

LADY LUCK MAY SMILE ON YOU, BUT SHE BEAR-HUGS EZEQUIEL PEREZ

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It's not often a man can brag of winning the lottery . Of getting a brand new life.

Twice.

But Ezequiel Perez can.

"I've always been an optimist," he says.

The first time, in his native Cuba , he won the el bombo --- the U.S. lottery that awards 20,000 visas annually to Cubans and their families.

That stroke of luck, on an island with 11 million, brought him to New Jersey in 1995, to a better life, opportunities for his two sons, and a home of his own.

Then fate struck July 23, to the tune of \$33 million in Florida's lottery .

"I've always been a simple, humble man, and I don't think that money will change that," says Perez, who took a one-time lump payment of \$17.7 million.

But many things have changed already. Even financial freedom has its costs.

The Palm Beach Post spent a week trying to track down Perez, 51. Relatives told a reporter that Perez had flown to Cuba , where his father had died the weekend before Perez claimed his prize.

But Perez never left the country. Getting to him involved connecting with several relatives and friends. Calls on the spot using cell phones. A set interview time in the driveway of a West Palm Beach home. A half-hour late, he drove by and motioned for a reporter to jump inside his new truck. Then, he drove a block away before stopping to talk.

Perez isn't scared, he says, and he isn't trying to run away from anyone. But he does worry that the money, and the attention that's come with it, could put his family at risk.

So he shies from publicity. Doesn't want his picture in the paper, asks that his family be kept out of the spotlight.

"God takes care of those who care for themselves," he says.

Man sure of his luck

Perez always knew in his heart that luck would find him, even in Cuba , he said.

He had just finished working an overnight shift at a sugar mill. He was riding his bicycle to his home in the Cuban city of Florida and bumped into his cousin along the way. He told Perez he was going to Havana to file the paperwork for the visa **lottery** , and would Perez want to send along his information too? But Perez wasn't interested, didn't see a reason for it, and pedaled home. How quickly he changed his mind.

At home, his oldest son, 15 at the time, was crying, ashamed that he didn't have clothes to wear for a friend's party. There was no food to cook, and the misery suddenly hit Perez like a tidal wave. There was no future here, he thought.

That was Dec. 24, 1994.

So he applied for the lottery and soon after began telling people he was going to leave the island for good.

Had he gotten word, they asked. Did he get the yellow envelope in the mail, the telltale sign he'd been approved for a visa?

Nope. He just knew.

Even if his was the last name to be picked, he told people, he was going to get approved.

The months passed and the teasing started. Friends began teasing when they'd see him, asking, as if surprised, what he was still doing on the island.

But he was right in the end. He was approved in April 1995 and left that September.

Perez knows 'The Secret'

Perez, his wife and sons started their life in America in New Jersey. Then his wife's cousin helped get him work at an electrical company and the family settled in west New York.

But they lasted only about a year.

"I'm afraid of the cold," he explains, joking, though the air conditioning inside his double cab is set at 67 degrees.

They moved to West Palm Beach because Perez already had family here. He continued working as an electrician and eventually bought a house on Macy Street.

When his yearslong career at Atlantic Sugar Association ended in 2004, the result of layoffs, Perez headed back to New Jersey to find work. He and his wife divorced that year.

It wasn't until December that he returned.

It took him two months to find another job and even then, alone, it was sometimes a struggle to pay the bills with the \$519 Perez took home a week.

But things always seemed to work out, and Perez didn't worry too much about it.

Instead, he'd supplement his income doing small jobs for friends and neighbors. And he'd also test the powers of concentration.

He started watching a video called *The Secret*. He took the movie's premise to heart -- that the so-called Law of Attraction could make any wish come true.

Perez wished for money. Just like the movie suggested, he made a poster of all the things he wanted -- a big house, a nice car, and, of course, dollar signs. Sometimes he'd just stare at the piece of cardboard and imagine a new life.

If people had seen him, he concedes, there's no doubt they would have laughed.

Then again, Perez is used to incredulous snickers.

'Oh my God'

Perez is a longtime lottery player. He bought a ticket his first day in the U.S., and he kept playing after he moved to Florida. Every week, he says, he'd put in \$5 or \$6, hoping to get millions in return.

It was a whim that finally made him rich.

He went to Sedano's Supermarket in Lake Worth on July 21 to buy ready-made food. As he came in, one of the cashiers told him he should buy a Florida Lotto ticket. After all, the jackpot was \$33 million.

He didn't want to right then. He had already bought about four tickets; he thought he had enough.

On the way out, however, he changed his mind. As usual, he bought a Quick Pick, letting the machine pick the numbers.

The following Sunday, Perez went to a Publix off Southern Boulevard to get some breakfast. It was about 6 a.m., he remembered, when he went to check his tickets.

The cashier went through the first. Nothing. The second. Nothing. Then the third. Still nothing.

It wasn't until the second-to-last ticket that the machine sounded a curious beep.

Perez thought he had matched only five of the six numbers. Oh well. But then the cashier

checked them off. 06. 08. 35. 37. 49. 53.

The cashier checked the numbers again, and then came her confirmation: "Oh my God."

"She was more nervous about it than I was," Perez remembers, smiling.

What about Perez? He stayed cool, he says. Sure, he skipped breakfast. Sure, he drove to his oldest son's house. Sure his daughter-in-law checked the Internet -- five times, by the way -- to make sure it was correct.

But to him, this was all the way it was supposed to be. Hadn't he sworn to his friends he was going to win one day? Hadn't he been willing this to happen for years?

"I had a peace of mind that scared me," Perez says.

Find an attorney

Perez claimed his winnings the following Monday.

He chose to take a lump sum payment of \$17,695,051.38 instead of spreading the annual winnings over 30 years. Subtract the 25 percent the Internal Revenue Service takes off the top, and Perez pocketed \$13,271,288.54.

Ever since, the phone hasn't stopped ringing. Family and relatives congratulate him. Some ask for money.

There are other marks of a life forever changed. Perez has quit his job. He gave his old Toyota Avalon to a friend. And he's hired two attorneys to help him manage his money.

"If somebody wins the lottery, before going anywhere, he or she should find an attorney," Perez warns.

Perez is trying to be careful. He and his family have been traveling to Miami to confer with attorneys about setting up financial trusts, discussing taxes and finding ways to invest the money.

The only thing he's splurged on is the gleaming white Ford pickup. King Ranch model. Turbo diesel engine. Coffee-colored leather seats.

Other than that, he's saving the money for bigger plans. He wants to fly to Cuba to visit his family. He's invited his mother to come visit him in South Florida. And he wants to help his sons, now 19 and 28, realize their dreams.

Still, despite it all, Perez is determined to stay grounded.

"We still have our feet on the ground, and nobody's going to move them from there," he says.

Staff researchers Angelica Cortez and Niels Heimeriks contributed to this story.

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