

AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL J. TAFOYA

An Oral History Conducted by Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2018

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The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) Grant. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

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PREFACE

Daniel J. Tafoya is an undaunted soul. He attributes much of his success to the inspiration of his loving parents, Rose and Alphonso, from whom he learned to overcome the obstacles of poverty, dyslexia, and ADHD. He shares their stories of hardships and their personal belief that each of their four children could become successful.

In 1968, Tafoya was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where the family identified as *Spanish* rather than Mexican. When he became enamored with the Air Force, his father tried to dissuade him from enlisting; nevertheless, he did. His time in the Air Force proved fortuitous. He traveled the world and received recognitions. In 1987, Las Vegas and Nellis Air Force Base became home and also where a chance encounter with Gen. Henry Getchell would lead him to attend college and to earn multiple degrees.

In 1998, after a decade in the Air Force he retired and began his civil life career path primarily in the field in of education. He played a role in the beginning of Nevada State College and served as a lobbyist and director of strategic planning. After six years, joined Clark County School District and was promoted to director of charter schools. He also has been integral to the Latin Chamber of Commerce board.

Dan and his wife Bonnie have been married since 1990 and have two children, Daniel Tafoya Jr. and Sara Tafoya.

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December 12, 2018
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez

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Today is December 12th, 2018. My name is Laurents Banuelos-Benitez and I am in the Oral History Research Center. I am joined by...

Maribel Estrada-Cameron.

And Barbara Tabach.

Today we are interviewing Dan Tafoya.

Dan, can you go ahead and spell out your name for me?

Yes. D-A-N-I-E-L; J; Tafoya, T-A-F-O-Y-A.

Thank you. I'd like to start right at the beginning. Could you tell me where you were born?

I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

What was Albuquerque like when you were growing up?

Albuquerque was a small lazy city in the heart of the Southwest. Half the population lives in Bernalillo County, which is mainly Albuquerque. It's a very desolate state surrounded by vast expanses of mainly Indian reservation. It is picturesque as captured by Georgia O'Keeffe.

It's beautiful.

What did your parents do?

My dad had many jobs, but the one he was at the longest and retired from was the Albuquerque Public Schools where he served as a head custodian in a school. That's what he did. If I go off on a tangent, then just pull me back where we need to go. Because a lot of times when you do these histories, it's very easy to say, well, your dad was a custodian and he retired from being a custodian and life went on from there for him, but the stories obviously are much more complex than that.

My dad was a hero in my opinion. He spent fourteen years in the federal penitentiary. He was at McNeil Island in Washington State where he was incarcerated with the likes of Charles

Manson prior to Helter Skelter, people from a lot of the major Mafia groups from the L.A. and Kansas City mob, New York. He was kind of a *made guy* within the prison system. But while he was in there, he transformed into a gangster, into this much different human being. He has an extremely interesting story, but my story can't be told without his story being told because it's one of those stories that creates itself that you can't write better fiction, and so I verified a lot of the information.

He grew up with ten siblings. People knew everything about you back then, much more than they do now, minus Facebook.

May I ask, to put him in geographic context, did he grow up in Albuquerque himself?

Yes, he did. He grew up in Albuquerque. He ran the streets of Albuquerque, got involved with the wrong people and got in a lot of trouble, obviously. When he got sentenced was the saddest day of my grandfather's life. My dad had said, "It was the saddest day of my dad's life," because he had never seen my grandfather cry, who was a very tough, tough individual himself. The federal prosecutor said, "Well, if you're willing to name names, we'll take it easy on you." He said, "I'll tell you what..."—and excuse the French for the ladies in the room—he told the federal prosecutor and the judge, "I will piss on your grave and your grave before I give up any names." The gavel fell and the judge said, "Good, we'll see you in twenty-five years." He was sentenced to prison for twenty-five years and he ended up in McNeil Island, which was an old stone prison from the frontier days where they would keep prisoners. It goes all the way back before the 1900s. It was recently closed. But it is in picturesque Washington surrounded by apple orchards and stuff.

In prison he was a shot caller. He learned how to oil paint and he's a local artisan—he's passed away now—he's a local artisan in Albuquerque and had some really beautiful oil paints.

They were all requesting him; he had paintings in churches and stuff. He learned how to oil paint in prison. To supplement his income as a custodian, he would sell oil paintings. He would do a lot of Southwest-type Indian scenes. He also learned how to build cabinets. He was a very proficient cabinetmaker and often, on the weekends or after his daytime job, he would go and build cabinets. He taught my brother and I how to build cabinets. I painted a little bit, not as good as he. He paints in oils. I have several of his paintings around my house.

But in prison he went to go kill somebody. He didn't have to do that. He could have other people do that for him. He went to the cell. He had been in twelve years now, behind bars. He had his weapon and he went into the cell to kill this other individual because he just didn't like him. My father will tell you, "I don't know why I didn't like him. I just wanted to see him dead and I was going to take care of that myself."

He went up there and the brother prisoner said, "I know why you're here to kill me and I'm ready to go. I've already made peace with everything I need to make peace with." He says, "But before you do that will you pray the Rosary with me?"

My dad fell to his knees and cracked his kneecap because he fell down so hard. The spirit, my dad will tell you, just came upon him and my dad ran out of the cell, dropped his weapon and was just rambling. He comes back so vivid. He says, "I remember just praying and babbling and said, 'If you release me from these walls, I will not come back.'"

Within six months he was brought up on a special parole and he was paroled from the federal penitentiary. They give you five bucks and a gray suit. Everybody gets the same gray suit. I don't even think they give you a suit or five bucks these days. I think they just give you your stuff back you came with. They said, "Pick a direction except back in here."

So back in the sixties he starts thumbing, hitchhiking, which was very apropos back then.

This little mini bus picks him up, a guy with a little goat tea, a hippie guy, a young guy on his way from Washington down to see his girlfriend somewhere in California. He picks my dad up and they start talking. They're about thirty miles down the road going through Oregon and my dad says, "Hey, tell me about yourself." He hasn't talked to somebody, outside of prison. Back then they didn't have any signs saying "don't pick up prisoners" or anything like this. People were just kind of like that back then. He says to the young guy, "Well, yes, where are your people from?" He says, "Well, my dad and my mom, they live in Albuquerque." My dad is really..."I lived in Albuquerque, too. That's where I grew up. What was your dad's name? Maybe I knew him."

When he said the name of the individual, my dad had a total conniption. Again, just no different from what happened in the prison cell happened right there in that van. The young guy who picked up my dad was the son of the prosecuting attorney that put him away almost thirteen years beforehand. My dad jumps out of the—yes. My dad can't get the door open. The guy thinks that my dad's on a bad acid trip or something. He's trying to get the door open. My dad finally falls out while the car is moving. The guy thankfully was coming to a stop. The guy backs up the van, throws my dad's duffle bag out. My dad says, "I don't even remember how I got back to Los Angeles."

He dealt with alcoholism and drug abuse. You don't come out of prison a shiny new penny. He ended up meeting my mom and adopting me. My father had abandoned us six weeks after I was born. He threw me against the wall, hurting me as a six-week-old baby, and we never heard or saw from him again.

My mom meets my dad who had just got out of prison and they start to make a life for themselves. Growing up poor in New Mexico, we didn't know we were poor because everybody

else around us was kind of in the same situation. We were like everybody is okay. My father always provided the things that he promised. He never got in trouble again except six months before he died, he got a speeding ticket on the freeway. He swears to me he wasn't speeding, and knowing his car he probably wasn't because it didn't go that fast. If he was, I would have been pretty impressed. He raised four of us. He raised my brother and my brother graduated from college and retired from the United States Air Force. My sister is a special education teacher, has her master's degree, and is married to a superintendent there in Colorado. My other sister, she got her business certificate. Every time we go to her house at Thanksgiving, we always look at each other and our student loans and wonder how this young lady created a construction business. She doesn't have a garage. She has a coach house where it has seven cars; it overlooks Albuquerque and it's absolutely glorious. Unfortunately, right now she is going through a divorce, but she has been married thirty years. All of my dad's kids were very successful.

You just can't tell your story without giving credit to the people that helped you. My dad taught me how to play ball. He taught me how to ride a bike. He taught me how to paint. He taught me how to do many things.

But out of this story of prison and the gangster lifestyle comes this individual who gets shunned by his family because he is an ex-con. Today they're a little different with ex-cons. Back then they were like a pariah. The family wouldn't invite him to a lot of things. My dad was not a very tall guy. He was like five foot six. He was very Italian-looking. When we were kids, we never understood why people treated him the way they did and they treated him with a lot of respect, kind of like you'd see in the movies. They'd be very careful what they said to him no matter how big this guy was.

My uncle who wanted to be like my dad, he got sent to prison for drugs for a year and he

said it was the worst year of his life because it was the most boring life because my dad made a call however they do that from Washington prison to the New Mexico prison and said, "No one touches the kid." My uncle said, "I was basically in solitary confinement. No one would sell me anything. No one would give me a smoke. No one would give me a book to read. They would just not touch me. In the year that I spent in there, I left and it was just..." Prison was horrible for him because he wanted to be like my dad and it ended up that he couldn't do anything there because my dad wouldn't allow anything to happen to him. He was very thankful for that and they were very close after that.

He [my dad] got out and he had several jobs. He overcame alcoholism and that impeded some of his jobs, but finally later on in his life he was able to spend over twenty years working with kids and he absolutely loved it. He is the epitome, in my opinion, of diversity. To come out of prison after that long and go through all of this and be married thirty years and put all your kids through school is pretty darn incredible. That's pretty darn incredible. You don't realize that until after you're an adult and you realize how hard life is that you've got to pay bills and you've got to go to school and you've got to do this stuff. Then you look at somebody like him and think, here is a guy who came out of prison with zero and, yet, built something that is a legacy. I am a product of that. But whatever happened back in 1950 whatever where he got sent to prison, this journey has brought him across the way there, his legacy, at the Boyd Law School where my son received a full ride to be an attorney. But it just didn't happen, because my son is a bright individual or hard working. It happened because a prisoner made some right choices.

What was your dad's ethnic background? Where were the roots? The grandparents, where were they from?

Well, you asked, so I'm going to tell you. To my Latino friends here, don't be offended—*Spain*.

If you live in Albuquerque, the Duke City, the Conquistador City, you consider yourself Spanish. If you said you were Mexican, you would get your knuckles wrapped. You were from King Carlos; you were from "the blood of the crown," as they would say. A lot of us, we call ourselves Spaniards; you call yourself Spanish. When you eat food, you don't eat Mexican food, you eat Spanish food, although it is exactly the same. But it's from Spain and part of Italy and part of Sicily, and so there is this trail of things—and part Native American. The problem with living in New Mexico with the conquistadors—the house I grew up in is three hundred and eight years old. It was an adobe. It's a restaurant now. It's called Las Mañanitas on Rio Grande Boulevard. When I grew up it was a house and it's made of adobes and adobes are like this thick and the roof is this thick. They're very warm New Mexico houses. You can smell the pinion burning in the fireplace. It's magical. It's absolutely magical.

Going back, I took my kids because I wanted them to see my history. I said, "Hey, let's go in there." We're ducking down into these rooms because the Spaniards are not very tall people. The lady was giving a tour and she said, "Do you see the wood? It's all uneven and the floors are uneven." I go, "Yes." She goes, "That's because three hundred years ago those were cut by hand. There was no electricity."

There's partial Native American because the Spaniards intermixed with it, but the Spaniards would never admit doing that. They'd take slaves, in a sense, because Sara Tafoya is a very famous black potter; she's not black, the pottery is black and she's a very famous Navajo potter. A lot of the conquistadors would take slaves, take wives or whatever it is, and it became intermingled. But don't dare say you were an Indian either because you'd get your knuckles wrapped for that unless you can get a piece of that casino and then all the sudden you might as well be Geronimo. New Mexico is a very funny place like that.

The ethnicity is we have been there as a people for hundreds of years because it was a Spanish colony. New Mexico is the only state that its borders are drawn around cultural aspects of Spain. It's the only state to have its constitution originally written in both Spanish and English. New Mexico is called the Land of Enchantment. If you ever go there and spend enough time there, you'll know why. It's a very haunted land. It's a very beautiful land. A lot of ghosts. And there is and I'm not really a big ghost believer. But if you go there and you want to feel the vibe, you'll find it.

How about your mother, was she from New Mexico as well?

My mom came from Ojo Caliente, which is famous now for its hot mineral springs and people go up there. Again, they were miners; her family were miners. Ojo Caliente is the town, but she came from La Madera, which is the woods, because they used to cut *vigas* [beams] for the homes and for the railroad tracks. We called my mom's side of the family the nuclear side of the family. La Madera dried up because once the train comes through and you build the track, you kind of don't need to do a lot with it after that and there's only so much wood you can cut. So the next industry became mining, silver mining, whatever mining they could do.

My grandfather, Jacob Brito, he worked at the Manhattan Project during the day of building the bomb. He was a construction worker. Everybody moved from La Madera to find work. They moved to Los Alamos where Los Alamos Labs are. He was a construction worker.

I finally got a picture of my grandmother. It was on her wall. I told her, "That's a beautiful picture of you. You're a young lady. You look very dashing." The way that people dressed in the forties with that hair and the men always had suits on and were clean-shaved. Everybody looked good thing.

Very dapper, yes.

Everybody was dapper. Women looked beautiful. I don't know what it was. Today you take a picture and people look real. But I said, "That's a nice picture of you." She said, "Yes, that's me on the hill in Los Alamos at the Manhattan Project as a seamstress. I did a lot of seamstress stuff." I said, "You probably worked on Oppenheimer and stuff like that." I go, "Sure, that's really cool." She said, "Well, I was a seamstress and a housewife."

When the Los Alamos Labs started to settle down and shut down, my family moved on to western New Mexico and they worked for Kerr-McGee in the uranium mines in Grants—actually Milan, New Mexico, which is right next door to Grants. It's beautiful out there. It's absolutely gorgeous. Volcanoes in these vast areas. I remember going fishing out there. But they were all uranium miners and uranium mines are pretty darn dangerous.

When the uranium mines dried up because you have the non-nuclear proliferation, you have nuclear weapons stopping being built, which is a good thing, you have not wanting to build nuclear power plants in America, there's not a big need for uranium. So that dried up and they all ended up at the test site here in Nevada. They were alpine miners and they dug the holes where they would put the nuclear weapons and they would explode them underground. The last one that retired a few years back now, he worked on the Yucca Mountain project. All the way from Manhattan to Yucca Mountain, my family has roots in that industry and being part of that. That's my mom's side.

All throughout this there was poverty, there was alcoholism and there were abuses of whatever, things that happened that people don't like to talk about. My family definitely doesn't like to talk about it. I'm the one who talks about it. I was like, "Well, if it happened, it happened." They're like, "But we don't like it. Our lives are perfect." I said, "Yes, sure, you keep believing that."

My mom, she's a pretty amazing woman, too. She stayed with my dad all those years and they worked through life with their four kids. I admire her as well because she is a small business owner. I think she's seventy this year. She is never quite accurate on that date, but that's okay. But she still goes to work every day. She has her own business cleaning houses. My mom and dad, they've never done—especially my mom—never did anything small. If my mom was going to be a maid, she was going to be a maid for very rich people. She was going to clean the houses of doctors and attorneys and stuff. She just didn't go pick a house. She's very smart like that and she loves what she does and she makes friends with these people.

Growing up she worked at the Four Seasons hotel in Albuquerque, which at that time was probably one of the better hotels in Albuquerque. She would always go extra and do something extra in the room for somebody in making it clean or leaving a note or something like that to say, I hope you enjoyed your stay, or whatever. I found out she did this because she wanted tips because she wanted to be able to help feed her family.

She ran into these people that were visiting for a little while and they happened to be oil barons and they typically didn't stay in places like this. They usually stayed in super high-end places. The Four Seasons for Albuquerque was pretty high-end, so I guess that's probably why they may have stayed there. It had more than two stories. They liked her and they said, "We're moving from Texas to Albuquerque because we like it here. We like horses and our son moved here. How would you like to come work for us?"

Growing up I got to grow up in a mansion although we still had our trailer on the west side where we lived in the trailer park. The trailer park wasn't exactly what you'd think. Each trailer had an acre of land and it had trees. It was a really fun place to grow up and it was nice. But being at the mansion with them—and the place was big enough, it had its own chapel, its

own gym, and they liked me. I used to go rake the leaves on the circular driveway. I remember Ms. Cobb coming to me and saying, "Danny." And she'd have her old rich friends with her. She'd say, "Watch, I'm going to make him smile." She said, "This is for you." She'd give me a crisp hundred-dollar bill for raking the leaves and that's a lot of money back in the seventies. These people treated us very, very well.

When my parents started to get money from these people and they were like, "Hey, we want to buy your home; we want to do this," they weren't prepared for that. You just can't pluck anybody out of a lifestyle and stick them somewhere and try to attempt to make them into something that they're not. They were going through a time where they were going to get separated and divorced. Their love was so much that they said, "We'll leave the money behind and go back to being the people we were." That's how my dad ended up at the school district because he was not so much their butler as much as their handyman.

But it was great. We were eating high on the hog. This is '78, so you guys are too young to appreciate this. But they had given my mom a new Z/28 Camaro, which was pretty cool, and bought my dad a nice truck. Their daughter, I think her name was Christy. They would rotate her room out of all the toys once a month. They'd have some professional shopper come in. That's the kind of money they had. They'd say, "Okay, good. Those toys are gone and here are the new latest and greatest things." We'd be the benefactors of those things. For the three years we were there, we lived like rich people without actually being rich people, which was pretty darn cool.

I was telling somebody, a friend of mine from Sweden about a Christmas tree. We were talking about the holidays. I said, "Yes, I remember Christmas with the Cobbs." They would have pheasants and doves stuffed, real ones, as Christmas tree decorations and they all came from France. I know she's all like, poor doves. They would get animals and stuff like that. It was

just amazing. It was just magical growing up. It was pretty darn amazing growing up for my brothers and sisters to see all these great things that happened.

It's easy to say, yes, I do this now, but there's such a long story and that's the importance of oral histories is capturing all of that stuff. Growing up in New Mexico was magical. It was one of those things I regret my kids not being able to grow up like that. Riding bikes on the weekend was as much freedom as a person could possibly get, to ride bikes with your friends and go along the ditch banks of the Rio Grande and go fishing and hunting bullfrogs and shooting BB guns and not caring that you were going to get abducted and putting pennies on the railroad track. My dad would say, "You can go anywhere you want in town. Just don't let me find out you got killed by a train because I don't want to be known as the dad who had an idiot son who got hit by a huge train."

You could hear the whistle blowing and you'd hear that train and you'd stand on the tracks when you'd hear that rumbling and see how quick you could jump off the tracks before you got scared. Believe me, the train was about three miles away when we jumped off the track, so we weren't like the train was right there.

Running into your neighbor's house and his mom giving you tortillas with *mantequilla*, fresh baked tortillas or *biscochitos*, and eating red and green chile in New Mexico, just the four seasons of knowing that chill is in the air and you smell the pinion wood burning and you hear the geese flying south for the winter, and the leaves changing colors. There is a richness about it without having money, the things that money can't buy.

Can you tell me about your schooling?

Myself, school was miserable for me. I had ADHD and dyslexia and during the seventies they didn't know what that was. That's a pretty recent thing that they've discovered. But I always

knew I was really smart. I always could see things and I loved science and I loved all these things. It's like having a cool car without an engine. No matter how hard you try, you are always the kid—and I remember them putting dunce hats on me, real dunce hats. Yes, that's New Mexico. We're fifty years behind everyone else.

Wow.

They would sit you in the corner because you failed the spelling test. *Oh, you're stupid; let's put him in the corner.* They would call you retarded or whatever. You'd have to face in the corner or back then you would get paddled. They could hit you, corporal punishment. I remember I went to Daniel Fernandez Elementary School. I remember Ms. Eragon, for the record, God rest her soul. I remember getting a C. I'm dyslexic. I can't spell. I still can't spell. I remember they had these paddles with holes drilled in them so they were faster when they hit you and you could hear this *whoosh* coming at you. They'd say, "Grab your ankles." And you'd have to grab your ankles. If you didn't do it there, they'd take you to the principal and they would do it there. That was a state law. That was legal to do that. If you were a kid with dyslexia or any learning disability, they just figured that they'd beat it into you and you'd eventually get it.

Until I got to the eleventh grade, I had never really seen any success outside of ROTC or band. All my grades were dismal at best. I never really got too many F's, but a lot of D's, because I really tried hard, and C was like getting an A to me. I didn't mean to anybody to feel sorry for me because I was extremely inventive; I mean, I almost used that as a medal of valor of making it to where I did. Schooling was really tough on me and it was really hard because I wanted to be good at school. That's the problem. When you don't want to be good at school, then it's pretty easy. But when you want to be good at something and you can't, it's like wanting to pitch a baseball, but you don't have arms.

In the eleventh grade, Ms. Bokaford, my English teacher, she actually read my paper and she said, "I'm taking a class at the University of New Mexico for my master's degree. And do you know that you have something called dyslexia?" She's explaining to me the way I was interpreting things and that kind of turned a light on. She really didn't help me much after that. I mean, she tried. In New Mexico, twelfth grade, once you had your credits, you only really had to take one class in the twelfth grade, and if you went to work that sufficed for the rest of them.

So I went to work for the grocery store and I did well there. Then I went to UNM, the technical part of it, to go learn how to be an air-conditioning guy and I got a job at an air-conditioning place. Now, in New Mexico there's a lot of mobile homes. Part of that is most of the plumbing is underneath those mobile homes. You can imagine a mobile home in the desert that's contained with snakes and spiders and scorpions and all the other great things that live underneath a mobile home. It was cold in the winter and hot in the summer because in the summer you had to fix the air conditioners, which were on tin roofs. Just image being out here on a tin roof trying to fix an air conditioner, it's pretty darn hot.

I wanted to join the Air Force, but I wasn't smart enough, at least that's what people had told me. I had always told myself, I'm smart enough to do anything I wanted to do. I joined the Air Force. I went to go take the test and I studied for it for six months. Actually, I joined the Marine Corps and then a friend of mine was coming out of the Air Force office and he said, "Dude, you've got to see this. They have a record that plays movies." I'm like, *a record that plays movies? This guy is crazy.* He goes, "No, I'm not kidding. It's silver and they put it in this box and it plays a movie." I'm like, *this guy is nuts. I've got to go see it.* He says, "You've got to see it."

I went in there and I looked at the thing and I was like, "Wow, that's a record that plays

movie." He says, "No, we know it now as a laser disk." I look at this thing and I'm seeing the United States Air Force Thunderbirds and I'm seeing these guys and I had seen them perform before. I was like, *man, I'd like to do that, but there's no way. These guys are super smart.* To get in there you've got to be the A-student and that wasn't me. Marines was like...

And my dad was really supportive of the Marines because I had asked my dad, "Can I go to the University of New Mexico and become a regular student?" We were eating dinner. The way the culture is back then, and not too much different these days, we're eating dinner and I said, "Dad, I want to go to the University of New Mexico." He says, "That's great, *Mijo*. That's good. I know a guy that can get you on the grounds crew there." I said, "No, no, no, I don't want to work at the University of New Mexico. I want to attend as a student." And he said, "*Ah, Mijo, este aqui, esta loco.*" He's like, "You're ungrateful. You're crazy. *Un plato más*, isn't what we provided for you enough?" That's the machismo thing coming out of my dad, saying, "You want to be *como los gringos*, you want to be like the white guys. That's your problem and it's always been your problem; you want to be like somebody else that you're not. This is who we are." He didn't support me in going to the University of New Mexico, which is probably a good thing, but it didn't feel good at the time.

I had to make a decision. I said, "I'm going to go to the Marine Corps." He supported the Marine Corps because that's tough. He was in the Air Force in the Korean War prior to going to prison.

I went and took the test for the Air Force and I studied pretty hard for it knowing that I had the dyslexia thing. It helped me to slow down to kind of get over this and a friend kind of helped me. I got in and I got the call that said, "Yes, you passed. You're in." I was at Blake's Lotaburger. We were having lunch with my boss, the truck that we were working on. I remember

going to the phone booth. No cell phones, guys. I go into the phone booth. It was twenty-five cents at the time, so I had twenty-five cents and I put it in and called the recruiter. I said, "Is Sergeant So-and-so in? This is So-and-so calling." He said, "Yes, I was getting ready to call your house. I'm glad you called me. Congratulations, you're in the United States Air Force." And I didn't know what to say because I was going to go back in and eat a hamburger with my boss. If you're ever in New Mexico, eat at Blake's Lotaburger—it's phenomenal. They're all over the place there.—He says, "What's the matter with you?" Because he had been in the army. I said, "I just found out I'm going in the Air Force and I'm leaving in January." This was October. He just looked at me and he goes, "It's about damn time you smartened up." He was very proud of the fact. He told me, "You're the best worker I've ever had. You're smart. You figure all these things out. I knew that this was not the rest of your life."

I had three bucks in my pocket when I left to the Air Force. I said, "As long as I always have three bucks in my pocket, at least I broke even, at least I didn't lose." I literally only had three bucks in my pocket.

I was hanging out with the wrong people, which is very easy to do in New Mexico, God bless them. One of my best friends growing up was one of the only black people within many miles and his name was Edward Archie, I remember, from Louisiana. I was always over at his house. His parents were devout Baptists. They were from Louisiana and they were very proud of their heritage. He would pick me up every day from school in my senior year and a half my junior year, and I never asked him. I'd have to walk to work, which was about three miles away. So, you walk and you get there. It's nice in New Mexico. You walk along the shortcuts and the ditch banks and stuff and along the farms and whatnot. Every day for a year and a half, this guy was there every day waiting to pick me up and I never asked him. I never asked him why he

picked me up either. I think he was kind of a dreamer like me, dreaming that life is bigger than this.

One day when I was getting ready to graduate, I said, "So what are you going to do?" I kind of felt bad because his life kind of revolved around picking me up every day, which was kind of weird. But it was a free ride, right? We really didn't have a bus. He says, "You know what, Dan? I don't know if I'll ever see you again. I'm leaving. I am going to go to an Indian reservation, I'm going to marry a girl, and I'm never leaving again." I thought, *all right, you're a black guy in New Mexico and you're going to go...He's a real black guy. He's a big guy. He's not kind of black, he is black.*

Edward Archie left, found a girl on the Zuni Indian reservation and never left and was never heard from again other than the fact that my wife saw his son on Facebook kind of giving an update about their family in general and about him, but I never saw him again. I always wondered if I ever passed through New Mexico if I stopped in the reservation...Like he'd really be that hard to find. *Where is the only black guy in town? Oh, that guy; that's Edward.*

But I joined the Air Force and I did okay. My dyslexia still haunted me. My learning disability still haunted me. My ADHD still haunted me. I never took medication for it. Now when you have ADHD and it's focused, now you're an overachiever versus being what they would call a retard. That was their word, not mine, by the way, so nobody gets offended.

I get there and I make it through tech school. I do okay. I make it through basic training. I do okay. We all have our daily adventures dealing with people and I made it okay. Then I get to Nellis Air Force Base and my dad's legacy shows up again.

Two major events happened when I get here in 1987. One, I was lost on Nellis Air Force Base; I was trying to find an appointment where I was supposed to be. It's a big place, it's a new

place, and I'm not finding the building. This squad car pulls up to me. It's a colonel's car. This cornel gets out of the car and he says, "Young man, are you lost?" I go, "Well, yes, sir, I'm trying to find this appointment." He goes, "Good, get in the car." I knew what part of the base it was and he was driving the opposite direction. I have one stripe on my sleeve and I'm lucky I'm even here. I'm nervous as heck. He starts talking to me. And I said, "Sir, I think the building is back that way that I need to go to." He's totally ignoring me. He said, "Son, you ever think of going to school?" I was like, "No, sir. I'm lucky to be here." I kind of explained to him I wasn't exactly the most stellar student. He goes, "Well, who cares about that? Have you ever thought about going to school?" I said, "Well, it would be nice, but I just want to focus on my career." I'm trying to be nice.

He's going towards the Education Building and he takes me to the Education Building. He takes me in and there's a lieutenant behind the desk. He's a full bird. He says, "This is Airman Tafoya and I'm going to pay for his first two classes of college. If he doesn't pass, as long as he tries, I don't care. Just send it to this account over here and it will be taken care of."

I took my two first courses with CSN. I got a B. Well, I had never gotten a B in anything legitimately, unless somebody felt bad for me and said, "I'll give him a B." I got a B in psychology and I got a B in history. I said, "Wow, maybe I can do this." I started taking one class at a time and then another class and then another class.

But we're going to switch scenes real quick here. The second significant event was around the same time.

Before we switch, do you want to mention the name of the person who—

Yes. General Henry Getchell. He was the Stealth pilot that led the attack on Suddam Hussein during the first war in Iraq. He was a fighter pilot and wing commander at the time I was there. I

never caught up with General Getchell again, so I don't know if he ever figured what his ride did or what his investment was.

That same time period my dad's legacy comes back because I work in a fighter squadron on F-16s, at that time a combat squadron. I hadn't passed my full requirements yet to work on the planes. You couldn't go with them to travel until you were done with that. They were going to Puerto Rico, which would have been really cool, and then they were going to go to Ramstein, Germany after that and then come back, and I so wanted to go, but you had to pass your requirements first, which I was working on.

I'm sitting there and there's nothing to do. I mean, literally nothing to do. We have a water fountain there that is nasty. It's got all the calcium and whatever it is. I'm like, yes, there's so many jacks and stuff, I'm going to go out there and start polishing the water fountain. We didn't have bottled water back then. You drank out of the fountain or you go get a glass of water from the tap. Probably on Nellis Air Force not the best idea.

Chief Charlie Brown—the guy's real name, Charlie Brown—is the highest-ranking enlisted guy you can be. He's walking by while I'm scrubbing this thing, polishing it up. No one's asked me to do any of this. It's just that there's nothing else to do but sit there and stare out at the desert. He comes by and he's drinking his coffee and he stops. He does one of these things where he stops and kind of spits his coffee out and he turns back around. He backs up and he says, "Who told you to do that?"

He wasn't exactly the nicest guy. I didn't really know him, but just from seeing him talk to people. Big, tall, white gentleman, bald, turns red real easy. He's kind of got like a gauge on him; you see when he's mad. The redder he turns, you know he's not too happy. I said, "Sir, nobody's told me to do this. It was dirty and I just figured that I'm sitting around and I might as

well make myself productive." He says, "Come with me." I'm like, oh, great, now I've got in trouble. I was just cleaning the water fountain.

But my dad, when I worked with him in the summers as a custodian, he was bringing up my brothers and I in the summers to go help him at the school. One of the things we had to do was scrape gum and wash water fountains and I had gotten pretty good at it.

He pulls me into my boss' office, which at that time in offices you could smoke. You would have to cut through the smoke. You can sit here and have three cigarettes going, and if you had your buddies in, they'd all be smoking. The guy's name was Al "The Hit Man" Hanishiro and he was from Hawaii. He was one of the most relaxed people you'd ever want to meet. I never figured out why they called him "The Hit Man." I never asked him.

Chief Brown comes in, Charlie Brown comes in and he says, "Hit Man, is this your guy?" And he said, "Yes." And he goes, "What did he screw up?" He goes, "Who told him to clean the water fountain?" He goes, "I don't know. Nobody, I guess." He goes, "Good. This is Nellis Air Force Base Maintenance Professional of the Year." Which is one of the highest honors you can get. When you're an aircraft maintainer, Maintenance Professional of the Year means that you're Sierra Hotel, as the Air Force would say, shit hot. There's a lot of people that deserve that that at that time were actually working on airplanes.

I cleaned a water fountain because my dad was a custodian and taught me how to clean water fountains because back then that's what we did. We worked construction and we were custodians or cooks or whatever we did. Here is my dad paying the return on investment of making good choices of not coming out and saying, "I was a gangster"—and a lot of my uncles were like this—"I was a gangster and you're my son and you're going to be one, too." And that's the way it goes especially in New Mexico because it was about machismo. Are you a bad guy?

Do you have street credibility? Do people respect you? My dad didn't need that and he didn't want that for his kids.

My dad never liked to see us fight. He never wanted to hear about us fighting. He never wanted to hear about us cutting up at school. We feared my dad. I was much taller than my dad and I was afraid of the guy. When I got to basic training, and the drill instructors there are pretty tough people themselves, male and female, I was like, *dude, you can't hurt me nowhere near as much as my dad could threaten to do that*. I was very respectful, but I made it through.

I ended up being Maintenance Professional of the Year for Nellis Air Force Base for that year, which was a huge deal. That's important because getting that award sets your career into motion for everything else that happens because it's on your resume and everybody wants you. I got a lot of great positions there being Airman of the Year for washing a fountain. It's one of those stories that you would never know. For cleaning a water fountain, I get all this glory and fame and for the next thirteen years of my career, some amazing things happened, and we'll talk about those in a second.

But a kid who started with three bucks in his pocket, dyslexic, poor, ADHD, whatever name you could have that was probably me. I almost didn't make it into that situation based on I was hanging out with the wrong people, I told you, some friends of mine and one of them was a very known drug dealer, God rest his soul because he killed himself a few years after I left. A lot of my friends died that stayed there.

We were waiting for some girls outside of a high school basketball game. We're sitting in the car and we all had some beers with us, which you're not supposed to be doing especially if you're underage. The red lights flashed behind us and I'm like, *oh, crap, I screwed up and here goes my career*. The police pull us out of the car. They tell us to empty it out and get against the

car and they search us. In New Mexico if you're in a car with somebody who has drugs, you might as well have the drugs yourself and then you're going to jail, and the Air Force is going to say bye-bye. They get to my friend Robert. I didn't know a time Robert didn't have drugs on him. They search him down and say, "Do you have any drugs on you? What's this in your pocket?" He goes, "This is my grandfather's pocket watch." The guy pulls it out and puts it in the car. He puts it in there and opens it up and looks at the time and closes it back up and he empties out the beer. He goes, "You guys get lost. Don't let me see you again." I was like, *thank you, Jesus*.

I told Robert, "Thank God you didn't have drugs on you." He opens the pocket watch and lifts the face and there is packets of heroin. I was like, *oh my goodness, you're killing me*. New Mexico, like I said, is a very dangerous place. You might say, Dan, as evidenced by what? As evidenced by it having the third highest murder rate per capita outside of New York and Chicago because of all the heroin trafficking that goes up through there. That's why it's still today a very dangerous place.

I said, "Jesus, if you get me out of here, I will"—it sounded like my dad's prayer—"Get me out of this one and I will fly right." I get to the Air Force and I have a phenomenal career, absolutely phenomenal. They retired my number from being Airman of the Quarter. I was Airman of the Quarter nine times for the entire Nevada installation. I was a master instructor on F-22s and F-16s, F-15s and A-10s. I was considered a top gun.

What years were you in the Air Force?

I was in from the beginning of 1987 until 1998.

Could you describe Nellis Air Force Base in those early years? What was it like? Were there a lot of Latinos stationed there?

No, no, no, there wasn't a lot. At that time there was less than point three percent Latinos and

most of them were from Puerto Rico. I don't know if Puerto Rico had a large contingency. I joined the Air Force and I got to basic training and there's no Latinos. There was one guy from Amarillo, Texas, and he was a Tex-Mex guy, but he was also a thief and he got caught for stealing, so that's one Latino down. I didn't know have any Latino friends to hang out with. You get close to people in the military, but you get close to all races. But in the beginning you look for people that look like yourself, maybe they're from the same town, maybe they knew somebody from the town. You want a friend. There was no other brown people there except the Hawaiians. Now, I couldn't even tell you where Hawaii was on a map at that time, but I'm like, they kind of look Latino. They're brown. They said, "Hey, boo, [Hawaiian Pidgin, 49:50]." I said, "What did you say?" And his friend interpreted. He goes, "Are you a white Hawaiian guy?" I said, "No, no, I'm from Albuquerque and I've never been to Hawaii." He said, "All right, boo, you hang with us. You're good." For the next six months I hang out with the Hawaiian guys because there's no other brown people to hang out with. I'm hanging without with them and after a while you begin to very much speak pigeon. "Hey, brother, where you from? You from [Hawaiian Pidgin 50:22] pearl, big time pearl." After a while you start talking like that.

Then this new group of Hawaiians came in six months later and I said, *all right, well, I'm kind of one of them now, so that would be cool.* I'm in the ready room and he says, "Hey, boo, where you from?" I said, "Oh, I'm from Kam." He said, "Oh, you're Kamehameha boy?" I said, "Yes, Kamehameha boy."

My friend Rich Costa walks in and his eyes were this big. He goes, "Boo, what are you doing?" I said, "I'm talking pigeon with these guys. It's working." He goes, "Those are Samoans, brother." I was like, "What's a Samoan?" He goes, "They're tall as they are wide and they love to beat people up." The Samoan guy was kind of over here and he says, "Brother, are you messing

with us or what? You're funny?" I said, "Guys, I'm really from Albuquerque, New Mexico. I've never been to Hawaii a day in my life." Thank god, Rich, who was a really big bodybuilder guy, and some of the other guys jumped in and said, "Oh, you want to get pounded or what?" He says, "No, no, no, he's with us. He's cool."

In the early days of the Air Force, it was much different than it is now and Nellis was much different. You could walk on to Nellis Air Force Base and no one would say anything. But after 9/11 everything changed.

It was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun and I will tell you the adventure was like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. I think that's the closest I can come to telling you that the people you meet and the experiences that you meet. Here's a kid that said he was not smart enough. Still to this day it just angst me that a lot of young people don't join the military or the Air Force because they don't think they're smart enough, because their math scores aren't high enough or because you didn't take calculus. Let me tell you, I worked on F-16s primarily and there was only one math formula you needed and it was already done for you. It's an X-Y scale and it lines up the missiles and the bombs. In an hour I could show you how to do that. That's the only mathematical formula that you needed to know other than how to figure out the tip when you ordered pizzas. How many people never allowed themselves to venture out into that because they were afraid that they weren't smart enough to do it?

I thrived in the Air Force because I had ADHD, hyperactivity disorder, and I was always doing this and I was always outside and I was always washing water fountains or I was part of maintenance crews that would say, "Okay, we have a plane that's broken," and I was on a crew that they would call for by name to come out and fix those things because we were able to be different thinkers and fix things that typically couldn't get fixed that easily. Here I am from

Albuquerque, you know my story now, and I'm sitting with three-star generals and I'm being honored by these people and I am getting to fly in some of the fastest planes in the world and getting to meet people that I thought I would never meet.

I worked with, not for, but with the United States Thunderbirds for a little while there helping them fix their airplanes. I've worked with the Australian Air Force in an exchange program working on F-18s. I was there when the volcano blew up in the Philippines in Mount Pinatubo. I got to do things that I still to this day can't imagine.

I feel bad for my son because I don't tell him too many of these stories because he's got a different path than me and it's very easy for parents to tell stories that will influence their kids in maybe paths that weren't meant for their kids. My son has extreme ADHD as well. It's hereditary. We got him the help that he needed and he graduated from UNLV Honors College. He got a full academic ride here and got a full academic ride to Boyd. He's on a much different trajectory than I did. I hope that if he wants to join the military, he joins as a JAG officer or something like that.

I remember being there crouched down when B-2 bombers were coming in on special missions, and F-117 Stealth fighters and SR-71s, and getting to experience the sci-fi stuff that you can only dream about, and getting to actually work and meet those people. When you go to my office, you see the "I Love Me" wall out there and you see all these awards and stuff that were in boxes for years after I got out.

Still to this day the gravitational pull of the old neighborhood, of the old ways, they're still there. They never come out of you. I go back and I can't have conversations with my friends and my family; they don't want to hear about my adventures, maybe because you weren't supposed to leave Albuquerque. You weren't ever supposed to get out, and if you got out you

were looked upon as you kind of broke the code.

Did you go back? When you were in the Air Force, were you stationed here all that time?

I was stationed here, but I would travel everywhere else. I was stationed in Gunsan, Korea. We went to Yokota, Japan. I went to Guam. I went to Singapore, Australia and Germany. I traveled everywhere out of here, but this was always my home base and this is where I met my wife.

I met my wife. We met in 1988. I say '87; she claims '88.

I trust her. [All laughing]

We met in front of Caesars Palace.

Could you describe Las Vegas? I know you talked a little about Nellis.

It was awesome. It was run by the mob and it was great. You could wear a suit made of hundred-dollar bills and walk anywhere in Las Vegas and no one would touch you when the mob ran it. After the mob left and the Mirage took over, everything changed. Vegas changed and it became much more commercial. But when the Mafia was here, it was Frank and Sammy and Dean and it was sexy and it was glitzy. What was the guy with all the monkeys over at the Stardust? The Lido de Paris and all these shows. It was fun. And it was small; it started at Circus Circus and it ended at the Dunes, if I remember right, and it was desert from there. It was still old Vegas and I got to experience part of old Vegas.

When I first got here, I started dating a cocktail waitress that was way too old for me—my wife didn't know about that one—at the Dunes. Here I was a kid dating a cocktail waitress from the Dunes. That's why I said you can't write better fiction. If I was to read this story, it's like, oh, that never happens to anybody. But I met my wife out in front of Caesars Palace and it was in front of the fountains. She was in her car and I was in my car.

I couldn't afford a car back then. The only people that would rent you a car is a place

called Ugly Duckling Rent-a-Dent. It was a Ford Granada, beige. My wife had a new sexy sports car, a Nissan sports car with the T-tops and all that stuff. I pull up to the thing and she has a license plate that says *Bonikans*. I told my Air Force buddies that I was taking to the airport, "Watch this, guys." I used a pickup line. "Hey, Bonnie, how are you? Remember me from school?" Her and her friend are there and they're looking and going, "I don't think so. When did you graduate?" I said, "I graduated last year with you." My whole relationship started with a lie. She goes, "Pull over." I said, "Who's in the car with you?"

We get to talking and I fall in love with this girl. I'm like, oh, this girl is perfect. She looked like the girl from the "Karate Kid." Now I'm really dating myself. She gives me her phone number and I lose it and I can't find this thing.

Two weeks goes by, because I was taking an English class at UNLV, and I said, "I'll never see this girl again. The possibilities of ever finding this girl again...And she probably thinks that I never called her back, if she even gave me the right phone number." I went to go sell my books back to the bookstore. I always went through my books and they go through your books to make sure there's not pages missing and stuff. The number falls out. I couldn't get home fast enough. I took the bus because I didn't have a car, like I said. From UNLV, the bus from here to Nellis, you might as well have been on a covered wagon.

I went back. You had a roommate in the dorm at the base and you had a phone. It was a dial rotary military phone. I call her up and it's ringing. I said, "Okay, it's ringing, so it's not like the Burger King or she gave me a wrong number." Her mom answers the phone. I said, "I was calling for Bonnie." She goes, "Hold on. Let me see. I think she's outside." I was like, *it was the right number*.

We talked for the next eight hours. And I didn't like talking on the phone. We talked for

the next eight hours on the phone. That was thirty years ago.

What was she doing here in Las Vegas?

Her mom was born here. She was second generation. My daughter is third generation. She had just graduated from high school herself. We're the same age. She was working as a paralegal here in town for a law firm. We never left each other's side the entire time. The entire thirty years we've been best friends. We've been best friends for thirty years. It's not like even being married, it's just we know each other so well. We were just kind of the same people.

She went on to become a pediatric nurse practitioner. She got her paralegal degree, went and got her nursing degree after my son was born. She couldn't stand the sight of blood and she told me, "I want to be a nurse." I said, "Really? You can't even stand the sight of blood. You throw up at the sight of blood. You know that they do have to deal with people that are sick and have blood, right?" This girl is tenacious. She's half-German and half-Scottish or English, one of the two, whichever of the countries that likes to take things over, I told her. It's like every time I build something, she takes it over. It's like, you invaded my country again.

But she's tenacious. She's a bulldog. She attended Rancho High School. She was the first girl in Nevada to let her in a male varsity sport; that's the sport of soccer, because they didn't have female soccer. She loved soccer and wanted to play and she was so tenacious that she would not quit trying out on the team and she continued to do that. Just pretty amazing. She's very tenacious.

What was the military policy like as far as the airmen to go from Nellis to the Strip? Were there any rules or guidelines?

Don't do anything stupid. That was about it. If you were twenty-one, yes, just don't break any laws, don't write a bad check. The military was very strict and that's why some people didn't like

it. If you wrote a bad check, you pretty much ruined your career. If you hit your wife, do something stupid like that, you're done. You don't do that in the military. You have to live a very conscientious, very righteous life to some extent. Military was pretty strict. But if you knew the rules going in, you could use the system and have a lot of fun. You have a lot of fun, I'm telling you.

When I was in the Philippines, we had our airplanes and we'd wake up in the morning and there would be all these stickers on it. They were black snake stickers. We were like, *why are we getting these stupid black snake stickers?* Because you've got to scrape them off. You just can't leave them on the airplane. They stick them on the intake and it's harder to get to. We were like, *how are these guys sneaking on to get these things on?*

We hide out to find out how they're doing it and it's the SR-71 guys. If you've never seen an SR-71, they're actually beautiful, incredibly fast. It's the fastest airplane in the world. They're called *habus*, black snakes, and they're stationed out of Japan. We were in the Philippines and they were visiting. Every time they got a chance, they went and put these stickers on our planes. But we couldn't get to their planes because you have a marine guarding each plane with orders to shoot to kill if you even approach the plane. We would play games back and forth like this. I'm like, this is so dang awesome that we're getting to do this stuff.

Finally, we figured out a way to get them back. When they would land, they would land and they'd have to come in and they'd stop and do all these little inspections and they would send them back. What we did is we faked we were the first inspectors, and we went out there. It was pilots doing this and everything else. We would go with our stickers and we would slap the stickers on the inside of the door and stuff like that. It took them forever to figure out how we infiltrated. They actually sent their version of FBI. "How did you get to these airplanes?" No one

would say anything. Finally, they brought us in and said, "You're going to be up on charges if you don't." We had to explain them how we actually got to put our stickers on their planes.

Those are great things you get to do.

You'd be on victory alert, which victory alert is a thing that you get to do; it's waiting for the Russians to come fly by you on international airspace and you would scramble your planes up to go intercept them and just fly along next to each other so they could flip each other off. But the excitement and the adrenaline of getting to do those things are just incredible. That's why I'm saying adventures can be a step away.

I've lost friends, too. I've had friends that worked with me that were killed; that were shot, executed because they wore the uniform of the United States. It's a very real thing. But being in the Air Force was an absolute blast.

But you said, how were the rules? If you did something stupid, if you went and got drunk, you got a DWI, you wrote a bad check, you hit your wife, you damaged property; you're out. It is a very elite type mechanism that allows you to stay in. A lot of the kids that go in, they're like, "This sucks," and they leave and they never get the opportunity to really—or they never leave their room or they never take advantage of education. The Air Force will pay for you to take two classes at a time.

I've got to give credit to Dr. Cliff McClain because Dr. McClain is the one who really helped me get my four-year degree. Dr. McClain was the adult education person here. The United States Air Force has the largest community college in the nation. Everything you do in the Air Force for work, you're getting college credit for, which is absolutely incredible.

I got my four-year degree. I got five associates degrees from the Air Force. I got my bachelor's degree from UNLV. I have two master's degree. My last master's degree was

from Cal State Dominguez Hills. Then I have an Executive Leadership certificate from Georgetown University.

I own a Kung-Fu school and have for fifteen years. Again, God just has blessed me beyond my beliefs. Everything I've ever dreamed of, He's materialized for me. The people that I get to train with—I've learned from many people, but the ones that I reference is Dan Inosanto because I've got to go to a lot of seminars with him and got to learn from his daughter and son-in-law. Bruce Lee was Dan's instructor. Bruce Lee turned the school over to Dan Inosanto, who is eighty-five and still alive, and his daughter, I think, just turned fifty a few years back. But getting to get that close to people and learn from those people and getting to teach the arts here in my small business have been incredible.

I am chairman of the board for the Latin Chamber of Commerce. I'm going on my third term, so I'll be one of the longest-serving chairman on there. It's a great organization. It's a great business organization. It has very tight ties with UNLV and the other parts of the community.

If a kid like myself can make it, I have very little mercy on anybody else.

Why did you decide to leave the military and then what did you do right after? How did we get from military to owning a Kung-Fu and being...?

What did I do after the military? I signed up to be an officer to go to officer's school. The two-star general, base commander, looked at my resume and he says, "Dan, I'll deny ever saying this. Get out and go make some real money because we are not going to pay you. We are going to abuse you. We are going to do all these other things to you as an officer that you would be much better off at your age and given your resume." He says, "Go do it." I said, "Well, I can always stay in. I just got promoted. I could stay in and retire." He goes, "You do what you want to do and I'm going to sign this paper for you. But I will tell you, if you have that much

education and you have that stellar of a resume, you had better go out and use it."

When a two-star general tells you that you tend to take him pretty serious. I wrote down all the pros and cons. I talked to my wife. My wife is a little worried about it. My next stop if I stayed in the military would have been Misawa, Japan, to go work with a Wild Weasel squadron. The thing is, my family could move with me, but as a Wild Weasel, you'd always be somewhere else because they're always deployed. What Wild Weasels do is they're a version of an airplane that shoots down, kills surface-to-air things. It's a pretty cool job. Being called a Wild Weasel is a big honor.

I got to work with those clowns. I call them clowns because we'd always fight with each other. My last incentive ride was in a Wild Weasel, it was an F-4 Wild Weasel. I didn't want to go up in it. These things were from Vietnam. They still had guts on the thing. There was no place to hang on to. I call up the captain there at the Wild Weasel squadron who sets up the rides. The reason you get a ride is because you're Airman of the Quarter. There's only one Airman of the Quarter and I got it nine times, so I got nine rides, and my last rides was on a Wild Weasel.

I called the flight captain and I said, "Sir, you know what? I'd really like to hand it off to somebody who hasn't gone. I've gone enough. I've been there, done that."

But I had not been in a Wild Weasel. The people that worked in the school that I was in, because, like I said, I was a master instructor, the Wild Weasel guys would always give us a hard time. Somehow it got back to them that I turned the ride down. I come in two days later and my desk is covered, completely covered, my entire desk, with chicken feathers. They're all sitting there. It's one big U-shaped thing. It's a big room with U-shaped desks around. They're all reading their magazines trying not to laugh. I open the door and there is chickens in it, like you buy a chicken that you're going to roast in a bag and there's chickens in it. I said, "All right, I'll

do it."

They want to make sure I'm going to do this. I called the flight captain back and said, "Sir, I changed my mind. I will be there. Just tell me what time I'm supposed to be there for the incentive flight." Blah, blah, blah. I get there and they show up, too, just to make sure I'm going to get in this thing.

This thing is like an old wooden roller coaster that's really rickety. But it's a cool-looking plane and it's got a history behind it. All of these ones did fly in Vietnam. I'm getting ready to get in and I said to the pilot, "Just for the record"—they're standing there—and excuse my French—"I'd rather have a sister in a whorehouse than a brother who is an F-4 pilot." I paid for that dearly. He took me up and twisted my brain ten different types of ways in that airplane.

Two days later I was back in the squadron and they were all there and I stood up real quick and I got air sick. I don't know if it's something I ate or from the F-4 ride or what. They never let me live that down. Still to this day I don't live that down.

They're family. They're tighter than my real family. If I see an Air Force person, even a person that I wasn't even that close to but we knew each other, you sit there and you just embrace each other and you just hold each other. It was a brother/sisterhood that you just can't explain.

I'm curious about the Latino population, if you saw a change in the Air Force population to an increase in minorities or not. Is that just the Air Force?

No. The Army has a high population, and the Marine Corps has a population, and so does the Navy. The Air Force never attracted Latinos for whatever reason, so there were very few of us.

I finally met one and this guy looked Azteca. This guy had the nose. He looked Azteca. He was new there. I ran up to him and I said, "Brother, how are you been? What's going on, *ese*?" I go, "You're Latino." He goes, "I'm a Yankee." He was from Michigan and he was as

Yankee as they can get. This guy looked like he was on the side of an Inca pyramid, the nose and the features and the ears and everything else. He says, "Oh no, I was born in Dearborn, Michigan, and my family has always been in Dearborn, Michigan." I was like, *shoot, I missed another opportunity there.*

Finding a Latino person there was very rare. There were some Puerto Ricans, but Puerto Ricans tended to stay to themselves. Puerto Ricans were very tight with each other and if you weren't Puerto Rican, it didn't work out as well as you thought it might. There were very few Latin-American people in there.

You're so good at your job, because you help bring up memories. One that stood out, out of all of them, was a guy named Chief Leroy Tafoya.

No relation?

None whatsoever that I know of, although somewhere along the line I'm sure that the conquistadors might have crossed paths. I'm at the Base Exchange, the shopping center that they have there, and I'm waiting in line. Another guy comes by and he's a chief master sergeant and he's a Latino guy. He looks at me and he looks at my name and I look at his name. He goes, "Give me your ID card." Well, as a chief, you do what the man says. "Here's your ID card." He goes, "Step out of line and come with me." I thought I was in trouble.

He puts me in his car, takes me to the general's headquarters. Big doors, big oak doors. The secretary walks in and says, "Chief Tafoya is on a phone call." He goes, "That's not a problem." He kicks the door, boom. He swings the door open and he grabs my shirt, my uniform collar, and he shoves me in and he goes, "Here you go, you son of a bitch." I was like, *what the hell is going on?*

Here is a two-star general. He's a base commander. He looks at me and looks at my tag

and says, "Show me your ID card." I have zero clue what's going on. "Yes, sir." I'm in front of a general; I'm like this. He goes, "That SOB, *blah, blah, blah*. Get Tafoya back in here."

What had happened—I had zero idea this was happening—is that Chief Leroy Tafoya was retiring and the two-star general in front of other congressmen and stuff at the chief's retirement had said, "And the greatest asset to the Air Force is that we finally got rid of the last damn Tafoya in the Air Force." I just arrive at Nellis Air Force Base and this guy runs into me and can't believe that this is too good. As a chief you could get away with those things. It was a pretty funny story, but I thought I was in a lot of trouble. I was like, *what did I do wrong?* The general actually had me checked out to make sure it wasn't a joke; that I was actually where I was from.

I decide to get out of the Air Force because my wife had got into nursing school, which she worked very hard to do. We were going to go to Misawa for three years. She was going to be stuck there with a kid and I was going to be somewhere else. Her dad had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, which later he succumbed to. I went to work for the Community College of Southern Nevada as the computer operations person there because I worked on computer-type stuff in the Air Force. Life is never as easy. I thought I was going to go to an interview and going to apply for this job.

I got a job for General Exposition Service, GES, but I hated it. I was only there a week and all we ever did was play ping-pong in the back room because once you develop the website for the client, you waited for the next client to call and you develop the website. I was like, this is dead end.

I got a call from community college and says, "Hey, we'd like to interview you." I wasn't going to go and my wife said, "I went and picked up your suit from the cleaner's and you

complained about it and you yelled at me for it. You're going to put that suit on and you're going to go."

I go and I'm like, all right. It's not going well. The interview is not going well because he said, "Well, do you know how to work on this computer and this computer and this computer?" I said, "Your job description didn't ask if I knew how to work on this computer. Now, if you want a leader that will take the technicians that know how to do that work to do that work and provide the high level of customer support and customer liability that you need, then I am your guy. But if you're going to sit here and quiz me over the entire...Do I know the specific about a computer? I haven't received that training, so the answer to all of that is no."

A guy who was late for the interview on the panel, he walks in. He says, "Where are you from, by the way?" I typically don't say Albuquerque. I say, well, I was in Nellis Air Force Base. But I said, "I'm from Albuquerque, New Mexico." All the sudden, the room got silent. I'm like, *did I say something wrong?* He said, "Did you say Albuquerque?" I said, "Yes, Albuquerque." He said, "Okay, you're good. Let's go to the next person that you interview with." He just stopped.

I get to the director's office and they say, "This is Dan Tafoya. He's from Albuquerque." They enunciated it in a way. He goes, "So you're from Albuquerque?" I go, "Yes." He goes, "The senior vice president of the college is from Albuquerque." I said, "Oh, interesting. What's his name?" He says, "His name is Orlando Sandoval." I can't say I didn't know a lot of Sandovals, but I didn't know him. Sandoval is a pretty common name.

That afternoon I get a call back and says, "You're hired." Okay, the interview didn't go well, it wasn't much of an interview, but I'm hired. I start and I'm there starting and getting settled in and stuff and then the senior vice president calls me in. He's a gruff old goat. He comes

in, "Tafoya, are you from Albuquerque?" I said, "Yes, sir." He goes, "If I would have known that I would have never hired you. I was gone while they did it. Have a nice day."

I called my wife and I said, "We may not want to look at moving any time soon because I don't think this is going to work out."

I just found out that that was his personality. He liked screwing with people. I stayed there for six years. We became friends, Orlando and myself.

We were at a birthday party for his daughter at his house. He was a man of the grape now and then, well, mostly then—mostly now more than then. My son is a gregarious type, a young six-year-old or seven-year-old, whatever he is at the time. We're in the backyard; my wife and I were talking to some other people. And my son is inside. I guess they're going to sing "Happy Birthday" and they're pulling out the cake. My son, being my son, he wants to be standing over the cake. Orlando says, "Get away from the cake." I wasn't witness to this. I'm just telling you what I was told. My son says, "Are you talking to me?" Orlando says, "Yes, I'm talking to you." He grabs my son and sticks his head right into this cake and all hell breaks loose in my boss' house, and he's not even my boss; he's my boss's boss. There's cake flying all over. His wife is going crazy. It's just nuts. My wife is like, "There must have been a fight inside." Here comes my son out crying with cake all over his face. We're like, *what the hell happened?* I was like, *I'm going to get fired Monday; I know I'm going to get fired.*

No, I didn't get fired. Orlando ended up moving with Dr. Richard Moore to go start Nevada State College. I stayed there and I moved from computer operations manager to the director of IT to the director of government relations. Eventually I left as a lobbyist and the director of strategic planning for the college. I basically moved up several rows from working as a computer operations person, manager, to being a counsel to the president. Again, it goes back

to say here is a kid whose dad was in prison who had learning disabilities and ends up in these spots. It's almost like "Forrest Gump" sometimes.

What is your job today?

I left after six years. That was fifteen years ago. I came to the Clark County School District. I was leaving higher education and Carlos Garcia was the superintendent at the time. They had a job for a quality assurance coordinator there, and I was like, that's interesting; that's the kind of work I liked in the Air Force. I was a QA officer there. I was like, but why is the school district doing this?

I go there and meet him and I get the job. Well, he calls me on Friday and he says, "Can you come in and interview today?" I said, "It's my day off and I'm wearing jeans." I was cleaning my garage out. He goes, "I don't care. It's Friday. Come on in." I came in and had a talk with him and I got hired.

But he was pretty straightforward. He goes, "We have forty thousand employees and you're going to tell me that your training as quality assurance in what we're trying to do—I can do the numbers and how are you going to train forty thousand employees?" I said, "Well, I'm not, but there are methodologies on how you train that many people." He goes, "As evidenced by what?" I said, "Well, there is this guy named Jesus and he went and found twelve people and he went and convinced them about a certain way of doing things. And I don't know, it kind of changed the world." He just kind of rolled his eyes and he goes, "Oh, I forgot, you're Spanish." Because he was Mexican. He goes, "Dan is Spanish, everyone." He'd say, "He's brown as beans, but he's Spanish, everyone." Every time he'd introduce me to somebody we would be at—today it is probably a PC, I guess—but we would have a committee meeting, "This is Dan and he's [whispering] Spanish by the way." He loved giving me a hard time. Carlo is a great human

being.

I did that for about five or six years and then I got promoted to be the director over charter schools. I received the charter schools that the district oversees. I've been doing that for going on nine, ten years now. It's a new adventure every day.

What are your responsibilities as the director of charter schools?

To ensure legal compliance. I make sure that the schools legally comply with all the rules schools are supposed to, like teacher licensing, finances, safety, anything that revolves around a school. It's like being a mini superintendent of a mini school district; that's what you are. I have met some wonderful people doing it. It's been a blast.

My wife is just awesome people. My son, I'm very proud of. He's a lot like me, so we do this a lot. Not to an abusive point, but to a point that...Like this morning, he went and did something with his car and my car that I didn't appreciate, and I let him know that. My wife will call me later and she will say, "You were kind of rough on him." I yelled at him, right? I didn't have to. I could have just let it go and I am perfectly fine with that. Even as a young man at twenty-two that adversity, that wind—when they built the biosphere in Arizona, they put in the hardiest plants and trees that they could, but they couldn't figure out why the Acacia tree was dying. The Acacia tree in the wilderness lives on very little water and it doesn't need much nutrients and it thrives. When they put it in a biosphere, they couldn't get one to grow. What they discovered is that it needs wind. It needs adversity to make itself strong to do things.

I'm not saying abuse your kids. But, at the same time, if I let that go and just say, "Dude, you parked last night and you kissed the back of my car," I let it go. It's no big deal. There wasn't any real damage done, but that wasn't the point. The point was, you're paying for that car. I work on my car and pay for my car. I'm not driving a new car so that you could drive a new car. To me

that's a huge sign of disrespect. It goes all the way back to where we come from and the level of respect that we expect. I could let him get away with that but next time...If it's not a car next time, maybe it's something else. Maybe it's abuse in a relationship or a privilege or something. When you're told or reminded about those things, sometimes I feel, my own personal philosophy, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I never call him stupid or be mean to him, but he definitely knows I was not happy about that. We'll have a civil conversation at a later time. But anyway, that's my story.

Could you tell us the neighborhoods you lived in here in Las Vegas?

I lived on Nellis Air Force Base for a large part of that. I always wanted to live in Summerlin. I couldn't afford to live in Summerlin when I first started college, so I lived near Summerlin. Then as I promoted up my wife and I went and got a home in Summerlin. The only reason we wanted to live in Summerlin is because it had nice parks and we wanted to be near Red Rock where we could ride our bikes. It was just a pretty place, not that there's anything else with any other part of Las Vegas. It's just that was kind of like our—some people want to have a car or nice this or that. That was something that we wanted to do. We have a modest home there. We have worked very hard to keep it up. That's the neighborhoods I grew up in.

In Albuquerque, I grew up in the south valley, and if you grew up in the south valley, you were a tough guy although there were tougher areas than that. But that was legend. It was like Rancho High School; you don't want to go down to Rancho High School or you'll get mugged. Rancho is fine, most hours of the day. Growing up in Albuquerque, I grew up in the south valley and there was a lot of gangs. There was just a lot of gangs. It was just the way it was and they were in high school, too. Today the gangs tend to be out of high schools. There's no colors. But back then it was very prevalent and so you had to be very careful. You learned a lot of political

and survival skills while you were there, you did, the hard way sometimes.

Can you tell me a little bit of how you got involved with the chamber? I know you mentioned you were chairman.

Orlando, Orlando Sandoval. He didn't want to go to a meeting one day and he said, "Dan, you go." I went to the meeting. I showed up in a suit and tie and started meeting people. Then all the sudden I said, to your point, Barbara, "I found Latinos. Where have you guys been?" Then I found that they were from all over; Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, Cuba. They were all these Latino people and none of them were from New Mexico. In New Mexico, if you're a Mexican, you're a Mexican; you're not a Californian and you're not a Texan. Those are two completely different species of the animal. If you're from New Mexico proper that's very different.

In New Mexico, *hablamos español, pero muy mocho* – Meaning that we thought we spoke Spanish. But when we found out what real Spanish sounded like, we're like, we're speaking slang Spanish, like Ebonics Spanish. It was funny because we spoke Spanglish; everything was half-English, half-Spanish. If you go to New Mexico today and you listen to the Spanish radio stations, because that's what they call them, Spanish radio stations, most of the songs are in half-English, half-Spanish, which is like a sin to somebody from Castile because my mom is Castilian from way back. People will say, "Just stop. Just stop. You're hurting my ears. Don't even try. Speak English. You're better off." It was interesting.

What about foods growing up? What kind of traditional foods did your parents make?

We will claim that New Mexico does have the best food on the face of the planet, but everybody says that. New Mexico, the state vegetable is chile and the state question is, red or green? And the answer is yes, no matter which way it's asked. You have Hatch, New Mexico along the valley, which is famous for producing Big Jim Hatch, New Mexico peppers. Every meal and

every day has a side of red or green chile. It's more of a hybrid of Mexican, Spanish, Native American food. I had a Christmas party this last Friday night and we had tamales and we had *biscochitos*, which is anise seed cookies. We had *carne adovada*, which is marinated pork in red chile. We had *carne asada*. We had *pollo adobado*. The food was very rich, very rich, and it was fantastic.

My uncle when he was alive, God rest his soul, would send me a Folgers' coffee can full of pumpkin and bananas, and the older they got, the better they got. You warm them up in the microwave for nine seconds—you got it to a science—and a cup of coffee. If God made anything better, He kept it for Himself. New Mexico is very rich in tradition. We were at the Fiestas de Santa Fe and at that time I think it was the three hundred and third Entrada. People have the fiftieth anniversary, hundredth anniversary of the fiestas. In Santa Fe we have the three hundred and sixteenth anniversary of Entrada, which means this is when—if my history teacher from New Mexico was here, he'd slap me in the back of my head—of when the conquistadors came in. I forgot which one it was, shoot.

But lately it's been kind of a chaotic thing because the Native Americans want it to stop. They said, "Well, yes, you came to the country and it's like celebrating slavery or something like that." But the Spaniards really don't care; they do it anyway.

But I'm sitting there and my wife is shopping with her friend, Indian jewelry shopping, which once you've seen one piece of Indian jewelry, you've kind of seen them all if you grew up there. I'm sitting on a park bench waiting for her. We had just had lunch at a place called The Shed, which if you're ever in Santa Fe, go eat at The Shed. It's fantastic. It's French bread and *posole*. It's great. This guy comes along with a cart. It smells good. What's in the cart? In poor handwriting it says, "Green chile fried pork chop tortilla sandwiches." I'm like, oh my goodness,

that's fantastic. I bought two of them, one for each hand. I'm trying to eat these before my wife gets there. I'm sitting there just chowing down on this stuff. My wife is like, "You're still hungry, huh?" I was like, "I could not pass this up." If you were to ask me a last meal, it would be green chile, homemade tortilla, fried pork chop sandwiches. It was great. The New Mexico food was great.

Outside of the poverty that New Mexico—see, New Mexico likes staying poor. They pride themselves in staying like that, of talking the way they do, in living the way they do; that is them and don't dare come in and try to change it because you're going to get kicked out. Even though they leave New Mexico to go visit, they always come back and it's always grounded in the food and the love and the family and the gossip and everything else they do. It's just a very tight culture. But unfortunately, the culture has a lot of negative stuff to it. Being a *choro* is a pride of honor. If you just got out of prison, they're throwing you a fiesta. But when I graduated from college, I couldn't get any of them to come out to go to my graduation because no one had ever done it. They were like, "Oh, those gringos." They will say to you, "You want to be like the white guy; that's what you want to be like." I don't know about being like a white guy, but there's opportunities out there that I think all people should take advantage of and that they do and do very famous things. I mean, it's a rich family steeped in tradition, but there's also things...Alcoholism and drug abuse was rampant. Crime was rampant. Outside of my dad, I don't know anybody in the immediate family that ever ended up going to jail or anything like that.

My uncle on my mom's side, her one brother died of a heroin overdose. They found him in front in a yard where somebody had dropped him off. My other uncle retired from the United States government. He was the chief of nuclear material for Sandia Air Force Base. He was a Vietnam veteran, Marine Corps. The rest of my uncles worked honorable jobs.

It's hard to go back home, though. I go back home and it takes about a week and you start talking New Mexico pigeon. But everybody there likes to be old, old. Everything is old. There's a sign when you come to the New Mexico border that says, "Welcome to New Mexico. Set your watch back thirty years." They don't change anything.

Compare that to what you observed, especially being active in the Latin Chamber of Commerce and everything, with the Latino community here in Las Vegas.

The Latino community here is very progressive. It's very vibrant. It's wanting to better itself. I love the young people today. Tom Rodriguez, who is my mentor, kicked down a lot of doors. I was part of the Chicano movement where we kicked down some doors, too. Now young Latinos and Latinas will say, "Well, what do we have left to fight for?" I said, "That fight is now in the textbooks. That fight is for you getting the next job, not as a custodian, which is honorable, but getting that job as a director, getting it as a president, getting it as a congress person."

That's what I see different. It's a melting pot here. You can never speak for Latinos as a whole. You just don't do it. Everybody says, "Well, Latinos are Democrats and they're very liberal." Oh, no, they're not. I mean, a lot of them are very staunch Republicans. A lot of them are business owners. A lot of them are entrepreneurs, philanthropists. They are very opinionated and we all don't share the same opinion. We all do not share the same opinion. There are some that are staunch Trump supporters and there are some that are completely on the other end of it and everybody in between. You have people from Nicaragua, you have people from Peru and Ecuador, and they're all different. Then you have Mexico, Norteños, Sureños, Central Mexicanos, coastal Mexicans, who think much differently from the middle-of-the-country Mexicans, and then you have New Mexicans, Spaniards.

As dysfunctional as we are, we're very proud of who we are, New Mexicanos. We have

our own music. New Mexico has its own music that is very unique to New Mexico. They never create a new song. All they do is take a real old one and have somebody new sing it. How dare you break from tradition? And it's fun. We call them *rancheras*. We're kind of hillbillies. We're rancher-type people. We love country music and we love our boots and we love our cowboy hats. We love being New Mexican. It's a very prideful thing. It's hard to describe if you didn't grow up in it.

But I wouldn't want to live there. When I go back, the first day I'm like, *oh, this is so cool*. Day two, it's like, *I've got to get out of here; I've got to go*.

Hopefully it took you on a fun adventure, anyway.

It's fantastic.

That was great. Thank you so very much.

Thank you so much.

Thank you so much.

Five years ago I started a program for the Latin Chamber that is a scholarship program. But with me, my ADHD, I always have these radical thoughts because I was never part of the mainstream, so I always had to think outside to try to penetrate the mainstream thinking and my thought process was always different. I get this commission by the Latin Chamber to be the head of the Education Committee. I said, "Okay, you guys have a scholarship program." Yes, we do. "How many scholarships do you give away?" We give away like a hundred. "Out of those hundred, how many of those kids showed up the first day of school? What was the average GPA? What was the area of study? What was this?" They're all like, "Dude, we give a hundred scholarships. We're very proud of that." I said, "That's not sustainable." I go, "How long have you been doing this?" "We've been doing it for fifteen years. It's sustainable." I said, "No, it's

not. You're just doing it on the mercy of others. You're not doing it on your own to do this."

They wanted to tar and feather me and run me out of town, which they did.

I said, "We're going to go from a hundred and we're going to only do five. We're going to take those five kids and we're going to meet their families and we are going to follow them for four years." They're like, "That's crazy. We're not doing that because we have this big event and we invite all the presidents and the families are there." I said, "You're ripping them off because there's this top layer of Latino students that are stellar that you're missing out on because you're giving scholarships to the wrong people for the wrong reasons." I was being tarred and feathered and ran out of town.

We fast forward almost six years later now and we did it. We have an endowment of about seven hundred and some odd thousand dollars, which the chamber has never had an endowment of any type. We produce our own magazine. I'm the editor in chief along with Tom Rodriguez. If my English teacher, Ms. Bokaford, could see that her student who she described with ADHD is now the publisher of a very good magazine, by the way, and has got national recognition for it, she'd be probably pretty amazed.

The students that we have now, one of our students who just graduated—and they're all kinesiology students, STEM students—one of them just called me yesterday and she's screaming on the phone. She goes, "I got into the doctorate of PT school." That's huge, a single mom, Cuban family. This changes everything for her. Because we tell them, poverty does not rest nor shall we. Poverty doesn't care what color you are, what gender you are, what race you are. It does not care. Poverty does not rest nor shall we.

We've been able to put this program together. We have thirty in the cohort now, twenty that have gone on and graduated. Probably the pinnacle of that whole thing was a young man—

last story, promise—named Manuel Rentana. Manuel Rentana was born in the United States. At two years old his parents took him back to Mexico. His mom took him back to Mexico because the father was abusive. Fourteen years later, they sent him back to the United States. Dad is still abusive. This happens during the recession. The dad ends up losing his home. He ends up taking what money he's gotten from cutting lawns, Manuel does, and moves to Las Vegas and lives at his aunt's house behind Valley High School, which technically makes him homeless. He doesn't speak the language. He teaches himself how to speak English. He teaches himself how to play mariachi. His counselor calls me up because he's heard of the program. He says, "Dan, can you come by and visit this kid?" I said, "Send me his resume. I'm super busy." He goes, "Dan, I need you to see this one." I say, "Okay, I'll stop by."

I stop by and he put me in an office like this and here is the kid. I said, "Manuel, how are you?" I'm kind of being a little aggressive, jerkish, I don't know. I said, "Manuel, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Because I'm in a hurry. He sounds like Antonio Banderas. "Mr. Tafoya, I want to be an astronaut."

I tell the counselor, "You called me all the way down here to meet a kid who says he wants to be an astronaut. Astronaut isn't even a job, maybe in Russia."

I said, "You want to go where?" He goes, "I want to go to UNR to the mechanical engineering program." I said, "Why don't you go to UNLV? We'll get you a dorm room there. I know the president. I'll help you get support and everything else to get you set up. Your documents and everything else looks great." He looks at me and goes, "That's not the dream." He says, "That's not the dream." I said, "Manuel, I'll take it to committee, but I can't promise you anything."

I take it to committee and we select him. I said, "Guys, there's something about this kid."

I've held myself together throughout this interview and this will probably be tough, but I'll make it through because I've told this story enough.

He gets to UNR. He becomes the president of two halls so that he can pay his own rent. He becomes the founder—here I go—the founder of Mariachi Plata de Oro, the first sanctioned mariachi club in the state ever. Wins the President's Club of the Year that year. Gets selected to go to Hanover, Washington, National Security Agency, on a fully paid stipend, first freshman ever to do that. He carries a 3.8 GPA in mechanical aerospace engineering. Goes on and ends up at Oxford in the thermal dynamic something or another on a scholarship. He comes back on an internship, a fellowship-type deal. He comes back and gets picked up by Northrop Grumman to work on an internship for them up in Utah next year. He's in his junior year. He gets a call from NASA. Yes, NASA. He ends up at the Johnson Space Center as a robotics technician something-something with the Pathways program and gets hired by NASA. He takes a year off to do that.

Meanwhile, he takes that year off and then he has to go back to UNR to finish his degree program. During his senior year with all the great accolades and everything he's gotten, he gets awarded one of the national STEM Great Minds in Science awards for engineering.

I'm like, man, I was so wrong about this guy. Just like probably a lot of people said that I couldn't do it either.

Let's end this story on this note. He gets a letter from the president of the University of Florida. Full ride Ph.D. in aeromechanics, a quarter-million dollars. He turns it down. He turns it down because that's not the dream. The dream is to be an astronaut, but to graduate from Stanford University, the Stanford University. He turns it down because Stanford calls him up and offers him a full Ph.D. in astrophysics.

That's where Manuel is today and that's because we laser like focus down on kids who are highly talented even when we don't recognize it. Those are the types of things that you could do to change lives. That's what we attempt to do every day. When we look back on our journeys, we may not believe them ourselves.

What a great story. What is Manuel's last name?

Rentana. I'm going to send you some copies of our latest magazine called Latin Scholar. On the front page you will see Manuel and then on the inside you'll get to meet his family. You'll see a picture of Peter Guzman and myself hugging him at graduation because his family couldn't be here because they wouldn't let his mom over from Mexico. His mortar board says, "The sky is not the limit."

These are the kind of adventures that when we see human beings walking down the street and say, wow, that professor kind of looks disheveled, and to have no idea that that person may have been a survivor from a concentration camp or an engineer that worked on nuclear sciences or somebody who helped people beyond belief that they would never think, and that's what makes us so special, every single one of us. If I think my story is special, then all the sudden there's a kid who came here that makes mine look pale in comparison, and remember that. God mucks the wise and He chooses different gifts for all of us and we get to choose if we use those gifts or not.

I am the last guy that should be here telling you that I have master's degrees and I have attended Georgetown and that I publish and that I run a martial arts studio and that I'm the president of the second largest chamber and that I've flown in the fastest airplanes in the world because that person on paper didn't deserve that.

Thank you. I appreciate this. Thank you. [End of recorded interview]