

# Restaurateur helps Bush

HOUSTON (AP) — When Ninfa Laurenzo seconded George Bush's nomination for president in New Orleans, she touched her listeners' heartstrings.

The story of the poor single mother of five who turned a tiny Mexican restaurant on Navigation into a wildly successful chain of Texas restaurants appealed to women, to minorities, to other hard-working people who have made it on nothing but grit.

It's a story Otila Garza, a hard-working minority woman, can appreciate. In fact, Garza and Laurenzo have an astonishing amount in common.

Garza, for those who have not been lucky enough to dine at one of her or her sons' establishments in Pharr, Harlingen, Edinburg or Mission, may be the premier restaurateur in the Rio Grande Valley and surrounding areas.

She's certainly one of the Valley's leading citizens. She's invented so many dishes and dreamed up so many successful restaurant concepts, even her kids can't remember them all or some partially.

But Garza, like Laurenzo, entered

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*-Elvia De Leon Salyer daughter*

the restaurant business long on determination and short on cash.

Garza, like Laurenzo, has four boys and a girl, and both women were thinking of those kids when they launched their businesses.

Explained Garza, "I needed an open road. I was looking for a future for my children."

To Garza's knowledge, Laurenzo never has dined at her family's restaurants.

But Garza, whose daughter lives in Houston, has visited Ninfa's restaurants on Navigation and Westheimer.

"I like her food," Garza said. "I have plenty of admiration for this big lady. She is good and hard working like me."

Garza is 67. Rolando De Leon, her fourth of five children, is 35. "She's

in better shape than I am," he said.

"She could run the Pentagon. Or Exxon."

Elvia De Leon Salyer, Garza's daughter and a resident of Houston, said, "The power you feel when you sit with her is just unbelievable. Yet, she'll jump up and get you a cup of coffee."

The grande dame of Valley restaurateurs was first exposed to the business as a child. Her grandmother ran a small restaurant in Reynosa called Rio Bravo, and there she taught Garza how to cook.

"Even at 8 years old, I was looking in the kitchen all the time," Garza said.

It was years, however, before she practiced her skills in a professional way. Garza married, produced five children, divorced and remarried.

All the while, she focused on her children. She worked, De Leon explained, but her work was at home.

Garza came from a family that was well-to-do. Her first husband had been prosperous.

Her second husband, however, tried to support her and her children on his truck driver's salary, and Garza found it difficult to adjust to the new standard of living.

In 1970, she took virtually all the money she had — \$1,500 — and plunked it down on a small drive-in in Pharr known as the Round-Up.

"We had curb service, four little tables and a very simple menu," De Leon said. "Hamburgers, fried chicken, some Mexican food."

When Garza began searching for one more item to add to the menu, she settled on a fajita recipe she had learned at her grandmother's knee.

"At that time," De Leon said, "nobody in the area knew what fajitas were."

Garza remembered, "I gave them away free to the people. I would give them packages of tacos, fajitas, pico de gallo, flour tortillas, big butterfly shrimp. And everybody responded. Pharr is a small town, but the people are beautiful."

## New prison causes people to hunt jobs

AMARILLO (AP) — As construction begins on a new maximum-security prison, hundreds of residents in the Amarillo area have lined up for hundreds of jobs as laborers, carpenters and equipment operators.

More than 500 people picked up applications Tuesday for jobs as construction workers at Amarillo's new state prison, and about the same number of applicants were expected Wednesday, officials said.

Tuesday was the first day the jobs were offered to the public. It has not been determined how many jobs will be available during construction of the prison, to be called the William P. Clements Jr. Unit.

Most construction workers for the 2,250-bed, maximum-security prison will be hired locally, Mike Riley, local Texas Employment Commission supervisor, said.

Common practice is for out-of-town companies to bring in supervisors and equipment and then hire workers from around the area, Riley said.

TEC so far is only handling the hiring process for Clearwater Constructors of Austin.

## Texas chemical companies make disintegratable plastics

BEAUMONT (AP) — Chemical companies in Texas and elsewhere that spent fortunes making plastic last longer now are trying to make milk jugs, soda bottles, garbage bags, diapers and other plastics that rapidly disintegrate.

But making cheap, self-destructing plastic that won't fall apart before its time is proving difficult, company spokesmen say.

"Right now, there is a big call for biodegradable medical products and food packaging," Doug Draper, a spokesman for Dow Chemical U.S.A. in Midland, Mich., told the *Beaumont Enterprise*.

On East Coast beaches, plastic syringes and other plastic debris have washed ashore, causing a public outcry.

"But there is a real problem with this stuff breaking down before its time," Draper said.

People don't want their trash bags to decay along with their garbage in their kitchens, and scientists aren't sure if they can develop biodegradable plastic containers that won't infect food with bacteria.

And although most of the major chemical companies are researching biodegradable plastics, they are re-

luctant to market the products because large-scale production might endanger the market for conventional plastics.

And, biodegradable plastic typically costs about 15 percent more than conventional plastic, which sells for an average of 65 cents a pound on the market.

Dow Chemical Co. in Freeport, Texas, developed photodegradable plastic in 1985 for plastic six-pack canned drink connectors because animals, birds, turtles and fish were getting caught in or eating the original plastic rings and dyes.

Photodegradable plastic disintegrates when exposed to the sun for long periods of time.

Upon request from some manufacturers, Dow has also developed a biodegradable plastic, but it is not ready for marketing, Draper said. With biodegradable plastic, bacteria eat the plastic and cause it to fall apart.

An additive such as cornstarch is used to make the plastic appealing to bugs. Exxon Chemical, a unit of Exxon Corp., also is testing a plastic to which iron and nickel compounds have been added. The compounds eventually cause the plastic to break down.

Every American produces about a ton of garbage a year and most of that waste is thrown into landfills where it will remain intact for decades, said Allen Gray, Mobil Chemical Co. spokesman in New York.

"No matter what the material, there is very little decomposition in landfills due to lack of moisture and exposure to air and light," Gray said. "Biodegradability is not a solution to the nation's trash problem. We need more recycling, incineration and sanitary landfills."

Even if the plastics decompose in the landfills, it might create another environmental problem, Gray said.

Decomposing plastics may create chemicals that contaminate groundwater. Some decaying plastics also give off such gases as methane, which is flammable in large concentrations.

"We can't solve one problem by creating another," he said. "Garbage disposal is a volume problem, not a materials problem."

Scientists at Chevron Chemical Co.'s plant in Orange, Texas, began researching degradable plastics about three months ago, said plant manager Robert A. Walker. "This technology is in its infancy," he said.

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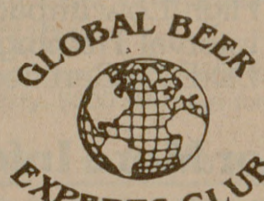
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