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July 1, 2007
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Daily News of Los Angeles
Los Angeles Daily News

Coming to AMERICA

Immigrant lives the dream, helps shape economy

BY BARBARA CORREA
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Immigrant rights' supporters like to point out America's strong tradition of foreign entrepreneurs — from steel magnate Andrew Carnegie to Yahoo!'s Jerry Yang — and their contribution to U.S. economic might.

Southern California draws immigrants from across the globe and many newcomers have shaped the American dream with their own hands.

Nato Flores, founder and president of Tower General Contractors in Sunland, was born in Zacatecas, Mexico, and moved to California with his family when he was 5. His father worked as a grape picker before relocating to Los Angeles to become a concrete mason. While still in grade school, Flores started working with his father building apartments in the San Fernando Valley.

That experience helped him land an internship and scholarship from Rockwell International, and he graduated from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, with an engineering degree.

After spending five years at various engineering firms, Flores started thinking about becoming his own boss.

A trip to Saudi Arabia was the catalyst that finally pushed him to open his own business in 1985. His employer at the time, Ameron International, had sent him to the Middle East to work on concrete pipe systems. After spending four months there, Flores had had enough.

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ENTREPRENEUR:

Love the work you do, and do it well

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"(The culture) was so oppressive to me," he said. "When I got back to L.A., I got down on my knees and kissed the ground at the airport."

When the boss asked him to return to Saudi Arabia for another work assignment, Flores decided the time was right to quit his job and launch Tower Construction.

Today, the company is among the largest Latino-owned construction firms in the city of Los Angeles, with 25 employees and about \$45 million under contract.

Earlier this year, Tower Construction won a contract to build a memorial to the seven crew members who lost their lives when the Columbia space shuttle exploded in 2003. The Columbia Memorial Space Science & Learning Center will be built in Downey on the exact site where Flores first took courses at Rockwell as a high school student. In a recent interview, Flores reflected on what has helped him as a successful entrepreneur.

Love the business you're going into, Flores advises budding entrepreneurs. "If you just do it for the money,"

Help for entrepreneurs

If you have an idea for a business, a good place to start is your local small business development center.

- Inland Empire Small Business Development Center: www.iesbdc.org
- County of San Bernardino Economic Development Agency: www.sbcounty.gov/opportunityca
- Valley Economic Development Center: www.vedc.org
- Long Beach Business Development Center: www.longbeach.gov/ecdc/

If you have a start-up business, seek the support of a local business incubator, which may provide office space, access to capital, training and mentoring.

- CHARO Business Incubator, East Los Angeles: www.charocorp.com/incubator.htm
- Business Technology Center, Altadena: www.labtc.org
- Pasadena Enterprise Center: www.pec-sbi.org
- IdealLab, Pasadena: www.idealab.com/Pasadena

advices budding entrepreneurs. "If you just do it for the money,"

it's going to be hard to make money, because you're going to hate what you do."

In opening any business, it also helps to be a workaholic. For years, Flores worked Saturdays. He doesn't do that much anymore, but he still works a good nine-hour day all week. And he loves it.

Know your numbers

One thing Flores has learned over the years is the importance of keeping track of the business side.

"After about 12 years and \$5 million (in sales), I found out that you really need to concentrate on the financial end of the company," he said. After being in business for more than a decade, Flores went back to school, taking accounting classes at UCLA.

"If you have good profit margins, the banks like you better, so you can get more credit. Your bonding companies are going to give you more, and you can bid (on) the bigger projects."

Pay for talent

When he started out, Flores was tempted to keep salaries at modest levels. But he's learned over the years that paying people well turns up on the bottom line.

"I've become a believer that you have to pay what people are worth," he said. "We have bonuses based on performance. If the company makes its money and there's 2 percent left over, a portion goes to the management team. On a \$5 million project, that's a lot of money." At the same time, underbidding a project makes a company look cheap.

"People think, 'If I sell really low, they'll give me more work.' I don't think that really works," he said. "If you go in too thin, you can't do a good job."

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