

Founder's success surprises even himself

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BRISTOL, Va. – Jose Gomez laughs when recounting the first time he told his wife about their impending move to the Twin City.

Gomez, then a snack food company executive in the Los Angeles area, had just purchased the former Terry's Snack Foods building at an auction. That was in 2000.

"I called my wife from the Holiday Inn at Exit 7 and told her I bought a building in Bristol," Gomez said. " 'Where in the hell is Bristol?' were her exact words."

Six years later Gomez, his wife and family have settled in the Mountain Empire and established Prime Choice Foods – one of the fastest growing Hispanic-owned businesses in the nation.

Gomez had spent much of his career working in the snack food business in his native California before deciding to make a new start.

"My wife's family was operating a \$50 million tortilla business and I took over their corn division in San Bernadino, Calif.," Gomez said. "I started from the ground up. I took it (division) from \$4 million to \$14 million a year. I spent 20 years of my life working there."

The price of that success included endless hours working, two hours of daily commuting, few vacations and little personal time with his wife and family.

Gomez said he and his wife were on a rare vacation when he suddenly decided to quit his job and start a business.

"She told me to go ahead because she knew how hard I'd been working," he said.

When they returned home, the mail included an advertisement for an auction of the former Terry's plant in Bristol.

"I only wanted to buy the fryer – a heating-control fryer. So I came here to an auction and bought the fryer. The banker asked if I wanted to come back for the building."

Gomez knew he wanted to establish his organic food business in the eastern U.S., but was unsure of the best location.

"I didn't think I could afford the building, based on California prices, I figured it would be a million dollars. But I came back for the auction ... There were four bidders, I was the last bidder and we got the building."

His plans were to come to Bristol for two years, retrofit the building to make tortilla chips and prepare to expand elsewhere.

"After two years, I moved all of my family here but one and we've been here ever since," Gomez said. "It's been a challenge – different learning curves, different cultures and work ethics."

Gomez praised the work ethic of his Bristol employees, saying it has given him the chance to spend more time with his family.