

# THERAPY AND

Miriam Guanche has taken on the top leadership role at the physical therapy clinic where she has long worked

by karen-janine cohen.

THE BIG STORY

A YOUNG MAN RIDES a stationary bicycle in a bright, comfortable room with familiar, yet puzzlingly different kinds of equipment than those in a typical gym. There's a trampoline, and something that looks like a treadmill. But the treadmill has a harness that holds up those with weak leg muscles. The trampoline is a "rebounder," often used by those recovering from ankle surgery. And the legs of the handsome youth, who is quadriplegic, are being driven externally with electrical stimulation from the bicycle.

This is the sheltering world of Miriam Guanche, who in August bought out Rob-in Smith, the business's founder, and who is now sole owner of Miami Physical Therapy Associates, Inc., in Coconut Grove. The specialty practice focuses on spinal cord and neurological injuries, though orthopedic problems are also treated. Since 2004 Guanche had been a partner in the practice, which attracts patients, mostly via word-of-mouth from across the world, from Madagascar to Vladivostok (see the pins on the wall map). A photo collage shows young and old; recognizable celebrities and regular people.

"We have some patients who have been coming here for 30 years," says Guanche, who has worked at the clinic since before she went to the University of Miami to earn her master's degree in physical therapy. She didn't start out planning to become CEO. It was an evolution. "From the day I started working, I was so proud of our facility, I wanted the greater good of the office," she says. She did community outreach, and networked with

area doctors, the richest source of patient referral. "I always treated the practice as if it was my own. It was natural."

That approach is exactly what made Smith, who started the practice more than 30 years ago, hire Guanche in '97, before she even started professional training. "I remember exactly when I was sitting in the gym and Miriam walked in to apply for a position as an aide," says Smith, who now works two days a week at the practice. He told her a job would be there after graduation. "Six months after she began working as a therapist, I told her, 'you could run this,'" he says.

Smith began including her in decisions, large and small, asking her opinion about issues from personnel to finances. "I knew what the answer was, and she came up with the same thing," he says. After several years he offered the partnership.

## New Challenges

Now, at 37, married and with two young children, Guanche is in charge of the clinic that, with eight therapists, sees about 50 patients a day. About half of the current 200 patients have spinal cord and neurological injuries; 20 percent overall are spinal cord patients, who often have long hard roads ahead. But progress-made is

Guanche's focus. "It's rewarding," she says. "There are days when they cry and we cry. It was harder in the beginning," she says, adding that sometimes she would go home and cry with her mother about the cases she saw. "I know I'm making a difference in peoples' lives. I learn just as much from the patient as they learn from me."

Patients usually come with a diagnosis, and test results like MRIs and x-rays. Creating goals is key. For the more seriously injured, that can include learning to roll over, or transfer between a bed and wheel chair. "A big part of therapy is patient education," Guanche says, adding that those with less severe problems confide they feel they shouldn't even be there. But, says Guanche, "Everybody's injury is debilitating to them in their own way."

One physician who sends patients to Guanche is Dr. Barth Green, chair of the Department of Neurological Surgery at UM's Miller School of Medicine and co-founder, with the Buoniconti family, of The Miami Project to Cure Paralysis. "I've known her for many years, and she is an extraordinarily talented and creative physical therapist with a special commitment to people with physical challenges and people with disabilities," he says, adding she goes to great lengths to provide therapy to those in the community with financial difficulties, while offering state-of-the-art technology generally not found outside research centers. Green, who met Guanche through Smith, with whom he did research, says he sends "dozens of patients to her each month."

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# THE BOSS



Miriam Guanche poses next to the ReWalk, which promises greatly increased mobility for those with spinal cord injuries

Guanche, whose grandparents emigrated from Cuba in 1959, always knew she wanted to be in the medical field. A confluence of events, including seeing the pilgrims at Lourdes during a backpacking trip to Europe, a subsequent broken leg, and the influence of a dear friend already in the field fused her future path.

Now she has a different challenge; to run her business while carving out time for the work she loves. “It’s a juggling act. I can’t get away from therapy, it’s what I love to do.” She’s dedicated the last six months to improving office efficiency. That included streamlining accounting, bookkeeping, legal and accounts receivable operations. It also means delegating. The staff have been used to coming to Guanche as junior partner with every problem. Now she directs people to take issues like scheduling conflicts and insurance questions to the office manager. “It’s a work in progress,” she says.

She is mentoring more-experienced therapists to help them make more independent decisions, while pairing them with their less experienced counterparts. In the fall she goes back to UM to earn a clinical doctorate—now being integrated as the professional standard for physical therapists.

## CHANGING FIELD

But her eyes light up when she talks about new ways to help patients, such as the ReWalk, made by Argo Medical Technologies; a battery powered device that moves a seated person to a standing position, then walks, controlling movement by sensing changes in the center of gravity. It allows a person who can’t move their legs on their own to walk and even climb steps. “It’s the first in the state of Florida,” Guanche says

But it’s not the technology that impresses those who use it, such as Guntram

Habsburg, who has been going to Miami Physical Therapy Associates for several years after an accident in his native Uruguay left him paraplegic. “After sitting for five years ... to be standing up and having eye contact on the same level with people, to move around on your legs—it’s incredible.”

Habsburg, who now lives in Miami and works for the Uruguay Consulate, says going to the clinic fills a unique need for the newly injured. “It’s a very homey place,” he says. “They make you feel at ease and have great professionals. When you just get injured, you are kind of dazed but [at the clinic] you feel contained, and their professionalism is fantastic.”

High on Guanche’s wish list is more space for ReWalk trainees and others practicing movement skills; and a pool would let her offer aquatic therapy and wellness programs—which could draw from those willing to pay upfront to maintain health, in the same manner that people buy gym memberships. Now, insurance payments are an important part of clinic revenue

Yet as time goes on, the squeeze by third-party payers might be the biggest challenge Guanche could face, says Smith, who adds that many insurance companies will only pay for 20 visits per year. What’s more, to capture the health care dollars that are available, some doctors’ offices and hospitals are opening their own physical therapy units.

At the same time patients with spinal cord injuries are being released from the hospital far more quickly—sometimes after 30 days—when in the past they might stay six months or longer. “Attention to rehab in the medical system is woefully lacking,” Smith says.

“People are getting discharged before they have been taught and shown how to go about taking care of themselves,” notes Guanche.

Still, Smith is confident that Guanche will meet the challenges ahead because when all is said and done, it’s the quality of care that counts. “The temperament, mood and air in that office is extremely positive,” he says. “One patient told me, ‘when I come in here, I smelled hope.’” ●