



TRANSCRIPT
Born Leader Podcast — Episode 5
Michel Zajur — Servant Leaders Pay It Forward

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Narration: Welcome to the Born Leader podcast, where we believe everyone is born to lead. The show explores leadership in its many forms through interviews with, and profiles of, leaders in our communities—people who demonstrate that we are all born leaders and there are many paths to discovering that potential. I'm your host Gaea Honeycutt, Founder and CEO of the Hypatian Institute Incorporated, a leadership development organization that creates innovative vehicles to cultivate competitive advantage for emerging and established leaders.

In this episode we welcome Michel Zajur, Founder and CEO of the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, an organization dedicated to building bridges to create, promote and enhance business opportunities for its membership by providing linkages with special emphasis on the Hispanic community. Our discussion focuses on the trajectory of his career and how Michel's business savvy and commitment to serving the Richmond community evolved into an entity that fosters cultural and economic exchange.

We begin with the foundations of his work ethic, the challenges and rewards of growing a family business, and how his family's business built connections with the entire community.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Gaea: Tell me a little bit about how you got started in business, and how you were involved in your family's restaurant.

Michel: Well, I always liked business. I guess I started with a Kool-Aid stand, raking leaves, shoveling snow, selling bubblegum in school. But I . . . I always liked business and always looked on creating things in ways to start a business or build an income stream.

Gaea: You were not one of the kids out there trying to gather an allowance; you were making your own money.

Michel: Yes, since a really young, young age.

Gaea: So, when did you start working in the restaurant with your parents, or did you always do that?

Michel: Being in a family business, you know, it was expected that as soon as you could, help out with the family and work. So, I was always . . . uh, grew up in the restaurant, washing dishes, bussing tables, waiting tables and management—every aspect of it, I've done.

- Gaea: What would you say are maybe the biggest lessons that your parents taught you in terms of the work in the restaurant?
- Michel: Well, first of all, it's a work ethic. We were never handed anything, we had to work. We expected in our family that everyone helped contribute, and I think it's really important. I think a lot of times, you have to have expectations set for you so you become an achiever and just don't expect to take what is given you. But, um, I very much grew up in that environment and really it was a need because my family worked really hard. My dad worked from sunup to 12, 15 hours a day. My mother raised six, six of us. So, it was a very busy family, a large family, and so we all had to help each other.
- Gaea: Are you the oldest, or the youngest, or—?
- Michel: No, I'm the middle.
- Gaea: Okay.
- Michel: I have two older sisters and the three of us were born in Mexico. And then, I have three other siblings and they were born here in Virginia.
- Gaea: Okay. So, how old were you when you all moved to the States?
- Michel: Um, it was the early '60s. I was just a young infant. I grew up and my parents didn't speak English. We grew up speaking Spanish at home and English at school. And I have a large family in Mexico, so I'd go back pretty often. But that's how I was raised: dual cultures and so...so I really can understand a lot of what these families are going through now, that are here.
- Gaea: Right. Well gosh, that means... Okay, you have six kids here in this family, you're saying have a large family... it sounds... when you say "large," I get the impression of larger than *your* family, everyone else back in Mexico.
- Michel: Very, very large. I've got cousins and aunts and uncles everywhere.
- Gaea: Wow. You know, you've really been involved in this restaurant. What about the other five kids? Was everyone as involved in working in the restaurant, certainly growing up but then after?
- Michel: I think, I was the oldest son... I was the oldest son, so as soon as I was old enough, you know, I... again, my father worked 15 hours a day... and when I got my driver's license, um, even my learner's, I was working. Then, my mother started and we would go and work so he could come home and rest. Being the oldest son, I think I had more, in that sense, the responsibility. My sisters, probably more at home and helping take care of the family.
- Gaea: You went off to school at VCU, correct?
- Michel: Yes, uh-huh.

Gaea: And studied business, and then brought that back to, um, to work at the restaurant, correct?

Michel: Right, involved in lots of different businesses. But the restaurant, you know, it really grew the restaurant. It became an icon in Richmond. If you go to The Valentine museum here in Richmond there's a display of La Siesta [Mexican] Restaurant. We sold our sauces in the grocery stores, had a big catering business, too. So, very involved business in the restaurant industry.

Gaea: What made you all decide to take it into those directions, into the catering and the packaged foods and other items like that?

Michel: I just saw the opportunities of growing the business. You know, a family business is wonderful, but at the same time, it has its negative aspects. And I would have probably expanded and did a lot more but, you know, there's certain, um... My parents had the philosophy, you know, "You have the business, you've got to be at the register" and that really wasn't the way that I saw things. So, I probably would have done things a lot different, so... But I think growing as we did in different areas, we did a large division... we had a... for kids and we had, uh... We started, I started a Spanish "Siesta Town". And what we did there, we had schools that would come on field trips and they would have lunch, they would learn to speak Spanish, they'd have a little fiesta, but it was a really a great program. They would, they would leave speaking, being able to put their hands up, down. Their, uh, their eyes, their mouth, their nose. And it really gave them an appreciation to learning a second language and understanding the culture. But it was very, very popular, you know. Parents would come... they'd come in busses a hundred at a time.

[LAUGHTER]

And, we'd put this on. But we, uh, we did a lot of catering for businesses and... But it was a... And it's, I like the business... You got to really know a lot of people... and again, it was sharing my culture.

Gaea: So, how did running the restaurant... and starting the Siesta program with the kids and opening up to the community even more... how did that translate for you then into launching the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce?

Michel: Well, first of all, I had no ambition to start a chamber of commerce, but I was very involved in the community. I really feel that, you know, it's important to give back and to be involved in the community. So, I was very involved. At La Siesta, we would have... because at that time there wasn't really... many Mexican restaurants or... people would come in just asking for help. As they moved here, they saw a Mexican restaurant: "Well, someone can speak Spanish there." So they would come and, you know, if they were looking for a job, if they were looking for a place to live, if they wanted to open a business or so forth... and it became an informal kind of place that you go to just to help people. At the same time, you know, we would... held a Cinco de Mayo party, back then when nobody knew what Cinco de Mayo was, in the parking lot.

[LAUGHTER]

Gaea: Uh-huh.

Michel: But it was very community. We did a lot of community events at the restaurant. So, it really was a community hub.

Gaea: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And so, with all these people coming to . . . sort of using the restaurant as a focal place . . . that's what led you then into starting the Chamber?

Michel: Yeah, you know, well we're doing these programs for the kids and lots of parents were coming. We'd get them in from kindergarten all the way through high school and college that would come for this program. It just made me see how people wanted to, to learn the different language, to learn a different culture, and I really thought how it was very important. I thought that it really enhances the way that you look at, at the world. Especially for international. . . so many opportunities exist in the world internationally. You could open your horizons, able to speak a different language. It opens the possibilities of . . . in so many ways. So, doing the program at La Siesta, I got involved in developing a sister city relationship with Richmond and Mexico. Specifically, my parent (my father) was from Zacatecas, Mexico. So, I was working to build a sister city relationship between Richmond, Virginia and Zacatecas, Mexico. And the group that was helping to do this, you know, someone came up to me and said, "You ought to start a chamber of commerce because you *are* a chamber of commerce."

[LAUGHTER]

"What you do in your restaurant and how you help people." And not knowing better at the time, I said . . . I told . . . and I knew there was a reporter, and I said . . . who was interviewing me, and I said. "I'm gonna to start something to help people." And so when . . . you say that in front of people, I guess you have to follow through.

Gaea: [LAUGHTER] Yes, absolutely.

Michel: I really didn't intend to lead the effort, just to get it started. But I realized very quickly that if I didn't follow through with it, it wasn't going to happen.

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Michel: And so um, with my relationships that I had and getting people, I, I . . . again, not knowing better, not really totally understanding what a chamber of commerce *did* . . . I started it.

Gaea: That really resonates well, because, um, when we started the Northern Virginia Black Chamber of Commerce, we thought we wanted to start a chamber of commerce, we wanted to create a place for, um, black-owned . . . black business owners to come learn and be able to create partnerships because it wasn't really happening in Northern Virginia. And very quickly it grew into something, I think, much bigger than any of us had initially anticipated. So, did it carry you forward or did you carry it forward initially?

Michel: Well, I, you know, I gathered Hispanic business owners and leaders in the community to come together. The thing is, they didn't know each other. Nobody knew each other really. Informally. Really, it was very powerful. I think, to bring people together and to see the possibilities. And really, just for them to know each other. Every time we would get together and have a meeting, you could see business happening. You know, opportunities coming to life that . . . someone would say something like, "Oh, they never knew it." So, it really took off, um, took off like that. It was at . . . it started at the restaurant. It was informal. We'd have meetings and events there, and it grew very, very rapidly. But it really brought a community, for the first time together to really know each other. And have people that, you know, that wanted to be part of the opportunities that they saw had many potential . . . opportunities of growth and business opportunities.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Narration: We'll be back after this break to speak more with Michel about building the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

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[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Narration: Welcome back. You're listening to Born Leader from the Hypatian Institute. I'm your host Gaea Honeycutt and joining us today is entrepreneur and Chamber executive Michel Zajur.

In the second part of this episode, we look at how Michel approached building the chamber and his lessons learned, and we'll also discuss how his passion for the community compliments his wife Lisa's passion for education. And how their pursuits come together to foster cultural exchange.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Michel: Well, I definitely see the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce as a two-way street. It's Hispanics becoming, disseminating into the community at-large, understanding the American culture — how to do business here, how to take advantage of this great country we live in, and building their American dream. But, likewise, I saw the opportunity for non-Hispanic businesses that want to do business with the Hispanic community. They want to grow their business internationally in Latin America. You know, how they would have the opportunity. Lisa, when she married into my family, you know, she quickly learned that she had to learn Spanish or she's going to get talked about.

[LAUGHTER]

And she did. Her background is education . . .

Gaea: Okay.

Michel: . . . curriculum design, and she studied with some leading experts in memory and language. So, she went to learn to take Spanish at the community college and it's just . . . just a long process. It wasn't fun, it wasn't engaging, and she just thought it could be done in a much better way than, than that. So, she developed a Spanish program she ran when my kids were growing up. She was a school teacher and she opened, opened up a bilingual preschool. Our kids were raised bilingual and she really, at that time, taught herself and learned from memory experts and, and really experts. And she developed a system of learning and she has a patent pending on it.

Gaea: Hmm!

Michel: But this is really what we did with the La Siesta program with the schools, and it grew. Lisa started the Spanish Academy. She does . . . goes into businesses and does industry-specific— she works with the medical field doing medical Spanish. Goes into law enforcement agencies and does that, Coast Guard. Retail Spanish, construction and so forth. But it's done in a vibrant way. At the same time, I realized being able to do this for the Hispanic Community to disseminate, to learn English, to understand how to do business . . . So, it really came together as, you know, bringing people together. So, you know, when you join the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, it's . . . you're not going to have to . . . people would arrive and say, "Do I have to

know Spanish?" No, but if you want to learn Spanish, we can help you. If you, ah, if you want to learn English, we're going to help you, you know. We're going to help that.

But one of the things I didn't miss, when I did start the Chamber, one of the first things I went to do is I went to see Jim Dunn, who is president of the Richmond chamber of commerce.

Gaea: Right.

Michel: And I . . . before I started it, I did not want to start something that would divide people because that's not what I'm about. It's bringing people together. And he very much encouraged me to, to start it, and offered his support. And, and because it really enhances the whole community . . . I've gone around the state and I've reached out to almost every chamber of commerce around the state . . .

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Michel: Letting them know about this organization. Working with them to really help develop, um, the business community in their area to help them, and to build a statewide network that we have here today.

Gaea: I notice that in Northern Virginia there are about, um, four Hispanic Chambers operating in that space. You have the Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber based in D.C., the Mid-Atlantic Hispanic Chamber based in Maryland, um, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Northern Virginia, based Northern Virginia also . . .

[LAUGHTER]

And so, do you find that you're working a lot with other Hispanic Chambers also?

Michel: Yeah, I work with all of them in some way or manner. I, um . . . at the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, but it's about being involved and really connecting each other to, you know, as a group, because it's important that you have these relationships. But there's more than that. There's other, there's a lot of smaller Chambers—the Mexican Chamber of Commerce, the Columbian Chamber of Commerce — there's lots of, several groups, but they're small and what I try to do is to reach out to them to bring them together in specific ways that we can work together to bring opportunity — especially to the state of Virginia.

Gaea: So, what has been probably the biggest lesson you've learned in this, in this time when you've been an entrepreneur, working first at the restaurant, starting these programs like La Siesta, the ventures that your wife is leading around education and doing the consulting and contracting with other companies and agencies, and then now with the Chamber? What do you think has been your biggest lesson . . . and you can have more than one?

[LAUGHTER]

Michel: I've gotten lots and lots of lessons learned. But I think it's, um, persistence not to give up because this has not been anything easy. In hindsight, I, you know, probably would have had

20 restaurants now really if I'd focused on myself. But I have the biggest pleasure. It's when you give back, and you're building something and helping other people to help to build their lives and their American dreams. It's a satisfaction that you don't get just from financial success.

And then, really, leadership. You've got to get involved. You know, you've got to be at the table. When I go out to meet with individuals it's, it's, you know, "What are *you* doing to give back?" A lot of times people want to join the Chamber because it's, you know, it's all about business. But the philosophy here at the Chamber is that you have to give back, you have to pull a hand to help someone come up, come up from the ladder. And that's the philosophy. So, if you're a member of the Chamber, we're going to help you to get exposed, we're going to help you to be successful, we're going to promote you, we're going to give you the recognition. But at the same time, you have to give back. And that's why we started the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Foundation. And this is probably a very, very important element and part of the Chamber that really is...that makes me wake up every day feeling really good about what I do. But, um, we have several programs there that I'll share with you in a little bit.

But, um, I think another thing is, you know, how do you make it win-win? The way that I have seen that we have grown to be so successful is, how do you make partnerships, how do you build partnerships? And it's got to be a win-win. So many times it's all about me, and you can't think like that. You have to make it a win-win-win. I'll tell you, a wonderful example is the partnership that we've developed with the Black Chamber, the Northern Virginia Asian Chamber and the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. I've tried this same model of doing this before. We did it in Northern Virginia in different areas, and it just never really took hold and...but it... But, I'm really glad to see how well we work together. It's—it's really a win-win relationship. We're doing joint membership; we're putting on joint events. It really helps all three organizations. We're able to give back so much more to our membership.

Gaea: Right.

Michel: And to the community by putting this partnership together. And you were very much a part of that since the beginning.

Gaea: A long time ago!

[LAUGHTER]

Maybe not as long as you've been doing it. 'Cuz the Chamber is now what, 15 years old?

Michel: Yes, 15 years old.

Gaea: And what has surprised you about the Chamber now versus when you first started it? What, you know, what has been your biggest surprise in its evolution?

Michel: Well again, I had no idea that it was, that it would grow to this level. We've put on some major, major events around the state. The people that I have come across and met, the leaders, the . . . it's been phenomenal. It's just real rewarding, you know, to have just a vision, a belief, and to

make it happen. Again, I did not really have any big ambition of growing a . . . the way it's taken off. But the vision that I do see is building something that's bigger than any individual. That's going to last past me or anybody else, to give back. And that's really rewarding. It makes you feel very good.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Narration: Michel and I concluded our interview discussing what makes Richmond the ideal location for business and the Virginia Hispanic Chamber's headquarters, and the mentor who inspires him and drives the philosophy behind the Chamber.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Gaea: It really seems like Richmond is the kind of community where everyone knows everyone. Or if you don't know that person, you're not too many degrees of separation from them. Would you say that it's a very intimate community, too?

Michel: Yeah, I think it's very intimate. You know, Richmond is used as a test market for a lot of products that would come on the market. If it took off in Richmond, it'd take off anywhere is what the . . . But it is, it's a very important market, a very dynamic, growing community. And growing this network past Richmond —you know, Richmond was a good starting place for us — but as we're in Northern Virginia and we grow the Chamber in all parts of Virginia. It's really added to the dynamics. But, being in Richmond is very important because a lot of what we do is in the General Assembly.

Gaea: Mm-hmm.

Michel: It's working with the state government, and lobbying and working with the delegates, and really advocating for business and advocating for the Hispanic community. So, being in Richmond, the capital city, is very important.

Gaea: Aside from your parents and your family, who was probably the greatest mentor, the most significant mentor, for you in terms of your career path and your trajectory?

Michel: Coming from Mexico, I saw my parents — they didn't speak English, they worked extremely hard their whole life, you know — I always wanted to help them. But there was one gentleman, specifically, that helped my father. He helped my father start his first business and he was just a good man. He would come over. He would, you know . . . he looked after my family and helped them. Back then, there wasn't an organization like this where you could go for assistance. I mean, virtually no one spoke, could help. You couldn't go anywhere, nobody spoke Spanish. I mean, just think of now. There's so many different areas that you could go for assistance. You can pick up your cell phone and call anywhere. You can go to the Internet, get any kind of information in any language that you want. You could pick up a newspaper in Spanish. Turn on the TV, radio, whatever. But back in the 60s, that wasn't the case. This gentleman . . . it was my dad's cousin . . . really helped him and I'm very grateful because I think our lives were greatly enriched because of him. I see, and I think this is my, my thought is this organization could do the same for so many other people, and um . . . It's helping them to get

started, helping them understand the system. It really can change people's lives and the future of their families.

Gaea: Wow. That's, you know, that's really reflective of the fact that you don't get where you are by yourself. That it's so important to help others and there is someone who has helped you. And some work more impactfully than others, but you never know whose life you're going to touch as you're going through your day, too.

So tell me this, because you are now . . . you've sold the restaurant and it's now a Korean restaurant, you were saying earlier to me. And you're kind of semi-retired, some might say, at least having sold the restaurant business, but you're very passionate about what you do here at the Chamber. What do you see for your future? Do you see doing this until you can't do it anymore?

Michel: Right now, I really want to grow the Chamber to make sure it's in good financial and stable because I want this to live. . . I put too much into it to not have it live, live on. But right now we have so many programs that we're doing — the business center, you know, helping people get loans, helping people start their businesses. We have legal clinics. We have some of the top lawyers here giving technical advice and assistance to individuals. We work with SCORE. One of the great programs that I'm really, really excited about is a program called Passport to Education. We're going to probably give out \$50,000 worth of scholarships this year. We've already given out over \$124,000 and this year we'll give out \$50,000. But, um, we're—we have the program, we have about a hundred mentors that go into five schools, mentoring youths. These are at-risk students that could, they could go either way. And if you can inspire them . . . you know, one their biggest visions it to turn 16 and get a job. If you can inspire them to . . . how . . . to stay in school and to see the future of what possibilities they can be, then it's life changing what you can bring on. So, this program I'm very excited about. But there's so many other programs like that. I think that's really what I've put my focus on. I just enjoy it and look forward to having a legacy live on.

Gaea: Well, you are clearly a blessing to your community because there's so much that you've been giving your whole life, and certainly through the Chamber. And really making a difference for people and mentoring some of these other Chambers. Certainly mentoring the Black Chamber. And creating those partnerships, too, which is so key and important to helping communities really gain a foothold and find success and help one another out. So, thank you so much for all that you do, and thank you certainly for doing this podcast with me, I appreciate it.

Michel: Well, good, and I know you're going to do wonderful. You're such a dynamic person, I know, with your leadership and everything I've worked with you on. I appreciate you interviewing me.

Gaea: Thank you!

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Narration: Before we wrap up, I'd like to highlight a key theme from this episode. This two-minute Leadership Moment will be a continuing feature of the Born Leader podcast, and I welcome your thoughts and comments.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Gaea: My interview with Michel Zajur brought home an interconnected set of ideas, what I really think of as life lessons. First, you don't get where you are on your own. We are all working hard to build the lives and communities we envision for ourselves. However, without the people who believe in us and our ideas, without the people who support and invest in what we do, most of us are lost floating in a sea of our own thoughts. It's that interconnection that made a difference for Michel's family when they first came to the United States, and he pays that early kindness forward time and again through the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, its Passport to Education program and other activities in the community.

The second idea is that you never know what effect your words or actions might have on others. Did his uncle know the lasting impact that his generosity and support would have on Michel? It's very unlikely, but that spirit has infused Michel's entire life and produced some incredible contributions to the people in his life and to the greater community. Supporting those around us is one of the core values of servant leadership. There's big-L leadership and little-l leadership. The first is what we often think about — being out front as a spokesperson or figurehead, being in charge. In today's Born Leader podcast the focus was on little-l leadership — the character and skills necessary to authentically lead oneself and others and to follow a path of purpose. The things that have led Michel to success and transformation, not only in his life but many others'.

Narration: That's this episode's two-minute Leadership Moment. Let us know your thoughts via email at info at Hypatian Institute dot o-r-g or through our Facebook fan page, LinkedIn group or on Twitter. Our handle is @H-Y-P-A-T-I-A-N-I-N-S-T.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Narration: I'm afraid it's time to wrap up Born Leader today. I want to thank Michel Zajur, founder and CEO of the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, for speaking with us about building businesses and the community at the same time. You can learn more about the Chamber, its programs and upcoming events at V-A-H-C-C dot com. I'd also like to thank our administrative partner, WSC Associates, LLP, who provides assistance on the business side of this venture. And thank you for listening. We'd love to hear from you in the comments section or on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

In the next episode of Born Leader, we'll speak with Ulysses James, Maestro of the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic Association. If you want to learn more about Michel Zajur or other guests on the Born Leader podcast, visit HypatianInstitute.org. That's H-Y-P-A-T-I-A-N institute dot O-R-G. Or follow us on Twitter at Hypatian I-N-S-T. Talk to you next time on Born Leader from the Hypatian Institute.