

## MIAMI GARDENS

Furniture chain helps the needy

El Dorado Furniture marks its 40th anniversary by giving furniture valued at \$5,000 to each of 40 families

BY BEGOÑE CAZALIS

[bcazalis@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:bcazalis@MiamiHerald.com)

After living 19 years in a rented Overtown apartment, Guy Milson, his wife, Dana, and their four children lost everything they owned in a gas explosion on Aug. 30.

The family stayed at a hotel for months, and when they were finally able to get an apartment, they had no furniture.

About a month ago, Dana found out she was going to be able to replace the air mattresses with real beds and the cardboard box with a dining table.

Their benefactor: El Dorado Furniture.

"It came right on time because we just couldn't take it anymore," said Dana, a science teacher at Miami Norland High School in Miami Gardens.

The Capó family, owners of El Dorado Furniture, made the gesture of appreciation for the support the company has received in 40 years of business.

The family has been in the furniture business since the 1920s, starting in Cuba, where they owned Casa Capó. The patriarch, Manuel Capó, and two of his sons, Carlos and Luis, fled the island nation after the Communist takeover, arriving in Mexico in a small sailboat named El Dorado.

They arrived in the United States in 1966 and a year later opened their first U.S. furniture store in Little Havana -- which they named after their 24-foot boat. Other members of the family later joined them.

Today, the company owns 10 stores and is regarded as the largest Hispanic-owned furniture retail business in the country and one of the top 50 furniture retailers in the United States.

The family celebrated the 40th anniversary of the business by inviting needy families to write an application explaining in 250 words why they deserved a new furniture set.

After the applications were reviewed, representatives of El Dorado Furniture visited the homes of applicants and took pictures to verify the information in the applications. Participating nonprofit organizations could also nominate families.

More than 300,000 applications were reviewed by a team of El Dorado employees, sponsors, media partners and members of nonprofit organizations.

Starting on June 27, two families were selected weekly to receive furniture valued at \$5,000 for each family. The gesture culminated in an Appreciation Ceremony on Nov. 14 at the company's flagship Palmetto Boulevard Showroom, 4200 NW 167th St., Miami Gardens.

"We wanted to help this community that has helped us tremendously," Manuel Capó said. "We only gave these families things every person has the right to have."

Pedro Capó, El Dorado Furniture's chief operation officer, said at the ceremony that the large number of applications reflected the sad reality of poverty in South Florida. "The beautiful part is that there was so much support from everyone," he said.

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Lynne Cameron, executive director of Neighbors 4 Neighbors, one of the nonprofit groups involved in the program, thanked the Capós for the gesture.

"I haven't seen this much unity in assisting our community in the 15 years I have been in this organization," Cameron said. "And I am proud to tell you that this does not stop here. We are going to take this data we have collected of all the applications and we are giving it to FIU's Department of Social Studies to analyze it so that we can take it to our representatives and show them how much need there is."

Amigos for Kids, which is dedicated to helping children in need, nominated the family of 11-year-old Jimena Peralta, who attends the organization's after-school program.

"We saw how her mother went through great efforts and struggled to take care of Jimena and give her a good education," said Jorge Plasencia, chairman and co-founder of Amigos for Kids.

Rosa Rodriguez, a Peruvian immigrant who has been living in a one-room Little Havana apartment for four years with her husband, Jose Peralta, and her daughter, Jimena, also was among the recipients.

"Sometimes I walk 30 blocks just so I don't have to spend money on the bus fare," Rodriguez said. "I do it all for my daughter because she is the one who has a future, and I will do anything to keep it that way."

Rodriguez did not know her family had been nominated for the furniture giveaway and when she found out she was a winner, she could not believe it. "I started crying, but this time it was finally of happiness," Rodriguez said.

Jimena, who wants to become a lawyer, read to an audience of about 200 at the celebration a speech she had prepared thanking the Capós in the name of all the winners:

"Señor Manuel Capó, I want to thank you for being my friend. I thank God for your existence and want to tell you that I love you as much as my new furniture. From now on, I will have no more nightmares because I will sleep well and cozy in a real bed."

Other winners included David McClaine and Michael Bedy, who suffer from mental disabilities but live independently as roommates in Plantation, helped by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities.

Carmen Alicea, a Homestead resident whose property was stolen by squatters who had occupied her home for more than a year until she was able to legally evict them, also got furniture from El Dorado.

The county and the city of Miami Gardens commended the gesture by the company, presenting officials of the firm with proclamations declaring Nov. 14 as El Dorado Day.

Roberto Capó, the youngest of the seven sons of Manuel and Aida Capó and chief marketing officer of El Dorado Furniture, read many of the applications.

"I would go back home and tell my family about all of these stories, and a lot of times they couldn't even believe it," he said. "We knew there was a great need in our community but we really didn't know it was so much: children sleeping on the floor, families without a table to eat [on]. It was very touching for all of us."