

Chris LaRiche seduces immigrants with lies

He offered empty promises but had secrets of his own

By Gregory Pratt

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Patricia Cabrera came to the Fifth Street Towers in search of immigration papers. Cabrera had been listening to La Invasora radio when she heard an advertisement that seized her attention.

"If you don't have legal status, our legal department can help you get a work permit," the ad promised.

Cabrera, a squat 35-year-old woman with thin eyebrows and layers of makeup that can't cover the years of wear on her face, has been living illegally in the United States since 2000, when she left Ecuador to find a job that would pay more than \$5 a day.

She dialed the number from the ad and spoke with Chris LaRiche, a local businessman who said that he helped immigrants find work and attain legal status. LaRiche invited Cabrera to his office so they could review her situation.

The Fifth Street Towers impressed Cabrera. With their gilded escalators and gorgeous skyway, the downtown skyscrapers were a far cry from the dingy shops in the barrio.

Cabrera was less sure what to make of LaRiche, a short, baby-faced man in his late thirties who wore a dark dress shirt and yellow construction boots. He claimed to be "European" with an Argentinean grandparent.

Dozens of other immigrants huddled in LaRiche's office that day. He would bring them into his quarters in small groups for consultations. When Cabrera walked into his office, LaRiche explained how he could help her family get papers.

"He said that he had a contact with immigration, 'Mike,'" Cabrera remembers.

If the Cabrerans wanted LaRiche's help, they'd have to make an appointment next week and bring \$500 each to initiate the process—a fee he said was a relative bargain.

"If you get an attorney, they will charge you \$10,000," LaRiche said.

Patricia returned the next week with her husband, Mario, a nephew, Geronimo, and plenty of questions. LaRiche pulled out a binder bursting with documents—"cases," he said, that he'd successfully processed for illegal immigrants.

"I fixed these guys," LaRiche said, indicating one stack of papers. Then, pointing to another stack, he added, "These guys I couldn't help because they gave me fake papers."

LaRiche courted the Cabreras with piles of documents, flashing government websites to give them a glimpse at the application process and teasing them with copies of what he said were work permits. He was a persistent suitor.

"I'm not lying to you," LaRiche said, massaging their concerns. "If I were lying to you, I wouldn't be here. The police would've come here for me a long time ago."

In the end, the Cabreras trusted LaRiche, paying him \$1,350 each, totaling \$4,050, for the promise of work permits for the family.

"If you don't get papers, I'll return the money," LaRiche guaranteed.

The Cabreras waited patiently, expecting to receive their documents in the mail on a Tuesday. They thought everything was going fine until that Tuesday came and went without the paperwork arriving. When another week passed without word from immigration, the Cabreras became nervous and called LaRiche, who assured them the permits were in the mail.

Worried, Patricia went to Pillsbury House, a south Minneapolis nonprofit. She was directed to a local immigration attorney, David Wilson, who had already heard of LaRiche.

When LaRiche heard that the Cabreras had spoken to an attorney about him, he was furious.

LaRiche warned: "I'll send your husband to ICE and you'll never get papers!"

LARICHE IS PART OF a burgeoning criminal enterprise: immigration scams. Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington filed a petition with the Federal Trade Commission in 2009 documenting a "widespread" and "increasing" trend of scams targeting immigrants.

"Until we filed the petition for Catholic Charities, there was no government agency that was trying to address this problem," says David Zetony, the attorney representing the organization. "Nobody was trying to quantify this as a problem or count the people who had been victimized and realized it. Most of these people were simply falling through the cracks."

The Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, and the FTC launched a national campaign last June to crack down on immigration scams. Since the program began, the federal government has received 1,200 formal complaints of immigration scams, says Tom Carter, national coordinator of the government's initiative. But the crime often goes underreported due to language barriers and immigrants' fear of police.

"For the most part, we believe consumers that are victims of this are trying to do the right thing," explains Carter. "They're trying to file for some benefit they think they're qualified for."

Even with the feds paying attention to the issue, the problem is still "pervasive" across the country and in Minnesota, according to Michele Garnett McKenzie, the director of advocacy at the Advocates for Human Rights in Minneapolis.

"We have people coming in who have been victims of this sort of behavior on a fairly regular basis," McKenzie said.

Local immigration attorneys say *notarios*—Spanish for a type of attorney that does not exist in the United States—can damage an immigrant's case to remain in the country. Government lawyers take false, incomplete, or misleading information in immigration applications very seriously.

"Our members are the ones that have to tell them, 'The notario ripped you off,'" laments Reid Trautz, a director at the American Immigration Lawyers Association. "I can't help you now because the one shot has been taken away by the notario."

LARICHE SOLD HIMSELF to the Twin Cities' Latino community as a respectable businessman who could put people to work.

LaRiche brought that pitch to La Invasora listeners last winter, when he began advertising his services on AM 1400. The ads promised to help Latinos find jobs in the restaurant and cleaning industries.

"He didn't say what companies," recalls Karla Ortiz, the sales representative who sold ads to LaRiche. "He just said different types and different companies in different cities."

Ortiz spoke regularly with LaRiche last January. LaRiche didn't want to sign a long-term advertising contract with the station, so he would call every day to renew his ad. One week, Ortiz wasn't in the office because her three-month-old baby was sick. LaRiche left her a number of voicemails, confused about her disappearance.

When Ortiz returned to work, she called her client back and apologized for her absence. LaRiche came across as kind and understanding.

"If you need anything, I can help," he said, offering to send flowers to the hospital.

The advertising seemed to be working: LaRiche told Ortiz he was taking 100 calls a day from Latinos interested in work, and so he kept buying ads.

But two weeks after LaRiche placed his first ad, a flood of calls came into the station complaining that LaRiche wasn't actually helping anyone find work. Angry customers told Ortiz that LaRiche had charged them a job application fee but didn't deliver on his promises.

Station management instructed Ortiz to ask LaRiche for more information about his company, but LaRiche refused to give her any records. She remembers him becoming abusive, calling her "stupid" and "retarded." The last time they spoke, LaRiche even criticized her parenting skills.

"That's why your baby is sick," LaRiche spat. "Because you're a bad mother."

Ortiz went to her supervisor, Juan Carlos Alanis, and played one of LaRiche's voicemails for him. Alanis told Ortiz to send LaRiche packing—his business was no longer welcome.

When LaRiche called again, Alanis told him the station wasn't going to run his advertisements anymore because of the customer complaints.

"I'm going to sue your company," LaRiche responded. "I'm going to take everything you have."

Latino media mogul Alberto Monserrate, who owns the station, heard about LaRiche's behavior. He was upset that someone was abusing his employees and disappointed his station had run an ad that didn't deliver on its promises. Monserrate, who also owns a Latino newspaper, had never received complaints about an employment agency before.

"I was pretty disgusted," Monserrate says. "This guy was something else."

DAVID WILSON'S EYEBROWS ROSE when he saw the young woman sitting on the waiting room couch in his law office. He hadn't seen Silvia Sibri in quite a while, but he knew from the upset look on her face that she was in trouble.

It wasn't the first time she had come to him for help. Three years earlier, the petite Ecuadoran, then 18 years old, came to Wilson for aid with her immigration case. He had won her legal status in the United States.

Now she needed his help dealing with LaRiche.

Sibri had answered a Craigslist ad for employment in January. LaRiche hired her to pass out flyers and go into the community to find unemployed Latinos. Sibri was quite successful, bringing in, by her estimate, over 150 clients.

One day, LaRiche asked if Sibri had a boyfriend. When she said yes, LaRiche asked if her boyfriend was jealous.

"I would be jealous if you were my girlfriend and were talking with people," LaRiche said, according to Sibri.

"I'm working," Sibri answered. "I'm not doing anything else."

"How much do you want to leave your boyfriend?" LaRiche allegedly offered. "\$1,000? \$2,000? \$3,000 a month?"

Sibri politely declined. But that wasn't the only time LaRiche had been accused of making unwanted sexual advances.

For 18 months, Lariche lived at the Westin Hotel, where he spent \$25,000, by his own account. Yet LaRiche didn't get along with the general manager, Mark Deinart, who "always had a bad attitude," according to a lawsuit LaRiche filed against Deinart last August.

One day last summer, Deinart kicked LaRiche out of the Westin after accusing him of sexually harassing hotel staff, LaRiche claims in court records. LaRiche demanded "proof" of the allegations, but Deinart wouldn't entertain him. (Deinart declined to comment, as did his attorney, Colby Lund.) The case was dismissed after LaRiche failed to show up for a court hearing this past December.

LaRiche's indecent proposal contributed to a growing feeling of discomfort for Sibri, who was receiving phone calls from immigrants complaining that LaRiche wasn't actually setting them up with jobs.

To one group of Latinos, he promised work with a cleaning company, but then claimed it fell through because their work uniforms hadn't arrived. Another group expected jobs at a restaurant, but LaRiche claimed the start date was pushed back because the building was under construction.

Sibri began to suspect LaRiche of lying to the immigrants, so on February 6 she called him to ask about it. When she showed up at his office the next day, LaRiche threatened to alert immigration.

"Okay," Sibri shot back. "Do it."

Police responded that afternoon to a report at the Towers of an employee theft. LaRiche accused Sibri of stealing \$160 from his business, which he told police sold "investments and stocks," according to the incident report. LaRiche claimed Sibri was an illegal immigrant with a fake ID. She showed her work permit to the police, who escorted her out of the building.

As soon as she left, Sibri went to Wilson, who told her not to communicate with LaRiche any further, and assured her that she shouldn't worry. Then Wilson called an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent he knew.

"They do not take lightly the invocation of their names to threaten and exploit people," Wilson says.

A WEEK AFTER LARICHE called the police on Sibri, he filed a lawsuit against her in Minneapolis small claims court.

The conciliation courtroom in City Hall bustled May 24 with men and women fighting over unpaid rent and broken leases. LaRiche wore a nice shirt, and sunglasses even though he was indoors.

Before the judge hears cases in conciliation court, the clerk orders the parties to step out into the hallway and share any evidence they plan to introduce with the opposing party. It was the only time Wilson ever came face to face with LaRiche.

Wilson immediately angered LaRiche by repeatedly butchering his last name. LaRiche kept correcting him, but Wilson couldn't get straight whether it was pronounced "La-Reech" or "La-Reechie."

"Are you Canadian?" Wilson asked.

"Don't worry about where I'm from," LaRiche responded, according to Wilson.

The two found plenty to argue over. LaRiche showed Wilson a binder full of dozens of documents. "I can show you all these people I'm hiring lawfully," LaRiche allegedly said, "and the people whose money I've returned because they had no papers."

Wilson didn't think the documents proved LaRiche was on the straight and narrow. He thought the records—a bunch of handwritten scrawls and photocopies of identity paperwork—were "all obvious fakes," and tried to convince LaRiche to give the binder to him to examine.

Their relations didn't become friendlier when the case was called by Judge Raymond Wood. LaRiche stood at his lectern and introduced himself, then lashed into Wilson for spreading lies. He waved his binder in the air and insisted that he was a "proper businessman."

"I'm working with ICE to make sure I'm hiring legal people," LaRiche testified.

LaRiche argued that Sibri had stolen money from his business, but didn't sway the judge, who dismissed the case. LaRiche left the courtroom disgruntled, but Wilson hung around in the hallway afterward, waiting for a couple of ICE agents he knew who had been sitting in the back of the courtroom, observing the performance.

"They just thought it was very interesting," Wilson says.

LARICHE WALKED INTO City Hall on November 14 to prosecute yet another lawsuit. He had filed a complaint in September against Wayne and Greg Freeman, the father and son heads of Executive Suites of Minnesota, over a dispute about office space that the Freemans had rented to him in the IDS Building.

LaRiche wrote in his complaint that the Freemans had cost him business and that he felt "bullied" and "harassed."

But LaRiche never got his day in court.

Soon after LaRiche entered the building, a stranger approached. It was a plainclothes officer with the Minnesota State Patrol. The cop placed LaRiche under arrest and led him to the rotunda in City Hall, near a marble sculpture of a god sitting atop a crocodile's head.

While this was going on, a young man walked up and asked, "Are you Chris LaRiche?"

"Yes," the handcuffed LaRiche answered.

"You have been served," said Michael Gavigan, an assistant for Wilson, who delivered a lawsuit on behalf of Patricia Cabrera, her husband Mario, and nephew Geronimo.

Shortly after LaRiche was taken into custody, the story took one final twist. Wilson got in touch with a state trooper involved in the investigation, who delivered a bombshell.

"He's not Chris LaRiche," the cop said.

THE CRIMINAL COMPLAINT shocked everyone who had dealt with LaRiche. Hennepin County prosecutors revealed that "Chris LaRiche" was a false identity. His real name is Mario Alberto Martinez-Alanis and he is a Mexican citizen.

Prosecutors charged Martinez-Alanis with perjury for swearing under oath that his name was Chris LaRiche. He was also lying, according to the complaint, when he testified that he had been working with ICE agents.

Despite Martinez-Alanis's testimony to the contrary, he had never spoken with ICE agents about anyone's immigration status except his own.

On December 5, Martinez-Alanis bonded out of Hennepin County jail—and was immediately taken to Ramsey County jail by ICE, which had placed an immigration hold on him. He remains there, and isn't interested in talking to the press.

"Mr. Martinez has declined the interview," reports ICE spokesman Shawn Neudauer.

Hennepin County rarely prosecutes perjury, but it's making an exception in this case, says county attorney Mike Freeman.

"This one hits you in the face," Freeman says. "He uses a false name, testifies to false relationships—boom, boom, bingo!"

Freeman's office recently filed a request with ICE to transfer Martinez-Alanis back into Hennepin County custody. They plan to take him to trial and are working to add felony theft-by-swindle charges.

When Martinez-Alanis's criminal case is over, he will be deported.

"One of the things he was doing is suggesting he'd find jobs for people for a fee and pocket the money," Freeman says. "We haven't seen that kind of chutzpah in a long time."

<http://www.citypages.com/2012-01-11/news/chris-lariche-seduces-immigrants-with-lies/>