

A  
REMEMBRANCE OF  
MANUEL LEÓN PONCE



JUNE 10, 1945 – JANUARY 9, 2001

*A lover of life and of the arts, an exceptional  
teacher, and a beautiful being who returned to  
humanity much more than he took*

## PROLOGUE

Manuel Ponce died on January 9, 2001 after a two-year battle with brain cancer. During most of the year 2000 he was in Miami receiving treatment periodically at the Sylvester Cancer Clinic of the University of Miami Hospital. Several times during his ordeal it seemed that he might fully recover from this illness. Sadly, that was not to be. He passed without pain at his sister's home in Coral Gables, Florida. He was entombed next to his parents at Graceland Memorial Park in Miami.

A memorial service is being held in Tallahassee at the Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church on March 24, 2001 at 1:30 p.m.

The Manuel León Ponce Memorial Scholarship Endowment has been established at Florida State University to aid worthy students in the pursuit of a degree in interior design. Laura Hoffman at 850.644.0472 can provide more information.

## A REMEMBRANCE OF MANUEL LEÓN PONCE

### BEGINNINGS

Manuel was born in the city of Artemisa, in the province of Pinar del Rio, the province next to Havana, Cuba on June 10, 1945. He was followed by his sister, Anolan, almost exactly two years later. Sr. Ponce's family grew sugar cane that was processed into sugar for sale overseas. The family also grew pineapples for export. Sra. Ponce's family grew tobacco that was turned into fine Cuban cigars.

The family stayed at the city home during the school year and during the summers, at the country home a few miles outside of Havana.

It appears that Manuel, or Manolito as he was called while his



*Manolito about age 6  
with sister Anolan in Cuba*

father lived, inherited his intellectual curiosity from his father and his style and class from his mother, Veneranda Sosa. Anolan says that her brother always had his nose in a book or, absent a book, let his mind go into the clouds. On occasion, when Sr. Ponce wanted to discipline Manolito, he would order him to sit in the corner and be quiet, minus the dunce's hat, of course. What the father did not realize was that, for Manolito, it was the greatest reward to have the opportunity to sit and think and not be bothered by anyone. He thrived on it.



*Manolito at his First Communion at age 9*



Around the age of 10 many Cuban boys are sent to boarding schools run by some element of the Catholic Church. In Manolito's case, it was a school run by the Jesuits. He usually saw his family on the weekends and in the summer. The food was lousy and the discipline strict, but the education was superior to that of other schools. It was a sad time for him and he usually tried to leave with his parents when their visits were over.

Manolito and Anolan loved the music of the islands, the bongos, castanets, the guitars, and the rhythm, rhythm, rhythm. Their parents loved to dance, whether to music of the radio or to the music of the live bands in Havana.

The late 1950s brought terrorizing acts to Havana. Families closed ranks and put restrictions on their children. As the storm clouds of revolution descended over Havana in 1959, Manolito's family more and more was concerned for the future. Sr. Ponce left Cuba for the United States in 1960 with plans to bring the family over 6 months later. Instead, and unknown to his family, he underwent military training and participated in the Bay of Pigs invasion. He, like most of his group, was captured and spent two years in prison, before the U.S. government paid Castro \$60 million in food and medicine in exchange for the return of the prisoners of war. The rest of the family left Cuba for the U.S. in 1961, ultimately settling in Miami in what became known as Little Havana.



## TRANSITION

Manolito was 15 when he came to the U.S. and he was filled with anxiety about his future. His gift with language enabled him to acclimate to English quickly. He and his sister both were enrolled in Miami Jackson High School, where Manolito tried to blend in with the Anglos, both in dress and mannerisms.

Manolito adapted well to the Anglo ways and ran for and was elected Senior Class Treasurer. He graduated in the top of his class in 1964 and set his sights on the University of Florida at Gainesville, much to the consternation of his family.

## UNIVERSITY LIFE

When Manolito left Miami in 1964 to attend the fall semester at the University of Florida, it would be the last time that he lived in Miami permanently. It was at this time that he took the Anglicized name "Manny." He decided to pledge a fraternity and was accepted as a pledge by the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity. Manny easily adapted to university life with its frat parties, football weekends, dances, dating, and a little bit of mischief-making. When family week came, Manny's parents were very proud to visit their son. The housemother of the fraternity remarked upon the elegance of his mother in her fine long dress, attractive string of pearls, coordinated handbag and shoes, and perfectly coifed hair and proper makeup.



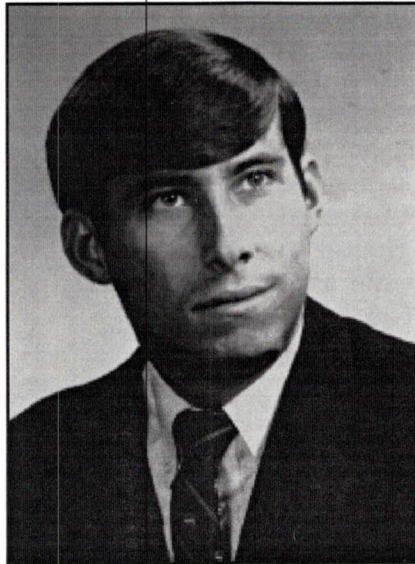
*Manny's Parents*

Holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year reunited Manolito with his family, if only briefly. Summer recesses provided longer reunions and summer jobs at Eastern Airlines and Jackson Byron's Department Store.

In his senior year he ran for and was elected to the Honor Court. Manny graduated from the University of Florida in 1969, having earned a BA with a major in history and a minor in architecture (95 quarter hours in architecture). He again returned home to Miami for summer employment and a chance to earn some extra pocket money.

### **MORE EDUCATION AND FIRST REAL JOB**

Manny was not yet ready to direct his energy towards a career and turned his sites to the master's program in Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University in Tallahassee. During the 1970 summer he interned with the Planning Department of Miami-Dade. He earned his MA in June 1971.

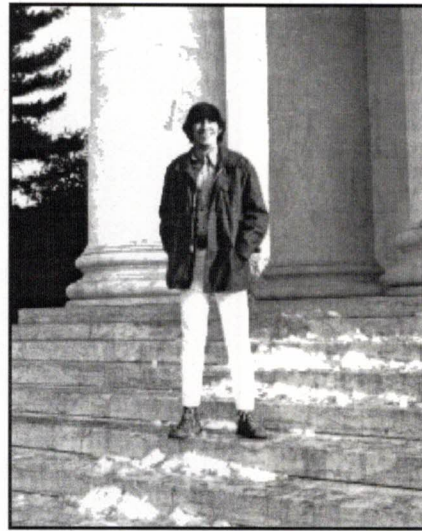


*Manny's graduation photograph - 1969*

Prior to the end of graduate school, he selected several potential employers in various cities such as Atlanta, Boston, and Washington, D.C. to which he sent his resume. Upon receiving his MA, he made a trip to all the places that had responded to his resume by giving him an interview appointment. He accepted an offer of employment as an Urban Designer by the National Capital Planning Commission. While in Washington, he got his first taste of teaching by lecturing in the evenings for a semester at Trinity College on the subject Urban Design.

But the challenges of the urban designer position in Washington were not enough to hold his interest, and he returned to Tallahassee, Florida a year later where a friend had arranged for him to go to work as a Community Development Specialist with the Florida Department of Community Affairs. The two benefits of this position were that he became a specialist in historic preservation and he developed contacts in the local governments of Florida.

Manny stayed at this job for 10 years, a job that did not challenge him and offered him no future. His intellectual energy was directed toward his personal and social life. He also began to dream about a career change to his first love—the arts. The purchase of books became a major activity for him. Books on interior design, architecture, furniture, and the royalty of Europe, especially France and the Louis's, became serious business for him. It is noteworthy that he devoured these books.



*Manny on steps of Lincoln Memorial, Washington - 1971*



## **CAREER CHANGE**

Eventually, Manny gained the courage to resign his state position and make his way to Brooklyn, New York and Pratt Institute of Design. His portfolio for admission to Pratt was the schematic drawings of a hexagonal gazebo that had actually been constructed in the backyard of his Tallahassee home on Lee Avenue. The chairman was impressed with Manny's knowledge of interior design concepts and with the fact that his gazebo design had been turned into reality.

Typical of the way he approached any endeavor he considered worthy, his preparation for moving to Brooklyn was methodical. His goal was to transform a Brooklyn loft into a designer's showcase. The right furniture was selected, the right desk was constructed by a friend, the right lamps and lights were acquired, and a wall cover consisting of a Bally shoes' poster advertisement, billboard size, acquired in Paris in 1976, was made ready to be attached to the bare brick wall on one side of his loft. Numerous prints were also assembled. A friend from University of Florida days helped drive a truck to N.Y. filled with all of Manny's possessions, and then helped him set up his studio.

However, a semester in Brooklyn was enough, along with a mugging he received by a pack of kids only a few steps away from his apartment. He returned to Tallahassee in January 1983 and enrolled in the Masters of Interior Design program at Florida State University. He also started work with the Florida Secretary of State's office as a Statewide Coordinator for Historic Preservation Projects. He attended interior design classes during lunch and during leave breaks in the afternoon and also in the evening. He earned his MA in Interior Design in 1984.

## **FIRST REAL TEACHING**

In 1985 Manny was asked by the chairperson of the Interior Design Department of Florida State University if he was interested in teaching a class on Historic Preservation as a tem-



porary instructor. Although interested, he at first declined the offer because the course would have been offered when he was at his job as the Preservation Coordinator. Later, he was again approached, but to teach the course in the evenings, and he accepted without hesitation. He taught as an adjunct instructor for four years until he received an appointment as Assistant Professor in 1989.

In October 1990, he was asked to participate in a Showcase House project to raise money for the American Cancer Society. A number of designers were each assigned a room in a house that was volunteered for the project. The challenge for the designer was to redesign the room in a way that would attract the public's attention and interest sufficient for admission tickets to be sold. Manny did a number on the guest suite, to the extent that it was the talk of the town and attracted many additional attendees. This was his first design project for the public and it was given major play in a Sunday magazine story in the Tallahassee Democrat. He convinced a lot of people that he was a serious interior designer.

The appointment as a professor of interior design rejuvenated his career interests. The students loved him and he loved teaching. He won a university-wide Excellence in Teaching Award in 1991. Manny was consistently given the highest ratings by his students.

His specialized knowledge of historic preservation caused him to be hired by the City of Fort Myers to prepare a research report and restoration plan for the historic interiors of the Burroughs Home Museum. Two years later the final product was unanimously accepted by the Fort Myers City Council in February 1992. His plan and recommendations are still being incrementally implemented virtually without change.

In the summers of 1990 and 1991 he was a guest lecturer at the Preservation Institute: Nantucket. He lectured on Historic Details and Ornamentation and Greek Revival Interior Detailing.



*Showcase house guest suite he decorated - 1990*

## **MANNY BECOMES MANUEL**

It was about this time that “Manny” finally learned to be comfortable with his Cuban culture and became Manuel. Since his earlier years, when he first arrived from Cuba, he had wanted to be American (that is, North American) with blond hair and blue eyes. He thought the Anglo look was more desirable and that a member of that group was smarter and superior overall than other groups, particularly Cubans. These feelings persisted and made him less bold than he would have otherwise been. But when he finally crossed over that barrier, his Latin character exploded and his pent-up reserves of energy were released into creative torrents that began an uninterrupted series of accomplishments. Now it was okay to speak Spanish, play and dance to Latin music, cook *picadillo*, *arroz con pollo*, and *lechón asado*, drink *mojitos*, and invite the Latin population of Tallahassee over to your house. The discovery that being Cuban isn’t so bad was helped along by positive reinforcement from close friends, plus Manuel’s own maturity.

## CONTINUING EDUCATION

It was in the early 1990s that he teamed up with the Center for Professional Development connected with Florida State University to offer continuing education courses for Florida licensed interior designers. After a brief period of collaboration, Manuel decided to form his own business and became an approved provider of continuing education courses. This was in addition to his professorship. In 1992 he started his business, Design Arts Seminars, and began teaching courses such as *Recreating the Historic American Interiors*, *American Architecture* and *American Furniture* in numerous Florida cities.

As he gained renown, his courses attracted standing-room-only crowds of, not only interior designers, but also their non-designer spouses and friends. Architects also began to attend. He began receiving requests for speaking engagements at arts councils, museums, and historical societies throughout Florida.

Sometime in 1992, several of Manuel's admirers in the interior design field in Naples, Florida thought he should meet Stanley Barrows, professor emeritus of Parsons School of Design, New York and retired from the Fashion Institute of Technology, also of New York. Professor Barrows had taught such designers as Mario Buatta, Thomas Britt, Ronald Bricke, Albert Hadley and Angelo Donghia at Parsons. One of the Naples designers had studied with Professor Barrows and the others knew him from his frequent sojourns to Naples to escape the harsh New York winters. These Naples designers had taken courses taught by Manuel and were struck by how much he reminded them of a young Stanley Barrows in expressions, teaching style, passion, knowledge, and in many other ways.

A plot was hatched to introduce the two professors and Manuel flew to New York as his part of the arrangement. It was an instant match—the two fast became very close friends and co-conspirators in an elite group of two. Manuel made frequent trips to New York where the professors poured over Stanley's book collection, walked the sidewalks in search of bargain art



books, drank champagne and dined at leisure at some of Stanley's favorite restaurants. Stanley told one of his New York friends that "Manny has it"—meaning that special collection of attributes that makes one a star. Stanley was a star and it took one to confirm another.

In the spring of 1993, Stanley Barrows was a guest lecturer at one of Manuel's seminars in Naples. Afterwards, they plotted all sorts of excursions; to St. Petersburg, Russia, to Italy, and so on. Alas, life was too good; Stanley Barrows, who was about 80, and suffering from emphysema, died in Naples in January 1995, three days after Manuel had gone there to meet him at the airport, and had to check him into the hospital, rather than take him to his apartment. Manuel had lost a kindred spirit; someone who thought as he did about art, architecture and interior design.

In 1994 a competition was conducted to select the very best teachers at Florida State University. Manuel entered that competition and was one of only a small number throughout the university to be honored with the Teaching Incentive Award,



*Manuel & Stanley Barrows at Barrow's NYC Apartment - 1994*

which consisted of a permanent salary increase. It was at this time that he was also granted tenure and promoted to associate professor.

## PARIS STUDY TOUR

As early as 1990, Manuel dreamed of conducting a study tour for interior designers and architects using Paris as the classroom—a “classroom without walls” as he called it. He began an intensive reading and learning period, making several trips to Paris over the next several years and taking thousands of photographs to aid in the development of his course. By late 1994 he was ready to market his “Understanding French Design” course to Florida interior designers to take place in the summer of 1995. He had been talking about the Paris study tour in all of the courses he taught in Florida during the two previous years. The Paris program was the feature in the winter 1994 issue of *Haut Décor* magazine, with Manuel’s photograph taking up the entire front cover.

Originally Manuel offered the program for eleven weeklong sessions, beginning in May 1995. Three more weeks of courses had to be added to meet the overwhelming demand. It was a sell-out hit. About 360 persons attended during this first summer the course was offered.

One of the highlights of the Paris study tour was a welcoming party given by Manuel at his apartment on the Ile St. Louis, number 5 quai d’Anjou, which looks out on the river Seine. He had acquired this apartment for the purpose of entertaining the interior designers who took his courses, as well as to have a place to call home during the summer months. The apartment was constructed about 1640 and has the original Versailles parquet floors. The stone walls are 17 inches thick and provide for insulation against the heat or the cold. He embarked on a redesign of this apartment which was published in the March/April 1998 issue of *Southern Accents* magazine. The Paris study tour was offered again for 10 weeks in 1996. It was accredited for architects also during this second year.



Manuel's fiftieth birthday occurred on a Saturday during the first summer the Paris study tour was offered. And, of course, this occasion required special planning. He invited American and French friends to join him in Paris on Friday, June 9, 1995 for a dinner at his apartment. Seventeen friends were there and partied and drank champagne until late. The next morning, his birthday, guests loaded up several minivans and departed to the Loire Valley for a weekend in *la vallée des rois*, featuring cocktails and dinner in a sixteenth century manor house, located on the grounds of the *Château d'Azay-le-Rideau*. Only Manuel's guests and the manor house staff occupied the manor house. His birthday group spent the night in the manor house. This special weekend included other treats too numerous to list. It was definitely done in the Manuel Ponce style.



*Manuel in typical lecture pose, eyes closed and one or both hands raised to make a point - Paris 1996*

## CLASSICAL DESIGN IN ITALY

Manuel was always thinking about the next round of seminars, and Northern Italy and the Palladio countryside were first on his list. While the Paris seminars were going on, he was already studying about and working out the details for the Italian experience. Upon returning to his teaching position at the end of the summer, he enrolled in an Italian language course to audit it before he had to teach his interior design courses in the morning. Manuel had hoped to have the Italian course ready for the 1997 summer, but the uncertainty of hotel accommodations for the groups forced him to postpone the program until the following summer.

"Classical Design in Italy", a study course that began in Venice, moved through the Veneto (countryside) for an examination of five Palladio villas, and concluded in Florence, after a stop in Asolo at the beautiful hotel Villa Cipriani, debuted in May 1998 and continued for 14 weeklong sessions. It was another hit, judging by the comments and evaluations of the participants. Four hundred sixty four licensed architects and interior designers attended over the summer. *Florida Design* magazine published an article on Manuel and his Italy study tour in the winter issue of 1998.

## HEALTH PROBLEMS

It was during the fall of 1998 that he had the first symptoms of weakness in his left leg and arm. A CT scan revealed a spot on the right side of his brain, but a biopsy was inconclusive. The spot resolved itself over the next three months with the only treatment having been the steroids given prior to and after the biopsy. Although some specialists thought the episode might be lymphoma, most thought it was a rare form of multiple sclerosis and Manuel would probably not be bothered by it again.

Not one to be idle for long, Manuel was guest speaker in March 1999 at the Design Fest/Neo Com South Annual Exposition and Conferences in Dania. The topic: Parisian Apartment Interiors. Spring break came several weeks later at Florida State

University and he flew off to Spain to do more work on his España study tour. While checking out the nightlife in Madrid, he slipped and fractured his right ankle and returned the next day to Tallahassee to have the fracture set.

## ESPAÑA

In the summer of 1999 Manuel repeated the Italy study tour and also offered several weeks of the Paris program. Some participants attended both courses that summer. It was at the beginning of 1999 that he announced his plans for a study tour in España in 2000, a program he had been working on feverishly for two years. Details were mostly complete and more than 100 architects and interior designers wrote in to reserve spaces, although the marketing materials had not been mailed.

Sadly, the España course will never happen because illness struck Manuel down in the prime of his life and he passed out of this world on January 9, 2001. He had reached the age of 55. His body was fighting an invader even as he led his students in Italy and Paris in the summer of 1999—he just did not know it, or he pushed on in spite of it, not wanting to give less than what had become expected of him.



*Manuel lecturing at Palladio's Villa Rotundo,  
Northern Italy - 1998*





*Manuel overlooking Toledo, Spain, August 1999, preparing for his España Study Tour for the Summer of 2000.*

### **Accolades**

Manuel Ponce's lectures, especially the ones in Paris and Italy, often inspired his listeners to write devoted prose about his charm and his brilliance, his passion and eloquence. Some wrote poems of their experiences and a few groups rewrote familiar songs with their own lyrics describing their week's experiences following Manuel around the alleys and villas of Italy or the boulevards and museums of Paris. What follows is a sampling of what his fans, friends, and students thought of him:

A poem about the experiences of the Northern Italy study tour, July 1999, by a nondesigner:

## MANNY

*Ah, Manny, the stories you tell:  
how, at eighteen, you hopped from a bus in Rome  
into the drizzle of a late afternoon, wandered into the Pantheon, empty  
except for a choir rehearsing Gregorian chants,  
and wept at the sound and sight: how light and rain  
swept through the hole in the great dome: how  
a rainbow arched in the shaft of mist: how you fell to your knees in  
wonder, embraced forever  
the glory of space defined by Intelligent Man.*

*Last year, told you were dying, you prayed  
to your saint at Santa Maria dei Miracola,  
then didn't die...a horrible misdiagnosis. Now  
you walk like Lazarus through the narrow alleys  
of Venice, talking in your eloquent Spanish patois  
of the classical moment, the intricacies of entablature,  
how artifice is used to get at the truth of things.*

*On the road to Aslo, stuck in traffic, your mind races  
ahead through olive groves and yellow fields  
of sunflowers. "Might as well curse the rain," you say  
of the broken itinerary, "then you are the fool."  
How laid-back and elegant you look nursing a martini  
in the loggia before dinner, all the bright colors  
of your Cuba before you in the garden. How wistful  
you seem as you gaze toward the mountain.*

*In Florence, you slouch in perfect contrapposto pose  
before Cimabue's ruined crucifix, eyes closed, shoulders  
slightly rounded: life imitating art. Your graceful fingers  
describe the truth of the dome, convergence of rising things,  
perfections of geometry, the complete man who fits inside  
both circle and square. "Un paseo en coche," you say,  
"life is a ride in an open carriage." Thanks, Manny,  
for letting me ride beside you this short time.*

*Jim Britt, Knoxville, TN*



"Manny was not only a good friend, a leader in the design field, but to me, an expression of what Interior Design is all about—passion, intellectual expression and professional capability."

*C.F., Winter Park, FL*

"One of our brightest lights in the design world went out with the death of Manuel León Ponce."

*J. F. as quoted by J. M., Fern Park, FL*

"A week does not go by without my thoughts and fond memories of you, of Paris and Italy. You have contributed so much to my view of Interior Design, beauty and charisma. You have inspired so many of us. You have contributed so much to our lives."

*D. M., Boca Raton, FL*

"We miss the joy of being in your dynamic presence."

*J. F., Chevy Chase, MD*

"I think of you so often—it is hard not to—you have such a wonderful Zest for life and all the people you touch in your path cannot think of anything but the very best and warmest person that you TRULY ARE."

*J. P., Coconut Grove, FL*

"No one can ever take your place as a teacher with such enthusiasm (contagious!), spirit and depth of knowledge—you make the artistry, buildings, history come alive!"

*J. M., Ft. Lauderdale, FL*

"I will always treasure the time and experiences I had with Manny. He opened up my eyes to a greater appreciation of the arts. He gave me the confidence to go where I have never been—not just in travel—but in interacting with the different cultures, in looking at a piece of art, a basilica, a fabulous palace."

*M. M., Tallahassee, FL*

"All I want you to know is that I never had so rich a cultural and educational experience as that served up by you in Italy and France last summer."

*J. O., Los Angeles, CA*

"You are truly one of a kind and have touched so many lives. It has always been my pleasure to know you and travel with you. You are truly a talented, educated, poised, professional, handsome beyond words, and a wonderful gentleman with a huge heart."

*S. L. S., Tampa, FL*

"I have often told him [my husband] if there was a photo by the definition of the word *teacher* in the dictionary, it would be yours—you are such an inspiration to so many."

K. C., Santa Rosa, CA

"I never met another human being who had as much *joie de vivre* as Manny. He taught me so much not only about architecture but also about life. I feel privileged to have known him."

C. M. G., Pt. Washington, NY

"I would really like to give back to someone that has made my life so much richer. Our wonderful times in France and Italy are among my highlights in life. I have you to thank for those memories."

S. E., Winter Park, FL

"I want to thank you for all you have done for the interior design profession in Florida. I know setting up the Design Arts Seminars took a lot of effort. The seminars have meant so much to all of us. Their content is always excellent. Without your effort, continuing education for our profession would be reduced to technical trivia."

K. G., Naples, FL

"Thank you for an absolutely great week. Your love of beauty in all its forms and your enthusiasm in transmitting it to others leaves an everlasting impression."

H. M. L., Paris, May 1995

"You are a National Treasure! I will be ever grateful for seeing Paris through your eyes."

S. F., Paris, May 1995

"The man has brought *salsa* to Paris."

M. & D. R., Paris, June 1995

"The beauty of Paris is overshadowed by your wonderful presentation!"

J. C., Paris, July 1995

"Your enthusiasm, passion, and wonderful hospitality has caught me by surprise—my friends at [work] said you were terrific, but honestly, Manny, I am ready to escape from the professional world and return to college. You are an inspiration to continue learning for a lifetime."

A. H., Paris, May 1996

"Thank goodness you are there, here, for those of us who are starved for intelligence, insight, profound appreciation of the fine things in others, and are so enriched by sharing these loves with one as gifted as you in articulation and sincere poetic intuition."

V. C., Paris, June 1996

"You are magic! We could never have sensed the pulse of Paris without you. We are fortunate."

J. & J. H., Paris, June 1996

"I feel truly blessed to have had the opportunity to know you and, more importantly, to have learned from you. You are one of the greatest designers and the greatest teachers I have ever known. Your passion for design and your *joie de vivre* is infectious."

R. B., Paris, July 1999

"It is not often through our journey of life we have the opportunity to meet a person so special, filled with joy and passion who is driven to share his knowledge and heart with others. What a wonderful experience to have met you (that special one) to illuminate Italy for us."

B. P., Italy, July 1999

"You have such a gift for bringing history alive for us to feel the moment of inspiration the Masters had when they created the spectacular pieces we are so lucky to see. Thank you for your research and passionate twist to a marvelous Renaissance Period."

C. S., Italy, July 1999

"We loved everything! You are too FABULOUS! I learned so much! Thank you for your enthusiasm, your caring and your teaching. You truly are *Il Magnifico!*"

L. T., Italy, July 1999

"I wish you many magical moments. How wonderful to be as passionate as you are about your talent."

J. W., Italy, June 1999

"I wanted to write to you not only to let you know that you are thought of, but also to tell you that you have been by far the best professor I've ever had and that your passion and love for good design impacted me in a very big way. Up to this day I've yet to find another professor that shows the same qualities that you possess."

K. C., April 2000



"I met Manny when we were 18 years old and freshmen at U of F. I knew from the first day I met him that he was a unique person. After 36 years of friendship, I feel the profound influence he has on my life every day. We were fraternity brothers when my brother died and I realized later, that he became 'my brother' that same day. He was always encouraging me to try new goals. He had a phrase that he constantly drilled into me when I was hesitant—'Just bite an onion and do it!' The tears in my eyes are not from that onion, but from the loss of 'my brother' ".

William T. Clements,  
longtime friend from U of F days, now Washington



A special remembrance by Manuel's beloved sister, Anolan:

## MI HERMANO

Manuel Ponce Sosa Martinez Saez. That was his given name. He was my brother, and he was the better looking and the more intelligent of the two of us.

Not that I was bad! But at conception, he managed to steal all the good looks and traits of the family: the Ponce-Martinez' rich, thick black hair, the emerald-green eyes, my father's intellectual curiosity and mental capacity; the ambition and drive of the Sosa-Saez' and especially my mother's beautiful white-magnolia skin and sense of style. It seemed, also, that the left and right sides of his brain had battled to overcome one another—and neither won; and thus perfectly balanced, he would excel in both the arts and the sciences!

These blessings were evident early on. With the help of a first-grade "lecture" book, he taught himself how to read when he was only 5 years old; then he taught me the 36 stanzas of Jose Marti's famous poem, *The Little Rose Shoes*, when I was only 4 years old!

And as time went by and the neighborhood kids were playing marbles, he was reading *Ben-Hur* and *Ivanhoe*, delighting me with passages that would stir my interest, and I would end up reading the books too. A true romanticist he was, and when I turned 18, he gave me Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. He looked at me and said, "My sister, you and I are Madame Bovary." He knew well!

It was about the time that he took world history that he first felt his call. He would talk about the Medieval Times, the Crusades, the French Revolution...and I, his audience, would be mesmerized by his rhetoric! Then he became fascinated with the Renaissance period, his favorite of them all; and we would dream of one day traveling to far away lands to visit these places and see these sculptures and paintings.

It was in 1965 when the World's Fair was held in New York, and the Italian pavilion had brought from the Vatican Michelangelo's *Pietà*. We traveled to New York with our parents just for this! And in what would be his first "official" presentation of a masterpiece, he discussed with us Michelangelo's magnificent sculpture, calling our attention to the virgin's beautiful, merciful hands, and her oversized torso dwarfing the body of Christ..."as if," he said, "the artist wanted to show all the love of the mother for the son..."

There was never any sibling rivalry between us, our roles were very well defined—Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. He was the celebrity, the mentor. I was the disciple, his most loyal fan. And so it stayed for the rest of our lives.

He left home at 18 to go to college. Our lives took different paths...but nothing changed! Until the day he left this world, he never addressed me by my first name but would call me "My Sister," and I, in turn, would call him "My Brother." And in those words we knew that no matter what, no matter the distance, no matter how much time might pass—we knew we had each other!

My brother went on to find success in the same manner he learned to read, by himself. Alone with his intelligence and drive as his only tools, he became Professor Ponce; and the cobblestone streets of Paris and the palazzos and piazzas of Florence and Venice became his classrooms, and his voice could be heard in the halls of the Palace of Versailles!

But in that hidden part of his being where humility dwells, the little boy still lived. He felt guilty of his success, he would tell me, because he enjoyed so much what he was doing—it came so effortlessly to him. To lecture in front of the portrait of Louis XIV and of Marie Antoinette and in front of Michelangelo's statue of *David* was more than he ever dreamed.

The professor par excellence gave us all a final lesson before he left us...a lesson on how to die with dignity and courage. He was all



class until the end. The illness was physically crippling him, but his personality, that "Manny" that everyone loved, was still intact. And he would walk elegantly with the help of his antique cane, wearing his starched white linen guayabera with his Panama hat tilted to one side and that debonair and mischievous look of the one that awaits the end because he has had it all!

And as the end got close, the terrible illness mercilessly took away all the "gifts" that he had been bestowed at conception.

How painful to watch him paralyzed in bed and know that he would never again be able to walk the cobblestone streets of Paris, and the palazzos and piazzas of Florence and Venice! What sorrow to witness the silencing of that strong voice, the voice that had filled the halls of the Palace of Versailles.

His last dwelling in this world was the Italian villa he designed for me, a monument to his great taste and class. In the days when he was feeling better, with pink champagne and caviar served, he liked to sit in what he had christened "The Beautiful Room," and contemplating the ornate coffered ceiling he had designed, he would rejoice in the beauty around him.

Then the end came, peacefully, surrounded by those who had loved him so much. The soft smell of two gardenias, my mother's favorite flower, permeated the room, and I knew that she was there to help her son go with her to Heaven.

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They came to take his body. They asked me if I wanted to remove the blue silk pajamas he was wearing. I said no. They placed him on a stretcher and covered him with a delicate white sheet.

And then, slowly, they wheeled him out: across "The Beautiful Room" under the ornate coffered ceiling and sparkling Venetian-glass chandeliers that had been his idea, through the foyer and past the antique Adam-style console and Antoine de la Gandara painting that we had bought together; then out on the porch. Very carefully, they prepared to go down the steps that lie on each side of the fountain, the fountain that he designed for the entrance of the house. One, Two, Three! They are now on the cobblestone driveway in front of the fountain with its mosaic-inscribed letters that read, "Villa Anolan." But, should it not be, "Villa Manuel?"

It is January 9, 2001. It is dark now, it is 2 a.m. The funeral car is also dark. The attendants are dressed in black. Only one thing is white

and pure, and it is being wheeled away. "So long my Dear Brother",  
"Adios Mi Hermano!"

And Sancho Panza cries because Don Quixote has gone away!



*Anolan with her "Hermano", on the balcony  
of his Paris apartment, 1999.*

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## EPILOGUE



*Eric & Tito roasting a pig for  
Nochebuena 1997 (Christmas Eve)*

It was the tradition of the Ponce family for the first male of every other generation to be given the middle name León. Since Manuel's father was named León, Manuel did not receive the middle name at baptism. But he wanted to honor his father, and in 1979 he legally changed his name to add the León, except that he included a hyphen between Manuel and León, which he later dropped.

In telling this brief story of Manuel's life, a lot of significant things and people in his life have not been mentioned. His niece and nephew, Melissa and Eric Padron, who from the beginning called their uncle

"Tito," are two that must be mentioned. He loved this term of endearment, as he loved Melissa and Eric. His love for them had no bounds and he was always interested in their lives and would encourage their endeavors, but ask lots of questions and give them gentle advice. He remembered their birthdays and other special occasions, such as graduations. One sensed that they would do anything for Tito who would do anything for them.

Ardent fans of their uncle, they idolized him and loved him. During the legislative session in Tallahassee two years ago, Eric, on temporary assignment, spent many "enlightening" evenings with his uncle. His favorite greeting for Manuel was always, "And how is my artistocrat uncle doing?" he spent a week in Paris at Manuel's apartment while Manuel was in Italy: and on arrival there was so impressed, he called his mother to say "Mom, Tito has realized his dream!"

Melissa, though not in the design field, attended the 1998 Italy study tour. She would call her mother excitedly every night to tell her what they had done during the day, and would end each call with "Mom, Tito is the greatest!"

Here is an excerpt from a recent card Melissa sent to Tito on Father's Day:

"I didn't want this special day to go by without wishing you a happy Father's Day....I love you so much mi Tito. You are my big role model in the family because you had the guts to break out from the norm and follow your own path. You are elegant, intelligent, successful, and extremely kind-these are the very things I want to emulate.... I've always felt you very close to me and I promise one day to make you as proud of me as I am of you."

Melissa Padron, June 2000



*Melissa and her Tito  
in Florence, 1998*



Longtime friend Lewis Dennard  
prepared this remembrance of  
Manuel León Ponce, March 2001.