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## No Tengo Dinero

**Jose Leon knows how hard it can be for newcomers in America. So he does his best to help them — Cash only.**

BY NADIA PFLAUM

Jose Leon knows how to get things.

"Somebody need a house? I reference to this guy," he says cheerfully in a thick accent, holding up a Re/Max agent's business card.

As CEO of American Connection Services Inc., the 38-year-old Leon says he tries to help Kansas City's immigrants negotiate our country's unfamiliar customs and laws.

His thick, ringed fingers roam his desk. He pulls out a large Ziploc bag that holds a stack of business cards 3 inches deep. "You need a mechanic? I have mechanics here, too. You need a bondsman, I have this here. You need insurance? My friend next door, he does insurance. I send it next door." He points to his telephone. "Calls, calls, calls, calls. My phone is ringing, ringing, ringing. And you need a good restaurant? I have a good Mexican restaurant!"

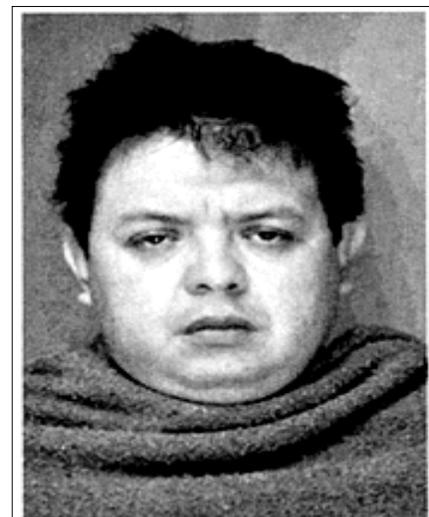
Leon also dabbles in roofing. He rides around in pickup trucks with construction crews, translating instructions from their English-speaking clients. Leon says he accompanies Spanish-speaking maids to their first housecleaning jobs just to make sure there are no misunderstandings.

"I really try to make good service," he says.

And yet, for all his good intentions, Leon doesn't have the karma of a man whose business is helping people.

Leon's front door is just steps away from the traffic

Doug Kubert



zooming by on 23rd Street in Independence. His office shares a strip with gun shops, fast-food restaurants, check-cashing depots and crumbling parking lots. Last July, someone shattered Leon's front window, and thieves stole his computer and a lockbox full of money, documents and checks. The next day, someone robbed his house on Bennington in Kansas City. The police report lists miscellaneous stolen papers, one Rolex and \$14,000 in cash among the stolen items.

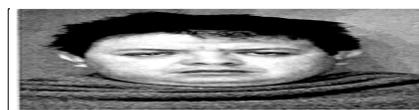
Leon seems to suffer such misfortunes regularly. Recently he's been driving a rental car because he hit a deer on East 23rd Street, he says, heaving one leather-shoed foot up onto his desk and lifting his pant leg to display a verifying bruise. Leon says his last office burned down. Once, at a North Kansas City car wash, someone punched him in the face, he says. He points out a scar to prove it. Leon also says that he has diabetes, which makes it hard for him to work every day.

Nonetheless, Leon is an opportunist -- which isn't illegal. If anything, it proves he's living the American dream. And he's becoming famous, too, at least among the people who form the grassroots infrastructure for helping Kansas City's Spanish-speaking immigrants.

But that fame might attract more trouble for the accident-prone Leon.

**The voice coming over** Sister Alicia Macias' speakerphone barks short, static notes in Spanish. The nun sits patiently, waiting to translate. The person on the other end will give his name only as "Augustin." He's talking about Leon.

Macias relays that Augustin is from Jalisco, Mexico, and works in both Kansas and Missouri. He's been here 15 years but doesn't speak English. He says that he wanted to become a citizen of the United States and to get health insurance, so he contacted Leon. Leon came to his house and said he could take care of everything -- but the process would take six months and cost \$2,000 a month. Later, Leon said Augustin owed the IRS \$8,000 in back taxes. Augustin gave Leon the money to pay the IRS, though he never saw any documentation of



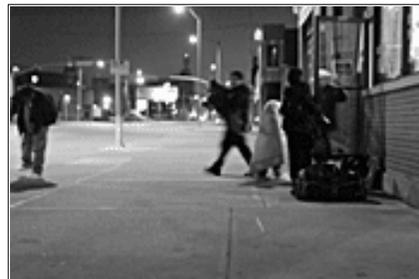
**Jose Leon's Kansas City, Kansas, Police Department mug shot.**

Luke Echterling



**A family arrives in Kansas City, Missouri, from Mexico.**

Luke Echterling



**Prospective day laborers wait early one morning to be chosen for work.**

Luke Echterling



the debt. Leon told him he would accept only cash and gave him no receipt.

Augustin recalls that Leon treated him very well -- like a friend -- when Leon came to his house.

He gave Leon \$14,000 before he started asking to see results. Augustin says Leon always told him he was working on it, but he grew less friendly. Augustin says that during their last conversation, on December 30, 2002, Leon told him that if Augustin didn't leave him alone, Leon would call the Immigration and Naturalization Service and have Augustin taken away.

Augustin is one of hundreds of people who come to Macias every year with stories they believed, of "new amnesty" programs for legalizing immigrants, of impossibly cheap health insurance, of deals on legal services. She works at El Centro, a family support center that offers English and Spanish lessons, job-training courses, help with home financing, and child care. When immigrants repeatedly come to her with complaints about the same person, Macias starts recording the promises made and the money lost. Leon now has his own folder among her files on suspicious companies and individuals.

It's hard to imagine forking over \$14,000 in cash without a receipt or a guarantee. But, Macias says, "People are desperate to be OK in this country. They'll do anything. They just want to believe."

That much was clear three years ago, when the *Pitch* reported on the practices of Alicia Morales, who wasn't a lawyer but was giving legal advice to immigrants and advertising her services over a radio show on Spanish-language station KCZZ 1480 (Allie Johnson's "Sounds of the Border," May 17, 2001). People would pay Morales for what they thought was protection under various amnesty laws in order to stay in the United States. The luckiest victims lost only money; others were deported because of Morales' mistakes. Though Morales isn't a lawyer, she's married to one -- James Phillips of the Phillips & Phillips law firm. It took nearly three years of complaints before authorities took any action against James Phillips and Alicia Morales. On August 5, 2003, Al Walczak, a deputy disciplinary administrator with the Kansas Bar Association, filed a formal complaint against James Phillips for allowing his wife to assist in the practice of law. And on February 10 of this year, the Consumer Protection and Antitrust Division of Kansas Attorney General Phill Kline's office filed suit against Alicia Morales.



**Sister Alicia Macias listens to immigrants' problems at the family support center El Centro.**

Luke Echterling



**Ancieto Lozada says he paid Leon \$650 and never heard from him again.**

Kline's spokesman, Whitney Watson, tells the *Pitch* that the attorney general's office had found "much to recommend litigation" after investigating Morales and Phillips' operation. "We have petitioned the court to allow this case to proceed under the aliases of Juan and Juanita Doe so that illegals can get justice without fearing discovery by INS," Watson says. In May, the Kansas Supreme Court will conduct a review and decide whether to suspend or disbar James Phillips.

Leon's enterprise is also unique to the immigrant community, but the realm he operates in is less easily regulated. His advertising is mostly word of mouth, though his business cards circulate on the city's West Side and along Independence Avenue. The business card proclaims "*Proveemos Todo Tipo de Servicios*" -- "We Provide All Types of Services" -- along with the Spanish word for lawyers, *abogados*, and bail bondsmen, *afianzadoras*.

Aniceto Lozada says Leon took advantage of the fact that he doesn't speak English.

Lozada moved here five years ago from Puebla, Mexico. He lives in Kansas City, Kansas; despite its boarded-up windows and sagging tiles, his house is one of the nicer places on the block. In his living room, a big-screen TV clashes with the peeling wallpaper. Sheets cover the windows, and a dripping sound emanates from the kitchen.

Lozada works as a roofer. He's thin and looks aged beyond his years; a deep scar splits his elbow. His children, Maria and Carlos, look healthy and energetic. Through an interpreter, Lozada recounts his experience with Leon.

After a car accident four years ago, Lozada received a letter informing him that his driver's license had been suspended because he hadn't reported the collision to his insurance company. A friend told him about a flier advertising Leon's services that he'd picked up at a laundromat, so Lozada went to Leon's office, which was then at 5232 Truman Road. Lozada says Leon told him he was a lawyer and that if Lozada gave him his birth certificate and \$150, Leon could take care of his "insurance fraud." For another \$500, Leon said he'd expunge the accident and suspension from Lozada's driving record. Lozada gave Leon \$650 in cash. Lozada says Leon told him it would be taken care of within a month. After two months and many phone calls, Lozada discovered that Leon had moved his office location and disconnected his old phone number.

When Lozada realized that he was out \$650 but no help was coming, he took matters into his own hands. He called his insurance company and discovered that employees there spoke Spanish. He got his accident report from the police station and cleaned up his record with the Driver Control Bureau of the Kansas Division of Motor Vehicles. It cost him only \$100.

Jennifer Hermann of the division's records department hadn't heard of Leon, but she says workers there sometimes encounter situations similar to Lozada's. She says her agency isn't concerned with drivers' legal immigration status and that no one outside the Driver Control Bureau can clean up a driver's record.

Before July 1, 2000, anyone could get a driver's license, regardless of his or her resident status. Applicants had to prove only their identity, that they lived in Kansas, that they could drive and that they could pass a vision test. After July 1 of that year, though, Kansas began requiring proof that immigrants were in the country legally. And as of last year, the state began requiring applicants to present a Social Security card or documentation of a taxpayer identification number to obtain a license or renew one that had expired.

Business is booming for people who can help secure -- or who say they can help secure -- driver's licenses for undocumented workers.

A few hundred dollars here and there might not sound like a big-time scam, but it's a painful loss for people who are desperate.

"For someone to be charging \$300, \$400 for a license and not giving any services to a person making minimum wage, who has to give up two weeks' pay and then not have nothing? That's very cold, isn't it?" says Martin Talamante, who has worked in Kansas educating Spanish speakers about U.S. driving laws.

"I believe we can all make a living. There's no need to be abusing other people," Talamante says. "You come here and before you know it, you're in more trouble than you thought possible. And why? Because you listened to someone who was here."

Lynda Callon, a neighborhood activist on Kansas City's largely Hispanic West Side, has also become accustomed to these sad stories. She encourages immigrants to learn English -- but not just because newcomers are expected to learn the language of their adopted country. Her reasons are much more practical. "As long as you don't know English," she says, "you can be a victim."

But it's not that easy. "Most linguists say that to learn and be proficient in a new language, an adult takes about ten years," Callon says. "These people are often working several very hard and dangerous jobs, so that when they are off, they're exhausted. In the summers, a lot of men work from six in the morning until nine or ten at night, six or seven days a week. The English-as-a-second-language classes that are available are overflowing, and a lot of the classes aren't conducive to many of their schedules. So there aren't people refusing to learn, but based on the life they're living ... most are learning English on the fly."

Callon runs the Westside Community Action Network Center, one of seven nonprofit organizations that work to help neighborhoods through community policing. The center recently moved from its old location -- a basement at 2415 Summit -- to a large, orange-painted office at 2136 Jefferson. From that vantage point, Callon and her staff can oversee the corner of Southwest Boulevard and 23rd Street, where day laborers wait in the morning to be picked up for work. These workers, Callon says, are serious about earning a living rather than making enough money to buy a few beers or some drugs. At Callon's CAN Center, workers can report employers who pay them too little or not at all, which she says is a

common problem for immigrants who do manual labor such as construction or landscaping. She says her staff tries to teach immigrants their rights. "They are protected by the labor laws of this country, regardless of their immigrant status," she says.

"Right now, there are so few affordable services for the number of Latino immigrants," Callon explains. "It's a population that lends itself to be exploited by their fellow countrymen."

Sources at the Jackson County Municipal Courthouse tell the *Pitch* that Leon would frequently show up there working as a private translator, usually accompanied by a lawyer. Together, Leon and the lawyer would scan the dockets for Latino names. The court administrator received complaints that Leon would go to the courtrooms where these people were scheduled to appear, approach them and ask them in Spanish for the names of their lawyers. When they told him, Leon would try to convince them to use a lawyer he preferred instead, though city ordinances prohibit "hawking and peddling" any goods or services on city property. Other sources say that Hispanic defendants sometimes thought Leon was their lawyer, even though he has no law degree.

"There is no question that Jose Leon's practice in municipal court is dubious and raises suspicion," says John Michael Quinn, a former Jackson County prosecutor and municipal court lawyer. "When we hear recurring stories from a multitude of Hispanic defendants, there's certainly the smoke of suspicion."

Quinn says that investigators from the Missouri Office of Disciplinary Council, the branch of the Missouri Bar Association in charge of regulating lawyers, came from Jefferson City to Kansas City and used his downtown office to interview as many as thirty Latinos who had complaints about a lawyer who works with Leon. The lawyer was never disciplined.

Sources within the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department confirm that there is an ongoing investigation of Leon's practices, but no criminal charges have been filed. Sources there admit that many of the complaints about Leon would be civil rather than criminal cases, such as breach-of-contract issues; people upset with Leon's company will most likely have to sue him to get their money back. Lacking money and time and disillusioned with lawyers in general, disgruntled former clients are unlikely to do so.

Perhaps Leon is lucky after all.

**Besides, Leon has explanations.** He throws his arms up over his head and wiggles his fingers like a spider, an evil look transforming his face.

"Money," he hisses. People are jealous of him, he says. "These people think I make thousands and thousands. I make a bit. For translations."

Outside Leon's office door at 11306 East 23rd Street, the ground is littered with mini candy canes, broken inside their wrappers. A few weeks ago, those candy canes were part of the décor inside, offered in shells held by porcelain angels. Now

the candy selection has changed to chocolate.

Inside, the smell of stale cigarette smoke and the sound of Spanish soap operas prevail. A vase with fake yellow roses sits on the desk of Leon's assistant; to the left of the desk, four or five chairs arranged in an L form a waiting area. Leon's interior office is separated into two rooms; one of them is obscured by a bookcase, though there isn't a book in sight. His shelves instead display an assortment of deities: plastic Buddhas, a painted Egyptian Nefertiti head and other Egyptian figures, a wooden crucifix, a purple-robed figure of Lazarus, Hindu-looking statuettes and faux-marble heads of Roman philosophers. They're gifts, he says, from happy clients and friends.

Affixed to the wall near the ceiling are two television monitors, one tuned to daytime television, the other flashing security-camera images of the lobby, the street out front, the parking lot in back and the back of his visitor's head.

He settles in behind his desk, folds his hands in front of him and grins.

"I'm not the type to do anything wrong," he says. "My company is a service. What we do here, the moment the people call me, 2 or 3 a.m., 'Jose, I in jail. Please find me a bonding company.' I call the bonding company, my friend Bob, in this case a very nice person at Freedom Bonding, and I talk with this guy because he only speaks Spanish, so I am the translator, and I make a charge for the people, \$50 or \$100, because you know I need to take something for my time. And I reference to the attorneys because they sometimes don't speak Spanish and these people don't speak English. And I have the workers because sometimes I'm not feeling very well because of the diabetic problems, too."

He goes on to explain how his company works. As he talks, Leon absently picks up papers and feeds them to a shredder.

"Sometimes a lot of people I charge here are illegal people," Leon says. "They don't have money here, don't have nothing here and call me. I receive collect calls from the jail from these people, and I contact the family, and the moment I contact the family, I tell them I make this charge and the family says, 'OK, don't worry about it.'"

The name Aniceto Lozada doesn't ring a bell for Leon.

"I had a big accident five years ago, and I lost my memory," he says. "That's why my English sometimes is very poor. It was here in Kansas City. I hit my hands, my head, my face, my stomach," he says, touching each spot for emphasis. "I was in a hospital for six months."

After the accident, Leon says he consulted a Kansas City lawyer for assistance. From then on, Leon referred the lawyer's services to friends when they needed legal help. Then it occurred to him: With the combination of his years spent living in Kansas City and his own legal experience -- on the wrong side of the law -- Leon had expertise he could sell.

In 2000, Wyandotte County District Attorney Nick Tomasic prosecuted Leon for one count of burglary and three counts of forgery for trying to cash three checks (for \$4,000, \$3,000 and \$1,000) on the account of a dead man named John Quintana. Only the forgery charges stuck; Tomasic dropped the burglary charge. Leon says he heard rumors he'd be charged for Quintana's murder.

Tomasic tells the *Pitch* that tipsters suggested Leon might have been involved in Quintana's death. "There were anonymous reports to that effect, but no evidence supported that," Tomasic says. "We heard also that he was more or less preying on illegal or legal Hispanics who didn't really speak English, but as often happens, we didn't get any witnesses."

Tomasic says Leon entered a no-contest plea for the forgery charges in February 2001 and in March of that year was sentenced to eight months in jail on each of the counts. But Leon never spent any time in jail. He spent 18 months on probation instead.

The entrepreneurial Leon registered American Connection Service with the Missouri Secretary of State on May 22, 2002, though he had been running his business out of an office before that date. The state now lists American Connection Service's status as "dissolved," meaning that no one has filed the annual registration report or paid the \$45 to keep the business active since it was first created. But it's still up and running and appears to be thriving on customers who don't speak English.

And Leon is uniquely qualified to understand their situations because his accident caused him to struggle with language, too.

"I get confused!" he tells the *Pitch*. "I lost 90 percent of my Spanish and English! I have very serious confuses. You say to me, *mi casa es su casa*, I don't know what it means!"

Right after his accident, Leon says, when he first woke up from his coma, he began speaking Hebrew, one of the five or six languages he says he knows. His family was originally from Spain but was displaced when the dictator Franco took over and kicked out all the Jewish people, Leon says. So the Leons moved from Spain to Mexico City and converted to Christianity. "I am not a Christian," he says. "I say too many bad words sometimes." (The mezuzah tacked to his office door sparkles with rhinestones.)

While in Mexico City, Leon says he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. He lunges behind his bookshelf to the other half of his office to prove it. Then he returns, huffing and carrying a cardboard frame painted gold. Inside the frame is a copy of something that looks like a diploma from El Universidad de Autonoma Mexico, its words in Spanish. The paper, like nearly every sheet in Leon's office, is creased, stained and a little crumpled. There's no glass protecting it.

The lawyers who call his ethics and practices into question are angry, Leon says, because he's taken too many of their clients. They want revenge.

"I am very sad sometimes for the situation of my company," Leon says. "You know, I make too many people jealous. Sometimes I make mistakes. It's true, I am human."

Frustrated, Leon points to the jewelry on his hands, his watch and ring, and laughs. "If I had lots of money, I would have my own house! See this ring? \$85 at a pawn shop.... People say I steal thousands. Tell me where is this money, because I need it in my pockets! I live well, legally. Maybe I am very stupid."

He says that he never asks about his client's legal status and that he takes only cash because that's all his clients usually have. "Really, the Spanish community never pays you in checks. I don't need problems with the community, because my face is in front of the community. I live in close to here, and the people see me in the church, in the schools, in the restaurants ... this is my story. I try to do the best for the people. Sometimes the people don't understand the rules."

**Since he first met with the *Pitch*** on January 22, Leon has changed his business cards. Now they read, in Spanish, that American Connection Service Inc. "Provides All Kinds of Services, To Reference Attorneys and Bail Bonds."

Leon promises that he is willing to repay people who have complaints about his services, and he says he's considering taking the Spanish words for *lawyers* and *bail bondsmen* off his window and his business cards -- but only after a few months, he says, to avoid the appearance that something has gone wrong.

"I will try to stop referencing the people before I know everything is sure," Leon says. "I'm not busy for referencing to attorneys. I'm busy referencing other things, for plumbing and roofing."

One cool, springlike day in March, a 25-year-old woman in a blue sweatshirt shows up at Leon's door. She's hoping to get a refund on half of the \$1,550 she paid Leon. Her house had been raided, and her husband was charged with selling marijuana and amphetamines. She insists she didn't know the drugs were in the house, but police arrested her anyway. Now she's afraid to go back to the house, and her husband and mother-in-law have fled the country. She says that while she was in jail, a friend told her to call Leon. He'd find her a lawyer, the friend said, so she agreed. She says Leon told her that part of his fee was for her release from jail, and part of it was the lawyer's initial fee to begin working on her case.

But this woman speaks English. So after she paid his fee, she started asking around. She consulted Henri Watson, an immigration lawyer who hosts a show called *Know Your Legal Rights* on Spanish-language radio station KKHK 1250. Watson told her that she would have been released from jail after twenty hours no matter what and that because she hadn't been charged with anything, there was no reason to hire a lawyer. Essentially, she'd paid \$1,550 for nothing.

When she later complained over the phone to Leon, she tells the *Pitch*, he offered to give her a refund of \$750. That was good enough for her -- she desperately needed the cash.

Leon takes the woman back to his office and jovially counts out \$750 in cash from a zippered pouch. Earlier that day, the *Pitch* watched as Leon paid another woman \$1,000 from the same pouch -- for roofing work her husband had completed, he told the *Pitch*. Both times, he repeatedly counted short. Both women corrected him.

When the second woman leaves Leon's office, he waves to her, smiles broadly and wishes her well. But once he's out of earshot, she tells the *Pitch*: "Once I saw you here, I felt better. You saw, he paid me like this," she says, snapping her fingers. She'd made three previous appointments with Leon for specific days and times, she says, and twice he'd been a no-show. The third time, he told her the money was with his brother. "He always had some stupid excuse," she says. "I think God put you in my way today."

Or maybe it was the result of Sister Alicia Macias' efforts. "I always say to my coworkers and friends that work is very easy when you work with your heart," Macias says. "I pray to God so much that those who are doing this to the less fortunate, that they get to change, that the Lord changes their hearts. All they think is money, money, money, but if they die tomorrow, where does the money go to?"