

Lucky in Love, Lucky in Lotto

Jackpot: The big winner says he's been fortunate to have a loving wife and children. They just got \$141 million luckier.

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SAN JOSE — Alcario and Carmen Castellano, California's newest mega-millionaire lottery winners, finally came out of seclusion Friday, staging a news conference on the covered patio of an elegant old downtown hotel they can probably now afford to buy.

The graying grandparents, who have long been active in Latino affairs in the San Jose area, hugged affectionately in front of the cameras and talked mostly not about money, but about the importance of family, true romance and giving back to the community.

The 66-year-old Castellano, a retired Safeway supermarket clerk, dashingly presented his blushing wife with a dozen red roses and then made a confession.

"I'm scared half to death," he told reporters, often repeating himself in Spanish for the throngs of Latino media.

Reading from a statement, Castellano described himself as a man who has pursued the American dream by providing a good home for his family and an education for his three children.

For 15 years, he played the lottery every week, picking his "lucky numbers" at the same South San Jose liquor store where he was considered one of the regulars.

On Sunday, he won \$141 million--one of the largest single-state lottery jackpots in history. He chose the cash option and will receive about \$71 million within the next six weeks.

Millions of less-than-lucky Californians were held in suspense when the state's newest Richie Rich failed to come forward for nearly a week.

But the waiting ended Friday.

"I am the luckiest man alive today because I have a loving wife and three great children--and some great grandchildren," Castellano said. "And I'm proud to say that my wife and I are going to be able to take care of their every need from now on because we just got a little luckier."

Castellano talked of the frustration of being a devoted father who was only able to pay for part of his children's college and graduate school education, as each had to take out student loans.

To laughter, he said: "I think we can safely say we are going to pay off those loans now."

Castellano said he bought 10 Quick Pick tickets Saturday and, as was his habit, promptly forgot about them. An early riser, he was making coffee Sunday when he decided to check his numbers against those published in the newspaper.

First he checked the Mega jackpot number and found that one of his tickets matched it. As he moved his finger along the ticket he realized that number after number came up lucky.

"First it was one, then two, then three and finally four and I thought 'Oh, good, I've won \$1,000,' he said. "I was so excited, and I took my finger off the last number and they all matched. I double-checked it a hundred times."

Then Castellano called a timeout: He took a brief walk and returned to the house and checked his numbers again.

They still matched.

"I figured I had to do something about this," he said.

So Castellano woke his wife. "At first, she thought something was wrong with me," he recalled. "When I told her, she got very excited. She jumped up and down. She hadn't jumped up and down like that for years."

Daughter Carmella Castellano, 35, the head of a trade association for community clinics in California, said the couple then contacted their three children.

"My mom said to me: 'We won the Lotto.'

"I said: 'You're kidding. Don't joke with me.'

Rather than come forward immediately, the couple said they first consulted financial advisors and lawyers.

"You just don't come out and collect," Castellano said. "First, you have to do a lot of planning."

Added his wife: "Our family has spent the whole week together."

Carmen Castellano said the couple plan to visit Mexico, South America and perhaps take a cruise down the Nile to see the pyramids. "We know winning the Lotto will change our lives in ways we can't yet fathom or predict," she said.

But Carmen, 62, a part-time secretary at San Jose City College, said some things won't change: The couple will continue their charitable and community work. And they'll stay in the house they've lived in for 35 years.

She said the couple's charity will focus on Latino education, arts and culture.

By Friday, the couple already exuded the trappings of becoming instantly rich: They had hired a media consultant.

But in winning their money, they lost none of their humor, or sense of romance. Carmen Castellano told the gathering that her father had always dreamed of striking it rich.

She looked skyward and said: "Well, Pop, your dream has come true for your daughter."