

Muchas



Ken Flisek (green shirt) poses with his maintenance crew. Many of the crew's members hail from Mexico.

Gracias

Pittsburgh superintendent Ken Flisek praises the hard-working Mexicans on his maintenance crew who helped save his job

■ BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Never mind the plateful of fajitas, which will surely turn cold from sitting untouched. Ken Flisek didn't come to Don Pablo's just to have lunch.

First on Flisek's agenda is not to satisfy a hankering for spicy food, it's to find Mexicans — specifically Mexicans who need jobs. That's the main reason Flisek came to the Pittsburgh-area ethnic restaurant on this winter day.

Flisek, the golf course superintendent at The Club at Nevillewood, has been searching for weeks for Mexicans to work on the golf course he manages. He knows that many of them migrate to the United States for such service-type jobs. He also knows that many of them have gained strong reputations for their solid work ethics.

Flisek hopes if he can recruit some Mexicans to work on his maintenance staff, everything will be fine again. The course's condition will improve, and the club's members will be happy once more.

And Flisek will be able to keep his job.

So when Flisek sees the two Mexican men

enter the restaurant, he jumps sprightly from his chair and approaches them, leaving his half-eaten lunch behind. Flisek introduces himself to the 30-something men and asks them if they're looking for work. When they reply "yes" in their broken English, Flisek tells them he might have jobs for them.

Flisek explains to the men that he's looking for laborers to work at Nevillewood, a private club in Presto, Pa., a suburb of Pittsburgh. Flisek gives the men his business card and asks them to phone him the next day.

Finally, a solid lead, Flisek says to himself after the chance meeting. On his way home from the restaurant, Flisek stops at his office. He sees the flashing red light blinking on his answering machine. The Mexicans have already called. Three times.

Flisek phones them back and invites them to his office for an interview. The two men arrive promptly the next day with a friend who's also looking for work.

Flisek explains to the three men what it's like to work as a greenkeeper. He tells them they could earn up to \$350 a week and work overtime. The men provide Flisek with the necessary documentation to ensure they are

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legal aliens, and they report to work the following day.

Flash forward from that winter day in 1997 to a spring day this year. Eleven of the 25 members on Flisek's maintenance crew hail from Mexico. Nine of the men are seasonal workers participating in a government visa program.

Two of the men, Jeronimo Corral and Antonio Hernandez, are year-round full-time employees. They have homes in Pittsburgh with their wives and young families. Corral and Hernandez say they are living the American dream.

Sitting at a table on the outdoor deck of the Nevillewood clubhouse on this sun-drenched day, Flisek sips a cup of coffee. The 47-year-old superintendent appears relaxed and confident — and for good reason. Things have been

going well at the golf course since the Mexicans joined the maintenance crew. The course's condition has improved and the club's members are happy again.

And Flisek still has his job.

"Their hard work and dedication have made my life easier," Flisek says.

Flisek recalls the day in October 1996 when he was called into a meeting with his new co-grounds chairmen.

They stunned him with the news that they were not satisfied with the condition of the course.

"We basically said, 'Ken, you have to find a way to get us back to where we once were,'" recalls Dick Daniels, one of the co-grounds chairman at the time.

Although caught by surprise with the news, Flisek didn't deny their concerns. He knew the course looked rough around the edges — some areas were left untrimmed, and bunkers weren't edged and sometimes not even raked. Flisek also knew the way the course appeared was unacceptable at a place like Nevillewood.

"Tournament conditions are no longer just for tournaments," Flisek says. "In many places, tournament conditions are required for everyday play."

What caused the substandard conditions? The reason was simple: Flisek couldn't find enough quality help. He had some hard and reliable workers on his staff, but not enough of them. "We were working our butts off, but the results just didn't show," Flisek says.

He had been battling this problem for a few years. Fortunately, Flisek's co-grounds chairmen were aware it, and told him they would support any ideas he had to improve it. But as they walked out of their meeting with him on that autumn day, they made it clear to Flisek that they might have to change superintendents if the course's condition didn't improve.

Flisek joined the Jack Nicklaus-designed club in 1991 when the course was under construction. "It was obvious to me during the construction phase that this was going to be a very labor-intensive course," he says.

The course, set among the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania, requires much handwork, especially around the deep-faced

Coming to America – Legally

Superintendent prefers using H-2B visa program to recruit workers

They want to come here because they want a chance at the American dream.

According to a recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center, a non-partisan research group in Washington, 46 percent of Mexicans say they would move to the United States if they could to improve their economic status, among other things. Twenty-one percent said they would be willing to live in the United States illegally.

Ken Flisek, superintendent of the Club at Nevillewood in Presto, Pa., is all for Mexicans coming to America — but only if they're legal aliens. Flisek has employed Mexicans at his golf course since 1997. But he won't employ any Mexicans if they don't have legal documentation.

Hence, Flisek has utilized the U.S. government's H-2B visa program to be on the up and up when it comes to recruiting seasonal laborers from Mexico.

Congress initiated the H-2B visa program, which allows seasonal workers in the country for up to 10 months, in 1991. Many Hispanics on H-2B visas come to the United States each year from around the world to live and work, filling jobs where there is a shortage of American workers. The process for arranging H-2B visas for U.S. employers and international seasonal staff can take up to five months from the initial application to the arrival of the employee in the country. The H-2B program was wrapped into the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service in 2002.

The Club at Nevillewood typically hires a broker or immigration attorney to conduct the process and secure the paperwork of hiring Mexicans through the H-2B visa program. The fee is around \$4,000 to bring up to 20 workers to the course. Nevillewood usually brings about 10 workers. The club also helps employees pay for their transportation from Mexico to Pittsburgh and assists employees with finding housing.

"I like the H-2B program," Flisek says. "We need to do more to bring in documented workers — we know who they are, we have their fingerprints — and close the borders to others, especially in this era and for its security concerns."

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bunkers. That means that Nevillewood requires a large maintenance crew during the playing season, 25 to 30 people, to keep it up to standard.

But Flisek had problems from the beginning finding good help. For one thing, the labor market had tightened in the Pittsburgh area, and there weren't a lot of young people willing to work on a golf course for \$8 an hour.

Flisek consulted with employment agencies, held job fairs at the club and took out

advertisements in the local newspaper's employment section to recruit potential workers. But nothing seemed to attract them.

Flisek surmised that some people were interested in working at the golf course until he told them they had to arrive at 6 a.m. daily and work on weekends. Then those potential employees' jaws dropped and their eyes bulged.

Flisek was able to recruit some college kids to the crew, but they couldn't start work until May and the golfers begin playing in April, meaning the crew was shorthanded in the early spring. When the crew was finally at full strength in mid-summer, the course was in good condition. But when the college students returned to school in mid-August, Flisek's crew was left shorthanded again.

Another problem within the problem was that some of the college kids weren't dedicated to their jobs. Every morning, it seemed, a college kid called off sick. "So I had a whole schedule that I'd made up the night before and then ... bam ... I had to change it at 6 in the morning," Flisek says.

It's not that Flisek never had hard-working college kids. They were just in the minority. Also, many college kids only worked one season. On average Flisek had to replace about 15 of his 20 seasonal workers every spring. He also had to train those workers, which took time and money. Spring is the time of year for superintendents and their crews to apply herbicides and insecticides — not to train a horde of new employees, Flisek says.

After meeting with the co-green chairmen, Flisek considered his hiring options. He had worked with Hispanics before at golf courses in New York, Illinois and Arizona. Many of the Hispanics impressed Flisek with their will to work, and several returned to the courses to work year after year.

But Flisek knew he would have a hard time finding Hispanic workers in Pittsburgh, which wasn't home to a large population of the group. However, after doing a little legwork, Flisek discovered that Pittsburgh had a small population of Mexicans who had migrated to the city.

So he launched his recruiting drive. Flisek placed a help wanted ad in a Spanish-speaking newspaper. He left his business cards and flyers describing the job at the city's only Mexican



All in the Family: Mexicans Stay Together

Lunchtime is a time
for togetherness.

Superintendent Ken Flisek is not only impressed with his Mexican employees' work ethic. He's wowed by their familial commitment to togetherness.

The Mexicans that Flisek employs at the Club at Nevillewood car-pool together, eat lunch together and live together. They even buy things together. And many of the seasonal workers save a good portion of their income and send it home to family members living in Mexico.

Two of Nevillewood's full-time employees, Jeronimo Corral and Antonio Hernandez, recruited their fathers and brothers to work at the course as seasonal labors. Corral's and Hernandez's families live together under the same roofs during the golf season. And everybody gets along well. Corral says Mexicans are people persons, especially when it comes to family members.

"We don't like to be alone," Corral says. "After dinner, we sit and have coffee together. We don't run off to do things on our own."

Flisek believes Mexicans are more loyal to each other, especially their family members.

"Their families stay together, and generations of their families will live in the same house," Flisek says. "They're much more communal than [Americans] are."

Brad Walker, irrigation tech at the Club of Nevillewood, says he's impressed with the Mexicans' family values.

"It's what America is missing," he adds.

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grocery store. He scouted Mexican restaurants for potential employees.

It was February, and Flisek hoped to hire new workers by mid-March. But his search wasn't going well. Part of the problem was that Flisek was shunned because some Mexicans thought he might be an undercover government agent looking to bust illegal immigrants.

But then there was the fortuitous meeting at Don Pablo's, and Flisek's recruiting effort found life. His new workers told Flisek they knew of other Mexicans who sought employment. By the summer, Flisek had six Mexicans working on the crew.

"My labor concerns were well on their way of being a thing of the past," Flisek says.

It didn't take long for members to notice an improvement in the course's looks.

"It turned out to be a stroke of genius," Daniels says of Flisek's choice to hire migrant workers. "Ken was able to raise the bar here."

Flisek knew he would have to integrate the migrants into his existing American crew, which posed both communicative and cultural challenges. Flisek took a refresher course in Spanish at a local community college. He also purchased an English-Spanish dictionary and a

book titled "Spanish for Gringos" for his American crew and him to peruse.

Flisek concentrated on obtaining training tapes, whether from the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America or equipment manufacturers, narrated in English and Spanish. He also began posting signage in the

maintenance facility in English and Spanish.

Shortly into the season, Flisek held a celebration for his entire crew — a Cinco de Mayo party. He figured it was a good way for his Mexican and American workers to get together in a nonwork environment. The Mexicans did the cooking, and Flisek supplied the beer.

"We had a great time," says Flisek, noting the Cinco de Mayo party has become an annual event. "It was a good way to meld the two cultures together."

The workers from the two cultures get along well. When he joined the Nevillewood maintenance staff five years ago, Brad Walker, the course's irrigation tech, says the Mexicans made him feel at ease.

"Ken puts a lot of trust in those guys, and we have a lot of trust in them," Walker says. "They care about this place."

Antonio Hernandez sips a Pepsi and nods his head in agreement as he listens to Jeronimo Corral speak on the virtues of hard work.

"We start at 6 in the morning, and we like to work late," says Corral. "And the more hours we work, the more money we make."

Hernandez says: "We're like ants. We never stop. We're always doing things."

An ugly stereotype, however, has plagued Mexicans for years. It maintains that they are lazy, unreliable and untrustworthy.

Corral and Hernandez are aware of the label, but it doesn't bother them. Flisek is also aware of the tag. He remembers watching old Western movies where Mexicans were depicted as irresponsible drunks.

Flisek is not sure where or why the stereotype originated, and he remains befuddled by it. He will tell you that many Mexicans are dedicated workers. Flisek tells many stories that depict their staunch work ethic. One day during the initial season in which he had employed them, a crew of five Mexicans was scheduled to mow the greens by hand in the morning and then trim the turf on the front nine holes. Usually, the tasks took a crew of six college kids about 10 hours to complete, but the five Mexicans finished the work in five hours.

Flisek didn't believe they could finish that much work in such a short time. So he took a

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Mexicans and America

Living and Working in the U.S. — Legally

Would you participate in a program that would allow you to work in the United States and cross the border legally on the condition that you eventually return to Mexico?

Yes 71 percent

No 18 percent

Would you participate in a program that offered the prospect of permanent legalization for migrants if you lived here for five years, continued working and had no problems with legal authorities?

Yes 72 percent

No 17 percent

Based on responses from about 5,000 Mexican migrants last summer.

Going to America

If you had the means and opportunity, would you migrate to the United States?

Yes 46 percent

No 52 percent

Would you work and live in the United States without authorization?

Yes 21 percent

No 76 percent

Based on responses from about 1,200 Mexican adults last spring

SOURCE: PEW HISPANIC CENTER



The Mexican workers adhere to a sound teamwork concept. "They go along one hole after another and never stop," says superintendent Ken Flisek.

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ride in his utility vehicle to perform an inspection. He was astonished to see they completed the work so quickly — and efficiently.

"That's when I realized that these guys were going to make us look pretty good in a hurry," Flisek says.

Chuck Foley, a longtime Nevillewood member who lives in a home on the course, says the Mexicans don't waste any time while working.

"You never, ever see them standing around," says Foley, who plays the course almost daily.

"Everyone speaks volumes about them."

Flisek believes the Mexicans' strong work ethic stems from their childhood. Because many of their families didn't own cars, Mexican children walked everywhere, and sometimes had to hike long distances to reach their destinations.

The Mexicans also adhere to a sound teamwork concept, which impresses Flisek. At any given time on the course during the day, there will be four of them pushing mowers and two of them lugging trimmers. "And they know exactly what each other guy is going to do," Flisek says. "They go along one hole after another and never stop."

Corral and Hernandez have helped Flisek recruit other Mexicans as seasonal laborers, including several members of their families. Only a few of the Mexican employees that Flisek has hired since 1997 haven't panned out.

Flisek admits it's not inexpensive to bring migrant workers to the course annually to work. The Club at Nevillewood typically hires a broker or immigration attorney to conduct the process and secure the paperwork of hiring Mexicans through the H-2B visa program. The fee is around \$4,000 to bring up to 20 workers to the course. Nevillewood usually brings about 10.

While his Mexican workers seem to favor manual labor, Flisek says he's careful not to make them the bottom workers on the maintenance crew's totem pole. He wants to show them respect by bestowing them with responsibility. That means teaching them to how to operate fairway mowers and triplex mowers.

Some of the Mexicans will work three months straight without taking off a day. It's not that Flisek doesn't give them time off, it's just that the Mexicans would rather work, even on weekends.

Before the Mexicans arrived, Flisek only had six-person crews working on Saturdays and Sundays. But those crews grew to about 15 on each day because of the Mexicans' willingness to work. More manpower meant the fairways and greens could be mowed, tasks that weren't usually performed on the weekend.

"The members were thrilled," Flisek says.

Despite their hard work ethic, the Mexicans have also had to endure other negative assumptions. They've been accused of taking jobs from able-bodied Americans. Flisek says

people have criticized him for hiring Mexicans over Americans.

But the critics, Flisek contends, are ignorant to the type of workers on the job market who are willing to perform manual labor, let alone get up at 5 a.m. to go to work on a golf course.

"They think I'm hiring these guys because they work cheaper," Flisek says. "I hire the people who are willing to do the job for me."

Flisek wasn't just looking to save his job by hiring the Mexicans. It was also about them and their livelihoods, he says.

Even though he couldn't pay them as much as he thought they were worth because of budgetary limitations, Flisek knew he could give the Mexicans a better opportunity than they could receive in their home country.

Flisek's four grandparents came to America from Slovenia about 90 years ago for the same reason. His grandfathers worked in western Pennsylvania's coal and steel mills. Many

of the immigrants who came to work on golf courses 80 years ago were from Italy, Flisek says. Mexicans are just the latest wave.

"My generation was the first one to go to college in the United States," Flisek says. "I'm sure that some of the kids of the guys working for me now will end up going to college, and they'll have more opportunities than their fathers had."

The Mexicans who work at Nevillewood aren't getting rich. Flisek says he pays the seasonal workers about \$8 an hour. With overtime, that translates into \$15,000 to \$17,000 in the eight months they work at the course. Employees who return the following season receive 25-cent-an-hour pay raises.

The Mexicans travel thousands of miles to Pittsburgh and other U.S. cities to work on golf courses because they can't make nearly that much money performing similar work at home. The average wage in Mexico is \$2 an hour, with agricultural workers making less than half that.

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Rakesh Kochhar, associate director of research for the Pew Hispanic Center, a non-partisan research group in Washington, says most of the people migrating from Mexico to work at U.S. golf courses are male and poorly educated.

"Most have not graduated from high school," Kochhar says. "They come from blue-collar backgrounds in agriculture and construction."

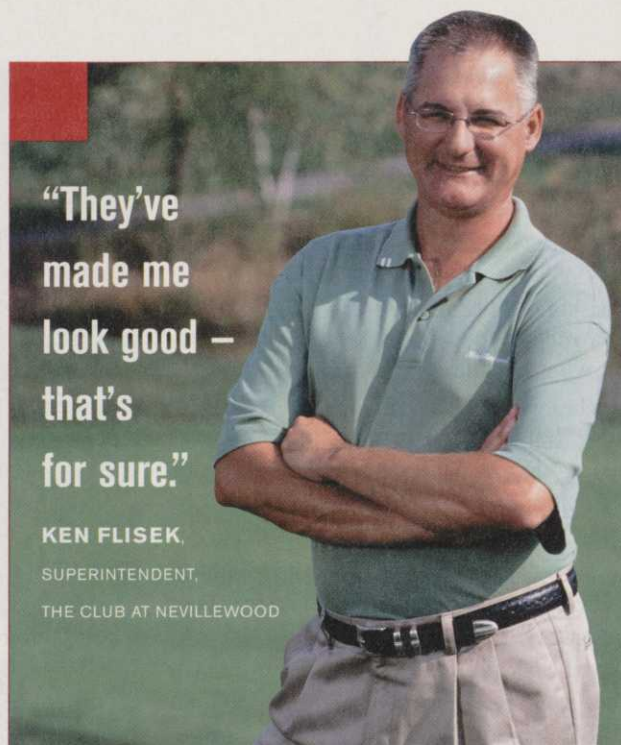
Many Mexican workers live together and share the rent while working in America. They send a good portion of their earnings back to their homes in Mexico to provide for their immediate and extended families.

"The cost of living in Mexico is lower," Kochhar says, noting that the Mexicans realize the American dollars they send home are worth more as Mexican pesos.

The 32-year-old Hernandez, who was 18 when he came to Pittsburgh from Acapulco, says he made the move to make more money. As full-time workers, he and Corral earn a few dollars more an hour than the seasonal staff.

The 33-year-old Corral, who's from a town about 60 miles southwest of Mexico City, says he felt like he needed to come to America to find a better life.

"I never expected to be working on a golf course," says Corral, who has been living in the United States since 1992.



**"They've
made me
look good —
that's
for sure."**

KEN FLISEK,
SUPERINTENDENT,
THE CLUB AT NEVILLEWOOD

"But then I got the opportunity to meet Ken."

Corral has been a full-time employee at Nevillewood for four years.

"Nobody has given me the confidence that Ken has given me," Corral says. "He also challenges me and pushes me to do things better. I'm thankful for him."

Corral has aspirations of becoming an assistant superintendent and eventually a superintendent. Flisek says he has the wherewithal to succeed.

"He's an important member of this crew," Flisek says. "He's a natural leader."

Flisek hopes all the Mexicans he hires can discover a better life in Pittsburgh, whether it's in golf course maintenance or another profession. In fact, three of Flisek's

former employees have left the course to begin their own businesses. Abraham Mendoza, a former Nevillewood greenkeeper, opened his own Mexican restaurant. Flisek and his crew frequent the Mendoza Express for lunch.

"It's refreshing to hear them say that they came here to live the American dream," Flisek says. "This is the land of opportunity. All they wanted was a chance."

Flisek has provided that chance at the Club at Nevillewood. And he's grateful to the Mexicans for giving him the chance to retain his job.

"They've made me look good — that's for sure," Flisek says. "When I receive compliments about the golf course from members, I always tell them that I'm only as good as the guys working for me." ■

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