

Manny Gonzalez-Brito



UFRAA is pleased to present this alumni spotlight on Manny Gonzalez-Brito. His rugby career at the University of Florida (UF) is stellar, and his positive impact on his family, friends and community are amazing.

Manny played football in high school and was itching to continue a contact sport. Upon arriving at UF, a friend had mentioned to Manny that "he heard you can tackle in rugby, and that UF had a team". The next day Manny called the team President and asked, "Is it true I can tackle playing rugby?" To Manny's joy, the answer was yes! The next day Manny was at practice at the ripe old age of 17. Two days later and clueless, he was thrown into a B-side game as a wing, scoring his first try. A Zulu warrior was born and he was immediately hooked! Manny made an immediate impact on the team as a rookie due to his contagious and intense style of play. Initially placed on A side as a 2nd row, Manny learned the fundamentals of set play before transitioning to wing forward where he would be teamed up with his fellow "Hanson Brothers" (from the movie Slapshot), Howard Ehsam and Aaron Fields.

Manny played for the University of Florida Rugby Football Club (UFRFC) from 1989-93, and made the Florida Select Side team and the Eastern All-stars as a wing forward. Upon graduation, Manny declined an invitation to compete for a spot on the All-American/Junior Eagles team in lieu of attending medical school. Manny served as team president from 1992-1993 under the mentorship of Romulus Alderman and Scott Jones (from the inaugural "men's" Gator Club side).

It was during Manny's time as president that college IDs were required for college play which resulted in the formation of the "men's" Gator Club side. Thus, Manny had the privilege of serving as president for both clubs. This also provided legendary players such as Bill Merlino, Tom Pigoski, Mike "Van Damme" Powers, Tom "Sully" Sullivan, and Bret Perry the opportunity to mentor, practice with, and even play against the collegiate side (as highlighted by the infamous "kill Manny" match)!

Manny was instrumental in the defeat of the top rival at the time, UCF, for the 1991 state championship. Lead by coach Mercer Russell, the state championship was a true physical battle! Go Gators! A tribute to our legendary faculty advisor Mel Fried!

Manny is sometimes referred to by his nickname, "G-Train", bestowed upon him by teammate and lifelong friend Andy Favata for his aggressive running style. He is proud to call former teammates and UF Professors Don Berringer, Matt Ryan, Ralph Ellis, and Todd LaFrenz mentors, esteemed colleagues, and friends.

While Manny was president in 1992, in a foreshadowing of his future career, he used his connections with the Shands (now UF Health Shands Hospital) Cuddler program, and coordinated a fundraiser for the Children's Miracle Network. The Cuddler Program is where volunteers comfort the newborns in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) of Shands Hospital.

Manny and two other UFRFC officers, Howard Ehsam and Aaron Fields, organized a "roof-a-thon" and vowed to stay on the roof of Joe's Deli until \$3,000 was raised (see the 1992 Alligator article on page 4). Manny used his connection through his now wife, Cristy, who had a sorority sister, Lisa, who was an NPR radio news reporter. After Howard and Aaron were on the roof for 9 days, the goal was met! As fate would have it, Howard and Lisa, having first met during the NPR interview, ended up getting married with Manny and Cristy in the bridal party! Manny's impact was life altering for many!



Manny and his wife Cristy (center) with longtime friends Howard and Lisa Ehsam



Manny joined teammates at the 2018 Rugby World Cup Sevens in San Francisco, California

Manny has this to say about his experience with UF Rugby and the University of Florida Alumni Association: "Being a part of the UFRAA is truly a brotherhood forged from intense training, ferocious competition, a love of life, and an undying loyalty to every last man! Nowhere else can the warrior, scholar, and brother co-exist with such grace. I am so proud to be a part of the few to be privileged enough to experience such love of sport and each other well beyond our physical and mental limits. A passion and sense of family that was displayed in the midst of battle as well as in the celebration of each other in between. This spirit runs in all of us, between us, and from us. Every gathering, party, and match, a testimony to our brotherhood".

Manny attended the University of Florida from 1989 to 1993, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology with a Pre-Medicine focus. Manny attended Nova Southeastern University College of Osteopathic Medicine from 1993 to 1997, and completed a Pediatric Residency at Palmetto General Hospital and Jackson Memorial Hospital in 2001. He also completed a Fellowship in Pediatric Critical Care Medicine at Jackson Memorial Hospital in 2005.

Manny is a member of the American Board of Pediatrics with a certification in Pediatric Critical Care.

Some high points of Manny's business career:

Chief Medical Officer, Miami Based Data Company LifeWallet

Pediatric Critical Care Medicine Physician, St Mary's Hospital

Former Director of the Pediatric Concussion Center at St. Mary's Hospital

Former Director of the Palmetto General Hospital Graduate Medical Education Residency and Fellowship Programs

Former Assistant Professor and Researcher at the University of Miami, Department of Pediatrics, Division of Pediatric Critical Care Medicine

Former Pediatric Scientist at the University of Miami/Batchelor Childrens Research Institute/Miami Project to Cure Paralysis

Manny has been happily married to his high school sweetheart, the amazing, super cool, and beautiful Cristy for 27 years. They have twin boys, Max and Alex, who defected to FSU, and our now attending law school. They are also incredibly proud of their daughter Nina, who is currently a Gator studying computer science. Manny is also proud to have had his younger brother Mike ("Chachi") follow in his footsteps as a flanker for the Gators from 1994-1998. In 1997, Chachi's team won the Southern Championship, advancing to the Elite 8, and ranking the Gators number 6 in the nation.

Twice while Manny's father was president of the Kiwanis club, Manny used his connections to get the UF team a coveted beer vending station at Calle Ocho, a hugely popular spring festival in Miami similar in size to Mardi Gras. It was a great fundraiser for the team and quite the party as some of the profits were consumed by the "vendors".

Manny has made several trips to rugby matches with his teammates from the early 90's including World Cup 7's in San Francisco, All Blacks vs Eagles for The Rugby Weekend in Chicago. Manny also supports the current UF club by attending National Collegiate 7's Championships in Philly in 2012 and Atlanta in 2022.

Fitness life after UFRFC

Aside from playing as an Old Boy and in tournaments, Manny was a CrossFit competitor from 2013-2021. A life-long lover of fitness, Manny continues Cross Fit training out of his garage where his boys are usually joining him.



Manny during the 50th Anniversary alumni

We are actually quite fortunate that Manny is still with us. He survived a major car accident from a high-speed collision in Miami on May 19, 2021. He had burns to his face and arms as well as multiple broken bones which included all 4 extremities. Miraculously, vitals were always solid with no skull, neck or back injury! Initially, the thought was he would be found "dead on scene" until fire rescue arrived only to find Manny awake and talking coherently, "freaking out" the EMT.



His surgeon was able to correct all that was broken all at once due to his strength and stability (a shoutout to Cristy, my kids, family friends, Cross fit, and my UFRC brothers!)



Mimmo Giambanco, Sebastian Tettamanti, Howard Ehrsam, Aaron Fields, Andy Favata, and Manny during his recovery.

Rehab highlights include: Teammates visited multiple times, a long, steady and powerful rehab. From bed to wheelchair to walker to cane to fully mobile in the span of less than 6 months.

Miraculously, he has completely recovered in less than two years! He has been fully back to work and training for the past 18 months!

Manny says: "Truly blessed and incredibly grateful for the love, support, and the time my former teammates took to visit me, feed me, inspire me, and help heal me! A debt and incredible gift that has no price! Thank you, my brothers!"

UFRAA is proud to claim Manny Gonzalez-Brito as one of our own!

Submitted by:
Tim McCarthy
Howard Ehrsam, Contributor
Ashley Smith, Contributor

Up on the rooftop ruggers still camp

By **JENNIFER ZOKOVITCH**

Contributing Writer

After 166 hours, two UF Rugby Club members Thursday night still needed \$700 to meet their goal of \$3,000 in their rooftop fund raiser, "Ruggers on the Roof."

Team captain Howard Ehrsam and Vice President Aaron Fields have been camping on the roof of Joe's Deli, 1802 W. University Ave., since last Thursday at 8 p.m.

They pledged not to come down until they raise \$3,000 for the Children's Miracle Network at Shands Hospital.

"We had hoped to be down to raising the last \$500 at this point," Ehrsam said.

"We are really surprised more service clubs have not donated money," Fields said.

Brenda Morgan, Shands special events coordinator for CMN, said she is pleased with the money raised.

"Whether they raise \$200 or \$3,000, it is money that is going to help the children," she said.

Fields and Ehrsam said staying on a roof for a week is hard.

"The days run into each other

up here," Fields said. "We have a lot of time to think about nothing."

But they said they haven't suffered from the lack of plumbing. They say they've figured out a way to use the bathroom that is "sanitary" but declined to elaborate.

Fields said they've seen "a lot of interesting and weird things" and learned Gainesville's traffic and night life patterns for every night of the week.

But fund raising is not all fun and education for the campers.

"This is not a joke to us," Ehrsam said. "We might joke about it, but hell, we have been living up here for a week now, and that is serious."

Fields said two children who have been helped by CMN visited them.

"One girl stopped to say thank you," he said, "because her brother has leukemia in Shands Hospital, and CMN helped him out."

"Hearing things like that is a real morale booster to us, and it keeps us going," Ehrsam said.

All donations go directly to CMN at Shands.