

MIAMI HERALD

December 31, 2009

Former Gov. Jeb Bush continues holiday tradition for migrants

BY ELAINE DE VALLE

Special to The Miami Herald

Josh Rodriguez and Columba Bush at the annual farmworker holiday celebration at EvergladesVillage. Last week, just before Christmas, Jeb and Columba Bush stopped by the migrant camps in South Miami-Dade to have lunch -- and start the annual farmworker holiday celebration at Everglades Village, for the 10th year in a row.

Columba Bush began the tradition a decade ago when her husband was still governor. She wanted to help teenagers at the housing complex for agricultural workers built after Hurricane Andrew decimated the trailer camp they used to live in.

"We have always had good volunteers and are able to get toys and make the holiday special for the little kids. But there wasn't anything to celebrate Christmas for the teenagers," said Steven Kirk, executive director of the Everglades Community Association.

Then, 10 years ago, Jose Luis Rodriguez -- a third-generation farmer and industry advocate on the national level -- got the Bush family involved in the youth event, which includes food, music, entertainment and some sort of gift, thanks to a multitude of sponsors.

"It gets harder and harder to remember what you gave them when they were 15, 16, 17," Kirk said. "So this year we gave them gift cards. They get the choice instead of us buying it for them. "I bet they like that."

Kirk thanked the Bushes, who have always been friends and supporters, he said. And he thanked the family of Jose Luis Rodriguez, a trade advisor to Florida Farmers in Lake Worth, who died in April at 62 after he was diagnosed with cancer. He and his father, who farmed in Palm Beach, were once considered the world's largest growers of eggplant.

Josh Rodriguez, a college student in Tallahassee visiting South Florida with his mother Daina Rodriguez, said he would follow in his father's footsteps -- not only in agribusiness but also in philanthropy. ``When you see migrant workers, you should want to help them out, not look down on them or make fun," Josh Rodriguez said. Daina Rodriguez said that when she brings herself to it, she will bring her departed husband's clothing to the village for the workers. It would be what he wanted, she said, before coming to tears.

Katie Edwards, executive director of the Dade County Farm Bureau, said Rodriguez was instrumental in the industry's agenda for South Florida. As a farmers' and workers' advocate, he is irreplaceable, she said. ``He had the ability to get things done and that is why we are standing here today," Edwards said.

Kirk told more than 100 migrant teens at the Dec. 22 event to stay in school and offered statistics about how success is tied to a college education. ``Our real Christmas present would be that you all go to college," Kirk told them.