Standing Firm

The Miami office of Hunton & Williams was founded in 1999 as an outpost for the esteemed 113-year-old Virginia law firm. Originally established to tap into the burgeoning international sector, the 15-year-old Miami office is among the firm’s top performers. It’s even managed to infuse some Hispanic flavor into Hunton’s southern culture.

By Jeff Zbar | Photography by Jorge Parra
Wally Martinez offered an apology as he walked into the 25th floor conference room at Hunton & Williams’ Brickell Avenue office. He was coming off a series of calls that left him a bit behind schedule.

But he was genial and ready to talk—about the office, the firm, and what brought a long-established Virginia law firm to Miami. Maybe his energy flowed from a busy morning. Maybe it was the three cups of cafecito—or Cuban coffee—he’d already had before 10 am.

“This is the only office with an espresso maker on every floor,” said Martinez of the Miami location, which this year celebrates its 15th anniversary.

On first blush, Hunton & Williams opening a Miami office could have had failure written all over it. The firm was an esteemed Virginia law firm steeped in southern tradition and legal culture. In one review, legal publication Chambers Associate called Hunton, “An influential firm on the mid-Atlantic legal scene [that] brings a sprinkling of ‘southern charm’ to the practice of law.”

That partners scouting Hunton’s first Florida office in the late 1990s decided on Miami—and selected among its founding partners three Hispanics—could have been dicey. After all, Miami and Richmond, Virginia, arguably are separated by much more than 1,000 miles. The practice of law may not change much from one office, city or region to another. But ethnicity and culture in some ways could have made the two cities worlds apart.

Instead, the intervening decade and a half has proven Hunton & Williams has built a bona fide success story on its southern border.

**Building on its Legacy**

Founded in 1901, Hunton & Williams has served both the government and private industry alike. Its Pennsylvania Avenue address has about 150 attorneys just blocks from the White House and Capitol. Before he was named a US Supreme Court Justice, Lewis Powell had been a partner at the firm for 25 years.

But by the 1990s, the firm’s key practice areas—litigation, business practices, regulatory/government relations, and international—were moving south. Not just farther south in the US, but into Latin America and the Caribbean. Even Ibero-America was showing up on client queries.

The firm’s partners knew they had to be in Florida. They visited, vetted, and eliminated from their list Jacksonville, Tampa, and Orlando. They were looking for a major plaintiffs market where a firm could focus on regional dispute resolution and an always-growing international book of business. They wanted a large US Federal Court. They wanted an office in a business capital for Latin America.

They chose Miami. And they selected local attorneys Martinez, co-founding partners Sam Danon and Juan Enjamio, and former founding partner Marty Steinberg—all from the Miami office of Holland & Knight—to hang Hunton’s shingle in temporary space in downtown Miami Center adjacent to the Hotel InterContinental.

Now based on Brickell Avenue, the offices logistically and culturally are as far as one can
travel along the East Coast and still be in a center of US business and law.

In many ways, though, the Miami office is no different from any other of Hunton’s 19 offices in the US, Bangkok, Brussels, Beijing, London, and Singapore. Power up a dormant PC in the morning and the screen says, “One Firm, Shared Values, One Goal”—just as it does at the desks of 739 attorneys—give or take—around the world.

That roster makes Hunton 51st on the National Law Journal’s 2013 NLJ 350 ranking of America’s largest law firms. The firm is 57th on the 2013 Am Law 100, with $557 million in gross revenue (though some discrepancy arises, as the firm’s fiscal year ends on March 31st—after Am Law’s publication deadline).

The partners built an office that became more than Hunton’s outpost in the gateway city to the Americas, said Martinez, who today is Hunton & Williams’s managing partner. They were handling Hunton work from across the US and internationally.

“Within 12 months, half my case load was from historic Hunton clients,” said Martinez, who since has been named by the National Law Journal as one of the nation’s “50 Most Influential Minority Lawyers.”

The Challenge of Miami

Building the Miami office was no small feat. At the time, though it had the second-largest federal court in the country—larger than Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles—Miami had not been seen as a primary legal market, said Thurston Moore, Hunton’s chairman emeritus who was the managing partner who helped negotiate the opening of the Miami office.

“Opening here (Miami) can be tricky,” he said. “An office needs an ethos that’s multicultural and attorneys and staff who are fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, as well as English.” It was a cultural breadth many new partners would have to navigate.

Then Moore “came across this wonderful band of brothers” from Holland & Knight, a firm that had nurtured its partners in a fashion similar to how Hunton developed its own, he said.

Enjamio had been a partner at Holland for three years when Martinez and Danon arrived as clerks in 1991. The two soon were named associates, and later partners. While at Holland, the three partners came to know one another through case work, often collaborating on client projects and various assignments, said Enjamio. Friendships eventually grew.

“We respected each other as lawyers, but at another level, through years of working together, we got to know each other as people,” he said. “We had a lot of personal values that we shared, and an enthusiasm for building something together.”

This was evident in the meetings—held in Richmond and Miami—between Moore’s team and its prospective partners. They were “citizen lawyers” who had a quality of training and education that Hunton was looking for. Each was the child of immigrants—or an immigrant himself, in the case of Enjamio—raised in a household where Spanish was the native tongue.

After a few meetings, the fit was obvious, said Moore.

“When you do these transactions, the greatest risk is not having a good cultural or social fit,” he said of negotiating the office’s opening. “After dinner, you felt like you just had dinner with your partners. The minute I met Wally, I said, ‘That’s going to be my successor.’
Like most law firms, Hunton grew by building and strengthening relationships and reputations. The attorneys had connections across the business and legal communities, which they tapped to help grow the fledgling office. As work arrived, Danon, Martinez, and Enjamio, as well as transactional attorney Fernando Alonso, who came with more than a dozen attorneys from Greenberg Traurig in 2001, each would confer amongst themselves and other firm attorneys on client assignments.

Their roles were clear. Enjamio, now Miami’s managing partner, brought complex employment and labor litigation experience. Martinez focused on business litigation and white collar criminal defense. Alonso was a transactional attorney and now chairs the firm’s Latin American practice group. Danon was an experienced litigator and today heads Hunton’s litigation practice. He is also a member of its executive committee.

Taking that expertise—and cultural poise—across borders is an invaluable intangible that won’t show up among billable hours. Danon recently returned from a week alongside a non-Spanish-speaking US client on a South American visit. After their return to Miami, Danon and the client dined together. The client confided in Danon on how his Spanish-speaking ability enabled the attorney to get to the heart of very sensitive matters.

“I don’t think you truly appreciate the value you just provided us,” Danon recalled the client telling him.

Value often translates into referrals. When a Hunton client in Colombia was talking with another business executive who was lamenting on the need for a culturally astute business law firm, the client mentioned Hunton. That business executive was from spirits company Diageo North America, which hired Hunton in 2000. Diageo remains a Hunton client to this day.

As senior vice president and general counsel at Diageo—and previously its regional counsel for Latin America and the Caribbean—Tara Hunt has overseen much of the Diageo–Hunton relationship. She relies on Danon, Martinez, and the firm’s other partners for more than legal advice. She seeks their business acumen.

“I want someone who’s curious, asks the right questions, and helps achieve our business goals,” said Hunt. “As I look across the law firms with whom I work, Sam and Wally stand out with an understanding of our end-to-end work. They’re driven by a genuine curiosity about what makes a business tick and then exploring how to make that happen.”

Alonso agreed. Hunton’s largely institutional client base, coupled with its attorneys’ business focus, creates an alluring atmosphere for “entrepreneurial partners who can work in an institutional setting,” he said.
The firm operates as a true partnership where every partner looks to benefit the whole,” said Alonso.

Martinez sought that client-side institutional setting when, in 2004, he left Hunton to become Diageo’s senior vice president and general counsel. He returned to Hunton two years later and today recalls his time at Diageo as being akin to graduate-level business school.

“In a corporation, you had to be a strong business leader,” said Martinez, “and you had to be sound on the law.”

That business savvy and legal skill have been clear to some outsiders for years. Wifredo “Willy” Ferrer met Martinez and fellow Miamian Danon while the three were at University of Pennsylvania Law School. He and Martinez, whom he met at a law school mixer, both joked about their nicknames, “Willy” and “Wally.” Ferrer and Danon later clerked for federal judges. Today, the two are very close friends.

From the start, Martinez exuded leadership, and Danon possessed an ability to handle “stressful legal situations … with composure, tact and expertise,” said Ferrer, the US Attorney for the Southern District of Florida.

“That’s a combination of skills which aren’t always present in the best of lawyers,” said Ferrer.

A Culture of Giving Back

Outside the courtroom, or even in the courtroom but with clients of a different socio-economic stripe, Hunton is recognized for its pro bono efforts. The firm donates at least three percent of total billable hours to pro bono services and all its attorneys participate in such efforts. The firm was among nine selected to the National Law Journal’s 2013 Pro Bono “Hot List”—one of only two firms named twice since the award’s inception.

Giving back often becomes the face of a firm, said R. Alexander Acosta, dean of the Florida International University College of Law. He knows Martinez and Enjamio, and has witnessed the firm’s community outreach under their leadership.

When the school started a scholarship for first-generation American law students, Enjamio—a Cuban émigré who arrived in Miami when he was 10—was one of the first to underwrite a student’s education, said Acosta. He’s also done pro bono outreach for local veterans, particularly as they’ve returned from deployment abroad.

“Even though he’s part of a national firm, he’s part of Miami,” said Acosta of Enjamio. “I believe they needed to make themselves part of the community, and Juan has done that.”

Another beneficiary of the firm’s pro bono outreach is Legal Services of Greater Miami Inc. Executive Director Marcia Cypen said Hunton spreads cases around the firm to share its attorneys’ expertise. The firm also steps up for larger projects. When Legal Services launched in 2009 its inaugural “Together, We Must” campaign to raise money and awareness to provide free legal aid to needy South Florida residents, some firms wrote checks, she said. Others provided hours of free help. Hunton did both, and continues to do so today.

“They showed a lot of leadership in taking pro bono cases and developing resources for us in terms of deepening the connection between law firms and the community,” said Cypen.

Whether helping the community or counseling clients, Martinez, Enjamio, Danon, and Alonso each has his own belief as to why the firm’s model has worked. The founding partners were ambitious, community-minded, and focused on shared success.

“There’s a sense that you want to succeed in your practice and do something great,” said Enjamio. “You want to be associated with great lawyers who are good people. We’ve pretty much succeeded in that.”

They’ve strengthened the firm’s role throughout the Miami and Latin American business and legal markets, and along the way have infused a taste of Hispanic culture and South Florida living into the firm. Now, even the New York office has an espresso maker.

“I don’t think that anyone thought we’d be as important a force here as we became. It was a lot of good fortune and collaboration,” said Enjamio. “We certainly spiced things up a bit.”