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JACKSON HEIGHTS & ELMHURST Arts & Entertainment Business & Economy Small Business Insider

# Terraza 7 Owner Mixes Music, Culture and Politics at Queens Venue



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ELMHURST — It's a Thursday night, and Freddy Castiblanco is watching as a welder works in his bar, Terraza 7. They're extending the mezzanine stage, a "hanging terrace" that you see as soon as you enter the bar.



Castiblanco, 41, has put a lot of work into Terraza 7, a little bar tucked away off Roosevelt Avenue that he uses as a music venue and meeting place to promote progressive causes.

The bar, at 40-19 Gleaner St. near the Elmhurst/Jackson Heights border, is a reflection of Castiblanco's taste, a veritable salon of Latin American folk and jazz.

But Castiblanco has also created a venue for the diverse community to learn about issues that are important to them while getting to know each other over a few beers.

"For me, it's very important that people who live in this country — I don't care where that person comes from — it's important that person recognizes the value of the other," Castiblanco said. "The idea is to be more involved in issues that affect our community from a progressive perspective."

Throughout any given conversation, Castiblanco will run off a list of topics he's passionate about: immigration reform, Colombian politics and living wage legislation, to name a few.



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In October, he joined a coalition of small business owners pressuring City Council Speaker Christine Quinn to support a paid sick leave bill.

Castiblanco also does what he can to surround himself with people like him: people who believe in progressive causes and what he refers to as "ethical" business, one in which the business owner makes it a priority support employees.

Beyond the coalition, he's become politically active, too. In 2009, Castiblanco was called as a witness at a House of Representatives Small Business Committee hearing on healthcare reform.

And he regularly sits down with local politicians, like Rep. Joseph Crowley, whose district encompasses Jackson Heights and parts of Elmhurst.

"The Congressman and Mr. Castiblanco have worked on a number of issues in the past, including healthcare reform and other issues related to small business owners in the community," said Crowley spokeswoman Courtney Gidner.

Born in Bogotá, Colombia, Castiblanco comes from a well-educated family. He has three sisters: one who studies ethnolinguistics, one who is a chemical engineer and one who works in public administration.

Castiblanco himself studied at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, and became a doctor after graduating. He worked in the emergency room at San Juan de Dios in Bogotá, treating mostly poor patients.

After Colombian hospitals were privatized in 1993, Castiblanco said he began to feel a shift in how the hospital was run, away from patient care and toward trying to make a profit.

"I remember that, as a doctor, the insurers asked me to see more patients per hour," Castiblanco said. "'You're ordering too many exams,' and 'You're giving too-expensive medicine to the people.'"

The hospital closed in 1998, and in 2000, Castiblanco moved to New York to study cognitive science. But his experiences in medicine helped shape his progressive views, Castiblanco said.

After moving to Elmhurst, Castiblanco studied English, observed for six months at New York Hospital Queens, volunteered at Elmhurst Hospital and began to prepare for his Board exams.

But there was something missing in his new life. The community he lived in felt fractured, Castiblanco said. People of different backgrounds lived amongst each other, but rarely interacted.

"When I came here, what I found was a very diverse community, but at the same time, really isolated," said Castiblanco, who is married with two children.

Around this time, Castiblanco's father, who already lived in the United States and was working as a realtor, had come across a building that his boss owned and needed to rent out. The younger Castiblanco decided to take it up as his next challenge, and on June 20, 2002, Terraza 7 was born.

Part of Terraza 7's aim is to make people in the community feel more involved, and to incorporate the traditions of their homeland — "cultural memories," Castiblanco calls them — into their new home.

"In order to create a new culture, it's very important to keep your memories," Castiblanco said. "Let them feel like their cultural memories can be part of a new culture."

To that end, Castiblanco invites jazz musicians from the city to interact with traditional artists from Mexico, Colombia, Peru and other Latin American countries.

The result, Castiblanco said, made people feel more empowered in the city they lived in. But by bringing communities together, he also said he wanted to make a broader point about understanding different cultures.

"If you don't talk about the complete story of somebody, of an immigrant, you tend to create a misunderstanding of, 'who is that person?'" Castiblanco said.

The constant work put into Terraza 7 has taken a toll on Castiblanco's dreams of starting a family. "I've gotten sidetracked: something in the bar needs fixing, or it's a slow season," he said.

But Terraza 7 has gotten over the hump of a struggling small business, Castiblanco said. Business has been steady, and they've been able to put on shows without interruption for more than a year.

"Now is the first time I feel that the business is stable," Castiblanco said. "We're creating a strong community that follows us."

This year, Castiblanco wants to stop renting space and make an offer to finally buy Terraza 7. He also wants to hold what he calls an "immigrant values festival," which he envisions as an arts festival with music, photography and film, where attendees will also have the opportunity to learn about human rights issues.

And, of course, he still hopes to tackle his medical licensing exam.

"Hopefully this year," Castiblanco said. "Actually, this year..."

Castiblanco paused, then laughed.

"I have a lot of things to do this year," he said.



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