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Miami International Airport boss walks the walk in new job

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Emilio González, the new Miami International Airport director of aviation.

Emilio González used to be in the military, where patrols are often central to the mission. As the new chief of the Miami-Dade County Aviation Department, González frequently “patrols” Miami International Airport — the sprawling air terminal that is the most important piece of real estate under his watch.

“I walk this airport every day,” said González, 56, during an interview last week at his MIA office. “I take my badge off and I walk and I listen. I’m trying to instill a service culture. If I can pick up a piece of garbage, why can’t anybody else? Or if I hear a couple that’s lost in the terminal, you just stop and say, ‘Hi, can I

help you?’ Leadership by walking around is what I call it.”

Since becoming director of the Aviation Department, González has set his sights on not only completing MIA’s multibillion-dollar renovation but turning it into a world-class airport where travelers move smoothly onto planes when they depart or into cars, buses, trains and taxis when they arrive.

“This is not only the gateway to the hemisphere, but the crown jewel of the county’s economy,” said González. “No matter where you go in the world, people recognize the name Miami. So this airport has an incredible brand name that we need to protect. . . . It has to be a world-class experience for a traveler to come to Miami, or they won’t come to Miami.”

MIA is not only one of the most important international airports in the country but is also Miami-Dade’s No. 1 economic engine. MIA ranks first in the nation in handling international freight and second in the number of international passengers, with an average of more than 100,000 passing through every day.

One of his priorities is to improve taxi service because of complaints he has received about how passengers have been treated by some drivers. “It’s a priority for me because passengers come through here and their first experience in South Florida is this airport,” said González. “Their second experience is getting in a cab to take them to wherever they want to go, and more often than not it’s not a good experience.”

Though González does not have a background in aviation, he has experience running complex operations. As head of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services from 2006 to 2008, González streamlined a system that had turned into a delay machine. Immigrants often had to wait years to get a green card or citizenship.

González also left a legacy of new immigration service buildings where immigrants have a more pleasant experience seeking benefits than in the past. Years ago, thousands of immigrants used to stand in line for hours outside the old Immigration and Naturalization Service building on Biscayne Boulevard waiting to ask for green cards or work permits. Today, there are no lines, and services are delivered in spacious, comfortable and modern buildings.

González's family left Cuba on May 8, 1961. The family, including 4-year-old Emilio and his 7-year-old sister Ileana, boarded the Spanish passenger ship *Satrustegui* and headed to Venezuela, where Emilio's mother, Olga González, had relatives. But after only a few months in Venezuela, the family headed to Tampa, where Emilio González Sr. had business associates from the tobacco industry in Cuba.

González was 9 when his parents became naturalized U.S. citizens at a ceremony in Tampa. He later attended the University of South Florida, graduating in 1977 with a bachelor's degree in international relations. González also obtained a master's degree in Latin American studies at Tulane University, another master's degree in national security studies from the U.S. Naval War College, and a Ph.D. in international affairs at the University of Miami.

González studied while he served in the U.S. Army for 26 years, with postings around the world. Eventually, he made the rank of colonel, taught at West Point and served as military attaché at U.S. embassies in Mexico and El Salvador. In 2000, he served as special assistant to Marine Corps Gen. Peter Pace, then commander-in-chief of the U.S. Southern Command, based in Doral. Also in 2002, González joined President George W. Bush's administration as the National Security Council's director for Western Hemisphere affairs, handling the Cuba issue. After that assignment, González returned to Miami to work at *Tew Cárdenas*, a law firm that lobbies in Washington. González helped the firm expand its global practice in Latin America.

González's wife, Gloria Aristigueta, is a retired elementary and preschool teacher in Miami. "She is now a full-time grandmother," said González, referring to his grandson, 8-month-old Noah, the son of Gloria, one of his two daughters. The other is Victoria, who works for the Hawn Foundation, which helps teach children social and emotional skills.

After leaving U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in 2008, González returned to the private sector, becoming the Miami-based representative of Spanish technology multinational *Indra*.

"I helped establish them here in the U.S.," he said. "I was their chief executive officer for North American operations." After 3 ½ years, González opened his own consulting firm: *NPI Advisors*. But when Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez asked him to take the Aviation Department job, González found the offer intriguing enough to accept it. He replaced José Abreu, a former Florida Department of Transportation secretary, who retired in March.

"I was approached by the mayor to see if I would be interested in doing this, and I thought about it and I said this would be pretty cool," said González. "It's not every day that you have the opportunity to be the director of an airport this big and this complex."

For González, MIA is almost like a city unto itself. "We have about 110,000 to 115,000 passengers a day that come through here and then you add on another 35,000 or so employees, so you're looking at a city of roughly 150,000 people," said González.

While Abreu oversaw completion of much of the renovation of MIA, it will be González's task to manage the final phase of the overhaul: reconstruction of the central terminal. This portion of the project also involves renovation of the airport hotel, which has begun. In the end, says González, his goal is to make MIA not only an efficient airport but a pleasant one — one that travelers will enjoy even if their flight is delayed. "The bigger the airports, the more complex they are, the more likelihood of a delay," said González. "If I'm going to be delayed four hours in an airport, I want to make it a good experience. I want to turn a bad experience into a good experience."

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