

OBAMA'S HONORED GUESTS: Luis...

Luis and Juan Yepez

Lawrence Business Owners are First Lady's Guests for President's State of the Union Address

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Lawrence business owner Juan Yepez got to shake hands with President Obama last night, pose for a photo and offer him some inspiration on how to improve America.

"I told him we're trying to do our part in creating jobs in the City of Lawrence where it has the highest unemployment rate and is the poorest city in Massachusetts," said Yepez, 36, of Stoneham.

"He said 'Hey, I appreciate it. That's what we need to get this country back where it should be'," Yepez said.

Yepez was one of 23 people from around the country who sat as special guests with Michelle Obama during the president's State of the Union address last night.

His brother Luis, 39, of Andover, was a special guest too. He got to watch the address with about 15 other people in the White House theater, munching on White House popcorn after getting a "Welcome to our home" greeting from Mrs. Obama.

The president invited the Yepez brothers to be guests because of their success as small-business owners. They were the recipients of the 2009 Small Business Administration Phoenix Award. They recovered from a major flood in 2006 that destroyed almost \$400,000 of inventory and managed to flourish in the midst of an economic downturn.

"They believe that doing business in an area hit by 17 percent unemployment is more than just giving back and that hiring first-generation Americans like themselves who want to work and contribute to society is the cornerstone of long-term success," said a White House press release acknowledging their invitation.

The Yepez brothers, born in New York City and the sons of Ecuadorian natives, have made their mark in Lawrence during the past decade. They have

built a commercial real estate company in addition to growing Mainstream Global, a worldwide distributor of computer products, consumer electronics, and electronic components, in mills once inhabited by earlier generations of immigrants.

"Today, we were thinking about our parents coming to this country 40 years ago," said Luis Yepez.

Luis Yepez added that he and his brother are committed "to the feeling that giving back to community and making a difference was a cornerstone. We're trying to make a difference," he said.

The brothers flew to Washington yesterday, arriving at noon. They paid their own expenses for what Juan Yepez called "a once in a lifetime opportunity that we'll cherish for many, many years."

"We definitely got the White House treatment," said Juan Yepez.

"We were fortunate to get a call today from Gov. Patrick, congratulating us for this special event."

They also got to meet with Congresswoman Niki Tsongas and the U.S. ambassador to Haiti.

Before going to bed last night, Juan Yepez got a phone call from the New York Times seeking his opinion of the president's speech.

"I thought his speech was very positive, and I just felt it was geared toward American people and small-business owners," he said. "For America to get back to the way it was, the small businesses need to create jobs for people."