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A dream that became a reality in baked goods

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

A lifelong dream of starting his own business has come to fruition for former migrant farm worker and mechanic, Salvador Magana. Magana, 59, and his family have made their way from the fields of California to ownership of Dos Milpas, a Latin American bakery, restaurant and convenience store in Fellsmere.

The Indian River Chamber of Commerce named Dos Milpas as Latin Business of the Year, recognizing the Magana family for its contributions to the Fellsmere community. The business donates food to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church's food bank, runs a soccer league for more than 200 children and regularly donates food and money to other Fellsmere organizations and events.

Seeking a better life, Salvador Magana moved his wife and two babies to the United States in 1970, all with permanent-worker status. They were a true migrant family, based in Oxnard, Calif., for more than 17 years but traveling in California and Oregon to pick crops. Two more children arrived and all four worked in the fields while attending school and graduating from high school.

"Dad taught us how to work," said Maria Perez, the only daughter.

Magana, who finished the sixth grade in Mexico, also attended a trade school and became a mechanic for Toyota.

In 1987, seeking a lower cost of living, the Magana family followed relatives to Fellsmere. Magana worked for Fellsmere Farms, now Sun-Ag, as a foreman for 10 years.

Bitten by the entrepreneurial bug, he also arranged delivery of tortillas from a Hanes City factory and began selling them door to door. When his cousin, Herlindo, opened a bakery in Fellsmere in 1997, Salvador agreed to work for him. By 2000, he was ready to strike out on his own and founded Dos Milpas.

Magana's eldest son, Francisco, had his own landscaping business, but joined his father as a partner in the new business along with another son, Salvador, Jr., a Wellington resident.

The younger Salvador Magana is a Motorola engineer who uses his master's degree in business from the University of Florida to oversee the finances for his family's business. Maria worked at several other jobs and brought her bookkeeping experience back to the family business in 2005.

The senior Magana had seen the tortilla production process in Mexico, and imported two tortilla-making machines from his homeland. He became one of the first tortilla manufacturers in Florida.

He and Francisco cold-called Mexican restaurants and convenience stores all over Florida to gain customers. Their success grew thanks to their products' obvious freshness.

"We make ours daily, so they're fresh, unlike the big companies," Maria said.

The major tortilla companies take advantage of economies of scale to undercut small independents like Magana on price. The big firms buy flour in bulk at lower prices and crank out hundreds of thousands of tortillas each day from large machines.

Along with two employees who are not related, family members produce on average 35,000 tortillas a day, four days a week. They mix corn meal, water and lime and insert the tortilla mixture into the machine that rolls out the final products. Maria and her mother stack, pack and box the tortillas for delivery.

Dos Milpas' bakery chef also turns out an assortment of Mexican baked goods, including telera (sandwich buns), conchas (shells) and bollillos (sub rolls), as well as a bevy of pastries.

Francisco personally delivers Dos Milpas baked goods west to Tampa, north to Gainesville, south to West Palm Beach and around the Treasure Coast.

Although Dos Milpas bakery got off to a strong start, business slowed down after Sept. 11, 2001, according to Francisco. In contrast to the current debate over illegal immigrants coming to this country in large quantities, Francisco says the truth was many Hispanic customers began returning to Latin America after 9-11 in the wake of increased illegal immigration enforcement and forced deportations.

Mexican restaurant and store owners began going out of business and, beset with a steep increase in flour prices, the tortilla business slipped more than 40 percent over the past few years.

To stay in business, the Maganas went in a new direction. In 2006, they opened Dos Milpas restaurant and convenience store in a space opened up when they cut back to one from two tortilla-making machines in the bakery.

The restaurant has done well, opening at 5 a.m. for breakfast and serving lunch until 2 p.m. Many of the patrons are field hands, so the Maganas expect business will be brisk from now until June when the pickers move north.

Francisco and Maria say their dad is a great cook. He manages the two cooks and orders all the products for the restaurant and store, in addition to handling all the bakery orders through his many customer contacts built up over the past seven years.

Francisco estimates that bakery revenues now make up just 60 percent of the total, with 25 percent of sales coming from the restaurant and 15 percent from the store.

Like many entrepreneurs, Salvadore, Sr. and Francisco Magana put in long hours. They open the restaurant at 5 a.m. and are usually at the store until 9 p.m., six days a week each.

"I love to work," Salvador said.

Francisco says the business is doing OK, but the business not making what they should. Still, he has great faith in his father, who is not so sure about the future.

"The economy is down, construction jobs are down. Many Latin American people took their savings and went home to their countries," Salvador said. "We're just going day by day. We don't know what's coming in the next two or three years."

Francisco vows the family won't quit.

"I'm almost 40, but I still listen to my dad," Francisco said. "We'll work it out together. We never lose faith."

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