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Mariano Martinez, in 1991, dressed as Emilliano Zapata with the original margarita machine inducted into the Smithsonian Museum of American History  
photo provided by Mariano Martinez

## Living Their Heritage

By Monica issitt

**EVERY FRISCO FAMILY** has their own story to tell and three men in particular also tell part of Frisco's story of pride, growth and change. Through honoring their heritage, dedication to their families and incredibly hard work, they encapsulate what it means to be Latino in a suburb of Dallas, Texas.

Santiago Arevalo moved to Frisco six years ago after watching the city grow out of its small-town shell and the suburban sprawl spread north. This was during the '80s while he was coaching select soccer teams in Plano, which he did for several years, coaching many recreational and select teams to state championships. As a Columbian, Mr. Arevalo holds soccer very close to his heart and considers it a very important part of his heritage. One of his life goals is to share this legacy with North Americans by showing kids that it is possible to have a happy family,

successful work life and an accomplished soccer career – you really can have it all. He knows all of this is possible, because he, himself, has worked to see all of this come to fruition in his own life.

While attending Andes University in Bogotá, he played professional soccer with Santa Fe, a top Columbian team, and then moved to France after graduating where he continued to play soccer professionally for three years. After a torn ACL ended Mr. Arevalo's soccer career, he then "decided to move to the U.S., get a master's degree and settle down." He did earn his graduate degree from MIT, and he did marry, but his life is more accomplished and full than most people, so "settling down" may not describe it accurately. After graduating, he worked for several top companies in the Dallas area and now works for Oracle as a solutions architect.

Mr. Arevalo still devotes much of his free time as a volunteer soccer coach and says his favorite "hobby" is coaching for FC Dallas, Frisco. He has always enjoyed sharing his passion for the sport with children and is the founder of the Frisco Athletic Club. In 1993, after his team won the select league championship, Mr. Arevalo was honored by Mayor Mike Simpson when the mayor declared March 24, 1993 as "FC Dallas Frisco Gold '93 Boys Soccer Team Day." In a town known for soccer, this was a bright moment for Mr. Arevalo and his players.

It would be difficult to find a more proud father than Mr. Arevalo. He and his wife of seven years, Liliana, share three daughters, Anika, Natasha and Tatiana. Mr. Arevalo would love to spend all day talking about these three--about Anika's attending medical school at the University of Miami and being the only

Hispanic on their highly acclaimed athletic team; about Natasha's bright future and attendance at Legacy Christian Academy; and about Tatiana's wild side and fun-loving temperament.

With what's left of his free time, Mr. Arevalo organizes weekly rides for Richardson Bike Mart and usually rides about 150 miles each weekend, riding most of these with Liliana. He says that riding with his wife to places like Pilot Point, Anna and Celina gives them lots of time together and, as he puts it, "It helps us develop a very high level of communication and that is very healthy for our marriage."

The Arevalo family enjoys celebrating Columbian holidays the traditional way – with music, food and crafts of their culture. Each July 20<sup>th</sup>, the Arevalos join with many other Columbian-Americans at parks in Garland and Carrollton in a kind of homecoming festivity. The yellow, blue and red flag of Columbia flies as the Columbian community from all over comes together to honor its heritage.

#### ENCOURAGING THE NEXT GENERATION

Another Frisco man has a story to tell that is just as incredible as Mr. Arevalo's, but is also very unique, in that it is laced with a different culture's originality and a different person's character. Francios Condejahn was born in Venezuela to French-Venezuelan parents and stayed in his home country to obtain a masters degree in mechanical engineering from Simon Boliver University in Caracas. Mr. Condejahn's wife, Aura, was also born and raised in Venezuela and the couple met during college in 1985. After Mr. Condejahn earned his masters degree in mechanical engineering and worked in the oil industry for two years, he and Aura moved to Richardson in 1995. Mr. Condejahn has been a project manager with McAfee for ten years where he is able to put his strong background in computer programming to work.

Mr. Condejahn is extremely dedicated to his community through his involvement with the Frisco Soccer Association. He is proud of the fact that when he came aboard almost ten years ago as the commissioner of the girl's league, there were only 1,600 total players in the entire league, and now, as

he sits as the president of the league, there are more than 4,500 registered players. Since Francois took a leadership role with the league; among them is their use of Pizza Hut Park for most Saturday games throughout the soccer season. Another change has been the rising number of scholarships the league is now able to offer kids moving on to higher education. FSA works with Frisco Education Foundation to choose students based on merit and will award five \$1,250 scholarships this year, with plans to offer more in the near future. Mr. Condejahn also takes great pride in the low registration costs the Frisco Soccer Association is able to offer its players, saying, "We provide a service to the community of Frisco. We represent the masses; we make the game of soccer available to everyone."

Mr. Condejahn has made sure his children have always attended Frisco schools and recounts that even though they were sometimes shuffled from school to school because of Frisco's swift growth, they were receiving the quality education Frisco is known for. His daughter, Marie, is now attending the University of North Texas in Denton, and his son, Francois, is a junior at Wakeland H.S. this year.

The Condejahn family takes pleasure in celebrating Venezuelan holidays even though they are not observed on the U.S. calendar. April 19<sup>th</sup> and July 5<sup>th</sup> are the two days on which Venezuelan independence is celebrated, important days in their home. Mr. Condejahn and his family love to gather together all of the ingredients for traditional Venezuelan fare and share it with friends and family. Food is an important part of their culture, and each dish has many variations, which, on important holidays, are all laid out in potluck fashion for every family to appreciate. The Condejahn's are accustomed to welcoming not only old friends into their home, but Venezuelans who may be new to the area, because he feels a strong bond with those whom he shares a home country, and because he loves to share Frisco with others. Mr. Condejahn's respect for both of his "homes" comes across when he says, "Just because we embrace our new country, doesn't mean we don't remember our past."

## BUILDING A FUTURE

Mariano Martinez may not live in Frisco, but his story adds to Frisco's flavor, quite literally, and is another that must be told. When he opened La Hacienda Ranch in 1992 he was not new to the restaurant business and his deciding to open a restaurant here may have helped jump-start Frisco's growth. The mayor of Frisco at that time, Mr. Bob Warren, says of Mr. Martinez, "I have always been very impressed with Mariano's vision and confidence in coming out here to Frisco and taking a huge risk to put a really, really nice restaurant in the middle of nowhere. He saw that this area was going to boom and the location of La Hacienda Ranch would soon be on a restaurant row."

The Condejahn family takes pleasure in celebrating Venezuelan holidays even though they are not observed on the U.S. calendar.

Mr. Martinez had an early introduction to the restaurant business, as he is related to the Cuellar family, famous for its El Chico chain. His father opened the second El Chico location after moving to Dallas from Mexico in 1938 and working with a Cuellar niece, Mariano's mother, Vera. Mr. Martinez worked his first party when he was twelve but soon decided he was much more interested in playing with his band, the Nitecaps.

Time passed and he started to formulate some original ideas about opening a different kind of Mexican restaurant, one with live entertainment, cocktails and a more upscale feel than most of the Mexican eateries around. He noticed a need for this kind of place and he was intent on bringing this part of his heritage into the spotlight.

Mr. Martinez didn't have an easy time of it at first, as ten banks turned him down for a loan to open his first restaurant, Mariano's Mexican Cuisine. The word "no" can easily become a dream buster,

but perseverance was not new to him; he had been down this road before.

Growing up in the only Mexican family in Lakewood in the 1940s meant he was the only Mexican student at Lakewood Elementary School. Mr. Martinez had to learn English so he had to work twice as hard as everyone else. That persistent little boy grew into a leader in his community who now speaks at many high school and college graduations. What advice does he give to the young adults looking up at him? To persevere.

Mr. Martinez now relishes being able to speak Spanish with those he works with in his restaurants, especially after his experiences during his English-only days in school. He appreciates both using the Spanish language and offering delicious Mexican food to the community, as both are a part of who he is.

His respect for family is still incredibly strong, as he and his wife, Wanda, have been married for thirty-four years. He says, "She is the best thing that ever happened to me, and I bet she'd say the same about me; that's how it works."

The Martinez's are especially close to Mariano's sister, Rose Marie, and nephew, Alexis, who Mr. Martinez calls his "nephew-son." Alexis works alongside his uncle at the La Hacienda Ranch corporate office.

Frisco would not be the wonderful city it is without all three of these men and their families, as they have not only become successful, but have each found a way to give something unique from their cultures to our community. As the childhood fable Mr. Martinez's mother, now 92, advised, "Life is like an echo; you only get back what you give." Mr. Condejahn would agree with this, too, because, as he says, "We help our community in any way we can, because when we do, we are contributing to our own future. We are shaping our city into what we want it to be." Mr. Arevalo, too, has this belief, for after giving his time and energy to this city, he now says, "We love Frisco. Everything I have, I have because of Frisco."

Frisco is a place where many different cultures come together and where many stories like these can be told.

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*Monica Issitt is a freelance writer living in Frisco.*