

The New York Puerto Rican Parade

Sara González awoke her husband Pedro, her twelve-year old son, Gabriel, and daughter, Nereida, early Sunday morning so they could be out of the house by eleven. They knew *El Desfile Puertorriqueño* (the Puerto Rican Parade) started at twelve and wanted to get to Fifth Avenue before the crowds gathered around the barricades and blocked their view. Pedro hurriedly helped dress the kids while Sara prepared his usual breakfast of *pan con mantequilla y café con leche*.

Sara was jubilant. Even though the morning news had predicted rain, *El Desfile Puertorriqueño* was always a special occasion for Sara and her family. As Puerto Ricans, we were always *tirándonos uno al otro* but not on this day. On this day *la sangre llamaba* as all Puerto Ricans were united and expressed their pride in being *boricua*. Pedro and Sara always enjoyed the flag-waving, and the enthusiastic crowds yelling, *¡Que viva Puerto Rico!* and singing, *Que Bonita Bandera*. The thousands upon thousands of red, white and blue Puerto Rican flags seem to form a cardinal sea that could be seen from any skyscraper in mid-Manhattan. The young ones in the family also enjoyed the parade. Nereida looked forward to seeing *el romántico perdido*, Marc Anthony. Gabriel, was hooked on Rosie Pérez with her Brooklyn accent. As she looked out the window, she regretted that her *abuelita*, Doña Cruz, couldn't attend. She had died last year, but before her passing that always went to all the *desfiles*.

For many like the González family, *El Desfile* is the ultimate expression of the Puerto Rican nationality. Nearly a million people line the streets celebrating Puerto Rican culture as floats, marching bands and Puerto Rican flags can be seen all over Fifth Avenue. It is the cultural reaffirmation of the Puerto Rican people held in bondage by a colonial experience. For many, *El Desfile* is the opportunity for Puerto Ricans to showcase our best and brightest and highlight our contributions to American society.

El Desfile remains the largest expression of the organizational capacity of the Puerto Rican people and one of our most recognized institutions. Thousands come from the island of Puerto Rico to join the 50,000 marchers in a cultural celebration that is watched and heard by over four million viewers via television and radio. The parade is a microcosm of the Puerto Rican reality and our continuing desire to preserve our Puerto Ricanness. But behind the positive cultural expressions remain lingering questions about the parade's organizers, its infrastructure, politics and fund-

ing. Who organizes *El Desfile* and what happens to the 30 million dollars in revenue it generates? Why has the parade abandoned its initial character as a grassroots expression of *nuestra puertorriqueñidad*?

Early History and Organization

The first parade was held in 1956 and was Hispanic, although Puerto Ricans constituted the largest number of participants. Jesús de Galíndez, a Spaniard, was the originator of the idea of all *hispanos* marching together in a parade as an expression of pride. The first *Desfile Hispano* took place with Antonio Méndez, the first Puerto Rican district leader and unofficial Mayor of *El Barrio* (East Harlem), as grand marshal. As the Puerto Rican hometown groups and population grew, there developed a strong need for the parade to have a Puerto Rican identification and it became *El Desfile Puertorriqueño*.

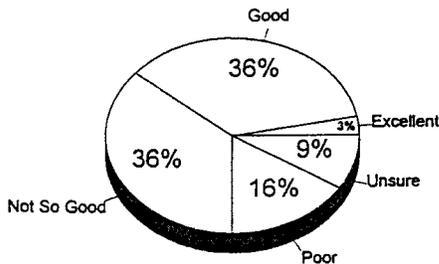
The backbone of *El Desfile* at that time was the hometown groups. Hometown groups that identified with towns in Puerto Rico would march in the parade highlighting a town hero, or a historical or cultural figure. The late sociologist Rosa Estades noted, "The Desfile is a predominantly grassroots movement; it is a day for *el pueblo* (the people) — even though most Puerto Ricans in all social classes participate or follow its progress." Today, amidst much conflict, Puerto Ricans continue the struggle to have the parade maintain its grassroots quality.

The early Puerto Rican day parades were also strongly influenced by the status politics of the island. During the first *desfiles* in 1959 and the early sixties, the *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD) was in power. The character, participation and leadership was dominated by *los Populares*. In 1969, the statehood party came to power setting forth a battle between those elements of the community favoring a more militant change for the island. The attempt by parade organizers to exclude activist elements like the Young Lords and the *Movimiento Pro Independencia* (MPI), among others, led to confrontations between activists and police at the parade. In 1976, Ramón S. Vélez, former president of *El Desfile* was snubbed by the pro-commonwealth ex-governor of Puerto Rico, Rafael Hernandez Colón. Vélez subsequently backed the New Progressive (pro-statehood) governor, Carlos Romero Barceló (now Resident Commissioner representing Puerto Rico in the U.S. Congress).

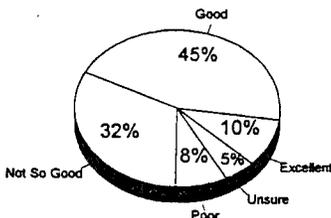
The conflict between elements of the community reproduced themselves in New York in the early '60s and '70s. *El Desfile* became embroiled in a controversy between South Bronx profiteer Ramón Vélez and then Councilman Gilberto

Puerto Ricans and Giuliani

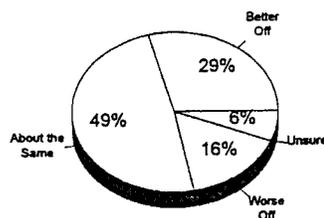
The Views of the Puerto Rican Respondents in the Hispanic Federation of NYC Poll (N = 535)



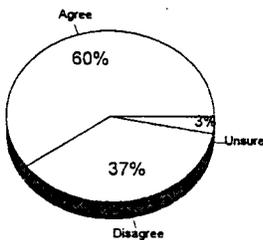
"How well is Mayor Giuliani serving Latinos in New York City?"



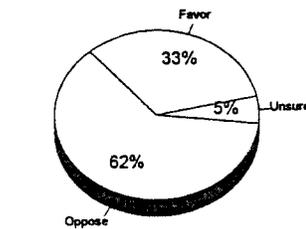
"How would you rate Mayor Giuliani's performance?"



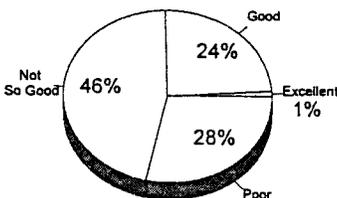
"Is New York City better off under Mayor Giuliani?"



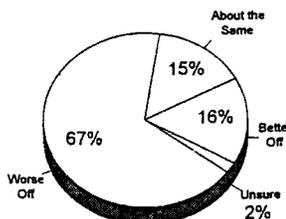
"Do you agree with Mayor Giuliani's policy of not cutting budgets of Police and Fire . . . ?"



"Do you favor or oppose Mayor Giuliani's proposal to sell or transfer management of some city-run hospitals?"



"How would you describe race relations in New York City?"



"Have race relations in NYC gotten better, worse, or stayed the same since Giuliani became Mayor?"

Source: *Second Annual Survey: Hispanic New Yorkers on Nueva York, Part I* (New York: Hispanic Federation of NYC, June 9, 1994). This survey was based on a total Latino sample of 1,011. It was conducted between May 19 and 31, 1994.

El Masacre del Presupuesto . . .

. . . continued from last page

representing the city's other legal defense funds, held a press conference to present a 23-page **Social Justice Budget Agenda** and calling on the City Council to vote against the Giuliani budget. They threatened to sue the city if the budget enacted has a disproportionate impact on the poor and people of color. Their effort was not effective because they failed to present a compelling legal argument for suing the city. Secondly, they failed to reach out to organizations already working on the budget, particularly in the Latino community. The result was that within the Puerto Rican community, Figueroa looked as if he were following the "Lone Wolf" approach of his predecessor, **Rubén Franco**.



The poll of 1,011 Latinos by the **Hispanic Federation of New York City** provided some useful insights into how Puerto Ricans and other Latinos viewed the Giuliani budget. Three-quarters faulted the city's quality of life, with 58% stating they would move out of the city if they could. It found that 58% of Latinos felt that Giuliani budget cuts were moving the city in the wrong direction. Privatization of city hospitals was opposed by 61% of those surveyed. However, 62% agreed with Giuliani that the police and fire departments shouldn't be cut, and a whopping 87% support the fingerprinting of welfare recipients. As the charts in the column on the left show, Puerto Ricans in the poll held similar views to other Latinos. One exception was the greater overall approval rating Puerto Ricans gave the Mayor (55% "excellent" or "good") than did Dominicans (44%). □

The NY Puerto Rican Parade . . .

. . . continued from page 3

Gerena-Valentín, when the Councilman charged fiscal mismanagement and fraud. Detractors maintained the parade organizers used *El Desfile* as a conduit to feed political campaigns for the emerging Ramón Vélez empire. Vélez's control of the Puerto Rican Community Development Project (PRCDP) and the Hunts Point Multi-Service Center in the South Bronx also served as an institutional base for controlling *El Desfile*. In 1979, Councilman Gerena-Valentín sought to have another Puerto Rican parade certified by New York City due to these irregularities, but then Mayor Koch supported Vélez, whom he once denounced as a "poverty pimp," and rejected Gerena-Valentín's request, characterizing him as a "communist."

Attorney General Sues *El Desfile*

The charges of corruption reached a crescendo in 1986 when New York State Attorney General Robert Abrams filed suit against parade organizers seeking an order appointing a special master to take financial control of the parade. Abrams alleged the parade organizers had created two corporations, one called "*El Desfile Puertorriqueño de Nueva York*," the other, "The Puerto Rican Day Parade" to get around a court order attained by the Attorney General in 1978. The *Desfile* and the Puerto Rican Day Parade had substantially the same officers, activities and purposes. The June 1978 court order was also against six parade officers and directors for failing to maintain adequate records. It had required the parade to reform its financial practices and it barred corporate president Ramón Vélez and corresponding secretary María Román from holding any office with or exercising any control over *El Desfile*.

The Puerto Rican Parade . . .

. . . continued from 5

The lawsuit alleged that Ramón Vélez continued to hold official positions with the group, serving as "advisor" to *El Desfile* and its banquet chairman. He also participated, on behalf of the *Desfile*, in delegations to Puerto Rico, met with dignitaries, attended press conferences, and served as Grand Marshal of the parade in 1983. The Attorney General argued that the parade maintained various fundraising projects, pageants, and production of a souvenir journal, from which the net proceeds were turned over to *El Desfile*. The community's only participation was limited to voting by making monetary contributions. Individual fundraisers were permitted to retain commissions for themselves, which ranged from 10% to 50% without public disclosure of these funds, as required by law.

In a stunning indictment of the parade organization, the Attorney General concluded that during 1983-85, at least \$81,224 received in connections with events conducted by *El Desfile* were not reported on its books or records. This included the Miss Puerto Rico contest in New York, the infant queen contest, the souvenir journal, the raffle and the scholarship.

The Attorney General also maintained that *Desfile* Executive Director, Frederico Pérez, had "endorsed and cashed checks" made payable to *El Desfile* that totaled at least \$5,024, received reimbursement for travel expenses unrelated to *Desfile* business, and failed to adequately describe expenditures.

A settlement was reached in 1988 between the Attorney General and parade organizers that required reimbursement of mismanaged funds and that the parade follow all record-keeping and registry requirements under New York State law. The order also required parade director Frederico Pérez to reimburse \$6,244. Moreover, the parade was to conduct periodic elections and limit each officer's terms to one year, each director's term to two one-year terms and barred any individual from running for President, Vice-President or Treasurer for more than two consecutive years.

The parade has since been conveniently reincorporated under the name, "New York Puerto Rican Parade," and the current president is Manuel Mirabal, a Ramón Vélez-ally. The "new" and "improved" Vélez, weighing thirty less pounds and sporting jet-black dyed hair and mustache, continues as General Coordinator and Banquet Chairman. María Román, named as *El Desfile*'s Treasurer and Corresponding Secretary in the 1986 lawsuit, is now Special Events Coordinator for the parade. Frederico Pérez continues as a member-at-large. *El que hizo la ley, hizo la trampa*. Boy, it's good Abrams didn't run for reelection, 'cause *lo cojieron de bobo!*

Accusations against parade organizers surfaced again this year when Manuel Mirabal, President of *El Desfile*, and a printing company, GALOS, a business agency of the parade,

were accused by *El Diario-La Prensa* columnist Jorge Mariategui of plagiarizing a children's coloring book entitled *Piki, El Coque: Visits New York and Goes to the Puerto Rican Day Parade*, from Peruvian cartoonist Carlos "CABE" Bernales, a former cartoonist-writer for *El Diario-La Prensa*. Mariategui made a venomous reference to well-read Mirabal as an illiterate, ironically appealing for assistance in resolving this alleged theft to the eternal Parade Banquet Coordinator, Ramón S. Vélez.

El Desfile is controlled largely by a select Bronx Puerto Rican clique, ignoring for the most part the *boricuas* from the other boroughs. While it is not within the purview of this column to assess whether the continued presence of these individuals violates New York State law, the spirit of the law has indeed been violated. As long as the parade organizers continue to rearrange rather than change the infrastructure of the parade, questions will continue to be raised about corruption and illegality within the parade.

Perhaps even more pernicious has been the increasing "caving in" and legitimization of the parade while the infrastructure is still open to question. High-profile politicians like Governor Mario Cuomo, Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, among others, continue to sponsor, profit from and fill parade coffers by organizing Puerto Rican parade days in a misguided attempt to bond politically with the Puerto Rican community. They are helping to build a Puerto Rican institution that has, at best, a legally shaky infrastructure.

The Commercialization of Puerto Rican Culture

The New York Puerto Rican Parade has become a commercial lightning rod for parade organizers wishing to exploit Puerto Rican culture. Fees are as high as \$8,000 per float to participate in the parade. Those paying the highest fees are allowed to march in the front of the parade, where company floats are treated to coverage from WPIX-Channel 11. Companies like Beck's Beer, Budweiser, McDonald's, Chivas Regal, Black Label Scotch and Coca-Cola, who so willingly dismiss the needs of the Puerto Rican community on a daily basis, do one-shot advertising by paying for a float, sponsoring a drinking session at one of the countless banquets, or handing out chump-change scholarships. In lieu of these one-shots, they pay for a page in one of the city's Spanish-language newspapers or television stations. Regrettably, many media outlets have joined this crass commercialization in an effort to reach the potentially lucrative New York metropolitan Latino market.

Perhaps the most tragic effect of this commercialization is the parade itself. Beer and tobacco company logos are prominently displayed, marketing death and negating a celebration of Puerto Rican culture and contributions. While the parade this year was billed as a tribute to Puerto Rican composers, nowhere in the line of marchers or floats is a tribute to our composers. Puerto Rican cultural icons and historic figures like Ramón Emeterio Betances, Albizu Campos and Francisco Oller, among many others, are not profiled in

continued on next page →

The Puerto Rican Parade . . .

. . . continued from page 10

the parade (except by using their names on banquet awards given largely to *perfumados* and other varieties of parasites). Instead, parade onlookers are treated to a diet of *cerveza*, *salseros* and Puerto Rican hip hop. Our music and culture is so much more encompassing of such diversity ranging from the Puerto Rican Philharmonic Orchestra to the *bombas y plenas* that resound in our *barrios*.

Equally distressing is that major issues confronting the Puerto Rican community are not a part of the parade. Concerns over substandard education, housing and employment are largely ignored and, when addressed, are relegated to the back of the parade. With the exception of HIV-AIDS organizers and a passing reference to Puerto Rican political prisoners, this year proved no different. So void was *El Desfile* of issues confronting the Puerto Rican reality that when the AIDS groups marched, a silence filled the air as parade watchers came face to face with this more persistent daily Puerto Rican reality. Parade organizers treat us, to boot, only to one side of the Puerto Rican experience with the criminal justice system. This year, *El Desfile*, led by Rudy "law without justice" Giuliani, was followed by a virtual army of Hispanic police, corrections, probation and court officers. Absent were the countless victims of police misconduct and those abused by the criminal justice system.

One pre-parade activity that could have been a beacon of light in this cavern of cultural darkness was the Puerto Rican Youth Pride Concert. All 2,300 seats were sold out to the junior and high school students in attendance. While such a concert could have been part of an ongoing attempt to reclaim our youth caught in the scourge of violence and self-destruction, instead mostly the music played on. Hip-hop recording artists Lisette Meléndez, K7 and Frankie Cutlass sang favorites as Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer presented parade and concert sponsors with proclamations (*política de pergaminos*).

Ironically, despite all this African-American-influenced music, charges have been made privately that the parade organizers were excluding darker-skinned *boricuas*. There was the near scandal last year when the dark-skinned winner of *El Desfile's* Miss Puerto Rico pageant was overshadowed at the last minute by the selection and elevation of a blond and blue-eyed Quincentennial Queen. This year, it was heard in insider circles that Malin Falú, a black Puerto Rican, was passed over as parade announcer for WPIX-TV at channel 11 for that talented *más blanca*, Gilda Mirós. Falú was denied the honor of sitting next to Marvin Scott of WPIX to constantly correct the Spanish of this out-of-place Irishman, in a modern-day version of "the prejudice of having no prejudice." It is also interesting that WPIX doesn't seem to have any Puerto Ricans on staff to cover the parade.

Parade watchers were also treated to a plethora of half-naked

woman (many as young as twelve) flaunting flesh while marching in what can only be characterized as the commodification of the Puerto Rican woman. The history of the Puerto Rican woman in the tradition of Julia de Burgos, Blanca Canales, Lola Rodríguez de Tió, Mariana Bracetti and Evelina Antonetti should not be demeaned and disrespected by sexist-driven parades that view women as *un pedazo de carne*.

In addition to the commercial dimension, one can't but be taken aback by the plethora of politicians who joined the parade this year applauding Puerto Rican culture, wearing *guayaberas*, and eating *alcapurrias* while ignoring and stabbing us in the back the rest of the year. While politicians are a fixture in most New York parades, one can't help but reflect on the hypocrisy of these elected officials. Mayor Rudy Giuliani led the parade, joined by state senator and former Dinkinite Olga Méndez and Councilman Antonio Pagán. But just last year you may remember that Giuliani almost came to blows with parade godfather, Ramón Vélez, when he and his wife Donna Hanover tried to join the parade. Political amnesia is such a wonderful thing!

Perhaps the saddest part of such vulgar commercialism is that a parade focused on culture and the Puerto Rican contribution could easily make room for the Puerto Rican/Latino business community by highlighting Puerto Rican businesspersons and their accomplishments without compromising its mission. Such recognition does not require the demeaning or ignoring of the most salient parts of the Puerto Rican experience as has become common practice in *El Desfile*.

Conclusion

Sara, Pedro and the rest of the González family returned home content yet exhausted. Despite the rains, the exhilarating crowds, music, and *banderas* had lifted everyone's spirits. On the way home on the train she and Pedro argued over whether this year's parade was better than last year's. But everyone had a good time.

For Sara González and her family, the Puerto Rican Parade remains a day of celebration and pride in being Puerto Rican in a town that has come to view us as an amalgam of stereotypes — welfare cheats and criminals. It is a day when an infinite number of Puerto Rican flags fly high in a cultural expression of a people who have given so much and receive so little. The parade is the Puerto Rican nationality in full bloom and a rejection of our colonial experience. We are indeed Puerto Rican and proud.

Yet even on a day of such celebration there are many questions of somber reflection for the Puerto Rican people. Why has the parade, once the pinnacle of *puertorriqueñidad* buttressed by civic organizations and hometown clubs evolved to *perfumado* banquets and *cervesa* commercials? Puerto Ricans are the poorest community in New York, yet corporations and parade organizers continue to pimp part of our culture and cast us as a one-dimensional people. These are the same corporations and their cronies that turned Malcolm X into a t-shirt and cap. Our heroes and cultural icons are rarely seen in the parade, while Puerto Rican onlookers are compelled to accept a drop of pro-Puerto Rican symbolism against the tidal wave of misery that is part of our routine existence. Perhaps a review of the Puerto Rican parade organizers and where the culture went is in order. *¡Desfile un día, pobreza todo los días!* □

Research assistance provided by Marina Ortiz and Rubén Sosa.

Please note: Due to popular demand, this *Crítica* totally omits any mention of the Cuban embargo issue, *porque ya nos tiene una bola quemá!* But, for more information on this issue, contact the office of Congressman **José Serrano** at (202) 225-4363.

Contradicciones

Heard your own Contradicciones? Call or leave a message (anonymously, if you prefer) after 5pm or weekends for our Managing Editor, Howard Jordan, at (212) 564-1075, or fax any time at (212) 564-1014.

The **Arizona Community Foundation** has recently received the largest direct gift in its history . . . and it came from a *Puerto Rican!* The foundation received a \$6 million bequest from the trust of **Florita Evans**, a longterm resident of Phoenix who made her fortune in local real estate. Doña Florita passed away on February 17 of this year at the age of 87. The foundation's president, **Steve Mittenthal**, stated that, "What makes this gift a triple-bonanza is that it is virtually unrestricted, it is immediate and the donor is Puerto Rican." He adds: "How marvelously ironic that the single largest gift ever received in our 16-year history should come from a donor of color." In case you're wondering, in 1990 the Census counted a little over 8,500 Puerto Ricans residing in Arizona.

From The "Are You Shittin' Me?" Dept. Congressman **José E. Serrano** just announced in mid-August that his arch-rival, Bronx borough president **Fernando Ferrer**, will be the recipient of the Medallion of Excellence from the **Congressional Hispanic Caucus**, which Serrano chairs! We have been reporting on the the cut-throat political maneuverings between the Serrano and Ferrer factions in the Bronx, so you will understand if we're a little cynical about Serrano honoring Ferrer for anything. In any case, Ferrer is scheduled to receive the award on September 27 at the Caucus' gala dinner being held at the Washington Hilton as part of the **Hispanic Heritage Month** celebrations. Hey Freddy, be sure to take a food taster to the dinner, just in case. We're sure either Councilman **José Rivera** or **Israel Ruiz** would volunteer!

Extra! Extra! Rev. Diaz loves another man! In his August 11 *New York Newsday* column, **Gabriel Rotello** referred to **Christopher**

Lynn, one of two openly gay members of the Civilian Complaint Review Board, as a "homosexual apologist" for voting to table a resolution condemning the alleged anti-gay statements of Reverend **Rubén Diaz**. Rotello exposes the fact that "Lynn defends Diaz passionately . . . calls him his dear friend and brother." In response, Diaz points out in a letter appearing in *New York Newsday* that he is no homophobe and that as a Christian Evangelical Minister he can hate the sin (meaning the gay lifestyle) but love the sinner. Fine, but we were in shock as we continued to read the Reverend's letter when he wrote: "I love Christopher R. Lynn and I am deeply sorry for the pain that statements attributed to me may have caused him." Holy shit! (No pun intended) Was this the wily Reverend's admission to practicing an alternative lifestyle? Had passion gotten the better of his judgement as he publicly professed his love for another man? Was his new wife going to sue for divorce? Was Pat Robertson gonna ask for all his money back? The community was dizzy with speculation! But as we read his original column on the subject in the August 19th *Noticias del Mundo*, it turns out he wrote, "Yo *estimo* mucho a mi amigo Christopher Lynn . . ." In other words, whoever translated his letter to English, took "*estimo*" to mean love, when it means holding one in high esteem. That's a little different. But be that as it may, *Reverendo, tus comentarios nos suenan sospechosos.*

Impacto recently reported in their new "Visto y Oído" section that politicians at **Jimmy's Bronx Cafe**, upset over *Crítica's* hardhitting commentary, were overhead threatening, "¡Si cogemos a Howard Jordan lo hacemos chicharrón!" (If we catch Howard Jordan we are going to burn him!). The always cordial Jordan reacted as follows: "A los políticos hay que cogerlos como a la mierda, de lejos y con un palo."

continued on page 5 . . .

Update

The New York Puerto Rican Parade: Illegal?

The **New York Puerto Rican Parade** may be operating illegally, according to New York State. Following up on **Howard Jordan's** June 1994 *Desde Los Barrios* column on *el Desfile*, *Crítica* contacted the state's Charities Registration Office to get copies of the Parade's most recent financial statements. These are reports all nonprofits are required to file with the state if they are raising funds in New York. To our surprise, we were informed that the Parade was not currently registered to do such fundraising and that the last financial statement they had submitted was for 1991.

According to **Douglas M. Williams**, counsel to the Department of State, the New York Puerto Rican Parade (Federal ID#13-3329982) was not in compliance with state regulations, a potential felony violation. Contacted by the state after *Crítica's* inquiries, Parade officials argued they were never informed that their reports were past due. It seems the Parade didn't tell the state of their change of address from a post office box to their current address at 2804 Third Avenue in the Bronx. They now have twenty days from the end of August to file their overdue financial report or face a possible investigation by the state's Attorney General.

A review of audited financial reports submitted to the state from 1988 to 1991 reveals that the Parade has been operating under a deficit each year. The deficit in 1988 was \$37,295 and in 1991 went up to \$53,520. In 1991, they reported revenues of \$254,055 and expenditures of \$269,501, carrying over a deficit of \$38,074 from the previous year. During this period, the presidency of the Parade passed from **Gladys Diaz** to **Manuel Mirabal**. Under Mirabal, the Parade's financial statements provided much fewer details on the sources of its funds and appear incomplete.

As of the end of 1990, the Parade reports that it owed, among others, **Ravel Associates** a fee of \$25,000. Ravel, by the way, is the consulting firm of South Bronx power broker **Ramón Velez**. As Jordan documented in his column, Velez had been barred by the state at one point in the past from participating in the Parade; he is currently serving as its banquet coordinator. It is also interesting that the new address the Parade gave the state is the same as that of *Ravel Associates!* **Impacto** newspaper recently reported that it is expected that Velez would be elected Parade president, now that Mirabal will be taking over the leadership of the **National Puerto Rican Coalition** in Washington, DC.

Looks like Mirabal got his training on running community organizations from the "**Elizabeth Colón Center for Leadership Development**" (please note that the organization she once headed, **APRED**, had the same problem with the state before it went under). *Vamos a prenderle una vela a nuestros amigos* in the National Puerto Rican Coalition. Looks like they're going to need all the help they can get when the Parade Guy takes over next month! □