

Former Nordstrom piano man still entertaining the South Sound

Juan Perez of University Place was cut loose from Nordstrom in January, but fans demanded an encore

By EVA REVEAR

Staff writerDecember 24, 2013

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Juan Perez plays the piano at El Gaucho restaurant in Tacoma on Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2013. Perez had played piano at the Tacoma Nordstrom store for 27 years until he was abruptly let go in January.

LUI KIT WONG — Staff photographer [Buy Photo](#)

When Nordstrom let Juan Perez go from his 27-year job playing the piano for shoppers early this year, he knew he wasn't ready to stop sharing music with people in Tacoma.

Tacoma agreed, and Perez keeps busy playing at least five days a week at several venues around the area. He said he still meets nice people everyday, no matter where he's playing.

"For me, it's the same," Perez said. "As long as you are friendly, it doesn't matter where you are."

Nordstrom decided to replace live music with recorded tunes. But within days of the 65-year-old pianist's final song on the main floor of the Tacoma Mall store, Perez received a job offer from El Gaucho in downtown Tacoma.

James Capangpangan, general manager of the restaurant, said he received several calls and emails from customers the same night The News Tribune published a story in January about Perez leaving Nordstrom. They suggested El Gaucho hire Perez.

The restaurant had been looking for another pianist, so Capangpangan was happy to make the call the next day. Perez has since played there three days a week.

“It was one of those serendipitous moments,” he said, “It was definitely meant to be.”

Perez learned to play the piano at age 7 in the Philippines capital of Manila, where he grew up. When he was 19, he played for the USO during a Vietnam tour and went on to play at the Hilton Hotel in Guam. In 1985, he moved to Tacoma; his family joined him shortly thereafter.

He now lives in University Place with his wife of 39 years. The couple raised 10 children here and have seven grandchildren.

Perez also continues to play at Bellevue Square, the Tacoma Golf & Country Club, Tacoma Yacht Club and Western State Hospital Chapel. He also teaches music and choir three days a week at Holy Rosary School in Tacoma, where his children attended. He started that job in 1987.

"I enjoy dealing with the kids there. They are fun to teach,” said Perez.

The rest of his time is filled with private events and parties at places such as the Tacoma Dome and the Greater Tacoma Convention & Trade Center. He said he still cannot believe that he’s so successful.

“I’m just so happy working,” he said. “Because of God’s blessings, there’s always hope for everyone.”

Capangpangan said he often sees Perez out on the El Gaucho floor between sets shaking hands with customers and thanking them. Some guests come in specifically to hear him play.

“He’s been such a huge staple here in Tacoma,” Capangpangan said.

Though Perez wants to play the piano for the rest of his life, he hopes to leave his various gigs in a year or two to do mission work for the Catholic Church. He would like to go home to the Philippines or to Africa.

“I want to give hope to everybody,” he said. “And it will be an adventure also.”

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