



Felix J Martinez

OCT 12, 1934 - MAY 21, 2025



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Table of Contents

Obituary	Page 3
Events	Page 8
Tribute Wall	Page 9



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From young orphan, political prisoner to Miami international banker, Cuban American Felix Justino Martínez dies at 90

With a bright yellow Warner Bros. bucket hat and a shirt to match, Felix Justino Martínez found freedom behind the wheel of an electric scooter he affectionately called his “Tesla.” It was his way of showing the world that multiple knee surgeries that left him struggling to walk and a diagnosis of Stage 4 colon cancer couldn’t keep him from the important matters of the day, be it a trip to Publix or a stop at the UPS store to drop off a package.

It took a spill on the scooter to force him to slow down, but only after passersby helped him up and watched as he quickly sped away back home. Stubborn, with a high tolerance for discomfort, he refused medical attention until a routine cancer scan showed a femur fracture. Even then, he thought all the fuss about bed rest was unnecessary. As long as there were minutes left to squeeze more moments out of life, Felix did not want to rest.

With the sounds of Perry Como, Frank Sinatra and Placido Domingo serenading his home in constant cadence with the shuffling of adult children, grandchildren, neighbors, caregivers and, most of all, a devoted wife of 62 years, Felix finally found peace and rest. He died May 21 at the age of 90.

His drive to barrel through obstacles and, in his words, “never feel sorry for myself,” were traits cemented in childhood. Born in Havana, Cuba on October 12, 1934, Felix was the youngest of five siblings, the children of Luísa Rubio de Martínez, a homemaker, and Justino Martínez Martínez, a police officer. The lives of the Martínez children quickly upended when both their parents succumbed to illnesses within the span of 18 months, leaving the three older sisters and two younger brothers to forge a close bond as they faced uncertainty. Felix, who was seven years old at the time, looked toward his siblings, the oldest 16 years his senior, for guidance and support.



Obituary

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Despite the dire circumstances, Felix valued education and relished going to school, occasionally relying on the support and understanding of teachers who provided food or assistance. By the time Felix prepared to enter high school, duty called, and he stepped away from traditional schooling to help support his family, at first finding work as a jeweler and later as an employee at Cuba's utility company. Committed to always improving and learning, Felix took the initiative to attend correspondence school at night, where he learned the basics of English and trained as a stenographer.

"I started working when I was 13 years old. I did all my studies at night; I learned English at night," Felix recalled last year. "I never saw the sun while sitting in a classroom."

It was in his early twenties that Felix came to meet the woman who would years later become his wife, María Guernica, the oldest of three daughters of an obstetrician and homemaker. A gentle yet spirited soul, María attended private college preparatory schools and enjoyed riding horses along the sand near her family's beach home in Tarará, not far from where Ernest Hemingway spent his days in Cuba.

Their courtship represented a quintessential attraction of opposites. Felix would borrow his sister's 1953 Chevy to drive to Tarará on the weekends. The couple found their rhythm playing volleyball and dancing at social clubs, where María was a member and Felix charmed his way in. They became secretly engaged after dating on-and-off under the watchful eye of the strictest of chaperones, María's mother.

A key turning point in Felix's life came following dictator Fidel Castro's rise to power during the Cuban Revolution in 1959. By late 1960, Cuba's utility company had become nationalized, leading to the layoffs of hundreds of employees. Though not among them, Felix expressed a show of solidarity one late afternoon following the end of his shift, joining dozens of other former and current employees in a peaceful march to protest the communist regime. The large group walked behind a sign emblazoned with the words of Cuban activist and philosopher José Martí, "La palabra es para decir la verdad, no para ocultarla." Felix barely made it half a block when an officer jabbed him with a rifle in the stomach, and he was thrown into the back of a police car.

The demonstration landed Felix and 19 others from the utility company in Cuba's infamous prison, La Cabaña, which by January 1961 housed 1,500 political prisoners. Felix described hearing the execution of 57 men by the firing squad, some were bunkmates in his cell as young as



Obituary

Felix J Martinez

OCT 12, 1934 - MAY 21, 2025

18 years old. The nights punctuated with shouts of, “Viva Cuba libre, viva Cristo Rey,” followed by the staccato shots of rifles. When María, then just 19 years old, on occasion would visit Felix, the guards intentionally ushered her past the blood-splattered walls. Fear and intimidation were Castro’s currency.

Felix refused to allow desperate times to define him. An artist without the means to explore his gift, he spent his days inside his cell making extraordinary works of art: a handwoven belt with a buckle carved from tortoise shell, a jewelry box and, most notably, a wooden portrait of Jesus carved using a shaving razor and other materials bartered inside the dank walls of the cavernous fortress.

When the U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs Invasion failed in April 1961, Felix believed his days were numbered: Each night thereafter, the 120 prisoners in his cell would stack mattresses up against the cell door as a way to fend off Castro's henchmen. Conditions throughout Cuba deteriorated quickly, forcing María to flee the island by ferry with only her two younger sisters.

“When the ferry crossed the bay by La Cabaña, my sister just wept and wept,” said María’s youngest sister, Esther. “She knew he was in there and might never see him again.”

As inexplicably as he was thrown into prison, Felix was released 10 months later. He eventually made his way to the United States, after loved ones pooled their pennies to get him on a flight to Miami. The Cuban government granted permission for Felix to travel on the condition he would convince his fiancée to return with him to the island.

Felix never looked back.

Once in Miami, the International Rescue Committee and the Methodist church – of which María and her family were devoted members in Cuba – offered essential assistance. They arranged for the couple to marry in Miami and relocated the newlyweds to Western Springs, Ill., to live with “sponsors,” a couple by the name of John and Betty Hicks.

With each act of kindness, Felix began to build a new life in a new country with the love of his life.

By the mid-1960s, the couple made their way to Staten Island, NY, to be closer to family who by then had established roots in New Jersey. Though he struggled to speak English, Felix gravitated



Obituary

Felix J Martinez

OCT 12, 1934 - MAY 21, 2025

toward the international language of dollars and cents, finding work at a bank in Manhattan. He later recalled how he watched others ascend – figuratively and literally to a higher floor – with a college degree.

That's when, at age 30, Felix decided to go back to school. He enrolled part time in night classes at New York University, leaving the bank at 5 p.m. to take the subway to Greenwich Village. After class, he took the subway to Battery Park, where he'd then board the ferry back to Staten Island. He'd then hop on the train, which dropped him off 3 blocks from his apartment and would walk the rest of the way home. He'd again awake at the crack of dawn to make it to the bank by 9 a.m.

Amid the craziest of schedules, Felix at 33 years old began another life chapter – fatherhood. He spent weekends on homework while at the neighborhood park with María and their firstborn, a son they named Felix. Soon after Felix earned his bachelor's degree from NYU, he and María welcomed a second child, daughter Lillian.

The young family moved back to Miami in 1971, purchasing the first home on a block in the Sunset neighborhood, an area more generally known as the vast suburb of Kendall. It was there that Felix and María finally and permanently planted roots, giving birth to their third and youngest child, daughter Anne.

At a time when other professionals his age found themselves mid-career, Felix entered his 40s launching what would become a successful and upwardly mobile 30-year career as a banker specializing in trust, estate planning and private wealth management. He began at Flagship Bank, followed by Sun Bank, Bank of America-International and Coutts & Co, all the while traveling for work throughout the world, amassing lifelong friends and mentoring many others.

When he retired at the start of the new millennium, Felix and María focused on dual missions: travel and grandchildren. Their vacations took them on cruises through the Panama Canal, Alaska and Europe. A world history buff, Felix exuded child-like excitement at walking inside the Sistine Chapel, scaling the Swiss Alps by cable car or walking the cobblestone streets of Amsterdam.

At home, Felix and María filled their days caring for their grandchildren, loving nothing more than a bustling home filled with cribs, toys, highchairs and controlled chaos. They tried their best to never miss a Grandparents' Day at their grandchildren's preschools around South Florida, venturing as far as Davie.



Obituary

Felix J Martinez

OCT 12, 1934 - MAY 21, 2025

As Felix took his final breaths on the afternoon of May 21, he left a lasting legacy: Choose to live life defined not by what you lack but by what you dare to dream.

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Felix Justino Martínez is survived by his wife, María G. Martínez, and his children: son Felix E. Martínez, his wife Michelle Martínez-Salom and their two children, Justin and Aria; daughter Lillian M. Peters and her four children, Caitlin, Sophia, Randolph and Riley; and daughter Anne L. Vasquez, her husband Daniel Vasquez and their two children, Danny and Veronica. A beloved brother, Martínez was predeceased by sisters Carmen Martínez, Felicia Martínez, Maria Lopez and brother Jose Martínez.



Events

Felix J Martinez

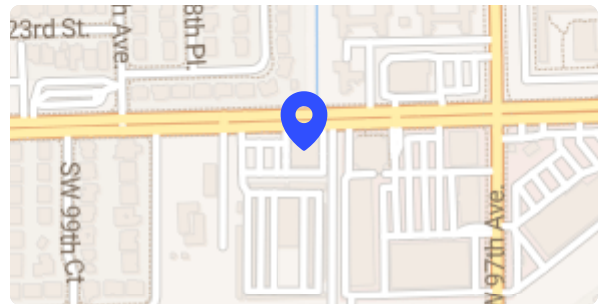
OCT 12, 1934 - MAY 21, 2025

Visitation

Thursday, May 29, 2025

6:30 PM - 10:30 PM ET

Memorial Plan Westchester Funeral Home
9800 SW 24th Street, Miami FL 33165

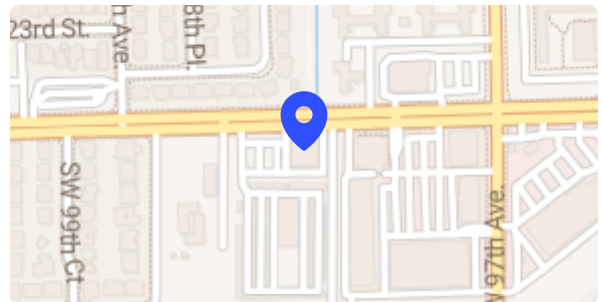


Religious service

Thursday, May 29, 2025

7:00 PM ET

Memorial Plan Westchester Funeral Home
9800 SW 24th Street, Miami FL 33165

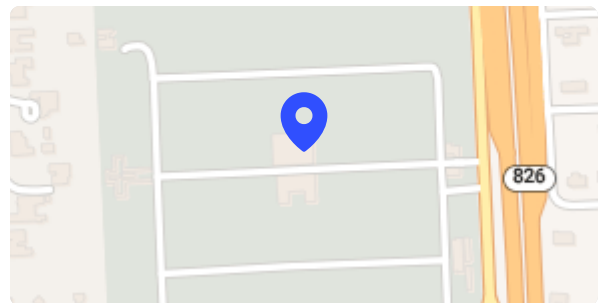


Burial

Friday, May 30, 2025

10:00 AM ET

Memorial Plan at Miami Memorial Park Cemetery
6200 SW 77th Avenue, Miami FL 33143





Tribute Wall

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OCT 12, 1934 - MAY 21, 2025



Maria Elena Ulacia posted:

My deepest condolences to Felix family, specially his three children! I will always keep him in my heart. I am sorry i can not atende today's funeral.

May 29 at 12:44 PM



Maria Elena Ulacia lit a candle in honor of Felix.



May 29 at 12:41 PM



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Felix by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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