That experience was a turning point in my life,” says de la Vega. “A light bulb went off. I was leading a team that had become comfortable with the old technology, and we had to make a commitment to change and we had to get through it or we would not survive. And it clicked because we had a clear vision, and then a clear, detailed plan. And we believed that it would be worth the effort. Yes, it was hard. The cold weather was hard for my family at first, but none of it was as hard as leaving Cuba when I was 10 years old. Ultimately, the experience in Chicago was a very good thing. Once again I had left everything I was comfortable with and accepted a challenge. If you stay where you are because you are comfortable and if you are afraid to take any risk, you won’t get that far.



“I’ve had several of those life experiences, where so much was changing and I was forced into an accelerated learning experience. They always make you better. Going to Cingular was like that. Just 45 days after I joined, I found out we were buying AT&T Wireless in the largest cash transaction in the history of the country. It was a huge deal and an experience that few people in their lifetime will have a chance to participate in. For me, it was a lot like drinking out of a firehose.”

De la Vega joined Cingular in January 2004 after a successful stint as President, BellSouth Latin America. It was there that he was immersed into the world of wireless technology. On February 17, 2004, the decision was



As President of BellSouth Latin America, de la Vega met with top government officials of the 11 countries where the company had operations to foster fair trade relations. They included Presidents Pastrana and Uribe of Colombia, Moscoso of Panama, Toledo of Peru, Kirchner of Argentina, Gutierrez of Ecuador and Bolaños of Nicaragua (above photo)

reached to buy AT&T Wireless and by October the deal was closed – a record time for such a huge transaction.

“We wanted to close at the beginning of October,” recalls de la Vega, “because we would then have 45 days before launching the new company. It was critical that we were ready before the Thanksgiving holiday and the biggest shopping day of the year. Without a successful fourth quarter we would lose a lot of sales. But the deal did not close until the end of the month. So we made the decision on October 26th to launch the new company by November 15. In other words, we had 19 days. We had been planning for months, but we only had those 19 days to execute the plan.

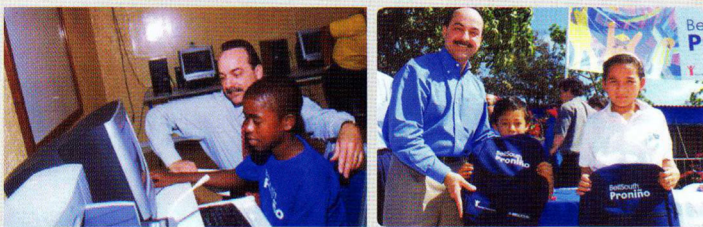
“With 30,000 employees on both sides of the merger, we had two of everything, so we started by picking the right leaders. We had to develop a game plan, explain how to implement it and train everyone in the use of new handsets. They had a thousand stores with their colors that had to be converted over to the orange Cingular colors. We had to re-merchandise and re-brand the stores practically overnight.”

And they did it. On the morning of November 15, 2004, Cingular opened as a new company. Many predicted that they would fail, but instead the company had the most sales that season of any carrier and the largest sales in the history of the wireless industry in the U.S. Today, Cingular Wireless is the largest wireless company in the United States, with more than 58 million subscribers who use the nation's largest digital voice and data network.

"The beauty of what we did," says de la Vega, "is that we didn't just say (to AT&T Wireless) that we are buying you and you have no say. AT&T Wireless had come up with a slogan with bars over people's heads. We didn't like the bars over people's heads, but we liked the bars. So we blended our ideas with theirs and came up with the "Raising the Bar" slogan. It was very successful."

De la Vega is a possibility thinker. He admits that he gets charged when others tell him something is difficult, or impossible. To him, nothing is more challenging than moving from Cuba alone and empty-handed at the age of ten. The lessons he learned then about adapting, working your way through the difficulties to get to something better, and seeing the opportunities in crisis, are all the same messages he now passes on to young people through his involvement in youth programs.

"I've always been involved to some extent with Junior Achievement or Boy Scouts, because I was helped by a lot of people when I was young. I want to return the favor. I am a proponent of not giving young people a handout, but helping them recognize their own potential and becoming all they can be. We have a crisis in education as many young Hispanics are leaving schools at alarming rates. More than 50 percent never graduate, and they are missing an opportunity that eventually will not only hurt the Hispanic community but the broader American community as well. So I try to help young people understand that staying



While President of BellSouth Latin America de la Vega was a strong supporter of BellSouth Proniño, a social responsibility program that provided scholarships for working children in 10 Latin American countries so they could get an education. During visits to the schools, Ralph played marbles with beneficiaries in Ecuador, distributed backpacks and school supplies in Nicaragua, and Panama checked students' computer skills in Panama

in school will help them in the long run."

De la Vega's business achievements include recognition by a number of organizations including the Hispanic Engineer magazine's naming him "one of 50 most important Hispanics in Technology and Business" for three consecutive years ('03-'05).

## "What People Are Saying About Ralph de la Vega"



"I have known and worked with Ralph for many years. He is without question one of the most talented executives I have ever met. He has the unique ability to move with ease between the big strategic issues and the operational details that make a business run. As a leader he always pushes his people to do more while recognizing the great work they have already done. Best of all, he is an optimist. Where others see obstacles Ralph sees opportunities – and makes the most of them."

**Stan Sigman, President & CEO  
Cingular Wireless**



"Ralph has impressive contributions to BellSouth Corporation through his successful leadership of various business units, including the operating success of Cingular Wireless. He is a strong leader who is able to set high goals for his organizations and motivate his teams to perform beyond their own expectations. His results are always impressive. But what's even more impressive is the degree of respect and admiration that he earns from the people who work with him."

**Duane Ackerman, Chairman  
BellSouth Corporation**



"Ralph is an amazing leader because of his intellect, transparency, candor and humanity. I am very grateful that he makes Junior Achievement a priority and a vital partner to accomplish his vision for young people. He is personally committed to helping young people understand their potential and the possibilities and promise the American free enterprise system affords them. It is truly an honor to work with Ralph de la Vega "

**Donna Stone Buchanan, President  
Junior Achievement of Georgia, Inc.**



"I am very fortunate to know Mr. Ralph de la Vega, a compatriot from the old country, a role model and a singularly upstanding citizen. Ralph's brilliance in business has enriched my and my colleague's professional lives, and his friendship and support is invaluable to all whose paths he crosses. I am enormously proud to consider him a friend. His sense of humor, intelligence and savvy are qualities I welcome and admire."

**Sara J. González, President & CEO  
Georgia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce**

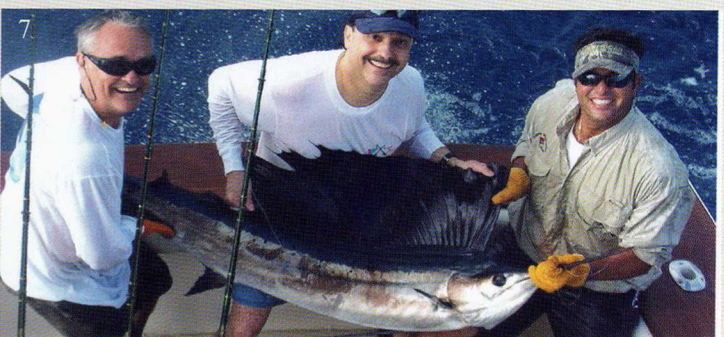
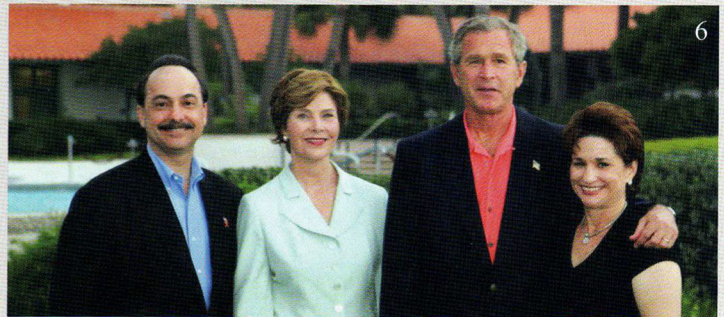
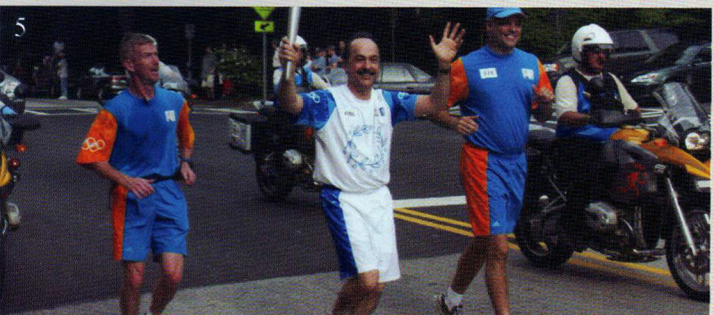
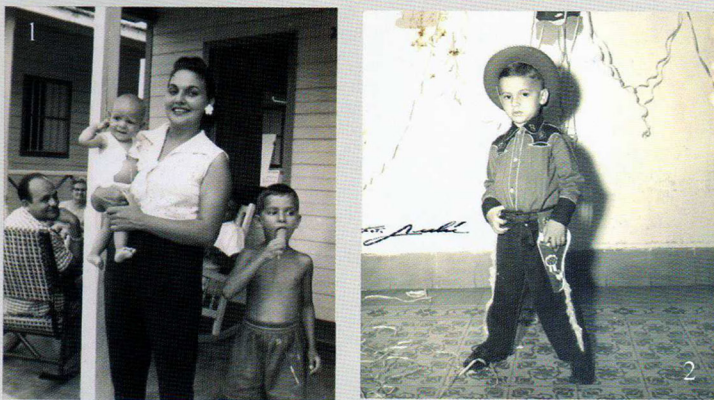
Hispanic Business magazine listed him as one of the “100 influential” individuals in 2004 and 2005, while Hispanic Trends magazine named him one of the top 100 professionals in 2004. He was elected the Executive of the Year in 2004 by the Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting, and in the same year, he was named the Atlanta Telecommunications Professional of the Year by the Atlanta Telecommunications Association. Also in 2004, Hispanic magazine named him one of six trendsetters who deserved recognition for their contributions to their fields.

His involvement with Junior Achievement is extensive, and he serves as Chairman of the Education Committee of Junior Achievement Worldwide. He is also on the Executive Committee

and the Board of Directors of Junior Achievement Worldwide. He cares deeply for young people and has made a commitment to doing his part to help lower dropout rates and providing a helping hand and encouragement to youth. He believes in the future and he believes in America.

“We live in the greatest country in the world in terms of freedoms, opportunities and our system of justice,” says de la Vega. “All that most people need sometimes, whether they are young people or people in business, is a little help and encouragement to see the big picture and not get discouraged.”

Clearly, that point of view has enabled de la Vega to reach great success in his career. His energy and enthusiasm for his company is infectious, and when he says he is working for the best company and with the best people in the world, you have to believe him. And you also have to believe that, when the announcement came in late 2006 that he would lead the merger of wireline operations at AT&T and BellSouth, he probably smiled and said, “Easy.” **M**



*Photos 1 and 2:* de la Vega in comfortable family life in Artemisa, Cuba, with father Rafael, mother Andrea and sister Barbara. *Photo 3:* A turning point in de la Vega’s career took place in (year) when he decided to take his young family away from tropical and heavily Hispanic South Florida to cold Chicago to take on a new challenge. Ralph and Maria de la Vega with their sons David (R) and Mark celebrated their first white Christmas. *Photo 4:* A meeting with Chile’s Minister of Telecommunications and Public Works Javier Etcheverry. *Photo 5:* de la Vega carries the Olympic torch in Atlanta in 2004. *Photo 6:* Ralph and Maria de la Vega with President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush *Photo 7:* de la Vega catches a large sailfish during a fishing trip off Miami with Ray Rodriguez, CEO of Univision (L).