

Aurelio De La Rosa

**Interviewed June 28, 2007
By Megan Zuba
Midway Village Museum**

Megan Zuba: What is your name?

Aurelio De La Rosa: Aurelio De La Rosa

MZ: And are you married?

AD: No.

MZ: Where do you work?

AD: I am a detective for the Rockford, Illinois Police Department.

MZ: How long have you been working there?

AD: 17 years.

MZ: Where did you originally come from?

AD: From Allende, Coahuila, Mexico which is somewhat of a border town.

MZ: What did you do before you came to the United States like what was your life like?

AD: I don't recall a whole lot of it; I was real young at the time age of four and did what any other four year old would have done, just hang out.

MZ: So you came with your parents, why did they decide to come here?

AD: Rockford back in the early, early 70s or late 60s, early 70s there were a lot of manufacturing jobs here and that's what drew my parents here.

MZ: So when you made this decision to come do you remember anything about the traveling process?

AD: I recall having to go to Mexico City, Mexico to get our visas in line to make the journey over here and then I also recall bits and pieces of the different locations that I lived in around the city of Rockford.

MZ: So had you ever been to the United States before you came?

AD: No.

MZ: And then you mentioned you were in other cities before you came to Rockford?

AD: The only other city that I have lived in as a child was Houston, Texas and then that was a real enjoyable time also.

MZ: Did you live there before Rockford?

AD: Yes.

MZ: So how come your family decided to come Rockford?

AD: The manufacturing industry was just that much greater here and jobs and wages were better here than they were in the South.

MZ: So how many people were there in your family when you came?

AD: Three or five total. Both of my parents, I'm the oldest, and then my younger sister and younger brother.

MZ: Did your family know anyone else living in Rockford?

AD: Yes, to be honest with you, my family was one of the first original families that migrated to the city of Rockford so the people that we knew, we knew the true friendship and just becoming acquainted with those individuals.

MZ: Did any of them help you get settled in, get used to the United States or anything?

AD: Some families did that, yes. They helped to make the transition a whole lot easier.

MZ: Were any of the families from Mexico?

AD: Some of the Mexican families that were here had ties, family ties to Texas to cities such as San Antonio where I had other family members and that's where the link came around.

MZ: So where did you stay when you came to Rockford? Do you remember?

AD: I lived in a home that used to be at the southwest corner of South Main and Loomis. The structure is no longer there. It's been replaced by a Laundromat and then I used to live down further on Main by St. Elizabeth and that structure is still there but we made another move over to the area of West and Morgan and our home is still there and then I grew up in a home at Loomis and Church. So we made quite a few moves.

MZ: What about now where do you live?

AD: I live in the city of Rockford. I live in the area known as Knightsville historic district area. I have a nice home there.

MZ: Do you live by yourself or with family?

AD: I live there right now with my girlfriend and so we coexist together. It's nice. I have two of her kids that live with us and I have a son who lives with me but at the present time he has gone to basic training.

MZ: How old is your son?

AD: My son is 18 years old, no 19 years old.

MZ: Does he live in Rockford?

AD: Right now like I said, he is at Fort Leonard Wood for basic training so upon his return he'll be living at home and going to school.

MZ: Is there anyone else from your immediate neighborhood from Mexico?

AD: You know, not that I know of. I know the street that I live on I only have neighbors on my left and right and I have the park directly in front of me so I really don't have any neighbors and my neighbors to the rear aren't of Mexican origin.

MZ: So any of the families that were friends when you first moved here do you have any ties with them?

AD: Yes, we still associate with them. We are still friends. They will be longtime friends.

MZ: So where did you go to school?

AD: I went to Barber Elementary initially and then I finished out the school year there and went to second grade at St. Anthony's Catholic Elementary School which was part of the St. Francis Consolidated and went through two through four at St. Anthony's, five through six at St. Peter and Paul and then seven and eight at St. Stanislaus and finished there and went to Boylan Central Catholic and that's where I graduated high school from.

MZ: In school, how did you feel like you were treated by other kids?

AD: You know my first year in school was real difficult for me. I got picked on a lot because I wasn't able to respond to people's questions. I wasn't able to interact real well with other kids and so I got picked on a lot and that was part of the reason for me going from Barber to St. Anthony's because St. Anthony's was more controlled. There was more disciplined manner. The nuns there, if any other kids would lash out, they would put them in place and I didn't have that kind of environment at Barber. It was difficult times.

MZ: Did you ever feel different from anyone else because of where you came from?

AD: No, as a child I really didn't look at the issue of race. I knew kids picked on me because I was not able to speak English at the time but I didn't find racism was a huge thing, not in the neighborhood that I grew up in because I grew up in southwest Rockford and growing up in

southwest Rockford you had Mexicans or Hispanics and then you had Italian population and then you had your African American population and there were some Polish there, so there was a good mixture are. I don't really think racism was a huge thing.

MZ: So when did you learn English?

AD: You know what, it was actually one of these things do or die. I had to learn and, I needed to advance in my school studies so I actually picked it up throughout the year that I was at Barber I picked up some stuff. Then my first year at St. Anthony's is when I locked it in. I was able to communicate effectively with the teachers and other students.

MZ: Do you remember what grade you were in?

AD: At St. Anthony's, I was in second grade. I learned it from a young age. At times I keep learning it hasn't changed.

MZ: So how was high school?

AD: You know I had a real positive experience at Boylan. There wasn't a huge Hispanic group that went to Boylan. I would say two to 3% of the population there but it was a positive experience. I participated in football and I participated in wrestling. The staff there was great. The rest of the students were real good students and it was because the environment than everyone was real outgoing and real athletic and things fell into place.

MZ: Why did you decide on Boylan?

AD: Actually my dad decided that for us. My dad had been the traditional head of the household who in my culture makes all the decisions for the family and being that we went through St. Anthony's, St. Peter and Paul and St. Stans it was just a regular transition from Catholic grade school to Catholic high school and environment. So he made that decision for us.

MZ: Did your parents attend church?

AD: Yes, we attended church at St. Peter and Paul.

MZ: So were you guys involved in any other organizations in the community at all?

AD: You know what; growing up as a kid I remember my parents were somewhat involved with the patriotic Mexican club down on south-central. Nowadays my dad runs the club down there and so we did things along that nature, things in the community that had ties to Mexican heritage. So those were the kind of things that we were involved in.

MZ: Do you remember any specific things that you brought over from your culture, habits or anything?

AD: You know one of the cultures that we still do practice to date whereas most Americanized families during Christmas usually have a turkey for meal for our Christmas dinner is real simple. The same meal that has been served for years and years and what that involves is the ladies come together and they make a huge batch of tamales and that is the actual meal that has been served for generations and we kind of kept that tradition, that's one; midnight Mass is another. The birthday parties, the whole piñata thing, it's still with us that never left. Others haven't but for the most part that's about it.

MZ: Will you pass it down to your kids?

AD: Oh yeah. I'm not a very good maker of tamales. I just hope that my mom is able to pass it on to my daughter and that she picks it up and that when she has her own family that she continues on with that tradition.

MZ: I know that you didn't speak English when you came here but did your parents speak English?

AD: They didn't speak any English for a long time and part of it being that they were proud and they wanted to keep their own culture and the other part it was difficult for them to interact with other adults who weren't of the mindset and weren't real willing to, or were not open to change. So really they didn't. Really they just hung out with their own friends and that's how it was.

MZ: Did they eventually learn English?

AD: Oh yeah, my dad learned English and my mom actually went through English as a second language years back but she actually took the initiative to become educated in the English language and get her vocabulary down so she could communicate effectively with people and my dad being the man that he was just picked it up. So they don't have a problem with it anymore.

MZ: You mentioned that your family wanted to keep their culture do you feel that they kind of held off from integrating a little bit to the United States?

AD: You know, I don't think so. My parents have never been one to say as far as you're talking the mix of race now, my parents were never that way as far as you are Mexican you will marry Mexican. My parents were real open with that. All their biggest concern was that I was happy and my siblings were happy in the choices that they made and that they had a good lifestyle and that they have a good life together with the other individual.

MZ: Do remember if you guys had a car when you first came here?

AD: You know I don't remember. I can't say that we had a car but there was a car available to us but it was a car that my dad and my uncle who also migrated here went in on together and we used to share the car because that was the thing to do. We lived below the economic level and therefore we had to make things work and that was one way we made things work.

MZ: So after high school what did you decide that it was you wanted to do next?

AD: Actually it was back in grade school that I wanted to become a police officer. But when I was in high school my junior year in high school, I made a decision, but given the economic status of my parents that I was not going to burden them with paying for my education and college so what I did was I took it upon myself and enlisted in the United States Army and so I enlisted in my junior year of high school and then upon graduation from high school then I left and went to Fort Benning Georgia to the infantry training brigade there where I did my basic and advanced training and I was stationed out Fort Bragg which was a home for elite and special forces unit. I was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division working in a reconnaissance unit, a scout unit. So it was a fun, fun time for me.

MZ: How many years were you in there?

AD: At Fort Bragg, I was there for four years and then I got out and did another four years combined time between the National Guard and reserves.

MZ: Would you say that was a positive experience?

AD: My time in service was very positive. I got to do a lot: I got to see a lot. I was involved in the invasion of Panama which took place December of 1989 and during actual invasion in the fighting I was caught in an ambush and got hit with a hand grenade and so then I had to spend some time recovering from those wounds.

MZ: Where did you get hit?

AD: I got hit in the lower extremities, my legs and whatnot but through the miracle of medicine I was able to recover safely and quickly and was back at it again.

MZ: Did you meet a lot of people there?

AD: I made friends in the military that are still my friends today and I'm talking I got out of the regular army in 1990 and we're into 2007 and I still communicate with some of the guys that I served with. There is absolutely nothing in this world that compares to the bonds and the friendships that you make when you serve alongside another individual who is working toward the same common goal and that's for the freedom of certain individuals and just laying their life on the line for this country.

MZ: So, now your sons doing that?

AD: Yeah, what happened with my son is last year before he graduated he was going to go enlist in the regular army and I was a little taken back by it having been a veteran of combat. He is my one and only son and I was afraid that he would be deployed and then maybe succumb to the same type of incident that I came to and to lose my son and that part of it is just that I am his father and I'm dad. I risked my life for country and on a daily basis there were times that I put my life out there for the community and he sees that as a real selfless act and at times as officers we put ourselves in harms way just to get the job done and there is no other profession like it. I

didn't want to lose my son to an act of war but when he came to me that he was going to enlist I was a little taken aback and became a little upset but we had a conversation, my son wants to follow in my steps. He went and joined the Illinois National Guard and enlisted and I'm going to serve my country dad. I've got to be my own man but I will meet you halfway and I'll do this. So he enlisted for six years in the Illinois National Guard

MZ: It really sounds like you have a great love for this country; did you always feel like that?

AD: You know I am Mexican, born there and I am a proud Mexican but I am American and this is where my roots are at and I will defend this country to the last. One thing that really, really upsets me is when people speak in a negative way of our brothers and sisters that are serving actively in the armed forces or that have served because nobody knows what it's like until you were there, until you have spent the 36 hours without sleep working your body to complete failure so that you can get the job done. Nobody knows until you see your brother next to you or your sister get hit and fall down, nobody knows.

MZ: Did you ever get discouraged?

AD: No, when it initially happened I went through a stage of some hard times but I have to tell you that when this happened to me it was more of a newer thing so the U.S. Army was real, real good on treatment all the way around, physically and in having to talk to somebody. I can't say anything bad about the U.S. Army. It was good.

MZ: After you got hit by the grenade were you scared to go back?

AD: No. What I wanted to do as I lay there in the hospital I wanted to recover and get back to my guys because I was a sergeant in charge of the squad but I wanted to get back and be there for the rest of my guys. That was my first concern, the guys that work for me but my injuries were such that I had to learn how to walk again and how to get through and have used my legs again so at the time it was quite dramatic.

MZ: How long did your recovery take?

AD: It took about four months. It was four surgeries and four months of therapy and I was back on my feet and had the means to run. The first thing I did once I was released from therapy, I went out on a run because I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't one to be held back by an incident that I didn't have any control over because I knew I had control over my actions and therefore I pressed on.

MZ: So the whole overall reflection sounds like it has been a positive experience for you in the United States. Is there anything that stands out as the best part of the experience like the Army?

AD: Growing up into my manhood the experience that stands out is my overall experience in the military and I think that it was one of the best things that ever happened to me. It made me the person that I am today. There are some things about it that I would change but I wouldn't change

anything. I love the military and if it was possible for me to still be in the military I would still be there. The one thing that did come to light, I got married while I was in service and my son and my daughter are the result of me being in service and to my wife who I am no longer married to but you know one of the things that drove me to want to recover with the ability to get back and see my kids because at the time I was stationed in Panama when this happened and have not seen my kids for quite some time so that's what I wanted to do was to get back here and have my family life with my kids and whatnot. But there were other things in the works that I didn't have any control over and that happened. Such is life

MZ: So when you came back from the military how old were your kids?

AD: I got out in 1990 my daughter was born in 87 and my son was born in 88 so they were little still.

MZ: So after you came back is that when you decided to become a cop?

AD: I came back and I was recovered more or less I still had some small injuries that were healing but they were good enough that I was still working out and running and what I did was I applied to the Rockford Police Department. They gave me a test date. I showed up for that test date down at RVC along with 600 other people and went through the physical agility. I passed, came back for the written exam. I pass that and came back for a psychological, or written and oral psychological exam and interview before the Board of fire arms police, passed that and was given a start date on.

MZ: How long did that process take?

AD: It took about seven or eight months. I took the exam in August or September and I got hired on the first week of April of the following year. It was rather quick.

MZ: So how has your whole experience with Police Department been?

AD: You know what, as far as my experience on the Police Department my experience has been very, real good. I had some bumpy roads and mind you everybody does but for the most part I love what I do, I am a full-time instructor for the police department where I teach everything on the subject matter of fire arms through police tactics as far as entries, I teach use of force, I teach other law enforcement related subjects but I also serve on the SWAT team so I work actively with the SWAT team. I am an instructor like I said. I am also a departmental armor that fixes a weapon when they breakdown. I am department translator so I assist on different interviews were there is a need for a Spanish-speaking officer. What else do I do? I serve on the awards committee. I am also the union president and represent the sworn officers for the Rockford Police Department in bargaining sessions. I teach my own martial arts school in the evening and I am also involved in the community, I help out with other officers that are involved with the Special Olympics and I also help out with United Way campaign and just different things that take place.

MZ: When do you become involved in martial arts?

AD: I started studying martial arts when I was back in seventh grade and my instructor back then was a black male by the name of Leonard Smith, just a great, great instructor. Leonard has since passed on but he was one of these individuals Rockford was fortunate to have and I actually learned a lot from him and he was key and instrumental in my desire to want to learn more about the martial arts and throughout time I have studied under Leonard. I studied from John Allen at the Rockford Karate Academy. I have also studied under other instructors away from Rockford but those are the two names that stand out here in the community.

MZ: You have a black belt?

AD: Yes.

MZ: Do you teach kids that?

AD: I used to teach kids with the previous group that I used to train with. I don't have the kids class right now that's actually in the works I am putting that together and it will probably be about a month before I start taking young students again and I have taught kids from the age of four on up. Little kids are tough at times you have to make it interesting for them. The kids I have taught have turned out to be real productive citizens.

MZ: You are going to stay in Rockford?

AD: You know I don't know if Rockford for the rest of my life is in my cards. I know that at times I deal with some pain as a result of my injuries from the war that I was involved in and so part of it I live with a level of pain on a daily basis but most of that I can control by working out an and an Advil here and ibuprofen there. It's just that at times in the winter it does get a little bad so I suck it up and drive on but I think that I may end up somewhere in Texas in my retirement.

MZ: Why is that?

AD: I have a lot of family there and I am big on family. I look forward to spending time with my parents. I look forward to spending time with other family members whenever there is a holiday of some sort and I think that Texas would be the ideal spot for me, down in the San Antonio Metro area. That's where I would like to end up.

MZ: Did you say you lived there?

AD: Houston, but Houston is just a little too big for me nowadays so San Antonio Metro area is looking real good.

MZ: When did you move to Houston?

AD: You know we moved to Houston back when I was still in grade school it was for a period of six months. My dad was offered a position down there that he took and then after being there he decided it wasn't quite what he was looking for and we moved back

MZ: Do your parents live in Rockford?

AD: My parents live in Rockford, yes they do.

MZ: Do you have other family here?

AD: Yes, my brother lives here, my younger brother lives here, and my youngest, littlest sister live here also.

MZ: So what was the most difficult or hardest part of living in the United States?

AD: You know I don't think there has been any huge, huge obstacle. There have been some hard times but you know I wouldn't compare them as anything that would have been defeating. It just so happened that we moved on.

MZ: Do you think that you are going to go back to Mexico?

AD: You know I have actually been looking to purchase land down there. I would like to have a summer home in Mexico and then a home here in the United States. If I stay in Rockford it will be one of these things where I will live here six months and then live down in Mexico somewhere for six months.

MZ: Have you met anyone in the Police Department that is from your hometown?

AD: There is nobody in my department that is from my hometown. No, not really. I'm hoping that one of these days other Mexicans apply and get hired. We do have some turn around. There's other agencies that are looking for some qualified individuals and sometimes we lose individuals that way but you know on the other hand there is some distrust between the Mexican community and police and we are hoping through time those gaps are bridged.

MZ: What do you do for fun?

AD: I do a couple of things, martial arts is one of my escapes. That's what I do for fun that's what I do to de-stress but I also have a Harley Davidson. I like to go on the motorcycle rides and I have an old antique car that I like to tinker on and go on rides as well and I like to shoot my handgun as well. So those are the kind of things that interest me so I kind of stay in that area.

MZ: Is there anything that was hard for you to adjust to, military or anything?

AD: You know I think that one of the hard things I guess coming back was just dealing with the undisciplined behavior of the average person whereas in the military yet we work at a level of

discipline but on their off time we let loose but we still never completely let loose when we were on base. The adjustment was a little different but that was just a matter of time.

MZ: Are you a naturalized citizen?

AD: Yes, I'm a citizen. Some years back I really couldn't tell you off the top of my head. Here's the funny thing I actually started into it when I was in service and was never able to finish the process because of my deployment to Panama so all that paperwork was lost in transition so when I came back to Rockford I had to restart the whole process again and it was a rather lengthy process and real bother some with some of the agents that are in the city of Chicago but I got it some years back and had to go over here to the federal courthouse to do my swearing in and what not

MZ: Was that exciting?

AD: Yes it was very exciting. It was a huge load off my shoulders to get it. It made it official; everything that I was feeling, everything I believed in was now official.

MZ: Do you have any feelings or opinions about immigration that is going on now?

AD: You know, I just think that if people would have listened to Greenspan they would have been educated as far as on what statements they've made on the issue of immigration and I will just leave it at that.

MZ: So how American do you feel now?

AD: I feel more American than some of the other individuals that I happened to come across on a daily basis because I look at people here that are born and bred here and I see this anti-American actions that they put out and I'm just taken aback and how could you? There are men and women in the service who are out there putting their lives on the line so that you can display that behavior because they gave you that right to do so and I am just taken aback by it. But I feel very American and I would be more than happy to step up to the plate and prove my actions again.