

Daily News

DailyNews.com



Victor Carlos came to the United States as an illegal immigrant 25 years ago. He worked his way up at Nat's coffee shop in Van Nuys from busboy to owner and now has a second restaurant in Canoga Park.

Hans Gutknecht
Staff Photographer

Recipe for success includes hard work with dash of loyalty

The 62-year-old Jewish coffee shop owner and the 18-year-old Mexican busboy formed a close bond working together at Nat's Early Bite restaurant.

Nat Elias liked the kid's work ethic and appreciated how he never complained when he had to pull an extra shift at the Van Nuys restaurant, sometimes working 10 hours a day, six days a week.

But Victor Carlos would have



DENNIS
McCARTHY

worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week if Nat had asked him to.

Why not? Nat treated him like a son, and Victor had no father in this new country after paying \$300 to be smuggled across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Nat knew Victor was in the country illegally, but he knew something else, too.

In the 40 years Nat had been in

DENNIS/A13

“...hundreds of busboys, dishwashers, waiters, and cooks - but this kid worked harder and smarter than any of them.”

the restaurant business in Los Angeles, he had hired hundreds of busboys, dishwashers, waiters, and cooks — but this kid worked harder and smarter than any of them.

That's why over the four years in the mid-1980s that Victor worked for Nat, he kept getting promoted — from busboy/dishwasher to waiter to finally head cook.

When Nat got ready to take off his apron for good in 1987, Victor was the first person he told aside from his own family.

“Nat called me in and said he was going to sell,” Victor said Friday while cooking up an omelet at Nat's Early Bite.

“I said, ‘Oh, no! Am I still going to have a job?’” he recalled with a smile.

Nat told Victor that he hoped so, because he wanted to sell the restaurant to him.

“I told him, ‘Nat, I'm making \$20,000 a year; I can't afford to buy your restaurant.’”

But Nat told the kid not to worry about it, he'd take a note and give Victor all the time he needed to pay off the \$150,000 selling price.

There was one thing Nat wouldn't wait for, though. The deal was off if Victor didn't get his green card and become a U.S. citizen.

The timing couldn't have been more perfect. Then-President Ronald Reagan had just signed into law an amnesty program granting many individuals unlawfully in the U.S. an opportunity to gain lawful permanent status.

Victor took the president up on the offer and got his green card. He became a U.S. citizen in 1993.

Heck of an accomplishment for a kid who didn't make it past second grade in Mexico and taught himself to speak English by listening to customers order food at Nat's.

He made \$60,000 that first year taking over Nat's business, and paid off the note to his old boss in five years.

“A lot of people told me I was crazy, a Mexican guy buying a restaurant where most of the customers were Jewish and wouldn't stay with me,” Victor said Wednesday, taking a break from cooking at Nat's West in Canoga Park — the second Nat's restaurant he now owns in the San Fernando Valley.

He could have named his new coffee shop Victor's, or maybe after his wife, Esperanza, or

daughter, Heidi, an honor student at Notre Dame High School in Sherman Oaks.

But he stuck with Nat's to honor his old boss, who died three years ago at age 79.

“My husband always had a special place in his heart for Victor. He always felt he deserved everything he got,” Yvonne Elias said.

And Victor said all those people who thought he shouldn't buy the restaurant have been proved wrong.

“Our Jewish customers stayed. Nothing changed,” Victor said. “I'm still in the kitchen making the matzo ball soup.”

His other cook is making \$1,000 a week, while the busboys and dishwashers are paid well above minimum wage.

“I remember what it was like

before, working for Nat, when you're making a couple of hundred dollars a week and can't afford to get sick,” said Victor, now 47.

“Nat didn't want that for his employees and I don't want it for mine.”

Before Nat died, Victor would talk to him on the phone at least once a month, or visit him up in Ojai where he had retired with Yvonne.

“I knew he was proud of me,” Nat Elias' former busboy, dishwasher, waiter and cook said as he walked back into the kitchen.

“Nat would always laugh and tell me he sold too cheap.”

Dennis McCarthy's column appears Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. dennis.mccarthy@dailynews.com, 818-713-3749

“Oh, no! Am I still going to have a job?”