

Tony, Maria, Alex and Erika Sirica

Sanford, Florida



The Old Jailhouse Kitchen and Spirits

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Tony, Maria, Alex and Erika Sirica:

Constructed in 1890 by William J. Hill, the first building supply operator in Sanford, FL, The Old Jailhouse originally housed a blacksmith and a wagon shop. In the early 1900s the building was occupied by a prominent celery grower and Sanford businessman before Seminole County acquired the property and converted it to a jail and later, the Seminole County Health Department. After sitting vacant for several decades, the Sirica's, whose presence has been felt in Central Florida since the 1980s, identified an opportunity and took action.

Alex Sirica, VP of Operations, Co-owner and son to Owners Tony and Maria, shared the story behind the family's journey and offered a glimpse into the life of this entrepreneurial family.

"My dad, who's originally from Buffalo, came to Orlando to work as a

salesman for a coffee company,” Alex said. “My mom, who was born in Cuba, was already living here at the time. My parents met when my dad’s friend encouraged him to attend a youth group meeting. They got married and it didn’t take long before they were in business together. My grandparents had their own bakery and my parents bought into that business. From that business came Panchos Bakery and other businesses such as several Aunt Annie’s, a duty free shop in the airport, a Jersey Mikes, a Chick-fil-A and an Asian restaurant.”

Alex continued, “I have a lot of great memories growing up around these businesses. One time my dad told me not to plan anything for the weekend. He then told me we had 2,000 pastries to make! It’s always been a family thing.”

As Alex shared, the idea to start a restaurant in Sanford was never on the family’s radar. However, after they saw the possibilities, they knew it was an opportunity they couldn’t pass up.

“Growing up in Orlando, I always thought of Sanford as an old city,” Alex said. “My Aunt Anna and Uncle Mike lived here and raved about it. We would visit and quickly saw why they were so impressed. Knowing our history in the restaurant business, my aunt mentioned that the old jailhouse was for sale. We looked at it from the outside and thought it was pretty cool. Once they opened the doors and we had a chance to look around, we felt like we’d just stumbled upon a hidden gem. We immediately started to brainstorm different ideas.”

Once they settled on the idea to turn the historic space into a modern kitchen and bar, the Sirica’s had a monumental task ahead of them.

“It was an empty shell,” Alex said. “There was nothing left to work with.

No drains. No Electrical. It was empty. Also, the layout wasn’t very functional. There were walls and small rooms, but we were determined to maintain the original history. We worked closely with my uncle, who’s a contractor and has sat on the Sanford Historic Preservation Board and the Sanford Community Redevelopment Agency Board, and the City of Sanford to approve the design. It was two years’ worth of work, but we took our time. We wanted to do it right. We were able to keep the original booking room, the visitation room, the solitary confinement area and the breezeway. My cousin Nick, who’s a welder, traveled from Texas to do decorative iron work. We all dove in and brought it to life.”

By February 2019, The Old Jailhouse was serving delicious food and spirited libations in one of Downtown Sanford’s most historically rich buildings. As Alex shared, the outpouring of support was overwhelming.

“One of our unexpected challenges was the crowds,” he said. “The waits were extremely long when we first opened. Fortunately, our customers were patient and our team did a great job. A lot of that has to do with how close we are as a staff. It’s a real family affair. Between my sister, Erika, handling the finances and social media, my mom doing the HR and interior design, my dad serving as President of Operations, our management team, consisting of Nick, Chef Bram and Brett, and Geraldine, who works with my sister in marketing, we all come together to help each other out.”

For Alex, who by day works as an Industrial Engineer with Pepsi, the joy of running a restaurant comes from the people he interacts with on a daily basis. “I love greeting guests, sharing the history of the building,

giving them the tour and watching them enjoy our delicious food and amazing cocktails.”

Looking ahead, Alex shared that his family has ‘big plans’ for Sanford. He didn’t offer many details, other than the fact that what’s to come will require ‘all hands on deck’.

What advice does Alex have for aspiring entrepreneurs? “Growing up, I was always told to do the dishes before you can own a restaurant,” he said. “Nothing comes easy or fast, and you’ll have to make sacrifices, but if you’re patient and you work hard, you’ll get there. And when you do, it will be the most rewarding experience of your life.”

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