

A tale of love, subterfuge and heartache

In 1987, a young Chilean man arrived on the doorstep of pizzeria owner Joe Di Maio. It was the beginning of a friendship that spanned a decade and dominated the headlines of the Waikato Times for a year. Wintec journalism student *Greer McDonald* revisits the story.

JOE DI MAIO remembers the day he met Mario Saez.

"He looked like a starved wee boy," he says. "His language skills were very poor but he was respectable and eager to please."

Mario, a 22-year-old Chilean man, had fallen in love with Joe's daughter Corina while she was an exchange student in Chile. So, when the couple arrived in New Zealand, Joe welcomed him into his home as a member of the family.

But it quickly became clear there were other reasons why the young man was desperate to remain in New Zealand.

Mario's father had been a personal bodyguard to Chile's ruthless military dictator, General Augusto Pinochet, who, during his 17-year rule of brutal repression, was responsible for the deaths and torture of thousands of his people.

Because of his father's connections, Mario feared he would be killed if he returned to his homeland.

An immigrant himself and father of five, Italian-born Joe, who at the time owned a popular pizzeria in Garden Place, says he immediately empathised with the young man.

"He was 22 but had the maturity of a 15-year-old - he was taught to stay quiet, don't ask questions, and don't look the wrong people in the eye."

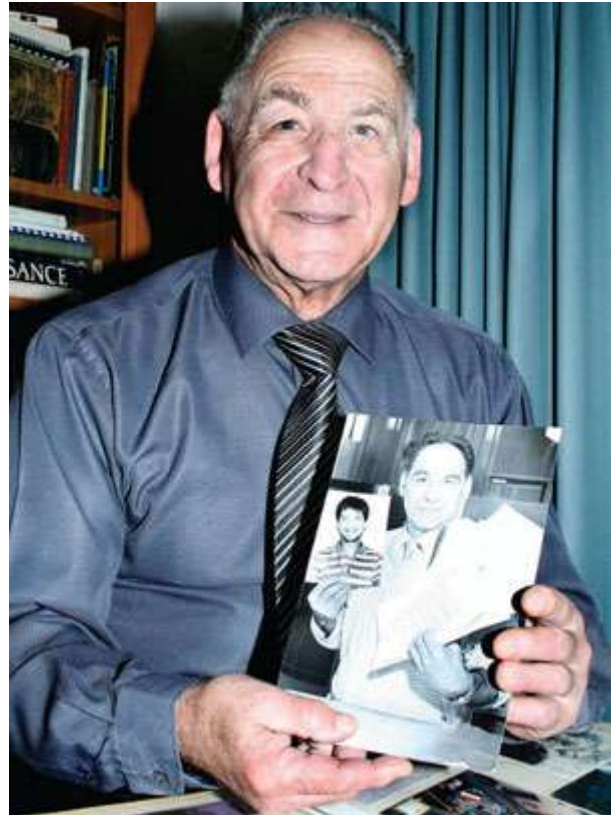
Although Mario's relationship with his daughter had ended ("You know what young people are like, they think they are in love but then reality sets in") Joe launched an appeal to help Mario to stay on after his tourist visa expired.

He also offered him accommodation and a job in his pizzeria. He says the young man had become like a son to him.

When the application for permanent residency was declined, Joe was distraught but also increasingly concerned for Mario's safety. When he approached the Immigration Department he was told they were aware of Mario's father's connections and that there had been allegations from Chileans in New Zealand that Mario was a "pro-Pinochet spy" and in New Zealand to create a "rat-hole" for his father to escape.

Joe says a member of the Chilean community also approached Mario and told him his father "had blood on his hands".

But while the Immigration Department acknowledged Mario faced an uncertain future at home - his family



NOW: Joe di Maio today with a photo of him and Mario Saez, the young Chilean man he took under his wing.

had been the target of car bombs and death threats - they said he "did not deserve special consideration".

Joe refused to give up the fight. A month before Mario's visa expired, he approached then Hamilton East MP Bill Dillon, who made further submissions on his application for permanent residency. A media campaign also swung into action. On July 13, 1987, Mario and Joe appeared on the front page of the Waikato Times - arms around each other, wearing matching bow ties.

Hamiltonians rallied behind the cause. Hamilton Girls' High students started a petition and Mario even received a marriage proposal, which, Joe says, he politely declined. "Marriage was sacred to him."

Then came a lifeline from an unlikely source. Joe approached former Immigration Minister Aussie Malcolm for advice and he says his suggestion was simply to "make Mario disappear" until an anticipated immigration amnesty was introduced later in the year.

Joe believes Mario's case had become an embarrassment for the Government which was reviewing the Immigration Act at the time. Overstayers were a "hot" political topic at the time, he says.

Malcolm, now an immigration consultant in Auckland, confirms he told Joe an "amnesty" was in the pipeline, which would provide Mario with another chance and gaining residency. He also said Mario's case was more complicated than many people believed due to the seriousness of his father's alleged actions.



THEN: The story of Joe di Maio and Mario Saez, as told in the Waikato Times of the day.

Mario went underground in Queenstown, where he was looked after by Joe's friends. The threats to his safety continued while he was in hiding. Joe says a member of the Chilean community came in to pizzeria and told him "the termination of the (Saez) bloodline was their only option".

When the amnesty was offered to overstayers, Mario returned to Hamilton and applied for residency, which was granted. The following year, General Pinochet was toppled. He died last year, aged 91, with 300 charges still pending.

Mario remained in Hamilton for several years, studying at Waikato University and working at Joe's pizzeria. He later married (the di Maios attended the wedding) and moved to Auckland, where he was believed to be teaching Spanish.

That was the last Joe heard from him.

Joe, now a Hamilton city councillor, says Mario, who would now be 42, has not attempted to contact him in over a decade and he has not tried to track him down.

But he remains optimistic they will reunite. "He is still my son."