

North Aurora author launches book in conjunction with Hesed House benefit

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Robert Renteria looks every bit the businessman. Dressed in a pressed button down shirt and tailored suit, he sits at the head of a gleaming wooden conference table at the law offices of Gil and Cruz in Aurora. Two cell phones are splayed out in front of him and an attache case rests nearby.

Renteria, a North Aurora resident, is the vice president and co-founder of WashPro USA, a Westchester-based commercial coin laundry company. He sits on the board of directors for the Aurora Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and is a member of several other chambers including the Greater Aurora Chamber of Commerce and the Quad County African American Chamber of Commerce.

This professional persona, however, wasn't always Renterias' to present as his new memoir, "From the Barrio to the Board Room" can attest. Born in East L.A. to factory laborer parents, one of whom suffered severe alcohol and heroin addictions, Renteria's youth provided ample opportunities to fall through the cracks, opportunities that very nearly became reality as he chronicles years of running with the wrong crowds, of neighborhood gang fights and garage parties fueled by cheap wine.

"The only legacy my father left behind was a pile of bills and a couple of empty bottles of booze in the trash," said Renteria of his father, who abandoned the family when Renteria was only 3 and who didn't resurface again until his death in a halfway house on Skid Row at the age of 38. "For all intents and purposes, he was homeless, he had nothing."

This glimpse into the sorry life of a father he never really knew gave Renteria the idea to launch his book in conjunction with a fundraiser for Hesed House, a center which provides services to the poor and homeless. The benefit will take place at 7 p.m. Friday, April 25 at Long Island Sound, 1920 E. New York St., Aurora. A \$30 admission grants attendees an author reception, complimentary copy of Renteria's autobiography, hors d'oeuvres and a cash bar.

The decision to put on the event was a simple one for Renteria. The decision to put his life on paper was considerably harder. It was a chance encounter with a young man, a stranger, that led Renteria to pen his life story.

"One day, I pulled up in front of a local tavern and this kid sitting out in front told me my car was phat and asked what was my secret. I asked him how old he was and he said 21, so I said, 'C'mon inside with me and have a beer and I'll tell you,' he recounted. "We sat at the bar and I told him to have the bartender get him a pen and grab a napkin. I told him the first word is 'hard' and the second word is 'work.' After that, he ran out the door with the napkin like it was gold."

Laying out the intimate details of his life wasn't easy, Renteria admitted, but in the end, he felt secure about the finished product.

"My goal is to put this book in as many hands as possible. My goal is to elevate the youth so they can spread their wings like the angels God intended them to be," he said. "I wrote the book as a way to give back. People today are looking for shortcuts because we've made life faster and more streamlined so people want things easier but [success] is a long process."

"A lot of people want to circumvent hard work but you've got to pay your dues," he continued.

Renteria's dues came with a stretch in the U.S. Army, where he became a sergeant. Then it came with a move to Lisle, where he slept on a friend's couch, buying Arby's 5 for \$5 roast beef sandwiches, food he made last through the whole week. Eventually came a chance to become part of the coin laundry business, an industry he's had continued success in for the last 18 years.

It is his mother Renteria credits with turning his life around.

"My mother told me years ago that I could be whatever I wanted to be," he said. "I was going left and she had me go right. I owed it to her not to break her heart."

For the event, Renteria has extended several tickets to local school students and nonprofits. He's also encouraging people to drop off non-perishable food items all night.

Ryan Dowd, executive director of Hesed House, is looking forward to this benefit, which will support people in emergency shelter and transitional housing programs.

"This is the first book launch/fundraiser I'm aware of," Dowd said. "With this event, [Hesed House] is hoping for awareness. There's this belief that a homeless person is a forty-something male with long hair, a beard and is a stumbling drunk. That stereotype only fits 5 to 10 percent of the population. People don't think of the 4-year-old, the 10-year-old, the single mom, the elderly couple or increasingly, the single father."

To learn more about the event or the book, which was published by Buffalo Grove-based publishers, Writers of the Round Table, visit www.fromthebarrio.com or call 630-248-1646.



Author Robert Renteria with his autobiography "From the Barrio to the Board Room."

By Patricia Murphy, Triblocal.com staff reporter