

High Profiles

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'I knew I could talk my way into anything.'

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but I know I can make it. Even when I was a kid, it was that way. My parents bought me a little training bike with big wheels. I wouldn't touch it. I insisted on a big bike with 10 gears and brakes on the handlebars. I didn't want that baby thing. I wanted to ride with the big boys."

The 38-year-old says he has never changed. He's a 10th-grade dropout who, nine years later, talked a bank into lending him \$56,000 to start his first restaurant. By then, he had passed a high-school equivalency test and was a student at El Centro Junior College.

His economics professor, Dean Van Trease, says Mariano is a student he's not likely to forget.

"He always had that phenomenal drive to get somewhere," Van Trease says. "I don't remember what kind of grades Mariano made. But I'll tell you one thing. I was one of the first to buy stock in his company."

Mariano was 27 when he opened his first restaurant in Old Town Shopping Village in 1971. There are now three more locations — downtown, Arlington and the Cabrito Cafe in Highland Park.

His favorite story about his first restaurant involves how he invented the frozen margarita.

"Margaritas were very popular in the restaurant right from the start," he explains. "My father gave me his secret recipe, and it's dynamite. But I started getting a lot of complaints. It seems the bartender wasn't consistent. 'So I realized I needed to make the drink in big enough quantities to always keep it the same. I just wasn't sure how to do that."

"Then one day I was in a 7-Eleven store, and I saw a bunch of kids drinking Slurpees. I realized that's what I wanted to do with the margaritas."

"I bought a machine for soft-serve ice cream and adapted it for cocktails. That's how the frozen margarita was born."

"The drink became so popular at my restaurants, I decided to put a frozen margarita mix on the market two years ago. But first I had to work out a way to do it."

WHAT HE came up with is a plastic bucket three-fourths full of margarita mix. The customer is supposed to fill the rest with tequila and then put it in the freezer.

"I used the same principle that people use when making ice cream without an ice cream freezer. It freezes to the perfect slushy consistency. It doesn't have to be churned or anything. Then you just scoop it up and serve it in

glasses, just like ice cream.

"It's in liquor and grocery stores all over Texas right now. I've applied for a patent, and we are getting ready to start a separate Mariano's Drink Mix Company to market it nationally."

Mariano then interrupts the interview to offer a tour of his house. He's not a person to sit still for long.

"It was a fantasy of mine long before I bought it," he says of his 2-story home. "I believe in living my fantasies. I do it whenever I can. I have a crow's nest on top of the house because I like to be up high. It inspires me. It gives me ideas. But then everything gives me ideas. I have to carry around a tape recorder just to make sure I keep all those ideas."

Mariano enters his "screening" room.

"Ever since I was a little kid, I wanted to have my own movie theater. I get first-run movies here and show them to my friends."

He opens a panel in the wall to reveal four videotape recorders and a videodisc player. Then he points out a wall with four doors, each with a round window in the middle.

"I PUT those doors in here because that's what theater doors looked like when I was a kid," he says. "I've also had a palm tree painted on the wall for the same reason. I wanted this room to be authentic."

Mariano says he puts up elaborate decorations at Christmas. He says there's always a traffic jam of people trying to get a better look. He puts a giant Santa Claus on the roof. But this is no ordinary Santa. The flamboyant restaurateur's version is painted with Mariano's face, sombrero and bullet belt.

"But it's Christmas," he says, "so instead of bullets, the Santa is wearing candy canes."

He says he would have adored such decorations as a kid.

"Only when I was a kid," he says, "I think there were some times my parents were sure they'd never live to see me this successful. Let's face it, I was a wild kid."

Mariano Martinez was born in the Little Mexico section of Dallas.

"But my parents moved us to East Dallas when I was six. There was just me and my sister, who was 13 months younger. My parents both worked in restaurants, so our grandparents took care of us. As a result, I couldn't speak English until I started school."

Mariano says his father, Mariano Sr., always encouraged him to work hard.

"He never tried to make me into anything. He said I could be wha-



Mariano Martinez

He was short on cash and education, but never on confidence. So he gambled on a restaurant. Now he owns four.

By Marilyn Schwartz

MARIANO MARTINEZ says he adores being the center of attention. He works at it. He thrives on it.

As president of Mariano's Restaurants Inc., a Mexican food chain, he prominently displays his portrait in each of his four restaurants. But no 3-piece suit for Mariano. In the pictures, he has chosen to appear as a Hollywood version of a Mexican *bandito*, complete with giant sombrero and flashing bullet belt. The restaurateur likes the costume so much, he has kept it as part of his wardrobe.

"That outfit is my trademark," he says. "I wear it on special occasions, and everybody knows Mariano. It's made me a celebrity. I don't even have to put a last name on my American Express."

Mariano also points out another distinction. He claims he invented the frozen margarita. He says this was so successful, he then packaged a mix for the frozen drink. His *bandito* portrait is displayed prominently on the label.

THERE ARE three separate phone lines in Mariano's East Dallas home, nestled on two acres of land behind a vine-covered fence. The phones ring incessantly. He finally takes two off the hook.

"If I don't, you'll never get the interview," he says.

Dressed in a navy blue polo shirt and bright red Izod pants, he explains, "I've always wanted to be somebody big, somebody you notice right off. I mean it's a real need."

Once, he tried to fulfill that need by trying to become a recording star. But record companies weren't exactly clamoring to sign him up.

"No problem, I just recorded a song myself," he says. "It cost me \$7,000 to get that record out, but it was worth it. I did the record singing three different versions of *La Bombe*. Jesse Lopez was singing with me."

"My only regret is that record didn't become a big hit. I don't understand why it didn't. Everybody loves *La Bombe*."

Mariano says he's the kind of person who will keep pushing until he gets what he wants. He just doesn't give up. To keep inspired, he listens to a motivational tape every morning.

"I always go for more than most people think I can handle. They might have doubts,

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Tosca

High Profile

Mariano Martinez

Born: Aug. 5, 1944, in Dallas.

Occupation: Restaurateur.

Favorite ways to relax: Golf, tennis, singing and playing music.

Ambition: To own and live on a big ranch.

Likes: Learning new things.

Dislikes: Being around negative people.

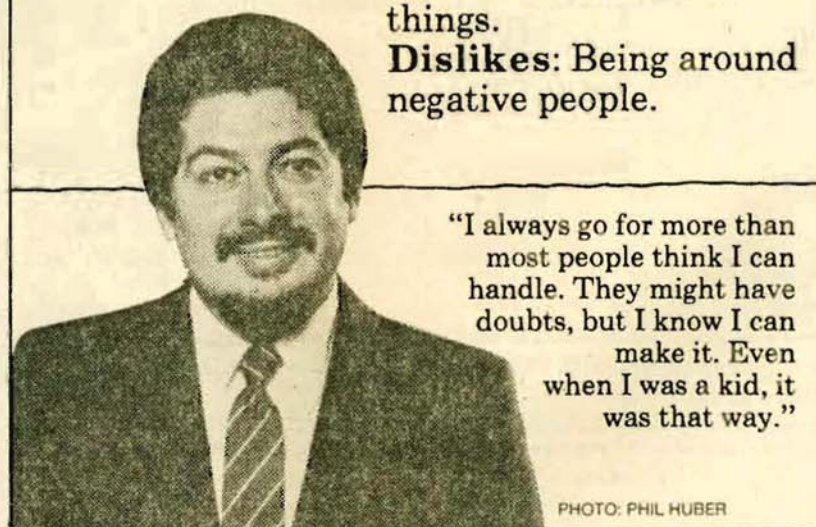


PHOTO: PHIL HUBER

"I always go for more than most people think I can handle. They might have doubts, but I know I can make it. Even when I was a kid, it was that way."

tever I wanted. I just had to work for it."

When Mariano was growing up, his parents owned a small Mexican restaurant on Gaston Avenue.

"He was just a little boy," recalls his mother, Vera Martinez, "and we let him work as a busboy. But Mariano didn't like that. He said busboys didn't make enough money. He wanted to be a waiter."

"I thought he might be too young and too small, but we gave him a big table to serve. He managed very well and right off, he started making more money."

WHEN MARIANO was 12, he walked into the restaurant and announced he was going to buy a motorcycle.

"I said he was too young," says his mother, "but his father said if he could pay for it, he could have it. It cost almost \$400, and he paid for it all himself. We signed the note, and he paid \$40 a month."

Mariano recalls the motorcycle got him into trouble at school.

"The principal wouldn't let me park it on the school grounds, so I parked it at a friend's house two doors down."

By the time he was 14, he was ready for a car.

"Back then, you could get a license at 14 if you took driver's education," he says. "But they taught that way off in North Dallas, and there was a long waiting list. But I called almost every day and made friends with the secretary. When there was an opening, she put my name in first. Then, when that

course was complete, I told my parents I wanted a sports car."

He paid for it himself. His parents signed the note and, at 14, Mariano was driving a red TR-3 to junior high school.

"By then, I hated school," he says. "I just didn't like authority. Finally, at 16, I dropped out and never went back."

"IT ALMOST broke my parents' heart. My father had no schooling. It was his dream that I finish. But I just couldn't. I hated school."

"It was a bad time," says his mother. "We were worried, but you have to understand Mariano never got in any bad trouble. He was just mischievous."

He quit working in the restaurant and supported himself by playing piano and guitar with various bands in Dallas. He also earned money by playing golf.

When he was still in school, he had met a young man who worked at a driving range. The friend taught him how to play, and Mariano learned how to hustle a golf game.

"I became really good at that," he explains. Later, he grins and drops the name of the friend who taught him to play. It was Lee Trevino.

As his expertise grew, Mariano says he began sneaking onto the Lakewood Country Club course and "hustling rich kids to play golf with me. Every once in a while, the pro would come and throw me out. That really hurt my feelings."

Sometimes his golf buddies

would invite him inside the club. That's when he first noticed Wanda Wade, the pretty, 16-year-old daughter of one of the club members.

"It was love at first sight for me," Wanda recalls. "He walked into the game room, and I thought he was the most exciting person I'd ever seen. We dated for five years, broke up for a year and then got married. We've now been married for 10 years."

MARIANO SAYS as a teen-ager, dating was touchy.

"I never had many problems with people being prejudiced that I was Mexican," he says, "except when it came to dating somebody's daughter. Then they'd have a fit."

"It got so that I hated to go home to meet the families. But Wanda's father was different. He was a doctor, but he never made me feel bad. He liked me right off. He always said I was going to amount to something."

Mariano continued his friendship with Lee Trevino and another young man named Trini Lopez, who wanted to be a singer.

"Then, all of a sudden, Lee was getting big in golf and Trini was getting big in singing," Mariano recalls. "I always thought I would, too, but it wasn't working out that way. I had to face the fact that I never was going to be any better at music or golf than I was right then."

"I don't like to admit things like that, but I knew I had to do something else."

Mariano decided to take the high school equivalency test and go to college. He passed the test and enrolled at North Texas State University in Denton. He graduated from El Centro Junior College in Dallas.

"I was going crazy. I didn't know what I wanted to be. Then, when I was in Denton, I realized the town needed a good restaurant," he says. "Something with entertainment. Some place the students could go when they wanted something kind of special. I decided I would open a restaurant."

He was in his early 20s. He had no management experience and no collateral.

"But that didn't matter to me," he says. "I knew I could talk my way into anything."

He decided to put the restaurant in a Denton shopping center then under construction. He also found a bank that would loan him \$50,000 if he could raise \$30,000 on his own.

"I talked to all kinds of people and raised all but \$5,000. I literally sold stock from door to door. I finally went to my father for that extra \$5,000. He thought I was crazy. But he loved me and wanted to encourage me."

"HE PUT up his pickup truck as collateral and borrowed \$5,000 to give me for the restaurant. I was very touched. That was almost everything my father had."

But the shopping center developers halted construction. Mariano

wasn't interested in another Denton location, so he decided to try his luck in Dallas.

"That means I had to get funding again because the Denton bank was only interested in a restaurant in Denton."

Mariano made the rounds to Dallas banks. No one was interested.

"I carried my plans with me at all times. I'd give my presentation to anyone who would listen. I was practically stopping people on the street. Finally, the First National Bank liked what I had to say. The Small Business Administration said they would guarantee the loan."

Mariano says the first thing he did when he began making money was to join the Lakewood Country Club.

"I TOLD you about my fantasies. I really lived out that one. One night the pro from the club came into my restaurant and asked me to play golf with him. I told him that was quite different from the days when he kicked me off the course. He said I shouldn't feel too bad. He used to kick out Lee Trevino, too."

"And when D magazine came out with a list of celebrities who were members of country clubs around town, they named me at the Lakewood Club," he explains. "Besides me, they named Dr. W.A. Criswell and Henry Wade" (the First Baptist Church minister and the district attorney).

But for Mariano, the real sign of success is that his portrait was painted by Dimitri Vail.

"When I was a little boy," he says, "I used to go to dinner with my parents at the Holiday Inn off Central Expressway. All down a big hallway were portraits painted by Dimitri Vail. There was pictures of Jack Benny, Carol Burnett, Johnny Carson and Emmett Kelly, the clown. I thought that was probably the biggest success in the world, to be in one of those portraits."

When Mariano began wearing his *bandito* costume around town, he attracted the attention of the painter. Mariano knew then he was going to have his portrait.

"But I wasn't going to ask Dimitri Vail," Mariano says. "That wasn't part of the fantasy. Dimitri Vail had to ask me."

"He finally did. I tell you, it was a big day in my life."

Mariano says he's constantly coming up with new ideas, but he's not ready to reveal them.

He did hint that he hasn't given up being a recording star. He says he just needs the right promoter.

"I've got this idea to record *Silent Night* in Spanish as a Christmas song. This has got to be a big hit. There's not a good Spanish version of *Silent Night* anywhere. I'm too impatient to wait for a record company. I'll fund it myself."

"If it's not a hit, I can always take the records and give them to my friends as gifts."

"You've got to keep thinking. You've got to keep thinking all the time."