



## **Cultivating Two Cultures: A Profile of Robert Astengo**

December 27, 2013

By Mariana Dale

For the Nogales International

*(Mariana Dale, a student at the University of Arizona, researched and wrote this story as part of an oral history assignment for "The Border Through the Eyes of Journalism," an undergraduate and graduate-level course taught by the U of A in Nogales.)*

When he left Nogales to join the Navy after graduating high school in 1978, Robert Astengo never imagined he would return to his border town roots. Surrounded by images of lush fields in his Rio Rico office, the produce marketer recounts his dreams of rescuing people at sea or becoming an architect.

"Looking back, hindsight is 20/20," Astengo said. "It took me a good 20 years to really find the passion of what I do here."

A 35-year veteran of the produce industry, Astengo learned the ropes from his father, who was born in El Rosario, Sinaloa. Astengo's father immigrated to the United States in 1912 at age 7 and grew up in the Los Angeles area. He eventually moved to Nogales, where Bobby was born in 1960.

Astengo has fond memories of growing up in a one-high-school town. He recalls many evenings spent cruising the main drag of Nogales with friends.

"It was just typical of a little, small town; it was wholesome," Astengo said. "I actually met my wife while out on one of those cruise nights. I can happily say that after 25 years of being married. That magic worked pretty good."

Astengo joined the Navy shortly after graduating high school and served four years. As he weighed his future options, his father gave him a new one to consider. The senior Astengo was ready to retire, and if Bobby came back, he would show him the ropes of the produce industry.

"I always knew it to be a very lucrative business. If you did things the right way, you could make a good life for yourself," Astengo said. "I thought, well, I will give it a chance."

Astengo now works as a sales manager for Prime Time International, a prominent bell pepper grower with fields in California and Mexico. Much of the produce never leaves the company from seed to shipping. He takes pride that the company often sees the process through from beginning to end.

“We start from seedlings in greenhouses, and we take those little seedling plants and put them in the ground until they fruit. And then we pack our own fruit,” Astengo said. “We market our own fruit and sometimes even deliver it to our end users.”

## **Family life**

Astengo’s family life has seen its own growth in the past decade. From the beginning Astengo and his wife knew that having children of their own was not in the cards. They built a rich life for two and plans included early retirement and travel. After volunteering with several non-profit organizations in Nogales, Sonora, that work with disadvantaged youth and young mothers, their plans changed.

“I guess it’s a human instinct that we want to have a family and we want to have children,” Astengo said.

In short succession they adopted Angelo at 15 months old and Santiago, who was only three weeks old.

Astengo now volunteers with a like-minded organization called Casa Hogar Madre Conchita, also in Sonora. It’s a home for young girls who may not otherwise have another place to stay. He recently finished a term as president of the organization.

“There’s a lot of bills to pay, there’s a lot of girls to feed, to clothe, to make sure their health is good,” Astengo said. “It’s like having 50 daughters, basically. It’s not easy, but it’s pretty fun.”

Astengo will continue to pitch for the organization, as long as there is a need. “It’s a lot of work, it’s demanding, but it’s also very enriching,” he said. “I wasn’t aware how it was going to impact me and how rewarding it is to give in that service-oriented way.”

Astengo beams when he talks about his sons. His desk is adorned with mementos of his family. A calendar from his sons’ school is pinned behind the computer monitor. Pictures of family vacations fill various frames. He’s enthusiastic about coaching their soccer team, The Minions. The cheeky yellow mascot is based on the creatures from the animated movie, “Despicable Me.”

“It’s the best thing in the world that can ever happen to anybody, just as it probably is for a mom,” Astengo said of fatherhood. “It’s the most fulfilling thing. It’s the realization of us, in the end.”

## **Dual citizenship**

Part of being a father is sharing his binational culture with his children. Astengo has dual citizenship in the U.S. and Mexico.

“It’s a beautiful thing to appreciate all cultures and all colors,” he said.

Right now, both boys are bilingual, a trait Astengo hopes they will maintain as they grow up.

“The Spanish comes from speaking Spanish at home,” Astengo said. “The English comes from the TV and the school system. And it’s a great mix because you learn both of them very well.”

Culture is embedded in the family’s traditions, whether it’s toting home a bag of nopalitos for the boys’ mother-in-law to prepare for dinner or adding a few extra holidays to the calendar.

“Our festivities, our fiestas are different,” Astengo said. “We go to July Fourths, but we also go to September 16th. That’s the beautiful thing about growing up in a border community.”

Astengo said there is no better place to grow up than in the middle of two countries and cultures, in a town like Nogales. “One of the great opportunities that we have here is that biculturalism. It ebbs, flows back and forth, and sometimes you don’t know where to draw the line here.”



### **Bobby Astengo**

Bobby Astengo explains how produce is packaged and stacked at Prime Time’s produce facility in Rio Rico.