

DYNAMIC LEADER OF THE YEAR

GAINING ALTITUDE

Rodriguez Soaring to
New Heights

By Rebecca Patrick and Anthony Schoettle



Mario Rodriguez has an enviable effect.

No matter what he's doing, he leaves an indelible mark on the people and places with whom he interacts.

But things didn't always come so easy for Rodriguez, the son of Cuban immigrants and political refugees.

Born in Brooklyn and raised in Miami, he grew up poor, which in the eyes of many put Rodriguez a couple of steps behind his peers.

That's the way he saw it too, at least initially. However, as he matured, his vision – for himself and those around him – changed.

“When I was young, I believed (my humble upbringing) was a disbenefit, but later in life, I realized that growing up poor was an incredible benefit,” Rodriguez imparts. “I believe that experience has driven me to serve others.”

His vision today is one grounded in relationship building. He has a knack for empowering people and galvanizing them around a mission wherever the journey takes him.

The Indianapolis Airport Authority (IAA) executive director has applied his service-first mentality to lift himself, along with the people and organizations he's associated with, to an altitude no one could have imagined.

Under his direction, Indianapolis International Airport continues to receive top recognition for its world-class customer service for business and leisure travelers.

It's been named the Best Airport in North America by the Airports Council International – North America every year since Rodriguez arrived in 2014. And time and again, it has ranked among the best in its class by the most respected airport rating organizations: *Travel + Leisure*, *Condé Nast Traveler* and J.D. Power.

“The Indianapolis International Airport is Indiana's welcome mat to guests from around the world and having Mario at the helm is why it has been consistently recognized as one of the best airports in the

country,” declares Gov. Eric Holcomb.

“He uses forward-thinking strategic leadership skills to improve our international welcome center, which contributes to the record-breaking economic development investments that are coming to our great state. I can't think of a better person to be the Indiana Chamber's 2023 Dynamic Leader of the Year.”

Lifesaving legacy

A civil engineer by trade, Rodriguez's 35-year aviation career has spanned multiple continents and taken him to executive posts at airports in Hong Kong and throughout the U.S.

The bigger the challenge, the higher Rodriguez seems to ascend.

In addition to the work he's done in Indianapolis, Rodriguez led transformations to restore the historic terminal at the Long Beach Airport in California and modernized Florida's Palm Beach International Airport.

But his greatest accomplishment occurred in New Orleans, literally saving the airport there from destruction and likely many lives as well. The impact of what happened in the Big Easy has been profound on Rodriguez and influences the approach he brings to his job today.

Rodriguez spearheaded an initiative, despite some resistance from local decision makers, to raise the levees around the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport when he was the chief operating officer of the New Orleans Aviation Board. In reality, the levees were beyond the scope of what the airport normally handled.

As a result of those efforts, the height of the surrounding levees was raised by nine feet and they were greatly fortified. The project was done a month ahead of time, and more importantly just three days before Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005, allowing the airport to be used as an evacuation and aid epicenter.

“Among all these projects (I've been involved in), the most meaningful is the one that saved lives: New Orleans,” Rodriguez comments.

He remembers the undertaking, and the run-up to it, like it was yesterday.

“Call it providence, predestination or just luck; I was at the right place at the right time and with the right resources,” he recalls.



Rodriguez is focused on serving others and making the community better. His philosophy, he submits, is summed up in this famed Ralph Waldo Emerson quote, “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It's to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”

“I remember looking at the levees in New Orleans, and honestly, it did not look good. You don’t have to be an engineer to figure that out. We had just put in so much money in our airfield, more than \$300 million, to make it safe for our passengers. Although the levees belonged to the levee board and not us, it would have been unconscionable to put people’s lives in danger because of a deficient levee. The levees posed a clear danger to others, so it was only correct to act. We rebuilt the levee on our dime.”

In the end, the water came within a foot of the top of the levee, but the levee held.

“Subsequently, this airport served as the evacuation center for the entire city, becoming the busiest airport in the world for three days,” Rodriguez observes. “It was the focal point for the air evacuation; helicopters were flying in and picking people up from their roofs and dropping them off at the airport to be transported via air to other cities in the country. We helped scared and injured people who had lost all their worldly possessions, having lost all our possessions too.

“The most noble act is one of service to others,” he adds. “I will carry the satisfaction of saving lives and the sheer terror of having gone through such an experience.”

Nonstop serving, learning

Rodriguez brought that focus on service to the Hoosier state upon arrival, according to Adam Berry, Indiana Chamber vice president of economic development and technology.

“For nearly a decade, Mario has really helped elevate Indiana on the national stage,” he proclaims. “He realizes that an airport is more than just a public transportation facility; it really serves as a hub for economic development and facilitates business, both to sustain and retain commerce in our state.”

Chris Gahl, executive vice president and chief marketing officer for Visit Indy, stresses that it’s difficult to underestimate the Indianapolis International Airport’s importance.

“It’s the front door not only to Indianapolis, but the entire state, for millions of people every single year,” Gahl expounds. “If you travel very much at all, you quickly realize how much our airport here stands out, how much of a jewel it is and the shining brand image it stamps on this city and state from the very first moment people step foot off the airplanes that land there.

“Not only does it serve many Indiana residents, it’s critically important in drawing numerous national and international events to this city and state. That’s all due to the staff that oversees the operations there, and of course, Mario is a big part of that,” Gahl concludes.

Rodriguez, local tourism and economic



It’s all about relationships for Rodriguez. That extends to both current IAA team members and people he hasn’t worked with in years. Rodriguez is always willing to lend an ear and offer advice.



On what makes the Indianapolis Airport Authority and Indy airport so special, Rodriguez offers: “The true magic occurs when you have the right team, and we have the right team that thinks of their community in great terms and wants to serve their community the best way they can.”

development officials say, has been a key player in getting additional flights – including direct, nonstop flights – to more major cities in and out of Indianapolis’ airport. He’s also led the charge to grow the number of restaurants and retail outlets established there and continues modernization efforts that have kept the airport in the upper echelon of every rating system that matters.

He’s done all that while prioritizing patronizing Hoosier businesses.

More than 80% of the airport’s expenditures – everything from hundreds of millions of dollars of construction to buying furniture from Jasper – are spent with local goods and service providers.

“It is always about improving our community by monetizing its investment in this organization and transferring it to the community by increasing, for example, our economic impact, customer service and support of different organizations,” Rodriguez relates.

He calls the years spent at various locations “a nonstop learning experience” and

a way to transfer what he’s learned to other places.

Indianapolis International Airport has been a clear benefactor of his wisdom.

The customer-centric innovations and programs Rodriguez has implemented include free fast Wi-Fi in the terminal, electric vehicle charging stations in the garage and new restaurants – including a farmers market featuring Indiana-grown and -made products. Indianapolis International Airport also boasts the largest electric bus fleet among Midwest airports and cutting-edge technology such as carbon sequestration techniques used on the current runway reconstruction project.

Perhaps the greatest indication of progress is that the Indy airport is on record pace. Close to 10 million passengers are expected to travel through the facility by the end of 2023.

Giving credit, opportunity

The consensus-building Rodriguez attributes much of the credit for the airport’s success to his team.

"I believe that people have a boundless capacity to improve our collective experience if given the guidance and opportunity to do so," he asserts. "You can do amazing things by providing an overarching vision and strategy and charting a clear course. The rankings are just a byproduct of having an excellent team and the team having clarity in what they want to accomplish."

Rodriguez gets philosophical – and emotional – when talking about his staff. The way he views his team extends to customers and the broader world.

"I believe that each of us is a summation of our experiences. The more experience I have, the more I realize that the only true value is people, whether it's your team or the people you serve," he explains. "Great spaces, excellent customer service and cutting-edge technology are all products of having a great team. Our awards are just a byproduct of that."

While Rodriguez is most certainly the boss at the airport, he's just as much a servant.

"Sawubona' is a Zulu greeting that means 'I see you.' All my life, I have tried to see people and look at things from their perspective," he reflects. "I concentrate every day on serving my team. I work for them."

Rodriguez also doesn't mince words about how vital diversity in thought is for his or any other organization.

"Inclusion and equity are a moral imperative. Diversity is a business necessity," he declares. "If you have one team with the same life experiences, you tend to get social conformity. Alternatively, if you have a diverse team with different life experiences and thoughts, you have a team that will continue to question the status quo and improve."

He continues, "We also serve a wonderfully diverse community with business and personal ties to the world."

Under Rodriguez's leadership, IAA has garnered accolades and honors for diversity and inclusion from the city of Indianapolis, including the Mayor's Diversity in Leadership Award and the Mayor's Accessibility Award.

"If I've learned one thing, it's that the true value is not in the bricks and mortars. The true value is in people," Rodriguez expresses. "If you have the right team and you have the right culture surrounding that team, you can do anything ... you can do marvelous things."

Hand in many activities

It would be difficult to find someone over the past decade who has had their fingerprints on more important initiatives in Indiana than Rodriguez, praises Berry, who calls him "one of the most influential minds in our state."

Impressively, that leadership spans far beyond the IAA and Indiana. Rodriguez's national stature has helped the Indy airport secure tens

of millions in federal dollars in recent years. Just in July, it received the country's largest allotment of Federal Aviation Administration Airport Improvement Program funding, nearly \$23 million, to construct energy efficient infrastructure and install solar panels.

Rodriguez was reappointed by President Joe Biden and appointed by former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump to serve on the U.S. Department of Transportation's Aviation Consumer Protection Advisory Committee. Additionally, he was selected as a member of the Biden-Harris presidential transition team to provide counsel on aviation industry matters.

"I genuinely believe that with commitment and volunteerism, we can make a better world," Rodriguez relates. "I aim to give, not to receive."

Indeed, he does. The list of state and local boards, committees and special initiatives Rodriguez is involved with is lengthy and varied.

Advancing Indiana's Latino community is one passion that's especially top of mind. He's a past board chair of the Indiana Latino Institute (ILI) and a founding member of the Indiana Latino Leadership Circle, which aims to help make connections for mid-level Latino professionals with the broader Hoosier business community.

"The ILI is very dear to me because it tries to elevate the Latino community through education and advocacy," Rodriguez shares. "Education is the great equalizer of us all. I grew up poor and I was able to study engineering and that's what helped me get to where I am right now. I truly believe that if we focus on education in this country, we could make things a lot better."

Ties that bind

Rodriguez speaks glowingly about his wife of 15 years, Monica Newhouse-Rodriguez, his two young children (Ava and Mason) and his two older ones (Mario and Christian). He's also enthusiastic about recently becoming a grandfather.

"My wife is the managing partner of her own firm (Newhouse and Associates LLC), with offices nationwide, and is very

successful and renowned in the aerospace industry," Rodriguez comments. "So, when she gives me advice, I listen."

When asked what he likes to do in his off time, without hesitation, Rodriguez declares: "Whatever my wife and family want to do."

Without them, he insists, nothing he has accomplished would be possible.

"They inspire and teach me every day. Words fail to express how much they mean to me and how they are my guiding light."

If the glow surrounding Rodriguez sounds too good to be true, his wife will assure you, it is not. One trip requiring air travel with him is all you need to see. "Mario is unique," Newhouse-Rodriguez explains.

"He will stop to speak to a dozen or more employees on his way



Monica Newhouse-Rodriguez knows her husband is always in her corner: "Mario has been not only my partner in this life, he is my greatest confidant, he is my greatest cheerleader, and he is positively certain of my success and never lets me forget it."



A young Mario Rodriguez (front row) was taught "the importance of a formal education and everything that goes along with it" from his parents. "I have carried that need to make myself better every day of my life," he relays.

to the gate, from his direct reports to customer service agents to janitors. He knows them all and is always clear that his door is open to them if they want to talk,” she emphasizes.

“You should also try to fly into or out of another airport where he has worked in the past. On a recent trip to Long Beach, the entire administration office staff came to baggage claim to see him. On another trip out of New Orleans, after one employee saw him waiting in line at security, more than 10 former coworkers followed him to the gate to catch up.

“It is his dedication to those employees that creates that long, unbreakable bond.”

Full of surprises

Indianapolis business owner and community activist Rupal Thanawala met Rodriguez seven years ago at a local public forum where he was expressing concerns over low high school graduation rates.

“He presented a robust and strategic solution to address it,” recalls Thanawala, CEO of Trident Systems, an information technology services firm. “I assumed him to be an educator, but shortly learned that he leads our airport!

“In our follow-up conversation, it became apparent to me that besides leading a



A world traveler, Rodriguez proudly reports that his favorite destination is one of his former hometowns: New Orleans. His top Hoosier hot spot is French Lick.

world-class and award-winning airport, he is truly passionate about building an equitable community – one with a key focus on improving education outcomes, economic development and environmental sustainability in Indiana.”

One thing most people don’t know about Rodriguez, says his wife, is that he has a license to captain a 250-ton cruise ship.

After starting as a deckhand as a teenager, “he worked his way through college as a captain

on the Island Queen in Miami doing cruises for tourists,” Newhouse-Rodriguez reveals.

“He has many, many tall tales and a fascination with pirates that all stem from this time in his life.”

So, as it turns out, Thanawala’s first meeting with Rodriguez is a true reflection of the man.

“Just when you think you know him,” she imparts, “you discover something else surprising and equally amazing.”



Indiana Sports Corp congratulates board member, longtime partner, and community advocate Mario Rodriguez on being recognized as 2023 Dynamic Leader of the Year.

Thank you to Mario and the entire team at the Indianapolis International Airport for continuing to make Indy the best host city for major sporting events.



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WELL DONE, MARIO!

Congratulations to Indianapolis Airport Authority Executive Director Mario Rodriguez on being Indiana Chamber’s 2023 Dynamic Leader of the Year.

We’re proud to have him on the board of the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation.



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