

USC Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism
Story Behind the Story

"CIR Seeks PLS"

Dan Kowalski

Published in *Bender's Immigration Bulletin*

June 2004

I've been working on this story since 1963. I'm still working on it. You can, too. Here are the four easy steps.

Step One: Learn Spanish (or any language other than your "native" tongue) at an early age.

In 1963 in Denver, Colorado, all public school third-graders, yours truly included, were forced to take either Spanish or French. Given that my mother earned her M.A. in Spanish literature and taught Spanish, and given that our family traveled often to Mexico (see Step Two, below), I "chose" Spanish. Our lessons came to us via black-and-white television, beamed from a studio in downtown Denver to all schools. The teacher was Mr. Manzanares. He looked at the camera, cupped his ear and commanded us: "¡Escuchen Ustedes! Listen!" I've been listening ever since. And I continued to study Spanish every year thereafter, through junior high, high school, and college.

Step Two: Get out of the U.S. at an early age, preferably to a "Third World" country.

We weren't hippies (too early, and my father was a dentist, my mother a teacher and homemaker, both Republicans), yet during many Spring Breaks in my elementary school days our family (Dad, Mom, four boys) piled into our VW bus and drove from Denver to Ciudad Valles, a little burg near Tampico, Mexico. There, far from the border and far from the comforts of suburban Denver, I learned on a visceral level that most folks in the world lived far different lives from mine. That lesson was reinforced in high school and college, when I returned to Mexico to live and study for months on end, often in remote locations.

Step Three: Play It Safe; Be A Bookworm.

Most of the other kids on the block were into team sports such as baseball and football. While no one called me a "sissy" and I could hold my own in games when pressed, I definitely preferred to read – anything, books, magazines, cereal boxes – rather than get dirty and risk injury. What a wus. Still, I'd do the same today, given the chance to begin again. Barring

Alzheimer's, I'll be curious and alert – and reading – far longer than I'll be able to throw a ball.

Step Four: Pay Attention to the Nervous Mexican.

In law school I thought I wanted to be a water lawyer. My uncle, whom I revered, was a water lawyer, and water law was (and still is) a big deal in parched Colorado. But flying back into the U.S. from Mexico I noticed the fellow seated next to me was nervous. Turned out he was nervous about whether or not "Immigration" would let him in. He was Mexican, and nervous. As an American, I thought nothing of re-entering the U.S. That got me to thinking. And thinking got me to take a class on immigration law during my last semester of law school. That hooked me, and I've never looked back. That one nervous Mexican started me down the road of obsessing over questions of identity, nationality, citizenship, and chance.

Conclusion

Mr. Manzanares wasn't nervous. My nameless seatmate was. I listened to them both. ¡Escuchen!