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Irresistible personality provides keys

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GEORGETOWN -- Here are four things Ernesto Lopez can't forget:

- Spending summers in Puerto Rico with his namesake grandfather, and watching in awe at restaurants as kitchen help and diners came to greet the elder as an old friend.
- That mixed, burning feeling in his stomach when a Newark Super Fresh cashier's impatient question -- "What'd you say?" -- had been directed toward his mother, whose thick accent the cashier professed not to understand.
- The international crowd of his father's clients, whom he met at dinner parties where he could devour his mother Sandra's Gouda cheese and shrimp dip, while sliding into English and Spanish with guests.
- Talks and visits with U.S. Sen. Bill Roth, a Republican known for tax cut legislation, in Roth's last years.

Lopez, 30, can't forget them because those experiences helped form the man he is today: an ambitiously amenable, irresistibly outgoing bilingual ambassador for the Delaware's **4-H** clubs.

"To meet him is to like him," says Jim Taylor, an attorney and one of his best friends.

"He's one of the most sincere and friendliest people you can find. He'll do anything for anyone."

With an expressive left-eye wink that rhythmically punctuates excited snippets of dialog, Lopez also is a politician in the making.

When he was 27, he ran for New Castle County Council president as a Republican, with the backing of U.S. Rep. Mike Castle.

He lost, but he seems to speak as though he is perennially on the campaign trail.

Except now, he's campaigning for **4-H**.

He's the kind of person who lives perpetually in the present: convincing others through the force of his enthusiasm that what he's doing at the moment is the most important thing he ever has done and ever will do.

Right now it's **4-H**, which annually serves more than 65,000 young people in Delaware in 145 clubs.

An organization created to provide "hands-on" training for children and administered in the state by the University of Delaware's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, it is no longer just a place where kids learn how to raise sheep, cows and goats -- although that still goes on.

"We still have animal science programs, but as there are less dairy farms and these kinds of operations and less kids living on those places, we also do specialized ones for suburban youngsters," said Joy Sparks, state **4-H** coordinator.

Those programs include after-school classes, camping, photography, computer science, horticulture and teen leadership programs.

"Ernie's the one making contacts in the community down there," says Margo McDonough of the University of Delaware's agricultural department, which sponsors **4-H** in the state. "He represents the new **4-H**. The demographics of Sussex County is different than a decade ago, and we're trying to serve communities we haven't in the past."

That includes a burgeoning Latino population, some of whom don't speak English, and some of whom -- like Lopez -- slip into both languages as easily as they can slide their hands into a pair of comfortable gloves.

A social education

Born in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, near San Juan, Lopez moved to Wayne, Pa., with his family when he was 9 months old. His father had gotten a job with a company that sold gambling equipment, including race track scoreboards.

The family -- which included an older brother and younger sister -- soon moved to Newark in 1978, and his father became head of marketing for Latin America, traveling up to two weeks out of every month.

Although he began school at Downes Elementary School, Lopez spent the fourth grade at Wilmington Christian School, from where he graduated in 1994.

But perhaps the greatest education he received, he says, came via his family and those summers back in Rio Piedras with his grandfather.

"They're very similar in personality," says Lopez's wife, Janis, of her husband and his grandfather. "A people person. He gets out and walks up to the grocery store and meets with his friends. He knows everyone."

Lopez also traveled around the world with his father, from Venezuela and Chile in South America to many parts of Europe, including Belgium, Switzerland and Greece.

And there was an affecting experience in the seventh grade, he says.

Father and son traveled on vacation to Nicosia, Cyprus, and then to Berlin, Germany, just before the wall came down in 1989.

"I was a kid who grew up in suburbia, safe, where everyone got along, and I had great friends," he says. "There, people were separated out because of nationality or religion or ideology."

It didn't make sense to a boy who grew up bilingual.

"It's who I am," Lopez says, without the trace of an accent. "It's essential. I can communicate with a segment of the population a lot of other people can't. That's what it's all about."

What "it" means for Lopez is communicating with anyone, with everyone.

'Two cultures inside me'

"I see it as two cultures inside me," he says. "At an early age, I was able to see the town where I was born, my four aunts who never came here, my grandfather who treated everyone with the same respect."

It was the attempt to overcome that feeling he got when, as a child, his mother was questioned by a Super Fresh clerk about something she said.

"She bit her lip," Lopez remembers, "and repeated what she had said slowly. That week my dad was in Venezuela, and it was just me and my brother and sister with mom."

Wink: "It told me I have to work hard. I can handle all situations."

A people-centered attitude dominated his undergraduate career.

He met his future wife during a high-school student council **conference** in Glasgow.

Born in Wilmington and raised in southern Delaware, Janis Drake came from a politically

minded family: her grandfather was state senator Charles Hughes, and she interned with Roth.

Lopez "was a lot more grown up for his years," Janis says. "He reminded me of a 16-year-old going on 40. He was serious about getting elected to student council."

They met up again at Gettysburg (Pa.) College, a small liberal arts college, and ended up living in the same co-ed residence hall.

They started dating their sophomore year.

Although both majored in political science and both love history, their contrasting personalities -- Janis is bookish, Lopez is not -- both flowered and intertwined at Gettysburg.

He spent a semester in Ecuador, while Janis spent the following semester in Japan. After those two semesters, both say they knew they were going to be together.

"He wasn't the best student in the world," says Don Borock, a political science teacher at Gettysburg College. "His wife was far better. Ernie was good-natured and he came to class. He was what you would call a late bloomer."

And irredeemably sociable, despite -- or because of -- being the only Latino on campus. At times, Borock says, Lopez's lack of initiative in class disappointed him.

"He didn't set the world on fire, and he got the grade he deserved" -- not an A -- "but he didn't complain."

That said, Lopez became president of his residence hall and vice president of his graduating class.

"He saw the light eventually," Borock says.

Life-shaping influences

That light was an ambition fueled by at least two events: his meeting and becoming friends with Roth. His first job out of college in the fall of 1998, an admissions counselor at UD.

While earning a Master of Arts in liberal studies from UD and researching his master's thesis on Delawarean J. Caleb Boggs, who served as a U.S. Senator, a U.S.

Representative and as governor of Delaware during the mid-20th century, he began interviewing Roth in the spring of 2002.

Roth had left the Senate the year before, and it struck Lopez how unaffected Roth was. Even after he was done his research, Lopez visited Roth about a dozen times to have lunch or talk.

"I even took him to the dentist's once," he says. "He needed a kid to take him to the dentist."

His friendship with Roth confirmed his Republicanism -- which had been inspired by his wife, who had interned with Roth.

More importantly, however, it also taught him that "Power is fleeting," he says. "This was a man who was in one of the most exclusive clubs in the world, and I can't remember ever hearing his phone ring."

Even so, Roth also reaffirmed for Lopez the power of a personality: even out of office, when they visited Dome in Hockessin for hamburgers, people invariably interrupted the meal just to say hello.

Roth died in December 2003, while Lopez worked at UD as an admissions counselor.

"I had a great job," he says. "I spent a lot of time with first-generation families -- Latino and African-American -- who never had someone go to college."

When he was quickly promoted at 26 to associate director for admissions, he spent much of his time going over student applications.

The most important part of an applicant to a major school such as the University of Delaware?

Sure, you need a good grade point average, recommendations, extra-curricular activities. But hands down, Lopez says, it's more about the essay and personal interviews. "These are people and not pieces of paper," he says.

"One of the biggest problems with college admissions for students is not knowing what they need to be prepared," says Karen Aniunas, assistant dean in the college of agricultural and natural resources at UD, who worked with Lopez.

"We were missing out on a lot of kids who didn't know how to express themselves,"

Lopez says. "I had a hard time saying no to half the pool of applicants."

4-H position a good fit

After his daughter Anna was born in 2005, Lopez began to rethink what he wanted to do. When the job of **4-H** specialist for volunteer development opened in Georgetown, both he and Janis thought it was a smart move.

Both their sets of parents lived near the beach, and the area was where Janis grew up.

The new family bought a house in Lewes.

"People were surprised I took this job," Lopez says. "What they don't understand is this is a missionary job. I can get to these kids on the front end. Youth development work is where I need to be."

Aniunas agrees.

"He's able to take the experience and knowledge he gained here with the higher admission process and take it to a different place," she says. "He has a way of being the guy next door with people, which make them relate. His bilingualism is a hit, he can work with two different crowds."

That includes not only speaking to Latinos in Sussex County, but also teaching and encouraging everyone else to get into a variety of **4-H** club committees.

"He contacted me through e-mail a few times," says Emily Harvey, 16, who has been in **4-H** since she was 7. Lopez encouraged her to join the state teen council, which organizes state events throughout the year.

"He said my name had come up a couple of times," she says. "I was a little surprised and very excited. It was an honor."

It's an intangible ingredient in a child's self-esteem, Lopez argues, that places children on a better track to succeed, let alone get into good colleges.

One of the more enjoyable aspects of his job at **4-H** occurs during Friday afternoons, when he works with the La Casita **4-H** Club, geared toward first-generation low-income Latino children between 10 and 13.

Most recently, they did public speaking demonstrations.

Joy Sparks, who coordinates **4-H** throughout the state, says it's Lopez's insistent optimism that sets him apart.

"People say, does he ever have a bad day? Not to my knowledge," she says. Lopez, she says, could walk outside and have something fall out of the sky onto his head, "and he'd say, 'It's sunny and beautiful.' "

From where Lopez is standing -- and anyone a handshake away -- it is.

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SANDRA LOPEZ'S GOUDA AND SHRIMP DIP

This dip was always one of Ernesto Lopez's favorites, says his mother, Sandra Lopez of Bethany Beach. It's easy, and men in particular really love it, she says, maybe because of the garlic.

2 wheels of smoked Gouda cheese

4 to 6 cloves of garlic, to taste

1 can of shrimp (she likes medium-sized)

Preheat oven to 350. Smash or mince garlic. Place one cheese wheel in a small baking dish and spread the garlic out on it. Top with the other cheese wheel. Pour shrimp and liquid over cheese. Bake for 20 to 30 minutes, until the dish is bubbly and just starting to turn brown on the edges. Serve with rounds of french bread or nice crackers as a base for the spread.

4-H FACTS

More than 65,000 Delaware youth and more than 3,300 volunteers are involved in 146 **4-H** clubs in the state -- nearly 45 percent of all Delaware youth.

The focus of **4-H** is leadership, citizenship and life skills, taught through programs ranging from service-learning camps to obesity prevention projects.

Who is in **4-H**?

K-Grade 3: 63 percent

Grades 4-6: 24 percent

Grades 7-9: 6 percent

Grades 10-12+: 7 percent

Residence

Farm: 3 percent

Rural: 50 percent

Towns & cities from 10,000-50,000: 20 percent

Wilmington suburbs: 15 percent

Wilmington: 12 percent

Top **4-H** activities

Personal Safety

Environmental Education/Earth Sciences

Animal Science

Plant Science

Leadership and Personal Development

Communications and Expressive Arts

Food and Nutrition

Community/Volunteer Service

Health

Agriculture

Nationwide

4-H, which stands for Head, Heart, Hands and Health, is a youth organization administered by the Cooperative Extension System of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The mission includes "engaging youth to reach their fullest potential while advancing the field of youth development." There are more than 9 million members in 100,000 clubs across the country.

The **4-H** Pledge

"I pledge my Head to clearer thinking, my Heart to greater loyalty, my Hands to larger service, and my Health to better living ... for my Club, my community, my country and my world."

For more information on **4-H** clubs, contact the UD Cooperative Extension offices in New Castle County: 831-8965; Kent County: 730-4000; Delaware State University: 857-6434; Sussex County: 856-7303.

University of Delaware College of Agriculture & Natural Resources

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