



EXECUTIVE VP ROBERT RENTERIA, JR. FINDS PURPOSE IN HELPING OTHERS BEAT ODDS

by Katie Gutierrez

IN 2003, ROBERT RENTERIA, JR. HAD just bought a new Mercedes Benz. Pulling up at a local tavern in his new car, Renteria noticed two young Latino men appraising the Mercedes admiringly. As Renteria walked past, one of the young men suddenly asked Renteria for his “secret”—how might the young man be able to purchase such a “phat” car? In response, Renteria confirmed he was 21 years of age and then offered to buy him a beer.

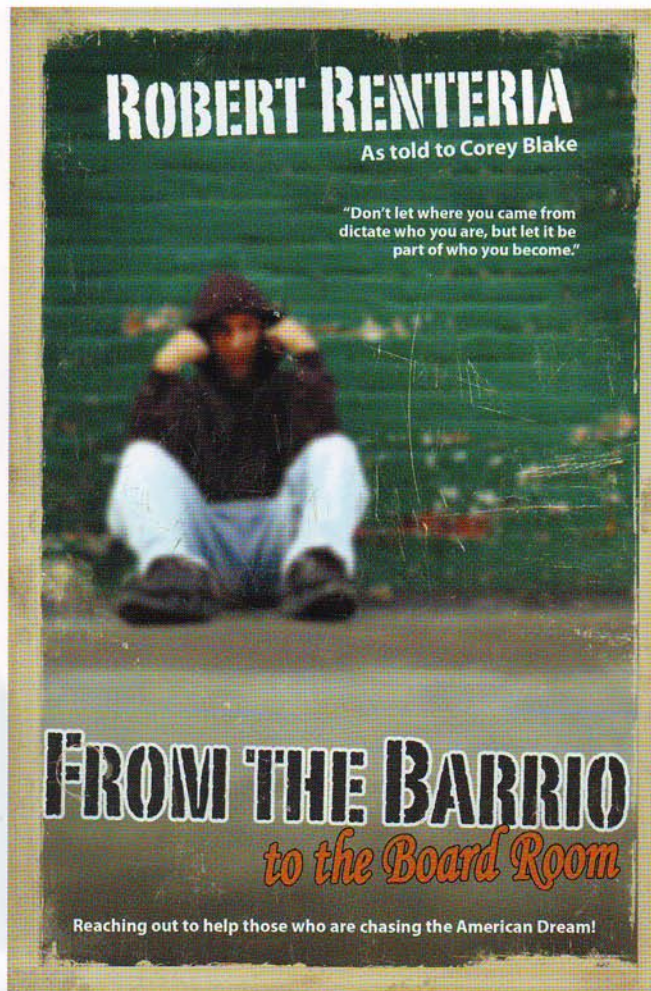
“I thought, ‘I have to talk to this kid,’” Renteria recalls, a laugh in his voice.

Above: Robert Renteria, Jr. After the two had finished their beers,

the young man asked Renteria again for his secret. Renteria smiled and told the young man to ask the bartender for a napkin and a pen.

“I said, ‘Write down these two words: The first is *hard*. The second is *work*.’ The kid looked at me, a little confused, and said, ‘Hard work? That’s your secret?’ I nodded, and he stared at the napkin a little more. Then, jumping from his seat, he shook my hand and rushed out like I had given him gold!”

The experience was an eye-opening one for Renteria, who had cofounded Wash-Pro USA, a highly successful business-



Above: From the Barrio to the Board Room, a book by Robert Renteria, Jr.

to-business consulting company for the coin laundry industry, in 2001. In many ways, Renteria learned as much from the young man as the young man learned from Renteria.

"It made me realize," Renteria says, "that we have children, teenagers and adults alike wandering around lost in a culture of darkness. I felt it was my obligation to do something about that."

Renteria began thinking about penning his autobiography, and the more the idea took hold, the more he became

convinced that the book would touch lives; that it would make a difference to at-risk Latino youth in particular. To understand and fully appreciate Renteria's conviction, it is crucial to know more of his story.

Renteria was born in the barrio of East LA to a faithful, hardworking woman and an alcoholic, heroin-addicted father. Renteria's father abandoned the family when Renteria was three years old, and later died at a halfway house on Skid Row. Renteria's mother struggled to support her young son and daughter through working numerous factory jobs, but the grim fact was that they were barely hanging on. They were so poor that the young Renteria slept curled up in a dresser drawer; his only entertainment was watching the fat, hairy cockroaches skittering across the walls.

With such a start, many may have considered Renteria's future hopeless—but he began a lifelong habit of beating the odds at an early age. At six years old, Renteria suffered a near-fatal accident when a carnival ride prematurely started and collided with his head. The blow knocked Renteria 50 feet into the crowd, shattering the front of his skull and sending him to the hospital in a screaming ambulance, barely alive.

After two days in the hospital, during which some family members were having private discussions about making funeral arrangements, Renteria began to recover. The stunned physicians informed Renteria's family that his survival was certainly one in a million—a true miracle. But the devastation was far from over; Renteria spent the next three years at a school for handicapped and physically disabled children, a time he still remembers as surreal and nightmarish.

Though Renteria recovered from the

accident, he tempted death once again as a teenager when he got involved with various gang members. Despite his mother's best efforts to the contrary, Renteria quit high school, took and sold drugs, was shot at and even stabbed. Then, when Renteria was 21, his maternal grandfather issued him a challenge: to leave L.A. Renteria's grandfather believed that if Renteria returned in 10 years, his friends would be on the same street corners selling even worse drugs—if they weren't dead or in jail.

military job experience, however, the owner passed on hiring him. Not rising from his seat, Renteria urged him to reconsider, promising to outwork everyone and protect the company as though it were his own. Intrigued by Renteria's persistence, the owner gave him a chance. After more than five years of seven-day weeks and overtime, Renteria had climbed to a managerial sales position, and generated gross sales figures of over \$1.5 million in sales annually.

“FOR ME IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BOTTOM LINE; IT'S ABOUT RIGHT AND WRONG, AND I'M UNWILLING TO MAKE A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL JUST TO BE A STAR IN HELL.” *Robert Renteria, Jr., Co-founder and Executive Vice President of WashPro USA*

After some thought, Renteria accepted the challenge, earned his GED, and enlisted in the Army. In July 1983, he left everything he'd ever known and began boot camp at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. It was the beginning of a new future.

“My family upbringing and roots did not allow me to make lame excuses or point fingers,” Renteria says. “Only children and cowards do that, and in the end, my roots gave me the persistence and pride to drive myself to be everything that my mother believed I could be—and everything I wanted to be.”

After seven and a half years of active Army duty, Renteria returned to find that his grandfather had been right. So, to avoid old habits, Renteria left LA again, this time for Chicago. There, he stayed with a friend for six weeks while job hunting, finally setting up a meeting with the owner of the commercial laundry sales and distribution center where the friend worked.

Because Renteria had no solid non-

Eventually leaving that company, Renteria continued rising until he was one of the most highly paid individuals in his industry. He bought his mother her first car and traveled all over the country, living a life no one could have predicted for him. However, Renteria felt a growing hollowness; the job had become all about the money and less so about the customer. Making a dramatic decision, Renteria left his lucrative job to start from scratch, aiming to build his own company with valued colleague John Vassiliades.

“For me it's not about the bottom line,” Renteria says firmly. “It's about right and wrong, and I'm unwilling to make a deal with the devil just to be a star in hell.”

Known as the “wash pro” by his hundreds of loyal customers, Renteria now devotes himself to every aspect of his clients' laundry businesses, including planning, design, construction, and financing. From only Renteria and

Vassiliades in 2001, WashPro USA now employs three full-time employees and six independent contractors, and Renteria has helped develop more than

“I believe that if this book changes lives, I’ll have played my part in helping to change the world,” Renteria says. “I want Latinos to know that we have no

“WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT TAKING CARE OF EACH OTHER IS THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD.”

Robert Renteria, Jr.

500 coin laundromats in the US and abroad. Through his business, Renteria has rediscovered the ultimate reward: caring.

“We need to remember that taking care of each other is the foundation of the world,” says Renteria.

In keeping with this philosophy, Renteria passionately believes that his newly released book, *From the Barrio to the Board Room* (Writers of the Round Table Press), will begin a cycle of caring among at-risk youth and those in a position to help them. Early in its first year of publication, the book has already garnered Renteria numerous speaking engagements at middle schools and high schools, an invitation to speak at Northwestern University, media features, an appointment to the board of directors for the Aurora Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and a spotlight mention as a member to watch from the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

upward limits. The only limits we have are the ones we put on ourselves.” HEQ

More information about Renteria’s book at www.fromthebarrio.com

WASHPRO USA AT A GLANCE

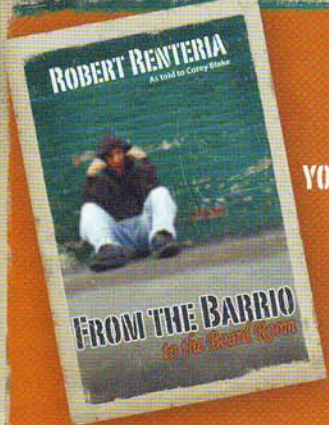
AREA OF SPECIALTY:

Three-pronged approach: help customers get into the coin business, assist them to develop while they’re in, and help them transition out when necessary

ANNUAL REVENUE:

According to Renteria, a “very financially healthy year.”

EMPLOYEES: three full-time, six independent contractors



“DON’T LET WHERE YOU CAME FROM DICTATE WHO YOU ARE, BUT LET IT BE PART OF WHO YOU BECOME.”

Robert J. Renteria, Jr.
Co-founder, WashPro USA
Author, *From the Barrio to the Board Room*

A better life comes from making better choices. Read the story of one Latino’s rise from the impoverished and crime-stricken East L.A. barrio, overcoming tremendous hardships and corporate discrimination, to become a successful business owner and sought-after speaker. *From the Barrio to the Board Room* is Robert Renteria’s highly anticipated life story — delivering a heartfelt message of hope for other Latinos, and anyone who is chasing the American Dream. *From the Barrio to the Board Room* is now available from Writers of the Round Table Press (www.fromthebarrio.com). For volume purchasing, please contact sue@writersoftheroundtable.com.

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