

[Hispanic community celebrates successes, diversity.](#) [Thomas Geyer.](#)

The Quad-City Times | Posted: Thursday, February 2, 2012 11:52 am



Henry Cisneros (Thomas Geyer/QUAD-CITY TIMES)

Alfredo and Virginia Castro say they are living the American dream. For 10 years, they have owned and operated El Mariachi Restaurante, a popular Mexican restaurant at 1317 15th St., Moline. But the American dream is not attainable without a primary ingredient that Virginia describes in a single word: Work.

The Castros were among 400 people who attended Friday night's annual Greater Quad-Cities Hispanic Chamber of Commerce banquet at the Quad-Cities Waterfront Convention Center in Bettendorf.

The keynote speaker was Henry Cisneros, the former mayor of San Antonio and the former secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD.

"We started selling our food out of a concession stand, a food trailer, for 12 years," Virginia said. "We worked festivals and events." "We were learning the restaurant business," Alfredo added. Opening El Mariachi Restaurante represented a big risk, but the couple knew they had a good product and they had worked to build a solid customer base. "We've been there for 10 years and we have 10 employees," Virginia said.

The Castros have created jobs not only for their employees, she said, but also at the companies that supply their restaurant with ingredients, ovens, blenders and utensils.

"It has taken blood, sweat and tears, but we are living the American dream," Virginia said. "Owning a restaurant is an all-day job," she added. But they are independent and know that their success depends upon their own initiative and drive. Laughing, Virginia said they have friends who own a restaurant, too. "They were telling us they're living the American dream and are now down to working half-days," she said. "We looked at them and asked: Half-days? And they said, yes, we're only working 12 hours a day."

The bottom line, she said, is that "The American dream is alive, but you've got to want it."

The Castros are one example among many success stories in the Quad-City Hispanic community, said Michael Reyes, the president of the Quad-Cities League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC. It is proof that diversity makes the Quad-Cities stronger, he added. "Hispanics have always been an important part of the Quad-City history," he said. Hispanics are integrated into the business community, are community leaders and have become a strong economic engine without which the Quad-Cities would be much poorer, he added. Reyes' message was echoed by Cisneros, who said that immigration is how this country was built and how it will prosper in the future.

The American dream is alive in the Hispanic community, he said. "Very few Americans ever have to face uprooting their families, leaving their homes, leaving their country, to go where they hope for a chance to work and educate their children and build a life," he said. "It takes a lot of courage, it takes a lot of gumption, to move to a place where you're always feeling like an outsider to start a new life."

The latest census numbered the Hispanic population of the United States at 50 million, Cisneros said. "It will be well over 100 million by 2050." That represents a powerful economic engine for the country's future, he added. Immigrants to the United States are usually young, strong and eager, he said.

"You look at Germany, Spain, Greece and the economic problems they have now," Cisneros said. "They're going to have a tough time fighting their way out. The native populations are getting older and they're not replacing themselves. They're also not gaining immigrants."

Bob Ontiveros, the founder and chairman of the board of Group O in the Quad-Cities, said that Cisneros brought the Hispanic community of San Antonio together and successfully integrated it into the mainstream economy.

Headquartered in Milan, Group O, founded in 1974, is one of the largest Hispanic-owned companies in the U.S. and is a global provider of marketing, packaging and supply chain solutions.

Integrating Hispanic-led businesses into the economic mainstream is one of the goals of the Hispanic chamber, Ontiveros said.

Many Hispanic businesses in the Quad-Cities have been started by entrepreneurs who had a dream and have "created jobs and spurred investment," he said. Because business loans are more difficult to arrange, Ontiveros added, "A lot of those businesses have been built on sweat equity."

Cisneros said that immigration provides a strong future for America, provided those immigrants receive the access to capital, training and education. "Immigrants want to contribute," he said, adding that it is time the United States revises its outdated immigration policy.

Immigrants do not take away jobs, as some people believe, he said, adding that it is a prejudice based on either fear or the "I got mine" attitude. "It's easy to forget the role immigrants have played in the building of this country and hard to fight the temptation to pull up the drawbridge once we're in the castle," he said.

Companies that hire immigrants, Cisneros added, "are getting the people with the gumption and courage to work and prosper. They have a spirit that demands respect."

#### **Hispanic Chamber 2012 awards**

- Awards given at Friday's annual meeting of the Greater Quad-Cities Hispanic Chamber of Commerce include:
- Corporate Sponsor of the Year, Highest Level Corporate support: State Farm Insurance
- Corporate Citizen Award, Impacting the Hispanic Community and Business Nationwide: Henry Cisneros
- Corporate Partner Award, Extraordinary Resources and Services: Vista International Operations
- Hispanic Small Business of the Year, Excelling at Management and Growth: Terrostar
- Community Leadership Award, Programs Impacting the Hispanic Community and Business: Community Health Care Inc.
- Ambassador of the Year, Promoting, providing, and connecting to resources and extraordinary volunteerism: Lee Vasquez

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