

# Hispanic chamber resurrected with focus on boosting international trade

BY CHRISTOPHER SHEFFIELD

A Memphis businessman who a decade ago started a chamber of commerce catering to Hispanics has reactivated the concept.

The Mid-South Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is being touted by founder and president Garland Reed as a "business-focused" organization for those

Mid-South Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Non-profit business organization President: Garland Reed Address: 5100 Poplar, Suite 2700 Phone: (901) 320-7133

seeking to do business with small- and medium-size Hispanic businesses in the region or to export products to Hispanic countries.

"Our focus is 100% business," Reed says. "Business, business, business, that's our focus. You won't see us marching for immigration rights."

That strict adherence to all things business is what will separate this chamber from other groups in the

area, he says.

The Mid-South Hispanic Chamber of Commerce has opened an office in Clark Tower and is in the process of hiring a multi-national staff and building a Web site, Reed says.

The chamber will provide an array of services including job referrals, grant writing, job training and preparation, national and international marketing and other aspects of business formation and management.

Another top priority is gearing up to host the Mid-South International Business Expo in the fall of 2008.

Specifics such as the date, location and other sponsors have yet to be firmed up, but Reed says he'll be approaching key government leaders at the city and county level and local corporations for sponsorships. He plans to continue to line up representatives from countries in Central America, the Caribbean, Africa and the Middle East who are looking for American-made products.

"It will be a wonderful opportunity to put Memphis on the map internationally," Reed says.

The Mid-South Hispanic Chamber was originally chartered as a non-profit organization in 1996 by Reed to meet the business and personal needs of the growing Hispanic business community.

A native of Chicago, Reed came to Memphis in 1990 by way of Colombia, South America, to tend to his aging mother. Soon after arriving, he and his wife, Diane, started a grocery store catering to the growing Hispanic and African residents here.

Fluent in Spanish, he says his reputation for helping Hispanics find key services grew and he soon found himself spending more time as an interpreter and consultant than running his own business. So he formed the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. But as his business interest grew, he found less time for operating the chamber and it stalled.

He decided to reactivate the chamber earlier this year after divesting himself of many of his business responsibilities. And there couldn't be a better time, he says.

The impact of the growing Hispanic population, estimated to be more than 50,000 in 2001 by University of Memphis researchers and now believed to be approaching 100,000, will be one of the more significant events for the city in the coming years, Reed says.

"As migrant workers, they used to come and go," he says. "But now they stay."

And more Hispanics are starting and buying businesses as a way to improve their lives.

David Spann, director of the U.S. Export Assistance Center in Memphis, says Reed is correct that the opportunities for local companies to do business in South America and other Hispanic countries are tremendous.

While he isn't familiar with Reed or the Mid-South Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, he says an organized effort could be successful.

"It's probably easier for a U.S. company to do business in South America than China or Asia," Spann says.

Because of proximity and a long history with the U.S., South American companies are often more predisposed to working with U.S. companies.

"Their business and ethical pattern are more similar to our own," he says.

Greg Siskind, immigration lawyer and managing member of Siskind Susser Bland PC, says he's found that chambers of commerce focused on the Hispanic community have largely been successful. Memphis currently has at least two similar organizations, Latino Memphis and the Hispanic-Business Alliance, Inc.

Latino Memphis was founded in 1995 and has a broad mission of serving business, families and individuals in the Memphis Hispanic community and

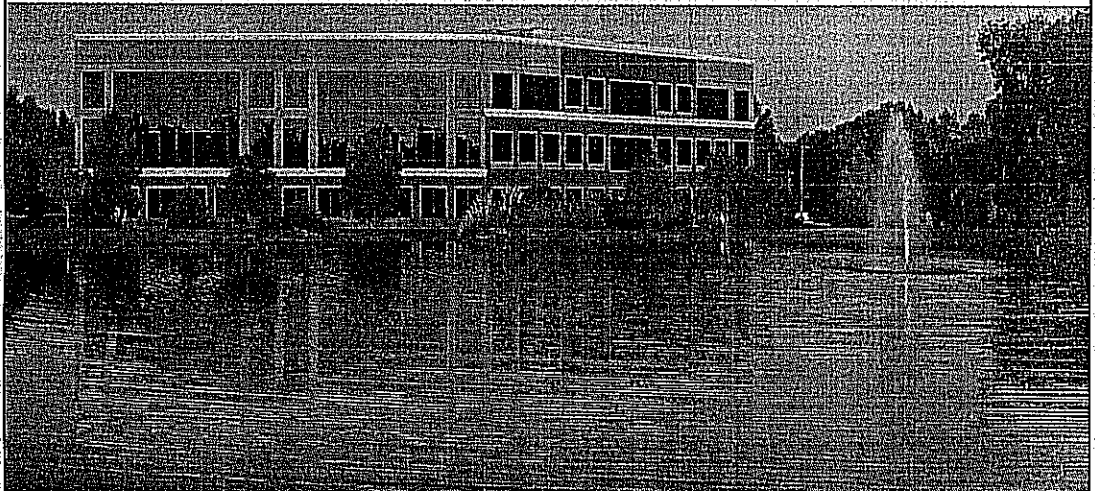
being an advocate for change. The Hispanic Business Alliance, started in the late 1990s, focuses on helping Hispanics participate in economic and political developments, according to its Web site.

Siskind says a chamber that focuses on trade, not just typical chamber activities, is needed.

"I definitely think that would be different than what the other groups are doing," he says. "An organization to promote exports to Latin America is great and there's plenty of businesses in this city who could export, and maybe this group would give them the contacts to do that."

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