

County Native Close To Roots

by Wayne Trujillo

Opinion

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Eagle County claims many enduring attributes: pristine snowscapes, soaring mountains, temperate summers and terrain that is so preternaturally conducive to recreational sports that the more ecstatic descriptions typically carry celestial implications – God’s country, skier’s paradise and hiker’s heaven.

Another less conspicuous attribute that has endured through seasonal shifts has been the Hispanic presence. Today, the Latin American tourists and investors who populate Eagle County’s slopes and the Latin American workers who populate its service industry represent both a dichotomy and archetypical bookend of the area’s Hispanic demographic.

However, even before Vail’s birth and ascendancy to a premier position as a global resort destination, Eagle County claimed a substantial Hispanic population and influence — mainly transplanted New Mexicans mining zinc and molybdenum in Gilman and Climax, residing in Red Cliff, Minturn, Gilman and adjacent Lake County’s county seat, Leadville.

Gilbert Cisneros is one of those peripatetic New Mexicans whose families arrived in Eagle County and introduced rural ranchers and shepherders to Hispanic flair, flavor and Southwestern flamboyancy.

A 1962 Battle Mountain High School graduate, Cisneros was born in Taos, reared in Denver, relocated to Red Cliff and roamed the Vail Valley when it primarily hosted sheep.

He entered the armed services immediately after graduation, but he returned to Red Cliff long enough to meet his future wife, 1965 Battle Mountain graduate Rosie Romero.

While many of Cisneros’ peers remained in the Vail Valley, Cisneros left to pursue higher education, earning a bachelor’s degree at Adams State University and a master’s degree at the University of Colorado. Cisneros’ postgraduate endeavors garnered him national, and even international, distinction.

He co-founded and co-directed the Chicano Education Project, where he hired an ambitious young attorney who later became Denver’s first Hispanic mayor, Federico Pena.

More than a decade later, in 1985, President Ronald Reagan appointed him the Rocky Mountain regional administrator of the U.S. Small Business Administration, an appointment that President George H.W. Bush extended another four years.

Hispanic magazine honored Cisneros as one of the nation's 100 most influential Hispanics in 1991, and Hispanic Business magazine applauded his accomplishments with the 2002 Hispanic achievement award.

His stewardship at the Small Business Administration, along with a previous position as the Denver Minority Business Development Center's executive director, introduced Cisneros to his enduring passion — the quirks, challenges and opportunities of small business. Propelled by an innate passion for Hispanic culture and small business, Cisneros embarked on a riskier but more rewarding path. This marriage of interests materialized in the Chamber of the Americas, a venture that Cisneros initiated in 1992.

In two-plus decades, he's traveled extensively through Latin America with a coterie of American businesses, hosting trade missions and introductions to untapped markets and unfamiliar cultures. The south-of-the-border jaunts also enlarged Cisneros' view and understanding of Hispanolia far beyond the insular New Mexican culture and language that reflects old-school Castillian Spain more than cosmopolitan salsa and semantics.

Cisneros also introduces Latin American presidents and dignitaries to Denver, hosting dinners and events that also present a podium for domestic political and business hotshots.

However, it's the unheralded Latin Americans, those beneath and beyond the international eyesight, who command Cisneros (and the chamber's) attention and agenda. Small businesses directly involve, hire and serve the masses, serving as a personal conduit to people largely invisible to the media and corporate moguls.

While Chamber of the Americas' business efforts reflect Cisneros' professional experience, the organization's cultural expeditions honor his personal past. Local villages throughout Latin America — whether in Peru, Honduras or Mexico — remind him of the rustic lifestyle, dwellings, customs and challenges of the New Mexican villages (and, yesteryear's Red Cliff) that populate his ancestral habitat.

While Cisneros constantly surveys the entire Latin American landscape, his current activities center on Peruvian concerns, specifically facilitating a cultural and business exchange between small- and medium-sized American businesses and Peruvian opportunities.

His goals and reach extend beyond American businesses and Peruvian peerage to embrace the nation's indigenous populations. A current project will provide better housing and employment opportunities to low-income Peruvians.

The same spirit possesses Cisneros' desire to extend his mission and message to Eagle County. He notices a similarity in the county's Hispanic composite that recalls the cultural contradictions and confluence in Peruvian pluralism — elite and indigenous, economic and social, that he's encountered in his extraneous escapades.

“There are so many Spanish-speaking people that live in the region plus the influx of Latin American visitors,” Cisneros observed. “There is room for a lot of business and cultural growth.”

Wayne Trujillo, director of communications for the Chamber of the Americas, is a Minturn native and Battle Mountain High School graduate. His family moved to Eagle County nearly a century ago. His uncle, Oscar Meyer, was the Eagle County sheriff gunned down by James Sherbondy on Tennessee Pass in 1937, and his Aunt Ollie Meyer was Eagle County superintendent of schools. His grandparents, Irene and Ralph Meyer, moved to Minturn in the 1940s and owned and operated Meyer's Garage. He currently lives in Denver.