

March 16, 2007

Guatelinda owner helping to shape a better community

BYLINE: **Bill Church** BJ contributor

Back in the Guatemala of the 1980s, a country racked by civil wars, military coups and bloodshed, Andres Cruz dreamed of being a businessman.

A social worker with the health department in his hometown, Cruz believed that if he put forth the energy he would realize his dream someday.

Today, he's the proprietor of Guatelinda, a successful Indiantown grocery store and restaurant featuring Latin products and homemade Guatemalan dishes serving the close-knit Guatemalan and Mexican communities.

Cruz does the cooking, turning out one soup and three entrees every day, one each with pork, beef and chicken. His wife works in the restaurant and his three children have all put in time after school and on weekends.

Andres Cruz dispenses more than Latin American products and Guatemalan food. Through the years, Cruz has become a leader for Indiantown's Guatemalan community.

Working with the Guatemalan consulate in Miami, he has helped with human-rights issues and the complicated process of obtaining legal status in the United States. Many immigrants sought political asylum as they fled Guatemala's 36 years of governmental and social upheaval.

His close ties to the consulate helped in February when he organized and sponsored the visit of Guatemalan President Oscar Berger to Indiantown.

The Guatemalans of Indiantown have repaid him with their loyalty. Cruz started his store by borrowing money from members of the community. He has paid them all back.

Cruz estimates that sales have doubled since he first opened the store in 1998 and the restaurant in 1999. He credits his success to the relationships he has built within the Latin community.

"I like Indiantown because it's a small town, like my hometown in Guatemala," Cruz said. "The community goes to the same church and we help each other out when needed."

It's been a long road for Cruz, as it has been for many Guatemalan immigrants. He crossed through Mexico and came to the United States in 1983, leaving behind his wife and two children. His first stop was California, where he became a laborer.

Three years later, he made the cross country trek to Indiantown, which had attracted a number of Guatemalans. He began by picking vegetables and fruit, and he and his family gained legal status under the amnesty provisions of the U.S. Immigration Reform and Control

Act of 1986.

Cruz learned English and began volunteering at Indiantown's Holy Cross Catholic Church service center, helping the Mayan Guatemalan community. Cruz points out that many Guatemalans speak one of the 22 different Mayan dialects, rather than Spanish.

With his background in social work, Cruz changed his avocation into his vocation by founding a not-for-profit group called Corn Maya with his wife, his brother-in-law and Geronomo Camposeco, who now heads the organization from Jupiter.

With assistance from University of Florida Anthropology Professor Allan Burns, they earned grants from foundations and raised money through events like dances and cultural events.

Cruz headed Corn Maya for nine years until 1995, when he opened a for-profit service center offering phone booths and help with phone calls to Guatemala and Mexico. He added CDs and cassettes, then clothes and shoes.

A temporary detour took him to Fort Pierce where he opened a gas station and small grocery store which failed. In 1998, Cruz began renting his present location on Warfield Boulevard and Guatelinda began selling Latin groceries, adding the restaurant in 1999.

Cruz' dreams of success are coming to fruition. His oldest daughter is attending Jacksonville University and another daughter is soon to graduate from South Fork High School and join her sister at Jacksonville. His youngest is a 12-year-old son at home.

"If you keep working on your dreams, one day it will be," Cruz said. "Today, I dream my kids will be professionals."

Copyright, 2008, Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers, Used here with permission. No additional reproduction or distribution of this article in any form is permitted without the written approval of Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers (<http://www.tcpalm.com>).