



ALEX J. FERNANDEZ
COMMISSIONER

MEMORANDUM

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the Miami Beach City Commission **Date:** September 14, 2022

From: Alex J. Fernandez, Commissioner **Subject:** **COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS**
Alex J. Fernandez **ITEM C4M – FLORIDA**
HISTORICAL MARKER
HONORING DESI ARNAZ

Pursuant to Section 82-504 of the City Code, please place on the September 14, 2022, City Commission agenda a referral to the next PSNQLC for the Committee to consider and issue a recommendation relating to the proposal to install a Florida Historical Marker in honor of Desi Arnaz. Additionally, I would like to refer this proposal to the Hispanic Affairs Committee.

Honoring Desi Arnaz with a historical marker in close proximity to the Park Central Hotel will be a significant and long overdue tribute to one of America's most famous adopted sons. The determination, talent, and perseverance of this teenage refugee demonstrated here would ultimately change the course of television entertainment.

It is fortuitous that the introduction of this referral coincides with Hispanic Heritage Month.

About Desi Arnaz:

Desi Arnaz was born Desiderio Alberto Arnaz y de Acha on March 2, 1917, in Santiago, Cuba. His father was a prominent physician, a wealthy landowner, and a popular senator. But Batista's Cuban Revolution forced Desi and his dad to flee to Miami (his mother would arrive later) where the penniless 17-year-old arrived unable to truly speak, read, or understand English. Remarkably, despite their reversal of fortune, neither he nor his father ever gave up hope. Their mantra "There has to be a way..." assured them they could overcome any obstacle.

For Desi, that meant cleaning canary cages for 25 cents each, helping his dad lay tile in Miami Beach homes, and struggling to save money by sleeping not in a home or in a boarding house, but on cots shoved in the back of a warehouse on SW Third Avenue. Arnaz never forgot sleeping with a club to protect himself and his father from the rats that infested the building.

A family friend and fellow refugee helped Desi enroll at St. Patrick Catholic School. Over time, he improved his English, learned guitar and the conga drum, and assimilated into his adopted home. Following graduation, he played a few gigs at the Roney Plaza Hotel where bandleader Xavier Cugat spotted the teenager's potential and took him on tour.

Desi Arnaz connection to the Park Central Hotel:

In 1937, Arnaz met Bobby Kelly, son of entrepreneurial restaurateur 'Mother' Kelly, who was then opening a 200-seat nightclub as an addition to the brand new Park Central Hotel. Promising Kelly an orchestra and pitching himself as Cugat's star performer, Desi was hired for a two-week engagement. Unfortunately at the nightclub's December 30, 1937 premiere, it was obvious the 20-year-old had been so desperate for work he didn't reveal his "orchestra" was really just the Siboney Septet, a handful of



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musicians who couldn't play the Latin rhythms Arnaz had promised. That's when his maxim -- "There has to be a way..." -- kicked in. Remembering his childhood in Santiago where a hypnotic rhythm was played at city-wide parties that stretched from dusk to dawn, Arnaz quickly taught the musicians to play a cadence of 'One-two-three-KICK!' Arnaz beat his conga drum in time, shouted to the audience to follow him, and above this primal rhythm he proceeded to dance everyone around the bar, out the doors of the Park Central, and down Ocean Drive for several blocks before circling back on Collins Avenue and back into the nightclub.

What Arnaz called his 'Dance of Desperation' launched 'The Conga Craze' in America. Even more significantly, the ensuing publicity raised his profile and led him first to Broadway and then to Hollywood where he met the love of his life, Lucille Ball with the two becoming the proud parents of Lucie Arnaz and Desi Arnaz, Jr., to his own (actual) orchestra, the production and ownership of *'I Love Lucy'* and, most incredibly, the couples' purchase of RKO Studios. Along the way, his development of technical innovations such as shooting programs on three cameras, on film, and before a live studio audience would transform television and American entertainment. And it all started at 640 Ocean Drive.

Proposed Marker Location:

Upon visiting the Park Central and meeting onsite with representatives of the hotel and the Planning Director, I would like to propose that the marker be installed on Lummus Park, across from the Park Central Hotel. The proposed location is currently being occupied by a city garbage bin installed over a concrete foundation.

About Florida Markers:

Florida Historical Markers are mounted on a pole, the signs are 30" high by 42" across. There are nearly 1,000 historic markers in Florida, yet only four of the 72 signs in Miami-Dade County are dedicated to people: Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Ameila Earhart, Judy Nelson Drucker, and Barbara Baer Capitman. Desi Arnaz will be the first man and Hispanic honored as an individual in Miami-Dade County.

Cost:

The cost for the Florida Marker is \$2,500. It is proponent's desire for small contributions to cover the cost of the marker. However, as part of this referral, I would like to propose for the City to upfront the \$2,500 cost of the marker and accept receiving a reimbursement of up to \$2,500 from the fundraising efforts.

Acknowledgments:

I am proud to be the legislative sponsor of this effort spearheaded by Mr. Gary McKechnie of Orlando, Florida. Mr. McKechnie was introduced to me by Miami Beach resident and Planning Board Member, Ms. Tanya Bhatt.

Mr. McKechnie nominated Desi Arnaz as the subject of a Florida Historic Market. To do so, Mr. McKechnie conducted considerable research and prepared a voluminous amount of paperwork presented to the overseeing committee that met in Tallahassee on May 24, 2022. The committee reviewed the packet of information as well as the proposed text of the marker and unanimously approved Mr. McKechnie's request.