

Homecoming: Yolo grower leaves U.S. to lead village

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Published in *The Sacramento Bee*

Sept. 29, 2004

The 'Tomato King' of Yolo County, Andres Bermudez, is retracing his steps, returning to his home in Mexico in hopes of using what he's learned here to improve the lives of the impoverished villagers there.

One day before being sworn in as mayor of this central Mexican town, Andres Bermudez held court in his unofficial office, a shoeshine stand across from City Hall.

Thrusting his black Tony Lama cowboy boots out for a polish on a recent Tuesday, the quasi-celebrity known as the "Tomato King" in the United States - "El Rey del Tomate" in Mexico - glad-handed with locals and reminisced about his meteoric ascent from dirt-poor laborer to millionaire farmer in Yolo County.

His latest success came in July, when voters here in Jerez elected the Winters resident to lead this largely rural municipality known for its corn, beans and peaches.

In between the humble beginnings and ultimate triumphs, Bermudez's journey has mirrored that of millions of other Mexicans who have crossed illegally into the United States, seeking work for themselves and hope for the families they left behind.

It is on behalf of these migrants, and the poor and unemployed, the 54-year-old U.S. citizen says, that he ran for public office. Touting himself as an unpolished common man who succeeded without a college education, Bermudez says he wants to turn Jerez into "a small United States," where the streets are safe, the populace healthy and the jobs so plentiful that people don't leave.

"I'm not interested in being a celebrity. I'm not interested in being a power guy," said Bermudez, a beefy man who dresses all in black, from his Stetson to his boots. "My reason is to help the Mexican people in my village, my town. I want to put Jerez on top of the world."

His promises have captured the dreams of local residents, who say they urgently need jobs and a leader who can provide them. And they have sparked a movement among Mexican immigrants in the United States, who believe more people should return to their hometowns to apply their American-learned know-how.

But the sometimes-crass Bermudez faces formidable obstacles. He has one three-year term in which to reinvigorate the struggling municipality of about 54,000. Outside of farming, there's little industry or commerce to speak of. The city owes thousands of dollars in back taxes. Unemployment is rampant.

Bermudez nonetheless remains steadfast about using his life experience - good and bad - to guide him.

"In order to help the poor people, you have to feel the poor, come from the poor," he said. "When you feel it like this, you understand the poor people. I still understand."

Born to a farming family in El Cargadero, a village about five miles outside Jerez, Bermudez and his family headed for Tijuana when he was 7. He hawked newspapers and fruit on the

street and sang in buses to supplement the family income.

But when he returned to Jerez at age 18 to farm, Bermudez saw no way out of poverty. "I didn't want that future for my sons," he said.

In 1974, he and his pregnant wife, Irma, sneaked into the United States in the trunk of a car. They arrived in Los Angeles sore but safe, and paid a smuggler, or coyote, \$550 for the trip. Soon, Bermudez headed to Winters and landed a job picking peaches for 25 cents a box.

He worked long hours and eventually was promoted to tractor driver and foreman. During his first years in Winters, he said, the Border Patrol deported him seven times. The sweeps were so frequent that Bermudez dug himself a hideout under a truck in an old barn.

But his fortunes began to skyrocket in 1982, when he and his wife were granted legal residency and he obtained his farm labor contracting license.

He signed on with the federal government to harvest and pack pine, redwood and other forest seedlings. And in 1997, he invented a machine that transplants vegetable seedlings into the ground. His nursery, Superior Transplants of Watsonville, grows millions of tomato, pepper and other plants annually.

The businesses earned him about a million dollars a year and the title of "Tomato King." When asked how much he's worth now, he shrugged. "A few million - I don't know," he said.

Even with his success, Bermudez says, he never forgot his roots. He, his wife and their three children often visited Jerez, a fertile swath of mountains and valleys in the state of Zacatecas. Each time, he chafed at the poverty, lack of jobs and constant outflow of residents.

Zacatecas has perhaps the highest rate of migration to the United States of any Mexican state. Roughly 800,000 Zacatecanos live "al otro lado," leaving about 1.3 million behind.

In Jerez, about the same number of residents live in the United States as in the municipality, said city historian Juan de Santiago Sanchez. "There isn't a Jerezano who doesn't have a relative in the United States," he said.

The migration consists mostly of young men who leave their wives and children behind to find work and send money home.

Carlota Urillo of El Cargadero covered her face with her hands and broke into tears when she recalled how her husband left Sept. 12 for another stint picking lemons in Phoenix. The mother of seven explained that for 30 years her husband has spent about six months annually in Arizona. He sends roughly \$100 to her every 15 days.

"I'm really depressed when my husband is gone," said Urillo, 50. "If there was just a place for the husbands to work here."

When Jerezanos do find work, the pay is often meager. A cashier makes about 60 pesos a day, a little over \$5.

Farmers say they earn even less. Bernardino Saldivar Munoz, 75, said sometimes the

market is so glutted with corn that he has to burn his crop.

Munoz lives in Tetillas, one of the more than 50 hamlets in the municipality of Jerez. Eight of his 10 children are in the United States. Though several of them studied to become accountants, most work in construction.

Years ago, Munoz went to California to work, following crops through the Central Valley. The money he earned helped him afford a better life in Tetillas. He purchased about 30 acres, where he has built two adobe homes.

His children are doing the same. One of his sons, 33-year-old Catarino Saldivar Lozano, who works in Reseda doing construction, had an enormous house built atop a hill in Tetillas but has yet to see it. He hasn't been back to Tetillas in more than six years because he worries about crossing the border.

Migration, Munoz said, is a bittersweet necessity.

"We live off the United States," he said. "We're really grateful to the United States, but we feel like we have a dagger in our gut."

Munoz supports Bermudez and urged his neighbors to vote for him. A blue-and-white salt shaker on his kitchen table reads, "For a new Jerez ... Andres Bermudez." Munoz believes Bermudez can bring jobs, and hopes he will teach locals his agricultural secrets, so their crops can be profitable.

That's exactly what Bermudez says he aims to do by bringing American equipment and crops to Jerez.

One of his most ambitious plans is to build two factories to can the produce grown in Jerez and create its own salsa: "Salsa el Rey del Tomate."

This is where Bermudez's proposal deviates from the political norm: He said he'll invest up to \$400,000 of his own money in the canneries, then, as mayor, offer them tax breaks and reduced prices for water and other city services.

Undeterred by the potential conflict of interest, he calls it an example of using his business acumen to benefit his hometown.

"If even 5 percent of Mexican politicians were to think about the people, Mexico would be better," Bermudez said.

This isn't his first attempt at reforming the system. He was elected mayor in 2001, but his victory was voided because he had not met residency requirements. Last year, he helped rewrite Zacatecan law to make it easier for migrants to run for office. Since December, he and his wife have lived in Jerez, leaving their children - 29-year-old Laura, 27-year-old Andres Jr. and 17-year-old Ernie - in Winters.

On Sept. 15, his inauguration day, Bermudez described his vision. Wearing a shiny black suit embellished with tan goatskin accents and a gold chain around his neck, he said he wants to make health care accessible, fix jarring cobblestone streets, bring order to chaotic parking habits and provide more ambulances.

He also plans to revive some traditions in the city of Jerez, a community with 16th century

Spanish colonial roots. Among them are a courting ritual in which men and women walk around the leafy town plaza, offering flowers to those who catch their eye, and allowing horses back in the plaza on Sundays, when bands play on the corners.

His proposals are popular among poor residents in town. In his first days in office, many of them flocked to Bermudez to shake his hand or offer a hug.

"Who doesn't like noise? The rich people. Who doesn't like horses? The rich people," Bermudez said. "Today, that starts changing. Today, the poor people run the city."

Rogelio Trujillo is among those inspired by Bermudez's trailblazing. The 62-year-old, who owned Trujillo Garden Service in Santa Barbara, recently returned to Jerez and is considering a run for office. The new home he is building will include a computer lab for local children.

"If we start to bring money here and create jobs, people will stay," he said.

Despite vocal support from people like Trujillo, Bermudez is facing resistance that began even before inauguration day.

When the outgoing mayor tried to dictate where Bermudez should hold his festivities, Bermudez stood firm that it should be the local bullfighting ring. When he took the stage, he was flanked by the flags of the United States and Mexico.

The symbolism excited some, angered others.

"He should be aware he's in Mexican territory, and he should respect the patriotic symbols from here," said Julio Cesar Flores, local bishop of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "If he has economic stability in the United States, I don't understand what his objective is to come here."

Teacher-in-training Maria del Refugio Avalos, 21, said she worries that Bermudez's lack of experience will hurt him - and the community.

"The municipal president should be somebody who was raised here and understands the system," Avalos said. "I'm afraid he doesn't know how to govern."

Bermudez admits he was unprepared for some aspects of the job. A man used to making decisions and making them stick, he was frustrated by the battle over the inauguration site and flummoxed when local party leaders wouldn't readily approve his Cabinet picks. It wasn't until after he'd taken office that he learned the city owed thousands in taxes.

Just a few hours after the inauguration, his bravado gave way in a moment of weakness.

"I miss my children. I'm missing the United States," Bermudez said. "I miss seeing my tractors and tomato fields and playing poker in the bar for drinks. I'm not interested in politics after this."

But Andres Bermudez isn't one to give up. Before the week was out, he had launched another grand plan: He's hired an envoy to set up a service that would allow Jerezanos in the United States to purchase goods, via catalog, from Jerez shops and have them delivered to people in town. And despite professing no political ambitions, he's hired a public relations firm to cultivate his image.

Eventually, he said, he wants to start a migrant-based political party.

But his immediate focus, Bermudez said, is Jerez.

"Jerez needs help with everything, you name it," he said. "I'll try to do the best that I can and see what happens."