

# A helping hand way up

By Sean M. Grady

It's a typically American challenge. How do you help business owners in an ethnic group — some whose families have been in the United States for generations, others who came to this country only recently — succeed both in their communities and in society at large?

At the Nevada Small Business Development Center — a statewide business assistance program of the University of Nevada, Reno and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas — staff members help by getting as much information into business owner hands as possible, and by connecting them to other folks who want to help them succeed.

A case in point:

Ever since the 1990s, the most-frequented zone of Latino-owned businesses in the Truckee Meadows has been the Wells Avenue corridor from Shopper's Square on Plumb Lane to Second Street in Reno. Other business owners have set up shop on such streets as Reno's Peckham Lane or on Prater Way in Sparks.

However, when Jesus Gutierrez started up his restaurant, Fresh Mex, in 2005, he chose a prominent storefront in the Keystone Shopping Center, placing his business right next to the heavily trafficked intersection of Keystone Avenue and Fifth Street.

Fresh Mex is the embodiment of a plan he and his brother, Gerardo, put together during the years they worked at the Eldorado and Silver Legacy hotel-casinos in downtown Reno.

The brothers had their future plans in mind when they moved from Mexico to the United States in the early 1980s.

"We always thought about running our own restaurant," Jesus Gutierrez says. "It was part of the dream."

The Gutierrezes opened their business using their own savings, without taking a business loan. This practice is common among



Photos by Sean Grady

*Nevada Small Business Development Center helped Jesus Gutierrez, owner of Fresh Mex, with a business plan and signage, key ingredients for business success.*

Latino emigrant business owners: some distrust banks after seeing their homeland's money drastically devalued, while others simply do not know that such assistance is available.

However their savings could go only so far, and that distance did not include the large outdoor signage that Fresh Mex needed to draw attention to itself. Instead, the brothers resorted to less visible measures that did not catch the eye nearly as well.

Fortunately, the restaurateurs learned of the Nevada Small Business Development Center, where — thanks to a donation from Wells Fargo Bank — the center and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Northern Nevada had a program in place to help Latino business owners.

In Fresh Mex's case, solving the main problem was simple. The center put the restaurant in touch with Signtronix, a California-based sign company specializing in affordable signage for small businesses.

Better still, when the sign company

learned the full extent of the brothers' story, it provided the new signage — a tall, post-mounted plastic sign and a set of banners for the restaurant's front and side walls — at no charge.

At the same time, the center helped Fresh Mex put together a formal business plan and took other steps to help improve the restaurant.

The extra help has turned out to be a boon, one that continues to improve how the restaurant does business.

"Any question you have, those folks up there have an answer for you," Jesus says.

And what happened to the restaurant's business after the new signage was in place? "It went up by about 300 percent," he says.

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