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This Kid Turned a Police Crime Scene Vehicle into a Flourishing Food Truck

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by: Justin Rubner

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Image: Star Press

In late 2012, Ball State University student Ricardo Licona observed a hot dog vendor rake in some mega sales on a late Friday night near campus and did what any teenager would do:

He enjoyed a late night meal.

Then he started his journey to become a food truck and restaurant owner.

“What if I could set up a cart or food truck and sell something simple like nachos?” asks Licona, a Honduran native, now a Senior at the Muncie IN university. “I didn’t know how I was going to do it. I just knew I had a passion.”

Three months later, Puerta al Paraiso food truck hit the streets of Muncie, serving Tex Mex-Honduran fare to hungry factory workers at lunchtime and partying students at night.

Licona’s Puerta al Paraiso is part of a food truck industry that’s expected to grow 316 percent from 2014 to 2019, according to the National League of Cities. It’s also part of a larger category responsible for ⅓ of new hires in 2014 in the United States: Small business.



The Sidewalk is celebrating National Small Business Week by telling inspiring entrepreneur stories. Today’s story: Puerta al Paraiso food truck.

The theme of the Small Business Administration’s National Small Business Week, May 4 to May 8, is “Dream big, start small.” *The Sidewalk* is highlighting these dreams — and realities — this week.

Meet your 40-year-old food truck

Spending wages from a part-time restaurant gig, Licona bought a 1975 GMC truck for \$9,500

with only 16,000 miles AND original tires.

It had been used by the city’s police force as a mobile crime scene vehicle. But it was about to become a mobile kitchen, a young businessman’s first foray into entrepreneurship, and a springboard to a bonafide brick-and-mortar restaurant.

“Those three months were challenging,” Licona says. “I was doubting myself every day. Surprisingly, with no experience, I got it to pass inspection.”

Armed with an engineering mind, the Telecommunications major upgraded the carbuerator. He retrofitted the police truck with a new sink, gravity water tanks, a 36-inch range and other kitchen equipment. He cut steel. He installed a generator, new plumbing and rewired the vehicle. He even painted the truck — with 30 cans of yellow and white spray paint from Lowe’s — and designed his own logo.

Then came the point-of-sale system. As a restaurant worker, he first looked at his former employer's POS. A massive system, it would cost him \$5,000 upfront and would hardly be mobile ... at least not more than a few inches.

He chose *NCR Silver*, due to its low monthly fee, virtually no upfront investment, light iPad mobility, reporting and intuitiveness.



Ricardo Licona, owner of Puerta al Paraiso food truck, is a student working on his second business.

"I thought an iPad wasn't going to be a full POS system," Licona says. "But now I love it. Silver is so much better than my former restaurant's. It's much more versatile, smoother and more user friendly."

While some entrepreneurs can spend \$100,000 to upgrade, design and retrofit a food truck, Licona did it on a shoestring ... and with some serious elbow grease of course.

"Before you knew it, I had a real food truck," Licona says. "I wanted to get it ready for a county fair in July 2013. And that's when I opened up for business. I remember everyone couldn't believe it. While food trucks had become popular elsewhere, it was only the second food truck in my city."

The fair was a success, especially to a college student who had sunk everything he had into the business. But he'd find bigger success in the party district near the university, where he says he generated \$1,000 in his first four hours.

Driving to the prize

The factory and late night party tours were taking him places. But Licona didn't stop there. With the income from those sales, he started snatching up restaurant equipment.

The city of Muncie was so impressed, it actually awarded him a \$125,000 loan to start a brick and mortar business. Licona also recruited family — some of whom are entrepreneurs and cooks themselves — to become investors.

Licona says he and his family are 90 percent complete with the restaurant, and plans on his grand opening in May ... just a few weeks after graduation.

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