

## Bucking the odds in Columbus

Doctoral study finds several traits common among Hispanic business owners that help them thrive

By Jan O'Daniel | Business First

It's Cinco de Mayo and Mexican immigrant Efrain

Quezada, 36, is busy working at El Vaquero on Olentangy River Road. He's busy bussing tables. Busy fixing drinks. Busy toting tubs of ice. Busy making sure the guests at a private party are happily sated.

But Quezada is no ordinary bus boy, bartender or server. He happens to be the owner of the 14-restaurant chain with stores across Ohio and in Michigan.

"I like hard work," Quezada says. Indeed. Working god-awful hours, seven-days-a-week helped him build an undeniably successful empire, and in the process brought an end to his six-year marriage to his first wife. "I worked too much," the now-remarried Quezada says. "Now I take Sundays off."

Like many Hispanic immigrants, Quezada came to this country in search of the proverbial American Dream, including owning a business and securing his family's future. He traded his engineering studies at the University of Guadalajara in Mexico for a migrant farm worker's wage and U.S. citizenship. He sold tacos from small carts with his uncle in an unsuccessful venture in West Virginia before relocating to Columbus, where he had no friends and no family.

The odds, as they say, were against him. And yet Quezada could be called an overachieving underdog among entrepreneurs, having survived the five-year failure rate experienced by 85 percent of startups.



## **Going Strong**

Not surprising says Chris Mendoza, 43, author of a study involving Quezada and 19 other Latino entrepreneurs. Mendoza, a former entrepreneur himself, spent 18 months interviewing successful Hispanic grocers, attorneys, restaurateurs and other small business owners for his doctoral dissertation. He concluded that hard work, perseverance, personal sacrifice and autonomy are important cultural traits common to successful Latino entrepreneurs like Quezada.

"The failure rate for Hispanic-owned businesses is higher than Caucasian firms, yet some Hispanics are able to defy the odds and succeed," says Mendoza. "I wanted to find out what enabled Hispanic business owners to keep their businesses operational beyond five years. Latinos are key contributors of our local and national economies. The future of America is built on the successes, passions and dreams of entrepreneurs like these."

If population statistics and marketing trends are any indication, Mendoza could be right about the nation's economic future and the Hispanics' role in it. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Hispanics (already the nation's largest minority group) are expected to reach 24 percent of the population or 102.6 million by 2050.

Such growth will likely mean an increase in Hispanics' purchasing power; some say it will reach \$1 trillion in the next three years. It will also mean an increase in the number of Hispanic-owned businesses, already growing at three times the national average.

And although only one percent of all businesses in Columbus are Hispanic-owned, the Columbus District Office of the U.S. Small Business Administration is looking to hire a business development specialist to help create program initiatives aimed at the Hispanic market.

## **Paying More Attention**

Tom Mueller, district director, says he's keenly aware of Columbus' growing Hispanic population. "We recognize it as a need and have put a request into Washington (D.C.) to have a Spanish-speaking person on staff."

But Mueller also says he believes, at least anecdotally, that the success secrets in Mendoza's study can be attributed to small business owners, regardless of race or ethnicity. "Autonomy. Tenacity. Optimism. These (characteristics) go across the board," he says. "I would say, however, that as far as minority groups go, they often start their own businesses in order to serve their communities."

And so it was with Realtor® Pilar Powell who began her real estate career focusing on the underserved Latino community. "I know there are a lot of hard-working people in the Hispanic community that want to own homes and few Spanish-speaking Realtors," says Powell.

"When I was growing up, my poppy had bought a house in Long Island, New York and he didn't have a Spanish-speaking Realtor. Within 3-1/2 years he left the house due to a lack of understanding about home ownership. My passion," she says, "is making sure that people are being looked after when they're buying a house."

Powell is a top-producing Realtor with Keller Williams Greater Columbus Realty and Ohio's 2005 Hispanic Business Woman of the Year. She also teaches English and Spanish home ownership classes as a volunteer instructor for Homes on the Hill.

Her clientele is now 55 percent non-Spanish speaking and 45 percent Latino; however she says 100 percent of her Hispanic business comes from family and friends of existing customers. "Part of being Hispanic is loyalty," she says. "Our philosophy is 'Do me right and I will always be your customer.'"

### **Loyalty**

Juan Jose Perez, 51, agrees that relationships are very important in the Hispanic culture. "The relationship really matters, especially in business," says the founding partner of Perez & Morris LLC, the only Hispanic-owned law firm in central Ohio. "I have Hispanic clients of essential wealth that will sign a blank check. That's trust. That's the epitome of having a relationship. I value that connection. If they are kind enough to want to use our firm, we should have so much respect for that trust."

Mendoza insists that the attitudes shared by Powell and Perez are culturally rooted. "The Hispanic business owners I interviewed provided a picture of the future as one

replete with frustration but also success and opportunity. They have a palpable passion and an unshakeable confidence. Most of them said 'I know exactly what I need to do and how to do it.'"

Entrepreneur Romi Hubbard oozes that kind of confidence with her purposeful walk, direct eye contact and matter-of-fact conversation. She works long and hard, dealing with clients and overseeing a worldwide team of contractors. Her company, Gracor Language Translation Services, specializes in translating textbooks, technical specifications, instruction manuals, consumer package leaflets and other business documentation into any of 50 languages. Gracor counts Mettler-Toledo and Nationwide among its local clients.

Puerto Rican-born Hubbard is driven to succeed and makes no apologies for it. "I came from a very hardworking family," she says. "My parents were self-employed physicians so it's part of my upbringing. My entire family is very driven. I never stop. I'm just so ambitious."

Family circumstances also fuel Alex Mendoza, who owns a campus-area apartment building, a residential construction and remodeling company, and three eastside McDonald's franchises.

Mendoza, 44 (no relation to study author Chris Mendoza), is a second-generation immigrant whose parents fled Cuba during the tumultuous 1950s. "My family had a farm in Cuba," he says. "They always worked very hard. Anything you got you got through hard work, not education."

"Seeing the way we grew up and the lack of resources and the inability to do the things we wanted to do and the struggles financially, economically and socially, my perception was that if you were successful, you could have the things you want. That's what drove me—not having, but the lack of."

Irrespective of age, background, education, experience or net worth, each of these entrepreneurs is a success by almost any standard. And according to the study, as well as their own life stories, Quezada, Powell, Perez, Hubbard, Mendoza and others

like them have two very important things working in their favor: a Latino heritage and an insatiable desire to work hard to secure their financial future.

-end-

### **Successful Traits**

Chris Mendoza outlined nine themes in his doctoral dissertation that he says are key factors behind the success of Columbus-area Hispanic-owned businesses in operation for at least five years.

- (1) family
- (2) autonomy
- (3) service
- (4) being involved in the business
- (5) community visibility
- (6) tenacity and perseverance
- (7) opportunity recognition
- (8) optimism
- (9) personal sacrifice