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TUESDAY, MAY 15, 2012
FINAL EDITION

CRIME

Miami mystery emerges from an odd N.Y. shooting

■ The murder-suicide of two South Florida business partners in New York has police searching for a motive.

BY MICHAEL SALLAH
msallah@MiamiHerald.com

For years, Brian Weiss, the health-supplement king of South Florida, was targeted with more complaints than anyone else in the history of the South Florida Better Business Bureau.

The Florida attorney general's office slapped

him with huge fines. Thousands of angry customers, who were charged millions for products they never ordered, inundated his office with calls and letters.

And investors sued him over his health-products business.

• TURN TO SHOOTING, 2A

U.S.-COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

Trade pact brings promise of gains

■ The long-awaited free-trade deal now in effect between Colombia and the United States is expected to have big benefits for South Florida.

BY MIMI WHITEFIELD
AND JIM WYSS
mwhitefield@MiamiHerald.com

At 1 a.m. Tuesday, a cargo plane loaded with more than 1.2 million Colombian flowers was due at Miami International Airport — the first shipment under the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which took effect at midnight.

Several hours later, U.S. officials were planning to unveil one of the first U.S. products to arrive in Colombia under the pact: a Harley-

Davidson motorcycle. Years in the making, the trade pact — it eliminates most tariffs on trade with Colombia immediately and phases out the rest over time — is expected to give stability to the commercial relationship between the two countries and unleash new opportunities for both.

Everyone from flower importers, shipping lines and consultants to lawyers, investors and exporters is ex-

• TURN TO TRADE, 2A



AT MIAMI FREE ZONE: International Trading Center Director of Business David Jones, left and General Manager Clarence Bird Jr., right.

AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

THE AMERICAS, 4A

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U.S.-COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

U.S.-Colombia trade pact now reality

• TRADE, FROM 1A

pecting to gain.

The International Trade Commission estimates the deal will expand U.S. product exports by \$1.1 billion and support thousands of new jobs in the United States.

Colombia hopes the pact will increase trade and lure foreign companies and investors. President Juan Manuel Santos has said the agreement will create 300,000 new jobs over time.

South Florida is expected to be a big beneficiary. Colombia is the region's second-largest trading partner with \$8.3 billion in total trade last year and that number is expected to increase with the pact. Enterprise Florida estimates the deal will create 6,400 jobs annually in Florida and increase Florida-origin exports by 13.8 percent.

U.S. PRODUCTS

Julio A. Gomez — whose Doral company, Innovair, exports air-conditioning equipment — has been doing business in Colombia for three decades.

Most of the products he exports are Chinese-made, but with an eye toward the trade pact, he has been adding more U.S.-made equipment to his mix and has become the Latin American distributor for a U.S. manufacturer.

"We've been getting a lot of calls from Colombia lately. I think the free trade agreement will have an immediate impact on our business," Gomez said.

Also expecting a boost is Frontier Liner Services, which owns two cargo ships that run from the Colombian ports of Cartagena and Barranquilla to Port Everglades and Jacksonville. Last year, the company carried about 12,000 TEUS, or the equivalent of 600 20-foot containers.

But Frontier is expecting traffic to increase about 20 to 25 percent once the trade deal has gained traction, said Gonzalo Rojas, the line's representative in Colombia.

"The real opportunities of the deal come when you can take advantage of traffic in both directions," Rojas said. "I think we will see lots of raw materials coming in and finished goods heading out."

He expects Colombian clothing and shoe makers will increase production as the country sees an inflow



EMILY NICHOIT/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

BOON FOR FLOWER INDUSTRY: Victor Giorgini, of Equiflor, holds dozens of Colombian roses.

of agricultural goods, chemical products and machinery from the United States. The trade pact eliminates duties on more than 80 percent of U.S. industrial and consumer product exports with the remaining tariffs phased out over the next 10 years. Because these tariffs ranged from 74 percent to 14.6 percent, their elimination will immediately make U.S. exports more competitive.

More than half of current U.S. farm products such as soybeans, beef, bacon, cotton and nearly all fruits and vegetables can now enter Colombia duty-free, and tariffs on the rest will be dropped within 15 years.

Some Colombian producers, however, are worried U.S.-subsidized agricultural products could swamp local markets.

Colombian Agriculture Minister Juan Camilo Restrepo has said that corn, rice, bean and soy farmers, among others, could be hit by the deal. But he said the government is boosting its financial support to those sectors.

Colombia farmers, he said, have no choice but to modernize and compete. "We can't cry over spilt milk," he said. Neither he nor the government think

'I think the free trade agreement will have an immediate impact on our business.'

— Julio A. Gomez, owner of an export company in Doral

among them U.S. exporters. That's because most Colombian products already enter the U.S. duty-free under an Andean trade preferences agreement, which needs to be periodically renewed.

It lapsed last year just before Valentine's Day and wasn't renewed until October. In the meantime, Miami flower importers had to pay tariffs on flowers imported from Colombia and Ecuador, resulting in an extra \$2.5 million a month in duties. Coming as it did just before the most important flower holiday, it created cash flow problems for some importers. Those duties were to be refunded.

"Now the trade pact makes duty-free status permanent," said Christine Boldt, executive vice president of the Association of Floral Importers of Florida. "It allows for better long-term planning now that we don't have to worry year-to-year about lapses."

MIAMI FREE ZONE

The International Trade Center at the Miami Free Zone has been concentrating most of its recent efforts on getting ready for the trade pact, said David Jones, director of business development, ITC, which provides business incubator services, will be hosting a trade mission from Colombia this fall.

ITC also is providing office space and business services to several Colombia companies new to the U.S. market.

"The free trade agreement was the final push for those companies already well-established at home to try the U.S. market," Jones said.

This week, ITC will begin a series of meetings in 16 Colombian cities doing business in the United States.

"Free trade agreements tend to help companies on both sides become more international," said Mario Suarez, president of Americas Export Corp., a business development consulting firm.