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## Ex-banker now president of Dade County Farm Bureau

By Margaux Herrera The Miami Herald

After years in international finance, Alice Pena returned to South Miami-Dade a few years ago to run her family's farm. Now she is head of the Dade County Farm Bureau.



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For 20 years, Alice Pena was a banker, spending three weeks per month out of town.

Now spends her days in jeans and runs her own farm in Redland where she cares for her chickens.

Pena was inaugurated as president of the Dade County Farm Bureau early October. The organization brings together local farmers to address the needs of their trade, both internally and with the government.

She took over her family's farm full-time when her mother passed away three years ago, and her lifestyle switched completely.

"It changed dramatically," Pena said. "Totally 180 degrees."

She began her transition several years earlier, when she became to an insurance broker to spend more time in South Florida. She had never worked full-time on the farm and did not anticipate all of the challenges that came with it.

Alice Pena, president of the Dade County Farm Bureau, works the afternoon feeding of her hens at her farm in the Redland on Nov. 16. Her hens provide organic eggs to community supported agriculture, CSA members and local restaurants. ALLISON DIAZ / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

"Farming is a very difficult, very hard life," Pena said. "You have to deal with the elements and nature, and so many unforeseen things."

She wakes up at 4 a.m. to answer emails and care for her chickens and land. Some nights, she does not get to sleep until 1 a.m.

"I've never been much of a sleeper," Pena said.

Pena's business, PNS Farms, is an organic egg farm. Since she took over and transitioned to organics, Pena's eggs have been in high demand.

"I was getting calls and email all over the country, from everywhere," Pena said. "They were interested in the organic, local, small, fresh farm."

As president of the Farm Bureau, Pena wants to work to educate others on the importance of local farming, both at the governmental and educational levels.

One of her main goals is to educate politicians on how trade policies affect local farmers. Much of the country's produce is imported from overseas, where there are often no regulations on farmers.

"They have to be cognizant of how it's hampering and impeding the local farmers to grow and produce their produce," Pena said.

She wants to ensure that the details in the agreements work in favor of the farmers, and that future policies become more stringent.

## Ex-banker now president of Dade County Farm Bureau (Cont' )

"This is really a huge circle that needs to be worked on," she said.

On the educational level, Pena wants to work with local schools to work agriculture into the curriculum. She wants to teach students that farming is not only manual labor, but also includes entrepreneurship and science.

She has already met with the University of Florida/Miami-Dade Extension, a school which receives funding from funding UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, the Miami-Dade County Consumer Services Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The school aims to bring research done at UF to the local community.

"You see these students how focused they are and how interested they are in agriculture," Pena said. "But it's about how agriculture affects them and their environment. They do a marvelous job."

Pena also believes in more community outreach, including farmers markets and local products being sold in stores. First, however, they need to bring back farmers who have left the industry because they not making a profit.

"There's a huge demand for fresh local foods and we can't satisfy them," she said. "And so there's a total disconnect."

What Pena believes to be their biggest issue, however, is immigration. The farmers struggle with having a legal workforce because government regulations have become so strict.

"They're like our family," Pena said of her farm workers. "They're our source of producing, working the land, getting things planted, harvested and in good condition to the consumer."

Pena sees society's perception of the migrant workers as skewed.

"When I hear these extreme position and all of this rhetoric about illegals taking over jobs, that just doesn't happen," Pena said. "People just won't take these jobs because they're educated and they have skills in other workforces."

Larry Dunagan, who was president of the Farm Bureau before Pena, said that the group has been fighting the same problems for years.

"It's really been government rules and regulations have been a huge problem for us," Dunagan said.

Although she has only accepted the position for two years, Pena maintains that she wants to make progress with all of her goals.

"I don't know a more tenacious person," said Miami-Dade County Agricultural Manager Charles LaPradd, who works as a liaison between the Farm Bureau and the government. "Alice is a bright individual that is very eager to work with others and move forward with the organization."

Dunagan says that the biggest challenge as president is representing all the different groups of farmers.

"It's just a very diverse huge industry, and it's tough keeping all of those groups satisfied, happy and all on the same page," he said. "I think Alice will do a fine job."

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/11/18/v-fullstory/2508512/ex-banker-now-president-of-dade.html#ixzz1e9qlyjuh>

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## In South Florida, women farmers are taking charge of the land

BY ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ



PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY: Joann Speers & her sister Angela DelliVeneri with father, Joseph & Frances LaRocca.

Deep in South Miami-Dade, where lush greenery gives way to brown fields, sisters Angela DelliVeneri and Joann Speers ready the land for this fall's crop of green beans -- an annual ritual they learned from their father more than 40 years ago.

“You just don't want to let it go,” Speers says of farming. “It's a way of life.”

Women have always participated in farm life, but historically in the background as wives and daughters. Now they're taking charge.

About 460 Miami-Dade farms, or nearly 20 percent, are run by women - a share that is inching up even as agricultural acreage dwindles. In Broward, the figure is 157 farms, or nearly 30 percent.

Consider these numbers from the U.S. Census of Agriculture: In 2002, 11 percent of the nation's 2.1 million principal farm operators were women; five years later, the figure had risen to 14 percent. In 2007, 22 percent of Florida's farms were run by women, a 28 percent increase in five years.

“It's been a slow, steady evolution, much of it due to the nursery industry,” says Debbie Brady, president of Florida Agri-Women, founded in 2003.

“Agriculture has become a pretty high-tech industry,” says Terry McElroy, a spokesman for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. “It's not a question of brawn anymore.” Some female farmers, like DelliVeneri and Speers, grew up in the business. Others took over when their husbands died.

But many, like Alice Pena, saw farming as a way to live their passion. As night surrenders to dawn, the one-time banker scrubs her hens' feeders, adds water to their trough and scatters feed around the coop.

“They're like family,” Pena says of the Isa Brown hens whose organic eggs she sells.

She runs the operation on the five-acre South Dade plot where her family began growing malangas, avocados and plantains in the late 1960s.

After her father's death in 1978, she sold her parents' Coral Gables home and built a house on the land for her mother. During the week she traveled internationally as a bank vice president. On weekends she helped with the farm.

Still, love of the land came slowly, Pena admits with a laugh.

“As a kid I hated it here. We would come on weekends and stay in the trailer, and I thought it was torture.”

But when her mother died last year, Pena took over the business, turning it into an organic farm with chickens and tropical fruits. Now she has a steady clientele, some of whom travel miles to buy her eggs.

“My life has evolved totally,” she says. “I don't wear a suit; only jeans. I go around in a ponytail without makeup, and I don't travel anymore, either. In certain ways, it's a lot more hectic, but there's a certain balance to it. I don't feel the tension or stress I felt in banking.”

June Ward of Emerald Forest Interior Foliage is another relative newcomer. Her eight-acre nursery, which cultivates about 20 varieties of crotons, sells to landscapers, garden centers, florists and interior decorators.

Ward started out in the accounting department of another nursery, moved on to sales and, in 1998, bought a nursery on Southwest 189th Avenue that now employs five workers outdoors and three in the office. Though the Indiana native knew plenty about the business side of nurseries, she learned everything about growing --

## It's not a question of brawn anymore

soil, fertilizer, pests -- on the job.

"People are very willing to help you here," she says. "You learn from each other."



**WOMEN RULING THE ROOST:** Alice Pena with Gary the rooster on her farm. "My life has evolved totally. I don't wear a suit; only jeans, says the ex-bank vice president.

Acceptance doesn't always come easily. Colleen Boggs was one of a handful of women in agriculture when she started Pine Island Nursery in 1972. She remembers when buyers assumed she was hired help and invariably asked to speak to a man. Yet, she says, she also benefited from being a woman in a male-dominated field.

"Everybody was kinder to you, and you stood out in the crowd," says Boggs, now retired. Male or female, South Florida farmers and nursery owners face daunting challenges, from development pressure to unpredictable weather.

"A hurricane doesn't skip over you because you're a woman," Boggs says. Mary Lamberts, a Cooperative Extension Service agent who works with Miami-Dade growers, says fresh eyes and flexibility are among the assets women bring to agriculture.

"They're more willing to look into niche markets, to try different things," she says.

Farming has never been an easy way to make a living, and the housing bust and recession have hit ornamental nurseries particularly hard. Vickie Parrish says sales are down about 70 percent at her Parrish Nursery in Southwest Ranches.

She doubts that many in the next generation will make a living on the land. Her daughter earned a horticulture degree from the University of Florida, but has taken a job with a farm-credit agency in Orlando.

At South Miami-Dade's LaRocca Farms, DelliVeneri and Speers are not encouraging their children to carry on the family tradition, either. "The farming business is not going to be here forever," DelliVeneri says. "I'm pushing them to get into other fields."