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Plain Dealer (Cleveland)

June 9, 2008 Monday  
Final Edition; All Editions

## Our ambassador to the world; Multilingual salesman out to promote Cleveland

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**SECTION:** NATIONAL; Pg. A1

**LENGTH:** 2093 words

### CITY DEVELOPMENT

San Jose, Costa Rica - From mountain farms so high and misty that Costa Ricans call them "cloud forests" come the coffee beans that Walter Casas pours into his roasters in the valley below.

At the end of a rainy afternoon, he stooped to sip spoonfuls of steaming coffee from glass after glass, testing the day's brew.

George Delgado, shirt sleeves rolled up, his tie loosened, took his own turn at the tasting table, looked up at Casas' questioning face, and softly said, "Perfecto."

As the coffee baron beamed, Delgado punched a phone number into his BlackBerry.

He caught a breathless immigration lawyer on a treadmill in his gym in downtown Cleveland and told him to get the visas ready. The Costa Ricans were coming, bringing the best coffee in the world.

Then he went out into the warehouse and played Ping-Pong with the men who unload the trucks. He wanted even them to remember him and the city he represents.

In the nascent quest to connect Northeast Ohio with new realms in the global economy, Delgado is the region's top scout. Multilingual, culturally savvy, prone to exuberance, he jets around the world trumpeting Cleveland - usually in places that never heard of us.

The Cleveland Foundation hired him a little over a year ago to lead a venture considered unprecedented for a philanthropy, a strategy to boost the regional economy by recruiting international talent, products and jobs.

Café Volio is one of Delgado's early successes. It's a premier brand in a nation famous for its coffee. It sells almost exclusively in Central America. But that's about to change.

The venerable, family-owned company plans to introduce its coffee to U.S. and Canadian consumers this year through Cleveland. Casas is one of a dozen Costa Rican exporters who signed a trade deal envisioned by Delgado and sealed April 7 at a meeting between Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson and Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez at the president's home.

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**Delgado** returned to San Jose on Monday to firm up the export deal and to push another idea. Costa Rica, its high-tech sector soaring, has resolved to become bilingual. **Delgado** suggested Cuyahoga Community College has just the staff to teach a Spanish-speaking nation English.

"George is a dynamo," said Tri-C President Jerry Sue Thornton, who plans to welcome a Costa Rican delegation this summer. "He likes to stay in the background, but he's imaginative and he's creative and he brings key people together."

He's just getting started, many hope. City officials are more excited about a November mission to Stuttgart, Germany, in which **Delgado** has lined up representatives of advanced-energy companies looking for an American beachhead.

He has been talking up the Cleveland Clinic with millionaires in Moscow - in their language - and he recently sat down with a top aide to the emir of Kuwait, who thinks his oil-rich kingdom needs to diversify into manufacturing.

In several foreign economies, **Delgado** is the face of Cleveland, a most unlikely one at that. Born in Cuba, educated in Moscow, he rose in corporate Germany through jobs that took him around the world. His first visit to Cleveland was for the job interview.

He's a compact, athletic-looking man - a brown belt in judo - with bright eyes and graceful, diplomatic reflexes. He's quick to usher another through a doorway first. He carefully pronounces names.

Age 40 finds him living a fast-paced, frequent-flier life with passion, though it torments him. His wife and 7-year-old daughter remain an ocean away in Munich, awaiting visas. Every Sunday, he calls a mother in Cuba he has not been able to see in 22 years.

Exiles suffer, he might tell you in a quiet, weary moment on a dark plane. They also give their best to their adopted home. Right now, that's Cleveland, a city he describes as a marvel.

Earlier this spring, soon after returning from Bavaria, where he helped persuade IBC Solar, one of the world's largest solar-energy companies, to plant its North American headquarters in Cleveland, **Delgado** sat at the window of the Starbucks on Playhouse Square and looked across Euclid Avenue.

He saw a midday street nearly still, windows empty in massive buildings. But he also saw wide, clean sidewalks. Granite. Marble!

The scene, he said, would intrigue people weary of crowds, high rents, pollution and pickpockets.

"A lot of people in Europe when they see this, they do not see failure," **Delgado** insisted. "The street is too beautiful. They see potential."

He wants to bring them here, and he's confident that he can. Not because he speaks six languages. Not because his BlackBerry brims with international contacts. But because he has been trained to excel as an envoy, a cultural bridge, whether he wanted to or not.

"It's not something you can plan," **Delgado** said, dismissing any romanticism. "It's something life confronted you with. And you lived it."

To Russia with a shove

As a child, Jorge **Delgado** was hard not to notice. He read poetry to crowds on the streets of Sancti Spiritus, a colonial city in central Cuba. At 16, he was identified as gifted in math. In Fidel Castro's Cuba in the mid-1980s, that meant education in the former Soviet Union, where thousands of young Cubans studied at elite schools.

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In 1986, he said goodbye to mom and dad, two sisters and a baby brother, none of whom he has seen since.

**Delgado** learned more than engineering at Moscow University. Glasnost, "openness," was blooming. The old Soviet Union was crumbling.

"I learned that communism does not work," he said.

When it was time to return to Cuba in 1990, he boarded a train to Vienna. He maybe too lightly crossed a one-way bridge to the West.

"My mother still suffers," he said. "I was 21. What did I know? Destiny."

Alone, a minority in a white, German-speaking society, he began his climb.

"The only way you survive is to absorb the culture," he said.

He studied German at the University of Vienna and taught himself the city. He became a tour guide on a bus, the man with the microphone. Working for tips, he earned \$200 a day, \$6,000 a month.

He went on to Munich for a master's degree in international business. There he met Susie, the German woman he would marry. The Russian market was opening and his first employer, a beverage distributor, sent him back to Moscow to drink vodka with Russia's rising industrialists and sell them German beer.

"Eighty percent of business is cultural," **Delgado** said. "Twenty percent is math."

By age 28, he was director of international sales for one of Germany's largest beverage conglomerates. He was maybe the only Cuban executive in Germany.

In 2000, he came to America to work for a global real estate company owned by an Israeli. He helped buy up Miami, married Susie **Delgado** Hoechtl and obtained U.S. citizenship.

Four years later, the couple moved back to Munich with a baby girl, Emilia, so that **Delgado** could go to work for a gourmet-foods distributor. He was leading sales teams in Europe when he learned of the opportunity in Cleveland, Ohio.

The ad, posted on an Internet job site, reflected a new tangent for America's oldest community philanthropy. The Cleveland Foundation sought a director of international relations, someone to introduce foreign companies to Cleveland and to help local companies break into global markets. It wanted someone who could sell Cleveland to the world.

**Delgado** weighed his credentials. He had traveled to over 40 nations. He now spoke English, Spanish, Russian, German and some Italian and Ukrainian. He felt, he said, "like I had trained my whole life for this job."

It was after business hours and Ronn Richard, president of the foundation, was alone in his offices when the phone rang. He picked it up.

**Delgado** told him he had read the want ad - the one that said "no phone calls please" - and that he was perfect for the position. He offered to fly in at his own expense. Reimburse me only if you hire me, he said.

"I said, 'All right,' " Richard recalled. "He said, 'I'll be there tomorrow.' And then the line went dead."

Richard, the former second in command at Panasonic, calls **Delgado** the best salesman he has ever seen.

"He's got chutzpah," Richard said. "And his heart's in his work."

'At the end of the day, it's culture'

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On a bright morning in San Jose last week, **Delgado** headed for the Casa Presidencial, Costa Rica's White House, with Eugenio Yanez, a former Cuban college professor he hired as a consultant, and Maria Isabel Boss, a Tri-C administrator born in Colombia.

The path was smoothed by an old friend, the nephew of the president of Costa Rica, the same man who arranged the meeting between the president and Mayor Jackson.

Guards waved the Cleveland trio through the gates after a cursory glance at passports. In a conference room, Cabinet ministers awaited. **Delgado** greeted several by name. He started introductions that segued into a quiet social gathering.

It was maybe 15 minutes before everyone sat down to café con leche and business, a discussion of Costa Rica's English needs and how Cleveland might help. Later, there were handshakes and hugs goodbye. No contract. Not even the talk of one.

Germans want to see statistics, **Delgado** likes to say. Russians want to drink with you. But Latin Americans need to get to know you.

"At the end of the day, it's cultural," he said. "You do not do business in these countries if you do not have friends."

He traverses several cultures from one place, his BlackBerry creating a virtual office. Standing in front of Costa Rica's beautiful National Theater, in the midday crush of pedestrians, **Delgado** drew stares as he talked loudly in Russian into his wireless phone.

He had taken a call from a wealthy Moscow vodka exporter he had steered toward the Cleveland Clinic for heart treatment.

"I believe we can get a few hundred patients a year from the former Soviet Union," he said offhand.

He knows his Rolodex is not endless. He said his contacts are only the start of a negotiation, less important than spying opportunity. And he likes to point out that he's just one member of a rising team that includes the foundation staff, the mayor's office and a growing network of local and influential friends.

Thursday night, **Delgado** graduated with the 2008 class of Leadership Cleveland, which grooms civic leaders from the local executive corps.

"I can't do my job alone," he said.

**Delgado** alerted City Hall to the export potential in Costa Rica, where the economy is booming. But the exporters there grew interested only after Chris Warren, Cleveland's director of regional economic development, flew in and described Cleveland's transportation network, the city's relatively cheap warehouse and port space, and its access to major markets.

And it was the arrival of Mayor Jackson that sealed the deal, several Costa Ricans said.

The mayor's humble bearing and sincerity goes over well in Latin America, **Delgado** said. "He's the anti-arrogant American."

In fact, selling Cleveland abroad is relatively easy, **Delgado** said. Selling Cleveland to Clevelanders may be the taller challenge.

He's dismayed by the community's despondency, its tendency to view the city as somehow inadequate. At times, he said, he feels like a life coach for a city, bucking up locals to pitch big ideas to foreigners.

But then, he enjoys special insights. He knows people like Walter Casas and the Costa Rican philosophy of pura vida - authenticity, the "pure life."

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It troubles Casas that most Costa Rican coffee sold in America is diluted with cheaper, inferior brands. That's why his family has shunned the U.S. market.

Standing in a modern factory aromatic with freshly roasted coffee, he said his priority is to protect a brand dating to 1938, and that means controlling how it is sold.

The "Cleveland project," as he calls it, allows him to do that. With a Costa Rican trade representative in Cleveland, warehouse space and maybe, someday, a roasting plant, Café Volio can sell its coffee in America uncut and pure.

It has been a dream of his family's for 20 years.

"Cleveland is the first U.S. city that came to Costa Rica and asked us," Walter Casas said, almost reverently. "We never heard of you."

Out in his warehouse, the first Clevelander he ever met was sweating madly, shouting in a couple of languages, and losing a furious game of Ping-Pong.

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**LOAD-DATE:** June 10, 2008

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**GRAPHIC:** TRACY BOULIAN THE PLAIN DEALER George **Delgado**, the first-ever director of international relations for the Cleveland Foundation, sees Cleveland as a city ready to be discovered. "To the Europeans, we're a blank page. We could fill that page with positive information, and it would all be true."

TRACY BOULIAN THE PLAIN DEALER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ROBERT L. SMITH** THE PLAIN DEALER Photo George **Delgado** takes a phone call last Monday outside the offices of the president of Costa Rica, in the Casa Presidencial, in San Jose. He receives international phone calls and about 200 e-mails a day on his BlackBerry. Photo George **Delgado** joined Walter Casas in the test lab of Café Volio, on the outskirts of San Jose, Costa Rica, last week for the daily "cupping," or tasting of freshly roasted coffee beans. He helped to persuade the family-owned coffee roaster to introduce its coffee to America through Cleveland. **ROBERT SMITH** THE PLAIN DEALER Text going right about right here and going right herey and right about herey.

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper