

Friends say lotto prize went to great man

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SAN JOSE — The nation's largest state lottery prize, a record \$141 million, couldn't have gone to a more deserving man, according to friends and neighbors of Alcario "Al" Castellano, a retired grocery store clerk who volunteered often to help Mexican-American groups.

Castellano, 66, chose the one-time cash option when he bought his ticket, which means that within the next six weeks he will receive \$70,794,364. After taxes, Castellano will net about \$50.9 million.

"My wife and I will never be able to spend all of this money. This is for our family and future generations," he grinned.

The former migrant farm worker plans to retire in comfort, take vacations with his wife, and most importantly, provide for his family.

He said he would immediately pay off his three children's student loans.

"I am the luckiest man alive today because I have a loving wife, three great children and some grandchildren," he said.

"I am proud to take care of their every need from now on because I just got luckier."

The couple also plans to donate to local charities they are familiar with, particularly ones fostering education, leadership and arts and culture for Latinos.

"We know that winning the Lotto will change our lives," Castellano said. "The one thing we do know is this will not change our core values."

Castellano thanked his wife Carmen profusely for the years of support that she had given him.

She wants to visit Mexico, Europe and Peru.

"I've always dreamed of seeing those pyramids," she said. "Now maybe our dreams will come true."

Castellano is a fairly quiet man, but one whose face is well-known at the city's many Mexican American cultural events, acquaintances say. Often behind the lens of a video or still camera, Castellano has spent many years amassing images of the city's rich Hispanic culture.

"He was the most supportive person," said Melinda Chacon, a box office worker at Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose who met Castellano when he videotaped a beauty pageant she was in. "He's very well deserving. I'm sure everybody felt the same way."

Carmen Castellano, a semiretired secretary at 62, is a board member of the folkloric dance group Los Lupenos, among other organizations.

"We went through a pretty rough year last year, and he and his wife have been there doing pretty much whatever they could," Maria De La Rosa, the dance group's artistic director. "He took it

upon himself to come in and clean for us, mopping the lobby, vacuuming the floors and taking the garbage out.”

Castellano was the dairy manager at a San Jose Safeway store before he retired with a bad back, said coworker Bob Skillicorn.

“You sit and think ‘It’s a sin for one person to win that much money.’ But when it’s someone like him, well, I’m really happy for him,” Skillicorn said. “He’s a real down to earth individual and a very strong family man. I know he’ll do the best for his family and community by giving back something.”

Castellano bought the ticket Saturday at Alex Wang’s liquor store, where he has bought tickets for 15 years.

“We’ve known each other so long,” Wang said. “He’s a nice guy. He’s smiling all the time.”

Wang’s smiling, too: he gets \$705,000 for selling the ticket. He plans to buy a car for his wife, Ling, and put the rest in the bank.

Wang said Castellano always marked two of his own numbers and let the computer do the rest with quick picks. The winner was the last number he bought that day: 3, 22, 43, 44 and 45 and Mega number 8.

Ticket buyers must decide at the time of purchase whether to take a one-time payment or 26 annual checks. Castellano chose the lump sum when he bought his ticket Saturday.

He said he woke at dawn Sunday, brewed coffee, and plucked his ticket from the refrigerator where it was posted with a magnet.

He sat down to read the paper and began matching the numbers, one by one.

“Now, what’s going on here?” he said to himself. “Is this real? I can’t believe it.”

He went outside for a walk, came back into the kitchen and checked the numbers again. He woke Carmen, “and she started getting hysterical and started dancing.”

Born in New Mexico, he moved with his family to California to pick crops when he was 9. He volunteered for the Army after high school in the mid-1950s. He and Carmen met at a dance in Salinas.

He has been a member of the local chapter of the American GI Forum, a Hispanic veterans group that produces annual Cinco de Mayo and Fiestas Patrias festivals. He shows up with his video camera at Hispanic parades, mariachi festivals, charity fund-raisers and other community events so often that the newspaper called him “the Mexican-American community’s unofficial videographer.”

The largest previous single-state lottery prize before the current record jackpot was \$118.8 million in 1991 in California — that was shared by 54 winners.

The largest multistate jackpot came in a Powerball game in 1998: \$295.7 million, shared by 13 machinists in Westerville, Ohio. The world’s largest jackpot ever won by an individual was \$197 million, won by a nanny in Boston in 1999 in the multistate Big Game lottery.

The Castellanos were quiet and nervous as they turned in the ticket Thursday, Lottery spokeswoman Norma Minas said.