Weaving a Web dream

BY JOEL SCHEDTMAN

MANNIX MARTINEZ popped out of his chair and scrambled from behind the counter to greet a pair of customers who walked into his Internet café at 2 p.m. on a recent weekday.

After a brief chat, Martinez sat the man and his girlfriend down at one of the five computers in the storefront shop — a high-tech outpost that opened last July on a block in Morrisania dotted with abandoned tenements and fried chicken shops.

They were the first customers of the day to enter the FLMax Cyber Café, at 904 Prospect Ave., just below E. 162nd St. Four more would walk in that day, bringing Martinez a take of less than $20.

There was no action that day, however, at the four plasma screen-equipped gaming consoles.

Despite the odds, Martinez is taking a giant gamble that even poor and working-class neighborhoods in the Bronx need the services of an Internet café.

"We took a giant leap into this," said Martinez, 37. "It's a huge risk. Nobody is doing anything like this around here, and we put our whole stake in it."

But after seven months, the idea of a Morrisania cyber café has not quite caught on. On an average day, Martinez might bring in anywhere from $7 to $120. Some days, no one visits at all. That makes it hard to meet expenses like the $3,500 monthly rent.

But Martinez has struggled with uncertainty before. The café is not a first career, or even a second.

For nearly 10 years, he worked as a cablevision technician, a well-paying job, until a brain tumor that caused dizzy spells forced him to resign. He's still under doctors' care for the condition.

A greater tragedy made him reconsider his next short-lived career as a gypsy cab driver. Another driver was killed for a meager night's earnings.

After that, his family convinced him he should finally reach for his eight-year dream and open the cyber café.

They even helped him finance it.

So far, the longshot hasn't quite paid off, and Martinez faces the stress of constant preparation for customers who often don't show up.

"This is the American dream," he said. "But man, it's a stressful dream."

VITAL STATS

FAVORITE AREA: Ferry Point Park. "I used to go with my sons to fly remote control airplanes there."

FAVORITE GAME: Call of Duty 4

LOW-BUDGET BUSINESS STRATEGY: "Getting my business put up on all the social networking sites, like MySpace, Facebook and his."

ROLE MODEL: "My mother. When I was young, she ran these businesses and it really gave my sister and me inspiration to try this."

Mannix Martinez's FLMax Cyber Café has typical Internet terminals, as well as gaming consoles.

Photo by Enid Alvarez

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