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CREATIVITY PAYS IN A SIMMERING SUMMER JOB MARKET

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Maybe Ignacio Cervantes was born to be a businessman.

Or maybe his foray into the food catering field is just the beginning for this honor roll student who has dreams of becoming president of the United States someday. After spending his childhood following around his food catering father, Cervantes, an East Aurora High School senior, has begun catering parties all his own.

He makes authentic Mexican tacos for dozens to hundreds of people nearly every weekend. And he's only 17. Cervantes, who goes by the nickname Nacho, may not have the typical summer teen job working at a camp, the swimming pool or a fast-food restaurant. But he doesn't feel like he has missed out on anything, either.

"I just love my job. Instead of just being inside a store or at Taco Bell all day, and just serving people orders, I get to meet new people every weekend, in Aurora to Yorkville, Chicago, wherever," he said.

"You get to be your own boss."

In fact, because of the tough job market, entrepreneurial teens like Cervantes are encouraging their peers to get creative about the job search this summer. By working for themselves, or taking on a non-traditional job, teens might just pick up on something they love.

A study released in April by consultant firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas also suggested out-of-the box employment is the way to go. The firm reported teen hiring this season is slightly up over 2009 and 2008.

However, teens seeking traditional jobs at the mall, restaurants and movie theaters will face "stiff competition from older and more experienced job seekers." Here is some job advice from a few hard-working teens in the Fox Valley.

Think outside the norm Cervantes was 13 years old when he began catering parties, usually held in someone's home. His mom was always on-site with him, but Cervantes liked to refer to her as his assistant. But the very first time he made a little cash was when he was 5 years old.

"I used to get \$5 and I would get happy. Now, I'm working for myself. Now, I cook for the same amount that my dad used to cook for. I give him competition," Cervantes said.

Cervantes says for him it's less about the money and more about the skills he is learning. The job has taught him how to network, be professional and communicate with others. Not to mention, he now loves to cook and often serves his friends.

"I told my friends that if I won prom king, I would have a big party and cater. I actually won, so I have to keep my promise to that," Cervantes said.

Weekends at work Cervantes spends his weekends catering parties for which he prepares, cooks and serves the food on-site, a process that takes four hours. He charges \$125 for parties of 60 people or less, and the customers pay for their own ingredients.

His advice for teens: "If you cannot find a job, then make one. Make something out of it. If you really want money so bad, earn it and work hard for it."