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De la Peña joins board of Spain-U.S. chamber

BY SHARON HARVEY ROSENBERG
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As a college student during the late 1970s, Miami lawyer Leoncio de la Peña spent summers backpacking through Spain on \$5 a day. These days, his travel allowance is considerably more generous and even allows for a fashionable apartment in Madrid.

"I'm very comfortable in Spain," says de la Peña.

That's convenient, because de la Peña has recently been elected to the board of the Spain-U.S. Chamber of Commerce, a Miami-based non-profit organization devoted to promoting trade and commerce between the countries.

"Because of his international, prestigious background in the legal field and his expertise working within the Spain-U.S. business market, the board of directors felt Mr. de la Peña would be a valuable asset to our organization," says Alfonso Goyeneche, executive director of the Spain-U.S. Chamber.

Recognized by the Spanish government, the Spain-U.S. Chamber seeks to promote economic and commercial relations between the two countries. For the last 21 years, the organization has sought to facilitate the entry of Spanish companies into the U.S. market and to assist U.S. companies seeking to market goods and services in Spain.

The Chamber also provides a fertile networking ground for South Florida professionals, such as real-estate brokers, lawyers and accountants, who hope to market their services to multinational companies.

Members of the Spain-U.S. Chamber represent a veritable who's who of local, national

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CHUCK FADELY/HERALD STAFF

RECENTLY ELECTED: Leoncio de la Peña.

and international corporations. For instance, the membership list includes America Online Latin America, AT&T Latin America, law firm Baker & McKenzie, Banco Atlántico, Banco Santander Central Hispano, Chase Manhattan Mortgage Corp., Coldwell Banker Real Estate, Deloitte & Touche, Florida International University, Goya Foods, Greenberg Traurig, Iberia Airlines of Spain, Ocean Bank, Telefónica and TotalBank. The Miami Herald Publishing Co. is also a member, as is Business Telecommunications Services, one of the largest companies in Spain.

Miami lawyer de la Peña, 42, is a member of the board of Business Telecommunications Services, and it was through that affiliation that he first became active with the Spain-U.S. Chamber, which he joined more than a year ago.

Working from an office on Brickell Key, de la Peña is no stranger to the world of international commerce. During the 1990s, he was active in representing Latin American investors who pursued malpractice claims with charges of mismanagement of funds and faulty investment advice against U.S. brokerage companies. In the corporate world, de la Peña has represented businesses, entrepreneurs and brokerage companies in Asia, Latin America and Europe.

This summer, for example, de la Peña & Associates prevailed in court and won affirmation of a \$363 million judgment for client Vitcom Corp., a New York-based telecommunications company. Victom had

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sued Miami-based Dependable Telecom Services in U.S. District Court in Miami and made allegations of fraud against that company.

HELPED GOVERNMENT

Earlier this year, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. tapped de la Peña to help the government collect and sell the assets of Hamilton Bank, a Miami-based bank that was seized by federal regulators on Jan. 11. That institution, which specialized in international trade finance, had a portfolio of international loans, most to borrowers in Latin America.

"He's been working with international corporations, especially from Spain, for quite a long time," says de Goyeneche, executive director of the Spain-U.S. Chamber. "I know a lot of companies that use his services as a legal advisor."

It was de la Peña's work with BTS, one of the largest companies in the Chamber, that first attracted de Goyeneche's attention. The Chamber elected de la Peña to its 15-member board because of his familiarity with the U.S. and Spanish legal and tax systems, a specialty that could help members avoid international legal entanglements and enable them comply with taxation treaties between the two countries. Such compliance can help multinational firms avoid double taxation in Spain and the United States.

BULLISH ON SPAIN

De la Peña is bullish on economic development in Spain. That country's Gross National Product posted real growth of 4 percent during 2000, according to the latest available figures from the Chamber.

In addition to its economic promise, Spain holds a special place in de la Peña's heart. As a child, he lived in Spain for five years when his family first emigrated from Cuba during the 1960s. In 1969, de la Peña and his family arrived at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City and after three months of living in Newark, N.J., his family moved to Miami in 1969.

Miami is the U.S. center of activities for the Spain-U.S. Chamber, says de la Peña. Likewise, the local office plays a key role in Latin American business development for Spanish companies, including several industrial giants that dominate their respective sectors in Latin America.

"Miami has become very important to Spain," he says.