

HONORING JUAN RAFAEL CÁRDENAS

11/27/20

Dr. Juan Rafael Cárdenas Gutiérrez leaves a rich legacy of integrity and enduring contributions as a businessman, entrepreneur, engineer, civic leader, and a pioneer in education, including co-founding universities in Colombia and as an early adopter of the Colombia Purdue Partnership (CPP).

Dr. Cárdenas was executive vice president at Coltabaco, one of the largest conglomerates in Colombia at the time, where he was a driver in growing company investments in the Andean region. Through his steadfast support as a board member of an equity company, it evolved into manufacturing consumer products in Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia with leadership positions in each market. His inspirational demeanor helped forge success throughout various other ventures during an impressive 53-year career with the conglomerate.

In May of 1960, he and 17 other visionaries came together to form EAFIT University in Medellín, an institution with local roots and global aspirations that is now prominent in Colombia and known throughout the world. He also was instrumental in founding the Lasallian University Corporation, demonstrating a commitment to society and educational opportunities. This university later awarded him an honorary doctorate in educational sciences.

Continually invested in helping the universities advance, Dr. Cárdenas served on the EAFIT board of directors from the university's founding in 1960 until his death in 2020. When the Colombia Purdue relationship was just a kernel of an idea, he saw the tremendous potential and was an early advocate. As a well-respected executive with a presence in every aspect of society, whether government, industry, academia, or community, he was a tremendous asset to the burgeoning relationship.

"Juan Rafael was the bedrock of Purdue's partnership with EAFIT," said Arvind Raman, Executive Associate Dean of Faculty and Staff, and Robert V. Adams Professor in School of Mechanical Engineering at Purdue University. "He understood early on that Purdue was serious about engaging and was key to securing EAFIT leadership's commitment to partner with us," Raman explained. "Juan Rafael also had a knack to see above and beyond possibilities that one cannot necessarily imagine today. In 2011 we made a presentation about Purdue capabilities, including a mention of our success with supercomputing, and the discussion turned to queries about what happens when we retire a supercomputer cluster. Juan Rafael thumped his fist on the table and announced, that's what EAFIT was going to develop with Purdue."

The effort to transfer parts of a retired supercomputer began with Purdue's ITAP, along with the partnership to make EAFIT a hub for supercomputing in Latin America. Today, EAFIT's supercomputer, christened "Apolo" in honor of the Purdue astronaut connection (*Apolo spelled with one L in Spanish*), is ranked in the top ten in Latin America helping researchers solve grand challenges in computational drug discovery, the preservation of Colombia's biodiversity, and other fields.

Dr. Cárdenas was instrumental in guiding interactions with Purdue Presidents Mitch Daniels and France Córdova, and Colombian university and government officials. His calm approach and openness put others at ease to jointly tackle grand challenges.



At a meeting at Westwood with President Mitch Daniels, standing, second row center, and rectors or their representatives from universities in the State of Antioquia, fall 2015. Dr. Cárdenas is standing, fourth from the right.

“I met Dr. Cardenas in 2007 when I visited EAFIT on my first trip to Colombia. From that moment, we became friends and Purdue gained a champion for discovering our shared future,” said Carolyn Percifield, former Director of Strategic Planning for the Purdue College of Engineering, who was instrumental in the CPP. “I am so sad to lose my dear friend, but the impact of his wisdom and inspiration lives on at EAFIT and Purdue.”

In the community, Dr. Cárdenas was equally influential, participating in Rotary Club activities and other civic foundations, and was a founder of the Medellín Metropolitan Theater. In younger days, he also was an athlete in school and part of the state basketball team of Antioquia.

His passion for education was no surprise. From his formative years, educational excellence had a starring role in his story. He attended San Jose School of the LaSalle Priests in Medellín, achieving the top student honor in each year of high school, graduating in 1949. For more than three decades, he served as president of ALDEA, the school’s alumni association.

He earned his degree in civil engineering at the prestigious School of Mines, part of Universidad Nacional de Colombia’s Medellín campus. He graduated among the top two students and along with that honor, received an international scholarship that materialized at Penn State University where he earned a master’s degree in industrial engineering. He returned to Colombia in 1958.



Dr. Cárdenas in his library at home in Medellín, Colombia.

Liliana Gómez, director of Purdue Colombia Inc. in Medellín, said, “Dr. Cárdenas will be greatly missed within the Colombia-Purdue community and fondly remembered for his pioneering spirit, kindness, intellect, and passionate encouragement and partnerships to advance education throughout Colombia.”

“At the CPP, we will be eternally grateful for his wisdom, friendship and ongoing support throughout the years, and he will be warmly remembered,” said Juan Diego Velásquez, managing director of the Colombia Purdue Partnership, based in West Lafayette, Indiana.

Dr. Cárdenas died October 19, 2020 in Medellín, Colombia, at the age of 89.