

Kevin Riordan: La Esperanza in Lindenwold an immigrant success story

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Body

La Esperanza's vivid rose-and-blue exterior puts it on the map. And the inside **story** of this landmark **Lindenwold** restaurant is pretty colorful, too.

"It's the essence of immigration," says manager Saul Cordova Jr., a 31-year-old Stratford resident.

On any given day at **La Esperanza** (which loosely translates as "hope"), you'll find Saul; his sisters Maricela, Claudia, and Norma; their parents, Saul Sr. and Susana; and various other Cordovas, most of whom live in the cluster of towns around **Lindenwold**. Another brother, Alejandro, pitches in as needed.

Originally from Tecumatlan in the state of Puebla, Mexico, the Cordovas have done more than build a solid reputation with **La Esperanza**. They've cemented their bonds with each other as well.

"We're so strong together," Saul Jr. says, "because we were separated for many years."

Like many **immigrant** families, including mine, the Cordovas came to the United States in stages. Longtime restaurant worker Saul Sr. arrived in California and then moved to New York in the early 1980s, followed by his wife (a skilled home cook) two years later and their kids some years after that.

I think of my grandfather James **Riordan**, who came here from Wales in 1922. My grandmother Naomi arrived at Ellis Island on Christmas of that year, having left my infant father in the care of her mother. My father joined them six years later.

Saul Jr. was 10 when the family finally was reunited in a two-bedroom apartment in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn. He spoke no English but mastered the language and earned a degree from the State University of New York.

No wonder he's a champion of the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act, which would enable children of illegal **immigrants** to use military service or higher education as a path to citizenship.

"A lot of these kids were brought here without their knowledge," Saul Jr. says. "Kids who have been here since they were very young can't go back. It's a Catch-22."

Introduced in 2001, the DREAM Act recently was approved by the House. But it faces a tough road in the Senate, as our national struggle over how best to handle illegal immigration goes on and on.

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When they got here in the early 1980s, Saul and Susana were undocumented, too. But they obtained citizenship under the sweeping reform measure signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1986.

"My parents became legal with the amnesty," Saul Jr. says, adding that citizenship opened doors for him and his siblings as well.

"If I didn't have the opportunity to go to college, and my brother didn't have the opportunity, I don't think we would be as successful," he says. "What college did for us was, it opened up our horizons. It helped us to think bigger."

Consider: **La Esperanza** has tripled in size - from 30 to 90 seats - since it opened in 2002.

"We opened it so my dad would have a job," Saul Jr. says wryly. "We never expected it to take off."

It's midafternoon and the restaurant is quiet, unless you count the energetic blend of ranchera, norteña, and Mexican pop songs on the soundtrack. Three generations of Cordovas join the conversation, with Saul Jr. translating.

I ask his father for the secret to running a successful restaurant.

"It's a secret!" Saul Sr. winks.

I try again with Maricela, the oldest of the siblings and the one in charge of the kitchen. She's there by 7 a.m. seven days a week.

The 46-year-old Laurel Springs resident is a bit more forthcoming; in fact, she's so expressive, I swear I grasp what she's saying even though I don't speak Spanish. And Saul Jr.'s summary bears this out.

"The love you put in brings the flavor to life," Maricela says. "You cook like you're going to eat it, or someone in your family is going to eat it. The love you put in comes out on the plate."

Some things don't get lost in translation.

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