

Your Personal **BEST**

## Dare to Dream

George Burciaga rose from Chicago's mean streets to become one of the top minority businessmen in the country.

by Chelsea Greenwood

**Drugs, violence, poverty and cultural barriers are just a part of daily life in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. For children in this Latino community, dropping out of school and joining gangs is all too common.**

But, in the early '80s, one young Pilsen native took to the streets and did something quite uncommon: The 7-year-old set up shop on a street corner and sold gum. George Burciaga, now 34, explains he was just trying to "put [himself] through school and feed [himself]."

The entrepreneurial seeds that were planted at such an early age have blossomed into [SmarTECHS.net](#), a Chicago-based IT consulting firm. As founder and chief executive officer, Burciaga has fostered partnerships with companies like Microsoft, IBM and Dell. Over the last three years, smarTECHS' sales revenue has grown 129.9 percent, garnering a spot for the past two years on *Inc.* magazine's list of fastest-growing private companies in the country. And, last September, Burciaga—joined by his wife and three children—traveled to the White House to be recognized as the 2008 National Minority Small Business Person of the Year.

Although he's come a long way since his childhood in Pilsen, Burciaga still embraces his roots and remembers the lessons he learned along the way. Raised by his grandparents, Burciaga was part of a large family of cousins and uncles he called "brothers." They looked after Burciaga and protected him from the violence of the streets. But when he expressed his hopes and dreams for a brighter future, most other people would mock his ambitions.

"The only people I heard something positive from growing up were my grandparents," he says. "They'd say, 'I'm sure you're going to be great. We love you. You're going to do a good job.' I leveraged those statements from my grandparents as fuel. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough. If my grandmother said it once a week, it felt like she said it 10 times a day."



Photo by Mark Bremer

The sense of loyalty established by his close-knit family environment has translated into Burciaga's business today, he says. "In the companies that I've started and I own, there's a sense of family between the employees, who are partners in this company and who I believe in."

Despite his grandparents' support, they could offer little guidance. "They were immigrants from Mexico, so they couldn't tell me what college to go to or what school to go to," Burciaga says. "I knew that they cared about me, but then I had to figure everything else out on my own."

What Burciaga figured out—with his gum enterprise and, later, in school and through part-time jobs—is that a strong work ethic is key. "When you establish a process that works—and that was the early days, long nights, [being] really focused

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