

## Section A

**Palm Coast man says thanks with flags**

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800 words

3 July 2004

Daytona Beach News Journal

XNJO

Flagler/Palm Coast News-Tribune

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English

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PALM COAST — He walked at a quick pace — not a stride, but more like a short-statured image on fast forward.

With three bundles of 30-inch stemmed flags tucked under one arm, Carlos Pinto knew exactly how to move.

"We already got the technique and the system," 64-year-old Pinto said over his shoulder.

With only five days before the Fourth of July and 2,000 flags to adorn houses in the Pine Lakes neighborhood, Pinto and his wife, Helena, followed their plan for maximum efficiency. She dropped him off at one end of Westgrill Drive, parked the car in the middle and started from the other end of the street. Part of their strategy is to cover the main streets first and then work their way into the small streets.

It's a routine Pinto has developed for the past four years to prepare for Independence Day. Pinto, a real estate agent with Realty Executives, says adorning his neighborhood with flags is his way of "getting the name out" for his business and giving thanks to the United States.

"I'm grateful that this country had opened the doors for us and my family," he says.

Raised in Cali, Colombia, by his aunt, Pinto said he has so many brothers and sisters that his parents couldn't afford to support him. Pinto began working at 10 years old to buy books for each school year.

"I grew up with limited opportunities and big dreams," Pinto said.

In 1966, he came to the United States, hoping to go to veterinary school. When Pinto, then in his early 20s, discovered tuition would cost him double his salary, his plans changed. He ended up working on Wall Street for a subsidiary of the New York Stock Exchange where he says, there was "no room for mistakes."

Attending night school helped him refine his English and understand fast-talkers on the telephone.

Now, with two grown children living in New York and a wife who says she supports her husband's unusual tradition "100 percent," Pinto and Helena relish in their annual project.

"We consider this our country," Helena said, to which Pinto added, > "Yes, in our hearts and in our minds." And that project grows with the population spurt every year. His first time, he put up an ambitious 800 flags. In four years, that number has more than doubled. This year, a couple of his colleagues are also helping to decorate the Palm Coast streets beginning with the letter "C." Pinto knows that if he wants to put up 2,000 flags in time for his Pine Lakes neighborhood to enjoy them on Independence Day, he must plan ahead. That's why his work schedule is always clear the week before the big day. And with help from his wife, sister-in-law, and nephew, Pinto and his mini-team spend a few nights working on the kitchen table, attaching his "compliments of" tags to the flags. The rest is just a matter of putting them up — another component Pinto has mastered. He holds the handle a quarter of the way from the bottom of the handle. With a firm grip facing downward, he quickly jerks it into the ground. If it hasn't rained in a while, Pinto says, the ground is harder and more difficult to pierce. Pine Lakes resident Fetu Grabowski looks forward to Pinto's flags every year. "It's the coolest thing," said Grabowski, who discovered hers Tuesday night. Pinto has even made an impression on people that haven't met him yet. Victor Uribe, a professor of Latin American history and law at Florida International University in Miami, says from his Impressions, Colombian immigrants tend to be more patriotic about their home country than the United States. "I imagine he's had a good experience in the country," Uribe said. "This is an eccentric guy in many respects." On this recent afternoon, there was just one glitch in the system. Pinto had forgotten to bring his extra car key, and had to wait for Helena to finish her half of the block. Still, after putting up 30 flags in 10 minutes, he knew there was much to be done before July Fourth. His ultimate goal, he says, is to one day decorate the entire city.

Photo | Palm Coast resident Carlos Pinto places a flag on the lawn of a neighbor Tuesday. The 64-year-old Colombian immigrant places more than 2,000 American flags on the lawns of his neighbors each year before the Fourth of July as a way of showing his patriotism for a country that offered his family so much opportunity for success. News-Tribune/ BRIAN MYRICK

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