

Fort Salonga resident is inspired by Sir Thomas More's 'Eden'

By CLAUDE SOLNIK

Many people have favorite books that stay with them for a lifetime. Manuel F. Martinez can say that, and more, of Sir Thomas More's "Utopia."

That novel – depicting people caring for each other – gave Martinez an idea for a healthcare business: Utopia Home Care.

"The elderly would take care of the children," said Martinez of the book. "That was their job. It worked out beautifully. That was Utopia, and I liked the concept."

In 1983, Martinez, 71, created UHC, which provides home health services to the sick and elderly in Connecticut, Florida and New York. The founder of UHC is also the CEO and a former president of the Long Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Fueled by an aging population and a growing reliance on home healthcare, UHC earned Martinez the Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2002 and was thrice listed among Long Island's fastest-growing firms.

But is UHC as free from flaws as its name implies?

"Is this a perfect company?" Martinez asks. "Pretty much. I would like it to be."

As it stands today, UHC employs 1,700 people and just opened a second office in Kings Park, home to its headquarters.

"It was too hectic here [at the HQ]," said Manny Martinez Jr., one of Martinez's sons

and a vice president of the firm. "Before, home care and the headquarters were both here. Now home care has a field office in Kings Park."

But the road for Martinez has been far from Utopian. At one time, Martinez, whose mother is from Puerto Rico and whose father is from Spain, found the world to be not only imperfect but sometimes downright inhospitable.

"I had a hard time in the beginning getting jobs," he said. "There was discrimination. The person involved or a friend of yours would tell you on the side [that in] getting jobs, you wouldn't be selected first."

Martinez believes he was even discriminated against when he applied for loans. He said he was



Manuel F. Martinez

turned down by four institutions – the Small Business Administration and three banks – when he sought to borrow \$10,000 to start UHC in 1983.

But his belief was strong that Long Island needed home-care services, so Martinez scraped together enough money to launch the business.

"Go back 25 or 50 years and the thinking was old: Put [the elderly] into a home," said Martinez. "The heyday of nursing homes was 1980 [through] 1990. Then home healthcare became more recognized."

Before founding UHC, Martinez worked in the trust department at Citibank, as a business consultant for the predecessor of

Coopers & Lybrand and as deputy director of the Bronx-based anti-poverty group Morrisania Community Corp., an umbrella organization for more than a dozen groups that provided various services to the poor.

"I wanted to get involved in management," he said. "What I was doing all along was becoming a systems analyst. After a while, it was so easy. I saw myself as a leader."

Then came UHC. Martinez had his training in business and leadership, so it wasn't a stretch for him to create and grow a company. He majored in management at Fordham University and went on to get his M.B.A. from Adelphi in 1974.

"I felt I had the mechanics in mind. I started implementing my program from a living room in a modest abode," he said. "I

GOING SOLO: When turned down for loans, Manuel F. Martinez scraped up enough money himself to get Utopia Home Care off the ground.



called it Utopia. I brought back the concept. This is going to be called Utopia."

Martinez expanded the company by acquiring several firms in Connecticut and opening a number of offices there.

"Manny's always been a risk-taker, and yet he's cautious at the same time," said Jim Kelly, director of marketing at UHC. "He doesn't dive into something. He's will-

ing to take a risk, but he analyzes it first."

While More's Utopia may be idealistic, those who know Martinez note that he's eminently practical.

"I learned a lot from my father about management skills and financials," said Martinez Jr. "The bottom line – it's important. A lot of people go out of business ... not watching the bottom line."

With UHC, Martinez indeed has a business, but one that does good work and enriches people's lives.

"We find that people live longer if they remain in familiar dwellings, as opposed to taking them out and putting them in a nursing home," Martinez said.

The Fort Salonga resident looks back at some of the hardships he faced while trying to start UHC and says that even those experiences are partly responsible for increasing his motivation and sharpening his entrepreneurial drive.

"I was determined not to take crap from anyone," said Martinez. "I became so bitter from all of this. I was determined to succeed."

So what does "Utopia" mean to Martinez today, aside from being the name of a book and a component of his company's name? He said it means being close to family, which is as close to Utopia as life gets.

"I consider myself the luckiest guy. I have a business, and all my sons and daughter work at the business and live around me," he said. "And grandchildren too. What more would a father like to have? Not much."