

Starting Over

Set to co-chair the U.S.-Spain Chamber of Commerce and with a newly appointed right hand man in his law firm, Leoncio de la Peña is headed for the big leagues. ■ *By Valeria Escobari, Miami*

De la Peña & Associates has much to look forward to. The boutique law firm specializes in serving foreigners who want to do business in both the United States and their native lands. For years, it served South American clients doing business in the U.S., and Americans doing business in South America. The office is now set to add Spain to its list.

As a curtain raiser to his revamped law firm, Leoncio de la Peña will host President Jose María Aznar in October in Miami, to award him the Chamber's "Spaniard of the Year" award. The timing of De la Peña's nomination serves him well. Through Spain's support of Bush's war on terror, the country has positioned itself well with the current administration.

Miami is the U.S. center of activities for the Spain-U.S. Chamber, says de la Peña, and the local office of the Chamber plays a key role in Latin American business development for Spanish companies, including several industrial giants such as Prisa and Telefónica, which have placed bets on the region. And it's hard to overlook that Spanish banks are second or third in size throughout the region.

"While Spain has the ability to go directly to Latin America, the U.S. is a good medium and Miami has been the capital of South and Central America for at least 10 to 15 years. We are in the perfect place," he says. Having access to a bilingual work force and a working telecommunications and power infrastructure are practical factors his clients take into account, he adds. This is good news for De la Peña & Associates, because the firm's areas of practice

focus on growing international trends such as technological licensing, exporting, trademark protection, government regulations, real estate, tax, and foreign acquisitions.

De La Peña attributes his participation in the Chamber to his affiliation with the Business Telecommunications Services board, of which he is a member, but his ties to Spain go back to 1964 when his family left Cuba and headed for Spain where they spent five years. De la Peña remains a frequent visitor to Spain.

But De la Peña also has great local connections that benefit the Chamber

And to think De la Peña almost threw the towel last year, when he and his former partner Ricardo Bajandas ended their professional relationship. The break affected the firm significantly, as De La Peña had changed his company's name to add his new partner's. Upon Bajanda's departure in 2002, De la Peña considered merging his company with a larger law firm and taking up an offer from Kluger, Peretz, Kaplan and Berlin, a 50-lawyer, Miami firm focused on providing businesses and wealthy individuals with legal counsel.

"When I split off from my previ-

DE LA PEÑA'S FIRM FOCUSES ON GROWING INTERNATIONAL TRENDS SUCH AS TECHNOLOGICAL LICENSING.

— and his clients as well. He is an active member of the Republican National Committee and devotes time to Voices for Children, a group which supports court-appointed advocacy for abused and neglected children. He serves on the board of BTS, a Fortune 500 company based in Spain that provides telecommunications service in Latin America and Asia.

The challenge for his firm has been to deal with the demand for his services. According to De la Peña, people come to them because they have a multicultural, seasoned team of attorneys. "The advantage of working with our firm is that we understand our clients' needs, we understand their culture," he says. "We understand what aspects of the law need to be explained to them."

ous partner, I spent a good time deciding whether I wanted to join other law firms. In October, I realized it wasn't for me, I wanted to grow my law firm and needed other lawyers—great lawyers," says De la Peña.

Good luck and perseverance took him back to a former colleague, Otto de Cordoba, a lawyer from New York who had worked with De la Peña representing tobacco companies during the 80s and 90s. "He was available," says De la Peña about his hiring. "He is pure raw intellect, a brilliant writer and he complements me well. I'm not a stellar writer."

De Cordoba is from Cuba as well. His family emigrated to the U.S. in 1960 and lost everything on the way. He grew up in Queens, New York and paid his way



ALBERTO MOSQUERA

■ Leoncio de la Peña and Otto de Cordoba head De la Peña & Associates.

through undergraduate and law school at Columbia University bartending at the Waldorf Astoria. In 1987, after a few years at a law firm in New York, his older brother persuaded him to move to Miami.

He would meet De La Peña well into his career, about seven years ago. De Cordoba did not buy into De la Peña's concept. "I didn't know if it was really going to work, the idea of picking the clients you want. Normally, if someone calls, you take his business," he says. "But in a way, turning people away, he has been able to get an interesting mix of clients and a profitable firm."

"To some degree in this firm, which is why it has been such a success, and one of the reasons why I am very happy to join it is that it's sort of like a private banking analogy to a law firm. We really try to cater to a niche of individuals and not really be all things to all people, but be all things to a certain group of people. It has really proved very effective and as a lawyer it's good because it lets us work with a very so-

phisticated niche of the market," says De Cordoba about the firm.

De Cordoba was a partner at Martinez, Gutierrez and De Cordoba, representing Fortune 500 companies in commercial engagements and partner at Coffee, Diaz and O'Naghten. De Cordoba clearly has marked his ground in the city. He was the regional president of the Hispanic National Bar in South Florida for two years, (1995-1996) and he was director of the Cuban American Bar

Association, (1998-2000) and is heavily involved with Catholic charities.

Though De la Peña won a \$363 million judgement for client Vitcom Corp., a New York-based telecommunications company, the small size of his firm does not allow him to take on as many cases as he would like. "We are looking to grow,"

says De la Peña. "At this point, if you require twenty lawyers working on your case at the same time, you need to go to a bigger law firm." But he believes the size of the firm allows him to give his clients a more sophisticated, personalized service. "It is sometimes an advantage to have a lawyer responding directly to a client. We are less afraid."

His firm will not have to worry about a solid demand for their services: the crisis in Venezuela, Argentina and

ALTHOUGH HIS FIRM IS SMALL DE LA PEÑA WON A \$363 MILLION JUDGEMENT FOR VITCOM CORP.

Colombia has triggered a wave of affluent immigrants looking to establish themselves in the U.S. Moreover, Miami is a contender for the permanent seat of the FTAA, and he is the co-chair of the U.S.-Spain Chamber. With only seven attorneys though, there may be more work than the company can handle. ♦