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Jack of All Trades

Charles Garcia's knack for success sends Sterling Financial Investment Group on a steep growth curve.

■ *By Teresa Talerico*

Charles Patrick Garcia's motto could easily be, "If at first you *do* succeed, try, try again."

Mr. Garcia has never let a little professional success stop him from pursuing a whole new career. At 40, he has been an attorney, a writer, a Latin American intelligence analyst, an entrepreneur, an Air Force captain, and a White House Fellow.

His latest achievement? He heads one of the fastest-rising investment banking firms in the country. Mr. Garcia is chairman and CEO of Sterling Financial Investment Group, based in Boca Raton, Florida. Sterling is projected to generate more than \$50 million in revenue this year, has 50 offices in 10 countries, and may soon rival industry giant Merrill Lynch as the top U.S. investment banking firm with Latin American interests.

Founded by Mr. Garcia in 1997 with just three employees, Sterling Financial was recently named Florida's fastest-growing private firm by the University of Florida. While other firms on UF's annual "Florida 100" list averaged 300 percent growth over a three-year period, Sterling averaged more than 3,000 percent, according to Arnold A. Heggstad, finance professor and director of the university's Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. Dr. Heggstad says Sterling has been consistently impressive.

"When somebody's laid down the numbers they have," observes Dr. Heggstad, "it's not just talk. It's the old cliché: They walk the walk."

Striding into Latin America is Sterling's forte. The firm offers traditional financial

services, including an online site called myprivates.com that enables investors to buy into private companies. But its real edge is the Latin American market, of which Mr. Garcia seems to have an innate understanding. Born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Panama, he enjoyed a bicultural



Under the leadership of founder and CEO Charles Patrick Garcia, Sterling Financial Investment Group has enjoyed a three-year growth rate in excess of 3,800 percent.

upbringing, and he knows that Latin American regions differ dramatically.

"In the United States, you have this perception that because Mexico is on the border, everyone looks like Mexico," says Mr. Garcia. "You figure if they eat

tacos in Mexico, then they eat tacos in Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama. Every country is so different – the culture, the people, the financial services industry, the education. So you have to custom-tailor your services and products to the particular market."

Panamanian clients, for example, are interested primarily in online trading and mutual funds. In Chile, Sterling has helped families set up college funds. In Brazil, the focus is mergers and acquisitions.

In addition to its U.S. offices and locations in London, Athens, and Madrid, Sterling has branches in Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, and Panama. Mr. Garcia also hopes to open offices in Costa Rica and Mexico. Sterling's expansion into those countries would make it the second-largest U.S. investment

banking firm – after Merrill Lynch – with offices in Latin America, according to Sterling president Alexis Korybut.

Friends and peers describe Mr. Garcia as driven and disciplined.

"His greatest characteristic is perseverance," says George Burden, a city commissioner in Daytona Beach, Florida, who served with him in the U.S. Air Force and remains a close friend. "He sets a goal and works tirelessly at it. I'm not aware of any goal he has set that he hasn't achieved."

A father of two, Mr. Garcia surfs, rides Harleys and horses, skydives, and has a martial arts black belt. He admits he loves to excel in many arenas.

"I was very goal-oriented from a young age," he says. "I always liked having a lot of irons in the fire."

That ambition is hereditary. He was just two years old when his family moved to Panama, where his father, a heart surgeon, became surgeon general. His mother was an award-winning science teacher. Mr. Garcia says his maternal grandfather helped build an integrated hospital in Daytona Beach.

"I had these great people around me," he says. "I felt I had to do things in order to get recognized."

Boyhood friend Robert Staples remembers Mr. Garcia as an honor-roll student

who dabbled in sports and theater at Panama's Balboa High, but was especially dedicated to the R.O.T.C. program.

"The traits are still there," he says. "He's very down-to-earth, very ambitious – and that's the way he has always been. He's very much a planner. In each of these steps he's taken, he has a purpose – to become a very successful man, an accomplished businessman."

At 18, Mr. Garcia received a full scholarship to the U.S. Air Force Academy, where he became the fourth-highest-ranking officer, leading more than 4,400 cadets. Trained as an intelligence analyst, he distinguished himself by writing an analysis of China's air defense system. That led to a Defense Intelligence Agency grant to study guerilla warfare in places such as El Salvador, Colombia, and Nicaragua. His work there caught the attention of Gen. John Galvin, then Commander of the U.S. Southern Command in Panama (and later NATO Supreme Allied Commander). Gen. Galvin chose him as an adviser, and Mr. Garcia found Gen. Galvin to be an inspirational leader. He was especially challenged by a saying of the general's: "Don't bring me problems. Bring me solutions." Today Mr. Garcia has it posted on a sign over his office door.

Under Gen. Galvin, Mr. Garcia became an expert on Cuba's involvement in Central America. In 1987, a report he had written was declassified and published as a cover story in *U.S. News and World Report*.

At 27, Mr. Garcia was selected as a White House Fellow and worked in the Reagan and Bush administrations. He worked for "Drug Czar" William Bennett in the Office of National Drug Control Policy as well as at the Department of State under John Whitehead, former chairman of Goldman Sachs.

"He had a big impact on my future career," Mr. Garcia says. "John has been a close mentor and one of the reasons I'm actually in this business."

After his Air Force and government work, Mr. Garcia, who also has a master's degree in public administration, earned a law degree at Columbia University. While there, he wrote an article that helped change the way police conduct searches in private homes. Both the Florida and U.S. Supreme courts cited his work, which examined the abusive practice of unannounced forcible entries.

After practicing as a lawyer in Florida, however, he realized he wanted to work in international business. In the 1990s, he co-managed the Thrift Value Fund in Palm Beach County, helping it grow from \$15 million in 1993 to almost \$70 million in 1998.

He founded his own investment banking firm in 1997, naming it after his son, Sterling. After generating just over \$100,000 in its first year of operation, Sterling Financial Investment Group posted revenues of \$14.2 million last year.

Dr. Heggstad, of the University of Florida, is more impressed with Sterling each year.

"These guys have had by far the fastest-growing revenue, had phenomenal growth," he says. "They've been very consistent every year."

Mr. Garcia hopes to bring in \$50 million this year – possibly more if several strategic acquisitions come through.

He says he patterns his business after the Goldman Sachs model and employs an important technique in setting up Latin American offices. Rather than building an office entirely from scratch, Sterling partners with existing firms in each country, working with local experts who have an insider's knowledge of the region. An advisory board includes some of the country's luminaries, whose presence can instill faith in potential clients.

"I want to be recognized as a world-class firm around the world," Mr. Garcia says. "When someone says Merrill Lynch or Citibank or Sterling Financial, I want them to know who we are and say, 'That's a great company, great leadership, with a lot of integrity and excellence, great service.' I'd like to be everywhere."

Mr. Garcia even lured a high-ranking employee of Florida Gov. Jeb Bush back to a job at Sterling. Brad Baker, former executive director of the Florida Housing Finance Corp., now runs the myprivates.com site (before his government post, he had been Sterling's senior vice-president of investment banking). He calls Mr. Garcia a "visionary" and a tough

but fair boss who expects from his employees what he expects from himself.

"He expects everyone to be honest and work hard," says Mr. Baker, who was also a White House Fellow with Mr. Garcia. "He doesn't put up with excuses. If you need to take a personal day, it's not a problem, but he doesn't accept mediocre work."

Mr. Garcia, who has been invited to speak at the White House and was featured on Univision's "Orgullo Hispano,"

a series about outstanding Hispanic Americans, insists he hasn't done anything extraordinary.

"I think I haven't accomplished much at all," he says. "There's so much out there I want to do."

And while he has succeeded in a vast array of fields, his careers have all had a common denominator: leadership.

"Everything has led me to where I am today," he says. "When I went to the academy, I learned I had a gift for leadership. I also found that I was a good writer. Things

that I did always kind of led me to the same place."

Mr. Burden, from Mr. Garcia's Air Force days, agrees.

"He wanted to be a great leader," he says. "I don't think when he was in his early 20s he knew where that leadership role would be – in the business world, in the military. But he knew he wanted to lead, and he acquired those skills."

Of all the influences in his life, Mr. Garcia counts his late father, who gave him priceless advice, as the most significant.

"He told me that if I wanted to create a great company, I'd have to surround myself with people a lot smarter than I am, to let them do their jobs and not let my ego get in the way," he says.

His father also taught him to love his work.

"I define success as finding your calling in life regardless of financial gain," Mr. Garcia says. "If you do what you really love to do, you'll be able to face the obstacles you have every day, because there's nothing else you'd rather be doing." **HB**

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**—Charles P. Garcia
Chairman and CEO,
Sterling Financial
Investment Group**