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CORAL GABLES

FBI agents raid Sergio Pino’s Cocoplum home after he allegedly threatened his wife

BY TESS RISKI, JAY WEAVER AND DOUGLAS HANKS

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FBI agents raided the waterfront home of major Miami-Dade builder Sergio Pino and his company’s office in Coral Gables this week, according to the bureau’s field office in South Florida.

“I can confirm that the FBI conducted court ordered law enforcement activity at both of those locations,” FBI spokesman James Marshall said Friday, declining further comment.

The search of Pino's Cocoplum home, which he bought for \$4.2 million a decade ago, was carried out by an FBI squad on Monday night. The FBI conducted its search of the home builder's business at the same time.

The Miami Herald has learned that both searches are linked to an FBI investigation into alleged threats made by Pino against his wife, Tatiana. Over the past two years, Pino and the wife have been battling each other in a divorce case that is headed for trial in July, according to Miami-Dade Circuit Court records.

Sergio Pino's defense attorney, Sam Rabin, said Friday they're "aware of the investigation, have been cooperating and will continue to do so," declining further comment.

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The wife's attorney, Raymond Rafool, said they "fully support what the FBI and U.S. Attorney's Office is doing."



Sergio and Tatiana Pino. Cortesía/Elaine Palladino

A person in the neighborhood who witnessed the raid at Pino's home told the Herald they first heard a loud noise similar to a flash bang, followed by the same noise about 10 to 15 seconds later. After that, an agent announced through a megaphone that the FBI was carrying out a search and had a warrant.

The person, who did not want to be identified, said the agents were wearing tactical gear and carrying rifles and that the street was lined with law enforcement vehicles. The person also said there was a drone hovering over the back side of Pino's home, which faces a canal. The FBI was at the home for at least three hours, the person said.

"It was very well-coordinated," the person told the Herald. "It was a big raid."

While the FBI confirmed the searches of Pino's home at 142 Isla Dorada Blvd. and his business at 1805 Ponce de Leon Blvd., both in Coral Gables, the agency spokesman said he could not provide further information. It is unclear what specifically the FBI was searching for at Pino's properties — search warrants are not public records.



Sergio Pino's house located on 142 Isla Dorada, Coral Gables on Friday June 28th, 2024. Alexia Fodere for the Miami Herald

Pino, the son of Cuban immigrants who started his home-building empire after he and his father bought a plumbing supply business in the 1970s, did not immediately respond to email and phone messages seeking comment.

Pino, 67, president of Century Homebuilders Group, has for decades been known as a high-profile businessman with influential connections who has made large campaign donations to an array of local, state and federal politicians, dating back to the sprawling suburban explosion of Miami-Dade, the era of former County Mayor Alex Penelas, and the heyday of the powerful construction group, the Latin Builders Association. Century's website boasts that it has built more than 16,000 single-family homes from Tamiami to Florida City, making it the largest Hispanic-owned home builder in the nation.

Pino has come under the scrutiny of local, state and federal law enforcement in the past, but he's never been charged with a crime in connection with his home-building business and other investments or his prodigious political fund-raising activities.

In 2006, the Herald reported that a federal grand jury was investigating allegations that Pino played host to then-Miami-Dade Commissioner Jose "Pepe" Diaz on a

weekend jaunt to Cancún in exchange for his support of a large-scale project in Doral. Part of the investigation focused on a May 2004 fishing trip to Cancún aboard Pino's private jet. On the trip were Pino, Diaz and Carlos de Cespedes, co-founder of the Doral-based Pharmed, a medical supply giant.

Charges were never brought against anyone in the probe.

In 2005, the Herald reported on Pino's decision to pull out of the duty-free concessions business at Miami International Airport, which had operated for a decade and drawn the attention of investigators and prosecutors. Three years earlier, he and his minority partners in the duty-free joint venture at the airport came under fire in a report by the Miami-Dade County inspector general for earning more than \$14.6 million for their cut of a hefty airport contract despite having performed no actual work.

"The airport was guilty by association," Pino told the Herald before his Century Duty Free's contract expired at the county-owned MIA. "I never did anything wrong."

Pino's profits at the airport — on sales of about half a billion dollars over a decade — were small compared to his home building business, he said.

"There's nothing wrong with making money," Pino said. "If I had made \$40 million [at MIA], I'd be very proud of it . . . but [the airport] is too bureaucratic. Every time you want to do something, you have to hire lobbyists. It's a complicated business. It's not what I do best."

Nevertheless, the specter of controversy has hovered over Pino for years as he accrued clout by becoming one of South Florida's most influential political fundraisers. He has spent tens of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions for local, state and federal candidates.



Sergio Pino, the president, CEO and founder of Century Homebuilders Group, at the company's Midtown Doral residential complex sales center on Aug. 8, 2016. PATRICK FARRELL
pfarrell@MiamiHerald.com

Pino deftly mixes money, politics and philanthropy.

Pino was asked to join FIU's board of directors in 2003, and later announced a \$2 million endowment for the "Eugenio Pino and Family Global Entrepreneurship Center" in honor of his father, a bodega owner in Cuba who turned to odd jobs when he first arrived in Miami to support his family.

He also spearheaded the political campaign to torpedo slot machines in Miami-Dade County, and he donated his Le Jeune building in 2004 to headquarter President George W. Bush's re-election campaign in Miami.

Pino has also been a player in Coral Gables City Hall politics as a donor to Mayor Vince Lago. In 2019, businesses tied to Pino gave \$2,500 to Lago's political committee, Coral Gables First. Then in 2023, when Lago was running for reelection, Pino's Century Asset Management gave him \$1,000, according to campaign finance records. The developer has also supported Lago-backed commission candidates.

In March, two businesses tied to Pino gave a combined \$10,000 to a political committee seeking to get three referendums on the ballot this year, including a charter amendment to require voter approval for elected officials to raise their salaries.

Pino, twice married and the father of four, has cultivated his political and business savvy since his days as president of Latin Builders in 1990. He started in construction after he and his father bought a plumbing supply business in the late 1970s.



Sergio Pino's business located on 1805 Ponce de Leon, Coral Gables on Friday June 28th, 2024. Alexia Fodere for the Miami Herald

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Jay Weaver writes about federal crime at the crossroads of South Florida and Latin America. Since joining the Miami Herald in 1999, he's covered the federal courts nonstop, from Elian Gonzalez's custody battle to Alex Rodriguez's steroid abuse. He was part of the Herald teams that won the 2001 and 2022 Pulitzer Prizes for breaking news on Elian's seizure by federal agents and the collapse of a Surfside condo building killing 98 people. He and three Herald colleagues were 2019 Pulitzer Prize finalists for explanatory reporting on gold smuggling between South America and Miami.



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