

## 15 MINUTES

## The inimitable Israel Suarez and his Nations Association Charity

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Florida Weekly Correspondent

The Reverend Israel Suarez exists, he said, to help people who cannot help themselves.

As executive director and founder of the non-profit Nations Association Charities, he is a blustery whirlwind of activity and bravura charisma in his old, blue work clothes, thick glasses and trademark spotty English - even after a day that began for him at 5 a.m.

"I got up for the devotion, then to see the news, then I go to the Publix, unpack the bags, give it to the people in the little soup kitchen in back," he said.

"Then I stay at the office to start organizing a community program, then downtown to talk to the county commissioner - he wasn't there - then from there to the police department to invite them to a community meeting tomorrow night.

"Then I came here, someone was waiting for me, needed help getting some food, some job, some furniture. Then I came here to help unload this truck from Tampa.

"I get more tired when I do nothing. I don't play no games, man."

At 6 p.m., a drained and sweaty, yet forceful, 64-year-old Rev. Suarez was still working, unloading crates of skim milk off a truck from Tampa, outside his offices at the Nations Association on 4625 Palm Beach Blvd. The milk would be given away in the days to come, he said, at his "little soup kitchen" in the parking lot behind those offices.

Rev. Suarez was born in Puerto Rico and grew up in Brooklyn in the 1950s and 60s. His father worked as a maintenance man at the John F. Kennedy International Airport and his mother raised him and his three sisters and six brothers. He shined shoes for customers outside local restaurants for 5, 10 or 25 cents as a youngster, he said.

After graduating from high school and a local

bible college in Brooklyn, he completed his doctorate in the Dominican Republic, and moved to Fort Myers in 1976.

"I was fed up with cold weather," he explained, "and fled down here like a rabbit with my three daughters and my wife."

Rev. Suarez worked in construction, he said, until finding something better. He felt there were a lot of people in town who needed help, and that he was going to help them. His first office was in a donated motor home that he kept parked in a church parking lot, he said. They let him stay there for one year.

"I guess I was not such a bad guy for the church," he said. "Then one day someone put gas in the motor home and bingo, bye, bye motor home." With a fresh tank of gas, he relocated to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., he said, and moved into a building near downtown that was "practically donated," to create an all purpose haven for those in need of help - food, clothes, sleep, jobs, medical assistance (at one point a local doctor started a free walk-in clinic in one of the rooms), anything to help.

"I don't play no games, man," he said again, before giving a tour of his new offices on Palm Beach Blvd., in the old U.S. Post Office.

There is the reception room and waiting area - "Where I do all my intake" - where needy people come to tell him what, exactly, they are in need of.

Then down the hall, the pantry, a large room filled with metal shelves, some containing bags of rice or canned goods.

"You can see it is real empty," he said. "This thing was full of food, my man!"

Down the hall from the pantry, hallways were lined with Lipton Diet White Tea, donated by the Pepsi Cola Company, Rev. Suarez said, which led into another small room filled with more Lipton Diet White Tea.



COURTESY PHOTO

### Suarez

In another room across the hall: a massive freezer and refrigerator which filled an entire large wall.

"Empty!" he said, opening one of the refrigerators doors. "Empty!" he said, opening another, stressing how much food is given to the needy, and how in need he always is of more.

Rev. Suarez said he feeds over 87,000 people a year, among other services. The annual budget is about \$450,000 and is spent this way: 14 percent on management, 17 percent on jobs programs, 19 percent on food programs, 24 percent to run the thrift store, and 26 percent on family and youth programs.

The money comes to them this way: 0 to 1 percent from government grants, 4 percent from private foundation grants, 6 percent from fundraisers, 7 percent from the thrift store, 34 percent from donations and 49 percent from bequests (a provision in your will providing a gift upon your death).

There is an entire room filled with clothing,

and a room with a shower. Rev. Suarez's police uniform hangs in a small closet in the shower room - he is also the chaplain for the police department.

"When you see me in this, you don't recognize me," he said. "Because when you put on a uniform, you change."

There is the computer room, the boardroom, rooms for the Immigration Lawyer, the Programs Specialist, and Programs Coordinator (who is also his wife, Ruth Suarez), the classroom - "We teach English here" - which is filled with backpacks to be given away to needy schoolchildren. The place didn't look this big from the outside, but then again, neither did Rev. Suarez.

"I need someone to write a book about me," he said.

Almost all the various rooms and hallways are filled with plaques, almost all of them for Rev. Suarez, far more plaques than at any Hall of Fame. They come from groups such as the Dunbar Improvement Association, 1983; the Fort Myers Sertoma Club, 1987; the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, 1989; the Fort Myers City Council, 1991; the Gala Girls, 2006.

A framed letter from Congressman Connie Mack written on April 4, 1991, says, "Your untiring dedication and devotion to your dream has now become a beautiful reality."

President George Bush Senior had him aboard Air Force One in 1990 to accept his "276th Point of Light" award.

"Oh man, I had a good thing with President Bush," he said. "Both of them."

Rev. Suarez, during a brief silence, for maybe four or five seconds, almost seemed to close his eyes in sleep, but maybe he was just thinking or praying or both; his head lifted to extend an invitation.

"I will be working tomorrow," he said. "Wanna see me working?" ■

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