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# J.C. Restoration President Honored With Illinois Small Business Person of the Year Award



By **Matt Baron**

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Thirty years ago, heading to and from work as a cleaning supervisor for a restoration company, Jose Cruz placed his 7-year-old son, Warner, on his lap and began teaching him how to drive his battered Ford LTD Station Wagon.

On the job, he showed the boy how to strap on heavy-duty nitrile gloves, stick his hand in a broken toilet, and do whatever was necessary to complete even the humblest of tasks.

Those early days of the restoration industry were on Warner's mind one evening this May.

Along with more than 100 other honored business owners from across the country, he was in Washington, D.C. at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel to receive the Small Business Administration's State Small Business Person of the Year Award.

In 1982, Jose Cruz went from employee to entrepreneur in launching J.C. Restoration. Fifteen years later, Warner took the operational reins of the firm and in 2002 he acquired the company from his father.

Under his leadership, J.C. Restoration has gone from less than \$1 million in annual sales to a projected \$15 million in 2010.

Though Warner has clearly taken the company to a different level, he is quick to acknowledge, "If it wasn't for my dad and my mom (Martha), none of us would even be here."

So it was only natural that Warner seized the moment at the SBA event to shift the spotlight. After emerging from a group of Illinois companies nominated to receive the state award, Warner was named the Second Runner-Up for the National Small Business Person of the Year.



Warner Cruz (right) with wife Chiara Cruz (center) and father and founder of J.C. Restoration, José Cruz (left) at the SBA Award Ceremony in Washington D.C.

As SBA Administrator Karen Mills announced Warner's name, he grabbed his father by the shoulders and declared, "You're coming up with me."

"The greatest feeling was bringing my dad with me to Washington and being honored for all that he has done in life," Warner recalled. "My dad's always been my hero and having him join me on stage was a wonderful moment."

The SBA award recognizes the Rolling Meadows-based company for embodying the spirit of entrepreneurship, innovation and determination that make small businesses the economic engine of the United States.

Nominating Warner for the award was Douglas Kinley, president of the Small Business Growth Corporation, a Springfield, Ill. not-for-profit corporation that works with financial institutions to give financing assistance to small businesses throughout Illinois and parts of four other states.

Of J.C. Restoration, Kinley noted, "They are in the business of restoring lives, not just property."

Despite success that had already sparked a number of other industry and regional awards, Warner said he was "completely overwhelmed" upon learning of the SBA recognition.

"We try to achieve little successes every day. This was so much bigger than one person, this is about our entire company," Warner continued. "I was proud to receive the award on behalf of all our employees who work hard every day to turn our customers into cheerleaders."

J.C. Restoration has 70 employees working from a 102,000-square-foot state-of-the-art facility at 3200 Squibb Ave., which they moved into in April 2009. Its purchase was backed by an SBA loan, which made Cruz eligible for the Business Person of the Year Award.

Tracing J.C. Restoration's roots is an international journey.

For a man who had to rebuild his life after coming to the United States from Guatemala in 1969, it was fitting that his profession revolved around helping businesses and homeowners begin the process of rebuilding their lives from damage caused by flood, fire or storm.

From the outside looking in, his prospects might have appeared bleak. Armed with minimal English-speaking skills, he had only a few pieces of equipment and a couple of laborers working out of his own garage.

But his remarkable work ethic and gritty determination had already earned him a great reputation in the field of restoration. Work began streaming in. Over the years, the company has been very much a family affair.

Warner's sister Karen is a manager at J.C. Restoration. He has two other sisters, Marlene and Mary Ann, who have also worked part-time for the company over the years.

As for Warner, after working in a variety of roles, from carpet cleaning and general labor to office manager, estimator and operations manager, Warner was well positioned to succeed his father eight years ago.

Dave Orr, vice president of commercial lending at West Suburban Bank whose relationship with J.C. Restoration goes back more than 15 years, said both father and son "accomplished what they were looking for."

"With multi-generational family businesses, you tend to see two paths," Orr said. "One is an attitude of entitlement, where the second generation feels they deserved what they got."

"The other path is the second generation considers the business an opportunity—Warner fits into that category," Orr continued. "He viewed all that his father did as a steppingstone for him to take it to another level. Kudos to both of them."

J.C. Restoration is online at [www.jcrestoration.com](http://www.jcrestoration.com).