

## Chefs find American Dream in Jackson

Bilingualism is credited as a big part of how immigrants achieve their American Dream.

By Tom Hallberg Jan 22, 2020 0



Il Villaggio Osteria chef Jose Luis Beristain Perez, Bin22 chef Jose Luis Hernandez Morillon and Fine Dining Restaurant Group owner Gavin Fine speak to sixth grade students about the American Dream and the importance of being bilingual in work and in life Monday afternoon at Jackson Hole Middle School. Perez and Morillon both came to the United States as children and learned English at Jackson Hole High School.

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Two men named Jose Luis arrived in Jackson when they were teenagers, speaking little or no English. More than a decade later they have each achieved what teacher Michelle Rooks described as the American Dream, a concept that can encapsulate everything from economic security to positive social relationships.

Jose Luis Beristain Perez is the head chef at Il Villaggio Osteria, and Jose Luis Hernandez Morillon is the head chef at Bin 22. Neither of the former Jackson Hole High School students is yet 30 years old, but through a combination of perseverance and education they have created successful, fulfilling lives for themselves in their new country.

Rooks and the administrators at Jackson Hole Middle School invited the chefs to speak to sixth graders about how their bilingual skills have helped them achieve their goals.

“We’ve been trying to think about who are hometown heroes,” Rooks said. “Sometimes Martin Luther King seems distant and from the past, so who can we bring in as hometown heroes that the kids will see again?”

The chefs certainly fit that model. They spoke about immediately finding jobs when they moved here, working around their class schedule. Both found themselves at the bottom of the totem pole in their kitchens, washing dishes and doing the other small jobs that make a restaurant efficient.

“It was hard to go to school and work at the same time, but I think we made it,” Hernandez Morillon said. “We are here today in front of you guys.”

The assembly for Martin Luther King Jr. Day (also known as Equality Day in Wyoming) was to kick off the American Dream Project, a sixth grade arts-based endeavor that asks students to think about how the American Dream can be achieved by more people.

At the assembly, Rooks asked students to raise their fists to define the American Dream. In keeping with research done by The New York Times and the Pew Research Center, few raised their fists to show it meant getting rich. Many raised their hands to say it meant having the freedom to raise a family, work the job they want and live how they see fit.

“These two guys, they epitomized to us what the American Dream is in Jackson in 2020,” teacher Stan Morgan said. “They came here — I’ll just say it straight up, penniless — but with hunger, a desire to work, work ethic and just unbelievable commitment.”

Gavin Fine, the owner of the Fine Dining Group, which includes the restaurants where the men work, also attended. In addition to speaking about how hard the men work, he talked about the importance of bilingualism.

The chefs learned English when they came to Jackson, and Fine, who spent years working in kitchens before he opened his first restaurant, said he wouldn’t have taken the same career trajectory had he not spoken two languages.

His message was that no matter their plans, they should take their language skills seriously, because speaking a second language could help them travel or connect with people, regardless of the industry they eventually work in.

Beristain Perez agreed with that sentiment. He said learning English not only helped him become better at cooking, but also allowed him to develop relationships with people, a crucial part of his American Dream. The skills he developed in his time at Jackson Hole High School allow him to become close with a group of diverse people he might not have dreamed of interacting with when he immigrated to the United States.

“I tell them all the time,” he said, “you guys are my family. You treat me right.”