



Richard Gonzmart '71: A Passion for Living and Giving

“Here’s to life: Live life with passion, compassion, empathy, honesty, integrity, respect, hope, faith, love and peace.”

Coming from a lifelong restaurateur and wine connoisseur, these words sound like a toast over a glass of fine wine. But to Richard Gonzmart '71 of Tampa's legendary Columbia Restaurant, these are words embossed in the forefront of his mind. He doesn't just use them as a catchy quote to sign off his email messages. They are a pledge he lives by.



From running marathons to running with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain, Gonzmart indeed lives his life with robust enthusiasm and verve. Juggling multiple business projects and charitable endeavors as he plans his next travel escapade abroad, Gonzmart is a whirlwind of boundless energy living life to its fullest.

Gonzmart seemingly has it all: a rich family life, thriving businesses, the ability to travel and experience the best the world has to offer. In addition to running the Columbia Restaurant Group, he has created a signature line of cigars, bottles his own brand of wines from Spain, and is presently working with a producer to formulate his own labels of rum, bourbon and scotch. As a hobby and personal passion, he breeds and shows 26 award-winning German Shepherds, which compete both in the U.S. and internationally. He is exuberant when he talks about his dogs, two of which are constant companions at home and in the office.

Gonzmart does everything in a big way. He also has a big heart. Just as he demonstrates an amazing zeal for his career and personal life, he also has an incredible passion for helping others who are less fortunate. He sits on the board of several non-profit organizations and maintains an exhausting schedule sponsoring myriad charity fundraisers that benefit hospitals, children's organizations, cancer research and educational institutions.

"As we get older, we realize the importance of life, and how fleeting it is," said Gonzmart. "I don't want to be on my last breath wishing I'd done something I'd always wanted to do, or helped someone I should've helped but didn't."

"My parents taught me the need to help others. I remember as a first grader, my mother gave me \$20 to pay a bill due at school. While I was in class, I remember Sr. Mary John talking about the poor children in Central America and how we need to raise money to help them. So I gave her that \$20. A month or so later, the school called my mother to say her payment was late, and she was so angry with me saying, 'What did you do with that \$20? Did you lose it?' When I told her what happened, she starting crying – not because she was upset with me because times were tough back then for my family – but because she knew it was the right thing to do."

Gonzmart said he learned from his family to care for the community around him. "As tough as times once were for my family, we always realized that many other people had it much tougher," he said. "I now feel that if you can write a check for \$1 million to help out and it didn't hurt, then you didn't do enough. I like to think outside the box. During this tough economy, I've made a commitment to donate even more to causes. People tell me I'm crazy, but I believe that when you do good, good comes back to you."

Last year the Gonzmart family and the Columbia Restaurant Group donated over a half million dollars to over 130 charitable and non-profit organizations. Gonzmart's wheels are perpetually turning. As he dives into new and exciting business ventures, he is always considering what additional good he can attach to them. For instance, a percentage of the sales of his line of bottled wines benefits both the University of South Florida and the Humane Society. And like the wine, plans for his new rum will benefit more than his restaurants' tableside Mojitos.

Strong Supporter of Schools

Education is very important to Gonzmart. "I value my Jesuit education more than I do my college education," said Gonzmart. "My experiences there, my friendships, going to Mass, the theology classes, the discipline – it's tough to pinpoint any one thing – it's just the entire education."

A staunch supporter of Jesuit, he is a perennial sponsor of the school's fundraising events. He also has included Jesuit in his will with the intention of leaving a lasting legacy in memory of his family that will make it possible for needy students to obtain a Jesuit education. "It can be life-changing, especially for a poor minority boy, to have the opportunity to go to Jesuit," he explains.

Gonzmart also reaches out to help other area schools including St. Peter Claver Elementary School, Academy Prep in Ybor City, the University of South Florida and Tampa Catholic. Yes, even every Tigers'

bitter arch rival, TC.

"**Monsignor Higgins** from St. Lawrence Church had told me a few years back that it's not about the school or rivalries, it's about helping kids get an education," explained the former Tiger football standout whose image was hung in effigy at TC during his senior year. "So I helped TC because they needed help with their golf tournament. My wife had fun with that when I came home with a green shirt!"



Richard Gonzmart '71

He is especially gratified by the two scholarships he established that make it possible for two impoverished minority students to attend USF each year. The idea began as an effort to help a brother and sister from Brandon. "They had a single mother who was a migrant worker and their dad had died in the fields," explained Gonzmart, teary eyed as he recounted the story. "Four years later, they both graduated from USF with engineering degrees. She went on to work for a nuclear plant in New Mexico, and he's now working for an aeronautics firm. Two years ago at Christmas the brother came to me to thank me. He said when he was a senior in high school he was trying to figure out which strawberry or tomato field he would be picking from." Upon hearing that, Gonzmart established two annual full scholarships at USF on a permanent basis with the hope of impacting more young lives.

"I'm thankful that I was able to graduate from Jesuit. The community service that Jesuit encourages teaches you about caring for others. It makes you realize there's more to life than giving money."

So in addition to his philanthropic efforts, Gonzmart makes a point to give his time engaging in mentoring activities. Whether it is coaching, speaking to a class, or simply giving his numerous marathon medals to young cancer survivors in a children's hospital, Gonzmart is committed to improving the human condition. "When you give your time and you see a smile on somebody's face, it's better than any paycheck you could ever get." **AM DC**

– Robin Macar, JHS Communications Director