

Rufino Saavedra started his firm with paintbrushes and less than \$30 in capital.



One big painting job for local contractor Rufino Saavedra, below, has been re-painting the Slidell Outlet mall.

PHOTOS BY
CHRIS GRANGER

A portrait of his success

By JAMES WELSH
Business writer

Nobody was delivering season's greetings to Rufino Saavedra during Christmas 1989. Instead, he got a pink slip.

Saavedra, a native of Peru who had immigrated to New Orleans six years before, saw his American dream going up in smoke when he was laid off his job at Caterpillar Tractor Corp. in Harahan.

"I was very depressed. A week before Christmas, I lost my job," he said.

He assessed his situation. Like thousands of other Latin Americans, he had seen coming to the United States as the opportunity of a lifetime. Hard work and honesty, he was convinced, would pay off.

But even though he had a background in quality control and an associate's degree in engineering, Saavedra's English language skills left a lot to be desired. He wasn't exactly swamped with cash, either.

But today, Saavedra will celebrate Christmas as president of his own successful small company, a painting and restoration business he started with less than \$30 in cash. He can never be laid off again. This is the story of how he did it.

Starting from scratch

Saavedra already was no stranger to hard times. It had been difficult even getting started after he came to the United States.

In the beginning, he took odd jobs — maintenance work, machine shop operator — "Whatever I could get, to make an honest living with my limited communications skills," he said.

Before hiring on with Caterpillar in 1985, he had attended night school at Bonnabel High School to learn English. He made some progress, but was still speaking broken English when he left the company.

After the layoff, Saavedra began working for a contractor who painted apartment complexes. He learned the business quickly.

"I never said 'No,'" he said. "I worked from 7 o'clock in the morning until 11 o'clock at night sometimes. Three months later, I figured this little bird could fly on its own."

One day, he received a telephone call from the manager of a small complex, asking if he would submit a bid to paint apartments. He went to a Home Depot store and bought paint brushes, rollers and pans.



Then, he asked two other painters to come help him.

Suddenly, Rufino's Painting & Contractors was born. Total initial investment: \$27 for the brushes and rollers.

Only happy customers

The company operates around a determined policy of customer satisfaction.

"I came to this country looking for opportunity," Saavedra said. "Once we get it, we have to show the Americans that we can do it. If you hire me, my main concern is to make you

happy, no matter what."

Raffaele Beltram, Peru's honorary consul in New Orleans, said Saavedra is typical of many Latin American immigrants.

"He works hard," said Beltram, who is also Peruvian by birth and owns a travel agency. "He has his own business, he's honest, and he's making his way."

However, he said, Saavedra's rapid success makes him stand out among many other immigrants.

"There are thousands who don't make it here," Beltram said.

After that first apartment job, things grew quickly for Saavedra's

fledgling business. Next came a larger apartment complex with 700 units in eastern New Orleans.

All the while, his wife, Wynonne, who was born in the United States, handled the company's organization and paperwork. She also worked with Saavedra to keep improving his English.

He continuously beat the bushes for new work. Within two years, he had expanded his services to include residential painting, carpentry, dry-wall finishing and fire damage restoration.

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Rufino

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Today, the company has 24 full-time employees and usually handles five jobs at once. Saavedra hopes to break the \$1 million annual sales mark within three years. He's at \$700,000 now.

Filling a niche

Most of his new business comes by word-of-mouth, although Yellow Page advertising has also helped. Saavedra's client

list includes banks, hotels, hospitals, parking garages, residential home owners and shopping centers. He is currently painting the 300,000-square-foot Slidell Factory Outlet mall.

Business people say Saavedra has succeeded by filling a market niche.

"It seems like it would be easy to find a painter who's reliable and does a good job, but it really isn't," said Kerwin Byrd, director of support services at New Orleans General Hospital. Saavedra has handled the hospital's painting for two years.

"He's done tremendous work here, even when it was a rush job," Byrd said. "Since he has come along, I don't even look for other proposals."

For his part, Saavedra continues to thank the United States for his success. He plans to keep growing and eventually expand into general contracting.

"I could only dream of doing something like this in my country," he said. "The economy would never allow a small business to grow this quickly. This only happens in America, and I would say that I'm fulfilling my American dream."