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# The Case Against Blase

## Former Restaurant Owner Tells How Dealings with Village, Mayor Led Him to FBI

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*Journal Reporter*

Cuban-born Roberto Martinez wanted to live the American Dream when he arrived in the U.S. in the early 1960s. He started out as a newspaper delivery boy in Miami, and within a few short years had become a successful Chicago restaurateur. According to Martinez, his fortune changed grimly in 1991, when two men walked into his Logan Square restaurant, Lindo Mexico, offering an opportunity to expand into the Village of Niles.

Martinez, 56, spoke via telephone from Costa Rica, where he now lives, about what happened next. His experiences in Niles led to the rise and fall of another Lindo Mexico location and would play a significant role in the criminal indictment against longtime Niles Mayor Nick Blase, a.k.a. "the King of Niles". Martinez alleged corruption and improper use of his mayoral influence.

"I chose this time to speak out because...I wanted people to know what really happened," said Martinez.

Before he owned a restaurant, Martinez eked out a living mowing lawns and doing maintenance and service jobs at the Conrad Hilton Hotel in downtown Chicago. He later received a grant from Motorola to attend classes at Le Moine School, eventually receiving his electric technician's degree. Soon after, he realized what he really wanted to do with his life was operate a restaurant.

The first Lindo Mexico opened in April 1978 in Logan Square. Bolstered by success, Martinez soon opened another in Lincoln Park in 1982. But Martinez soon found himself tempted with an even more lucrative possibility: the suburbs. Martinez opened another Lindo Mexico location in 1986, near Northwestern University in Evanston. Business thrived. Martinez was eager to expand into more suburban areas. The men who came calling that day in 1991 represented a Niles restaurant that was seeking new ownership. Martinez jumped at the opportunity, and bought the place, located at 8990 Milwaukee Ave., for \$90,000, and started renovating the property.

Trouble allegedly started when the same men who'd suggested he come to Niles, now his landlords, said "things would be easier" if he worked with Mayor Blase to obtain an insurance policy. Martinez had plans to purchase insurance from a colleague, a fellow Cuban who operated a Spanish community insurance agency. The Mayor wanted him to purchase insurance through

Ralph Weiner and Associates of Wheeling, Martinez remembered. Martinez went with his choice and kept insurance through Spanco of Chicago for one year. But it would not be an easy year.

According to Martinez, his refusal to cooperate soured relations with both the landlords and Blase right off the bat. Although Martinez went to lengths to ensure everything in his restaurant was up to code, working with the designer of a "Lettuce Entertain You" establishment at the Water Tower Plaza in Chicago, he couldn't seem to get approved for a liquor license. Officials cited a previous criminal record, which Martinez denies, as the reason he was turned down. An excessive barrage of health and building inspectors seemed to be showing him a brick wall, Martinez recalled.

"Everything was done the right way," Martinez said. "The Mayor would not let me open."

Tired of being shot down and eager to move forward with opening plans, Martinez sought help from a friend who was a Chicago police commander. After a visit to the police station, the issue cleared up. Police told his friend the cause of the mistake was that his was a common name.

That solved one problem for the moment at least. However, inspectors continued to pay visits to Martinez after he opened Lindo Mexico with his preferred insurance company. He stated at one point entering while customers were present and threatening to close down the place for good.

According to Martinez, one plumbing inspector bluntly commented, "I know you're trying to run a business. Ralph Weiner is the only one who can stop this."

Finally, Martinez agreed to switch insurance carriers. Things settled down for a while, but problems resurfaced when Martinez announced a plan to expand the restaurant and buy adjacent lots. Martinez hoped to collaborate with a friend who owned a Mexican produce packaging company to build private rooms and increase the size of the restaurant and parking lot. Inspectors started coming again inexplicably, said Martinez, accusing him of serving alcohol to minors. Martinez was also denied permission to patch the parking lot and told that he would need to go through specific contractors if he wanted to make changes. Martinez didn't understand what was happening until he heard that the Mayor wanted to make his restaurant into a bank, he explained.

Things took a turn for the worse after a heated exchange with the landlord following a tense meeting with the Mayor, he said. Martinez received an eviction notice the next day based on \$90,000 in back taxes, which he stated he never owed. He paid it anyway, but eventually was nudged into an agreement to sell Lindo Mexico.

The building on Milwaukee Ave. where Lindo Mexico stood is now home to a Mid America Bank.

Crushed, Martinez sold the Logan Square location as well and moved to Costa Rica. Suffering from anxiety, he has had trouble finding steady work and finds it difficult to discuss the past now.

"It's been the worst five years of my life," said Martinez.

Martinez contacted an attorney to find out who he could speak to about pursuing a criminal case.

Eventually information that Martinez provided to the Federal Bureau of Investigations wound up becoming supporting evidence in a criminal indictment against former Mayor of Niles Nick Blase.

Blase was arrested on his 78th birthday in 2006. He was charged with filing false federal income tax returns and honest services mail fraud. The criminal complaint, filed last June, alleges Blase pressured business owners to buy insurance only through Ralph Weiner Associates since 1989.

"This is part of a case," Blasé said yesterday. "I'm not in a position to discuss it."

Blase resigned in August 2008 and plead guilty in October of that year, according to

Blase's trial date is set for March 2008.

That seems like a long time to wait for Martinez, who said he was eager to see justice done.

"I'm not sorry I did what I did," he said. "I'm just sorry it hasn't come to a conclusion yet."

The Mayor's term is set to expire in 2009.

*[Ed. Note: According to ABC 7 News Reporter Paul Meincke, Blase was sentenced in January 2010 and was jailed in April of that year. He was released just before Christmas.]*

*According to Niles Patch Staff Reporter Pam DeFiglio, he paid \$750,000 in restitution to three school districts. Martinez died in March 2010 of a heart attack in Costa Rica.]*