

A Burrito Fan Visits Ruiz Foods

To help celebrate the company's 40th anniversary, the president (of the United States) drops by.

BY WARREN THAYER

So what's it like to ride in a presidential motorcade? At Dinuba, Calif.-based Ruiz Foods, quite a few people know: Fred Ruiz, Kim Ruiz Beck, Mark Hannay, David Brickner, Ray Lacasse, Bryce Ruiz, Steve Windh and Glen McClaran. All of them had the somewhat surreal experience when President George Bush came to visit the company on October 15.

It all began when the White House called Ruiz Foods to inquire about a possible visit from the president a few weeks earlier. Naturally, everybody thought it was a joke at first. But this advance man somehow had the ring of credibility, and, in fact, the Dinuba, Calif.-based company had sent a letter of invitation a couple months before.

"Dear George..."

"We'd been sitting around brainstorming how to celebrate our 40th anniversary that's coming in January, and our president, John Signorino, said, 'Wouldn't it be great if the president of the United States came to visit our plant?'" recalls Kim Ruiz Beck, vice chairman. So a one-page letter was drafted, explaining that the company, the largest Mexican frozen food manufacturer in the country, would love a presidential visit to help with the celebration. After all, 92% of

Ruiz employees are Hispanic, and the company is involved in a program to help workers get housing. Not only that, but the location made it a perfect, high-visibility stop.

Fingers were crossed, but nobody dared let hopes get too high. After all, President Bill Clinton had said "no thanks" some years ago. But about 10 days earlier, Ruiz had been one of 23 companies honored as the U.S. Small Business Administration's "Best of the Best" at its Golden Anniversary Hall of Fame Induction ceremony in Washington, D.C. And in 1983, company Co-Founder and Chairman Fred Ruiz and his father, Louis, had been honored as Small Business Persons of the Year by President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George Bush Sr. in the Rose Garden of the White House. Perhaps now, Bush Jr. would come to visit the company.

There were more calls from more White House people, more questions, a visit from another advance man, and then... nothing. But a day or two before the visit, Ruiz got the word: "He's coming."

The rest was a pretty much a happy blur, Beck says. "It was very emotional, seeing my father and grandfather recognized years ago, and now meeting another president."

she says. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

The day of the visit, "Our plant was not our plant. The Secret Service was there, and we had very little control over anything. We got to meet the president, and he's larger than life



Ruiz Foods Chairman Fred Ruiz, right, welcomes hungry burrito fan.

but so cordial and friendly. He's very much a people person."

President Bush toured the whole facility, with the exception of production. Beck figures there were two reasons for that. First, Bush tries to minimize the considerable disruption caused by his visits to, well, just about anywhere. And second, "The complexity of smocking up and all would have been difficult, and I just couldn't see the Secret Service going through all that."

So now, the big question: Is Bush a burrito fan? Told that the company produces three million burritos a day, the president said, "For a burrito lover, I am in heaven!" ■