

# Scholarships form a Lasting Remembrance of "El Rey del Menudo"

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Pilsen has carved out a name for itself as the center of Mexican cuisine in Chicago and as a colony of emerging artists. On one hand, the neighborhood no longer projects itself like a grim scene from Orson Welles's film *Touch of Evil* and, on the other hand, Pilsen has become an attractive wellspring of culture and cuisine, ready to quench the spiritual thirsts of its own residents, tourists, *hipsters*, and Mexicans from other geographical areas and social strata who come to visit.

The renaissance thriving in Pilsen today wouldn't have been possible without the work, adventurous ambition, and even the false starts, of those

immigrants who arrived before us. It's true that, to a great extent, the culture of grand spectacle has been fomenting a historical amnesia in modern man; nevertheless, there are sublime acts that, though they go unnoticed, transform



El Esfuerzo Logo

themselves into hope rather than alienation.

In the same manner, there's no need to look down one's nose at the general assembly happening at the Saint Ann School. This is the second year scholarships have been given to Saint Ann families in need. For the students selected anonymously, assistance of any kind can lessen economic hardship in this era of stale economic growth, unemployment, and foreclosures.



The early years: Miguel and Elvira Bautista

The Miguel & Elvira Bautista Scholarship Fund was created by the Bautista brothers: Miguel Esteban, David, Alfonso, Juan, Jose, and Carlos. This charitable act grew out of their desire to pay tribute to their parents, Miguel and Elvira. Loving one's parents is, in itself, a generous act these days, but Miguel Bautista, better known as *el Rey del Menudo* [*the King of Menudo*], did something more than provide for formal education of his sons, something he could not achieve for himself.

Work on the railroads led the first Mexican immigrants to Chicago, where some put down roots on Taylor St. Miguel Bautista settled in the area in

the mid-1940's, shortly after migrating to Chicago from Mexico City. In time, he met Elvira, who had migrated from Iowa. Meanwhile, Miguel was working in a factory when it occurred to him to open a Mexican grocery store, one of the first in the

neighborhood. Not only did he provide groceries, Mexican magazines and vinyl LPs—which, to a certain extent, immigrants were trying to find to fill the void produced by nostalgia for their homeland—but he also improvised a card-based, honor system to provide credit to neighbors who hadn't been paid or who were running short on funds.

In that first effort, called *El Esfuerzo* [literally, *The Effort*], Miguel also started to sell *menudo*, *carnitas*, and *barbacoa*. It was there he set out two small tables and began to serve food to diners who came not only from elsewhere in Chicago but from outside the city. Food, besides satisfying the palate, feeds one's memory. Those first recipes were very possibly from his employees, who had emigrated from diverse parts of the Mexican republic, but the final touch of seasoning was the work of Don Miguel. Which is why, over time, he came to be known as *El Rey del Menudo*.

So far, the story of Miguel Bautista may sound like that of any enterprising, self-taught business owner who discovered, then carved out, his own niche. But what Don Miguel did differently was to not forget where he came from.

Juan Bautista, Don Miguel's son, remembers working at the store one day when a man came in—he doesn't remember whether the guy was looking for work, asking



Miguel and Elvira Bautista

for a handout, or was just plain hungry. Juan declined to help the man and asked him to leave.



Life goes on with a Bautista smile

From the other side of the store, Don Miguel heard and rushed out to the indigent man, extending a hand. Then he reminded his son Juan that he himself, Miguel, had arrived in Chicago with one hand in front of him and the other behind; that down on Taylor he knocked at a house to ask for help; that a woman opened the door only to run back inside; but that her husband, Gustavo López, heard and rushed out, extended his hand to Miguel and gave him a place to stay. Extending a hand to those most needy is an act Don Miguel never forgot about—nor did he want his sons to forget it.

The brothers were born and raised at 1118 W. Polk St. where

the original “El Esfuerzo” was located. Sometime later, the entire family moved to Pilsen, opening their second store, also called *El Esfuerzo*, at 18th. St. and Hoyne. On Polk St., the newer immigrants were viewed differently and had a certain rivalry with the Italian immigrants who had first inhabited the area. In Pilsen—which wasn’t running short on roughness as a neighborhood transforming itself during the ‘60s and ‘70s—Eastern European immigrants were beginning to abandon the neighborhood while Mexicans and *tejanos* were beginning to inhabit it.

Of the six brothers, no one wanted to continue in the retail business. With hopes of gaining respect and acceptance, and to protect the family, the brothers Bautista chose three seemingly different careers, except that all seek ultimately to serve their fellow man; three became police officers, two are firefighters, and one is a doctor.

Now, in a day when *El Esfuerzo* as a store is no more than an entry in the history of Mexican contributions to the economic and culinary development of Chicago, the brothers decided to honor their parents by creating a scholarship and returning something to the community. At first, the brothers began to get together to play golf, but they realized if they continued golfing through a tournament, what was just a diversion could be changed into a charitable act and that's how they decided to honor the memory of their parents.



Juan and Alfonso Bautista at Jumping Bean during the interview

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honor the memory of their parents.

The Bautista brothers know well that, not only did Don Miguel and Doña Elvira take charge of forging them into a family, but meanwhile they kept the store open, always extending a hand to their fellow man through groceries or work, and supporting community organizations that include the first Spanish-language publications in Chicago.

Returning to the assembly at Saint Ann, the families that receive the six scholarships at the hands of the Bautista brothers will not only be receiving help from a foundation but will be reaping acts of brotherhood that were sown the day Don Gustavo López reached out his hand to the man who would become *el Rey del Menudo*: Don Miguel Bautista.

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The scholarships were presented in November 2012 in the general assembly at Saint Ann School. If you would like to contribute to the Miguel & Elvira Scholarship Fund, you can speak with Alfonso Bautista: 312.217.4801.

*English language translation by Jim Green*

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