

Palm Beach Post

Emilia Fanjul: A Sweet Life of Giving

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We can imagine what a sweet life the country's most well-known and wealthy Cuban family, the Fanjuls, live.

They hobnob on Park Avenue, entertain in their Palm Beach mansion and relax at Casa de Campo, their 7,000-acre oceanfront Dominican resort.

So what is Emilia Fanjul, wife of sugar baron Jose "Pepe" Fanjul, doing inside an abandoned classroom behind the old 1928 high school in rural Pahokee?

Here, the stench of urine fills the air. Rotten ducts and metal framework dangle from the ceiling. Broken beer bottles, discarded shoes and peeled paint chips litter the floor.

"It's simple, but it's what we need for the children," Emilia Fanjul of Palm Beach says of the wasteland, shuttered by Pahokee in 1988, that she is helping to renovate.

The buildings will become the new home for Everglades Preparatory Academy, a charter high school Emilia helped to found in 2001. Because of her fund-raising efforts and Fanjul family donations, these 14 classrooms will accommodate up to 200 students this spring, up from 165 in the school's current location, an old furniture store in downtown Pahokee.

"They can study out there; they can have their sandwiches," she says, pointing to a patch of weeds and garbage where she'd like to see a patio and lunch tables. "It will be nice!"

In a casual navy pantsuit, oversized Tom Ford sunglasses and sensible shoes, she doesn't react to the filth. She has been here many times before. She steps over piles of debris, dirt and weeds while deciding on a cheery shade of yellow for the exterior.

"Why does it have to be gray or brown?"

She and Pahokee contractor Wally Lutz agree on a six-week timeline for completion of most of the renovations — in time for Spring Break — and Lutz leaves in his pickup. But as Fanjul heads toward her late-model Jaguar, several workman who had been hanging drywall start to pack up, and she stops in her tracks.

"Are you leaving because I'm leaving?" she asks, approaching the workers in a way that's both strong and genteel. "Are you coming back today?"

Sweet life

The Fanjuls, along with the Gomez-Mena family, dominated Cuba's sugar industry for decades. But after Fidel Castro seized power in 1959, they fled with their families and rebuilt their empire in the Everglades.

Today, four Fanjul brothers — Alfonso ("Alfy"), Jose ("Pepe"), Andres and Alexander — run the umbrella company Flo-Sun, one of the nation's largest producers of raw sugar, with more than 400,000 acres of cane in Florida and the Dominican Republic, and 25,000 employees among subsidiary companies such as Florida Crystals, C&H and Domino.

Many environmentalists consider chemical runoff and pollution from the \$3.1 billion sugar industry to be a major environmental drain on the Everglades.

But Hollywood saw only glamour in the Latin sugar baron lifestyle when it launched the TV show *Cane* in 2007. The now-defunct drama, similar to *The Sopranos*, was based on a wealthy Cuban-American family with a South Florida rum and sugar empire.

When CBS announced plans for the show there was speculation it was loosely based on the Fanjuls — so much so that a Miami-based attorney representing the Fanjuls contacted CBS.

"It has nothing to do with us," Emilia Fanjul says of the show, which is no longer in production. "I don't think that *Cane* is in any way representative with the Cubans and the success they have had in this country. I thought it was very poorly written and filmed."

In addition to making an official statement, denying the Fanjuls were being represented as the Duque family on the new drama, CBS also changed the setting from rural Palm Beach County to the fictional community of Playa Azul.

"I can't believe that a Cuban woman would portray the Cubans like that," Fanjul says of the show's creator, Cynthia Cidre, who emigrated to Miami from Cuba as a young girl. "It's all about sex and murder. I don't think it's representative of the Cuban community or of Miami. I only watched the first few episodes, and that's all."

Tale of two schools

Emilia Fanjul is chairman of the board at Everglades Preparatory Academy, a charter high school, and Glades Academy, a charter elementary school. The schools offer students individual attention and small classes. About 150 students in grades 9-12 (including about 30 athletes from Glades Central and Pahokee high schools) and 60 students in grades K-5 attend the schools.

"We look for the kid that's more in trouble academically rather than (in conduct)," says Everglades Preparatory Academy principal Bill Holmes, who was born and raised in the Glades. "If he has a 3 in conduct but a D in class, that's promising."

Vocational training is a focus of the curriculum, Holmes says, adding that just 300 out of

500 students have graduated since 2001. Fewer than half have gone on to college despite available scholarships and college prep classes.

"Many of those young children in Pahokee have never been out of Pahokee," Fanjul says of a city where 32 percent of the population lives in poverty. "They feel that there's nothing beyond there, there's no hope for them. And what I would like to show them is that there is, that they can make a life for themselves, get married, raise a family, have a job. And, ultimately, I would like for them to come back to Pahokee and give back to the community."

The Fanjuls may have no shortage of the finer things in life, but Emilia Fanjul says she cares about life beyond Palm Beach.

"It isn't just going to charity parties," says Emilia Fanjul from the orchid-filled library of her 1924 Marion Sims Wyeth island estate. "There are plenty of those. They're fine, and they raise a lot of money, and I do one, too, but it's important to me to be involved.

"We've all been so lucky and so privileged in our lives, but you can't just take, take, take, you know?" says Fanjul, whose landmark mansion includes a three-story tower that overlooks the ocean. "I am out there (in Pahokee) every week, working, solving problems, worrying, 'How can I do better for the children?' I organize trips for them to the zoo, to the science museum, for the high school to a restaurant in CityPlace for lunch with their parents. This is what the children love. For them it is all about caring and not about (writing a) check."

Although the family does write checks.

Each year, Emilia's husband underwrites 100 percent of the cost for the schools' January fund-raiser, "A Night of Expectations," which netted \$300,000 this year for operational costs, programs and college scholarships at the two schools. She and Pepe also personally donated \$200,000, while other family members donated \$100,000.

Classes at the elementary school are held in the parish hall of St. Mary's Catholic Church and in portables on church property. For seven years, Emilia has been raising money to combine with her family's contributions to construct a \$1.5 million school building.

With the help of a previous land donation from Florida Crystals, a \$500,000 grant from the William H. Pitt Foundation and other donations, she's getting closer to her goal and will start taking bids on the project this year.

Tradition in education

Born in Pittsburgh and raised in Manhattan, Emilia Fanjul says she gained her sense of community from her late mother, Helena Johnson Hackley, who volunteered full-time at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. Hackley helped Spanish-speaking patients fill out forms and learn English — before developing cancer and

becoming a Sloan Kettering patient herself.

"My family has always been involved in education," says Fanjul, whose grandfather headed the chemistry department at the University of Havana. "My grandfather and my mother instilled in me the feeling that education always helped you overcome whatever obstacles you have in your life."

Emilia moved to Palm Beach with her husband in 1968 after graduating from Barnard College at Columbia University and worked with her sister-in-law, Lian Fanjul-Azqueta, to found New Hope Charities for Pahokee's needy families. New Hope now distributes food bags to 225 families each year and provides academically focused after-school care and summer camp for 65 children.

Fanjul remains on the advisory board for the organization, which also helps expose children in western Palm Beach County to coastal cultural venues like the South Florida Science Museum and the Norton Museum of Art. She also hosts an annual fund-raiser for Mission International Rescue (MIR), New Hope's counterpart in the Dominican Republic.

She passed the sentiment on to her daughter, Emilia Fanjul Pfeifler, a New York publicist who recently has taken leave from her eponymous company to raise her son, Nico. Fanjul Pfeifler is involved in several New York charities, including American Ballet Theater and New York Weill Cornell Medical Center.

"I do not spread myself too thin," says Fanjul Pfeifler. "If I get involved in a charity, I like to see that their goals are met and that what they work so hard to achieve really makes a difference."

Lourdes Fanjul, wife of Emilia and Pepe Fanjul's son, Pepe Jr., is a board member at Palm Beach Day Academy and has helped create programs that bring Pahokee and Palm Beach students together.

"I work as a liaison so we can do things together with the two schools," says Lourdes, a University of Miami graduate who taught at schools in Miami and New York before moving to Palm Beach six years ago. "We have a Thanksgiving program where the Palm Beach Day Academy students collect food boxes for the students in Pahokee. They have all the ingredients for a Thanksgiving meal. Then they have a big lunch together, all the children from both schools."

Lourdes and Pepe Fanjul also pay for a West Palm Beach storyteller to drive to Pahokee and read to the children.

"A lot of the things they do aren't even publicized. But that's not why they do it," says Don Zumpano, principal of Glades Academy. "Never once have I ever seen them expect anything but self-gratification in return. I needed a scanner for a test. It's a \$3,000

scanner. Boom. ... Thank God for the Fanjuls!"

Bridging the gap

One of the reasons Emilia Fanjul says she remains involved in Pahokee is to raise East Coast awareness of the great needs in rural Palm Beach County.

Many of her friends, including some of the area's most generous philanthropists, had not even heard of Pahokee when she started her work in the Glades. She has helped show some of them the town, the schools and the students in need.

"It is my passionate belief and work to involve my friends here in the Palm Beach area so that they want to reach out to these rural towns like Pahokee, Belle Glade and South Bay and offer a helping hand. Otherwise, there is no future for growth out there."

And less of the things some might take for granted: a clean place to eat a sandwich and study. A great storyteller in a kindergarten class. Cheery yellow walls.

Thanksgiving dinner.

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