

Frank Mercado-Valdes

I produced an event at the Miami Marine Stadium at age 22, as a student at the University of Miami. It was 1985, and the riots in Overtown had just happened. A few of my fraternity brothers at Kappa Alpha Psi and I thought the City should do something positive, so we submitted a grant application to Miami Dade County to produce a Miss Collegiate Black America Contest. To our surprise, Commissioner Barbara Shuler and Commissioner Miller Dawkins actually took us seriously. We were awarded a grant of \$75,000, and we had to put on a show!

The Miami Marine Stadium was actually my last choice for the event but The Gusman, the James L. Knight Center, and the Coconut Grove Convention Center were not available. It was a very complicated production. I had 80 people working for me. I was very fortunate to have people like Albert Elias assisting me-and preventing me from making a fool of myself!

It drizzled the night of the event, and that kept attendance down. It seems that all of the contestants danced-and the dancers kept slipping because although there was a canopy over the stage, we could not keep the front of the stage dry. We did our best to have a proper lighting and sound system, but one of the dancers was a tap dancer-and we had not anticipated needing a microphone for her feet! The event was supposed to last 2 ½ hours-and it lasted 4 1/2 hours.

But still, that night was like magic. We had the University of Miami Jazz Band and Jon Secada (then Juan Secada a student at the University of Miami), sang the crown song for the queen. People came from all over the South to see their daughters compete. When the night was over, we knew we had done it! We celebrated at Dupont Plaza-and then I went back to my dorm room at Pearson Hall on the University of Miami campus.

That night was a very important night for many of us. My fraternity brothers went on to have long careers that started there. I went on to produce ten more Miss Collegiate Black America Pageants-several of which were shown on national television (Five years into the Pageant, we changed the name to Miss Collegiate African American” and this was the first TV show with the words “African American” in the title). Most of the people involved in the Pageant most fondly remember that first one at the Marine Stadium.

Producing that event at that moment was really a key point in the evolution of Miami. Miami Vice had not yet started, and Miami was just beginning its rebirth as a truly international city. Oprah and the Cosby show had not really hit popular culture. For me, it was just at the cusp as Miami was growing up.

I later went on to produce many shows in Hollywood, including some Emmy Award winning projects, but I never had a night in my Hollywood career that compared to the night that we “pulled it off” at the Marine Stadium.

Finally, when I think of the Marine Stadium, I have to mention my grandfather. I saw many other events at the Stadium-boat racing, wrestling (I saw the wrestler Dusty Rhodes get thrown into the water), but I mostly remember learning how to fish for blue crabs with my grandfather.

Grandpa knew all the tricks. We would go to the Marine Stadium and go right down to the water by the railings. We would tie pieces of chicken to a line with a can as a float. When the can went under water, you knew you had one. You had to bring up the line very slowly, because the crab was hanging on to the piece of chicken.

I wish my grandfather had been around to see me produce that show at the Marine Stadium; he would have been so proud of me.