



The Oral History of Benito Perez

April 12, 2023

Interview conducted by Deborah Holle

San Antonio, TX



Oral History Cover Sheet

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 22 years

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held:

United States Army National Guard 1971-1979

Texas Department Public Safety - Harlingen & McAllen 1973-1978

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department - Game Warden 1978-1988

US Fish and Wildlife Service

Gardena, CA - Special Agent, 1988 - 1991

Dallas, TX - Special Agent, 1991 - 1998

Washington DC - Senior Special Agent, Branch of Investigations, 1998 - 1999

Washington DC - Special Agent in Charge, Branch of Investigations, 1999 - 2000

Washington DC - Deputy Assistant Director, Office of Law Enforcement, 2000 - 2001

Portland, OR - Special Agent in Charge, Pacific Region, 2001 - 2004

Washington DC - Deputy Chief, Office of Law Enforcement, 2004 - 2006

Washington DC - Chief, Office of Enforcement, 2006 - 2011

Most Important Projects: Illegal take and sale of sea otter pelts; Upper Klamath Lake and Lost River Sucker fish, and protection of the head gates from the community wanting to destroy the dam facility to allow for crop irrigation and lasted for 10 weeks until 9/11 occurred. Covert case involving the sale of migratory bird feathers. Investigation involved the illegal commerce of poached elephant ivory, rhino horn, and various protected species and sold internationally made to look old as authentic Masai tribe artifacts in Kenya.

Colleagues and Mentors: Kevin Adams, Jerry Smith, Jamie Clark, Dale Hall, Jim Stinebaugh, Tom McKay, Larry Farrington, Marie Palladini, Ed Dominquez, Sam Jojola, Chente Bustamante, Jorge Picon, Joe Ramos, Tom Mason, Dave McMullen, Paul Chang, Tom Riley, Gary Mowad, Doug Goessman, Ed Grace, Dr. Richard Leakey, Adan Dulo, Manny Ladsus, Rich Guadagno

Brief Summary of Interview: Benito Perez was born in Alice, Texas in January 1952. He was the Valedictorian of his high school graduation class in 1970, Ben Bolt Palito Blanco Independent School District with a GPA of 97%. To support his family, he joined the Army National Guard and was in the infantry. During which he also volunteered with the Texas Highway Patrol. Benito attended Texas A&I University in Kingsville, TX; University of Texas–Pan American, Rio Grande Valley and Del Mar College, Corpus Christi, TX. He took a job with the Texas Department of Public Safety as a Communications Supervisor/Dispatcher in McAllen. He also worked for the Texas Parks and Wildlife starting in 1978 and later applied for a Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Law Enforcement position. His first duty station was Gardena, CA. His first big case dealt with the unlawful sale of sea otter pelts out of Alaska that also evolved into working with the FBI on an organized crime case dealing with stolen truck tractor trailers of seafood out of refrigeration facilities in Seattle. He also worked in Oklahoma and North Texas in a case involving the sale of “feathers” of protected migratory birds. Benito went undercover as a businessman

interested in the business of native American artwork. Many of the people he met assumed he was a native American, despite never saying he was. He also explained some of the ways he planned out his career to do the work he enjoyed. Jerry Smith, Division of Law Enforcement, among many others, significantly influenced his career. He volunteered to take notes as a Rapporteur at a CITES Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora conference of the parties in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. This task introduced him to numerous international contacts and enhanced his networking in international matters. He did temporary details in Miami and Washington D.C., including training missions to Mexico to train federal officials in CITES international trade mechanisms and law enforcement tactics and techniques. Eventually Benito is promoted to Washington as a Senior Special Agent, and while in Washington promoted to the position of Special Agent-in-charge (SAC) of Investigations. He then is promoted to the Deputy Assistant Director of Law Enforcement. During his initial tour in Washington, Director Jaime Clark elevates the Branch of Law Enforcement under the Refuge program and creates the Office of Law Enforcement and elevates the Chief of Law Enforcement to a Senior Executive Service position and to the Directorate level of the FWS. After his stint in Washington, Benito is transferred to Portland, Oregon as the SAC.

After getting to Portland, the conflict surrounding the endangered sucker fish in Upper Klamath Lake and the FWS, the Klamath Tribes, irrigators, and other stakeholders, all vying for limited water resources in the drought-stricken Klamath Basin and saving the sucker fish. After a 10-week standoff, 9/11 happens and the priority for everyone is securing planes. Some service agents become temporary air marshals and contribute to the security and safety of the airlines. Later Benito is transferred back to Washington as the Deputy Chief and eventually is promoted to the position of Chief of the Office of Law Enforcement. Before he retires, Dale Hall, FWS Director asks him to extend his retirement for another 3 years. The Secretary of Interior approves the extension. Benito retired in January 2011 after 22 years in the FWS.

Benito received the Guy Bradley Award from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation in 2011. This very prestigious award is presented annually, recognizes individuals for achievements in wildlife law enforcement.

The Interview

DEBORAH HOLLE: This is Deborah Holle, and I'm here in San Antonio to interview Benito Perez. So, I'll turn this over to him so that we can start this interview. I'll ask him a few questions to get us started. Okay. Where were you born?

BENITO PEREZ: Good morning, Deborah. I was born in Alice, Texas, in 1952.

DEBORAH: Okay. What did your parents do?

BENITO: My dad was a janitor at the local high school and my mother was an accountant - a bookkeeper - at the local high school in Ben Bolt, Texas.

DEBORAH: And you lived in town?

BENITO: Lived in town across the street from the high school and I had no brothers or sisters.

DEBORAH: And you tell me you were the valedictorian of your class.

BENITO: 1970. I graduated as a valedictorian of the Ben Bolt-Palito Blanco independent school district.

DEBORAH: Well, that's for me as a high school student who remembered those days, I think that was pretty impressive, actually.

BENITO: So, we're talking about a high school of 100 kids. Nevertheless, I had about a 97-point average.

DEBORAH: Can you tell us more about your education?

BENITO: I was a dad at 19, which was very detrimental to a lot of things that I had to rearrange in my life. My wife was my high school sweetheart. This all happened unexpectedly, but proactively. So, it curtailed a lot of things that I did from the standpoint of scholarship offers that I got and so on and so forth. So, we made it work. It's about finding work and starting to do things - working for the local newspaper and then ultimately in 1971, I joined the Army National Guard. I went off to training when my wife was expecting a child. She was 18 years old. And I came back. Vietnam was just about to end. I was in the infantry. I came back and then started to look for employment so I could support her and my child to be.

DEBORAH: Okay.

BENITO: That was in '71, '72. In the process of working for the National Guard, I was offered an opportunity as a Guardsman to work with the Texas Highway Patrol on special holidays. The governor

started a new special program, and that's how I basically started to volunteer, literally to work with a state trooper as their partner.

DEBORAH: When you were in college, I see that you went to Texas A&I University, Pan-American and Del Mar. You were an undergraduate in pre-law and criminal justice. Did those degrees help you in your career?

BENITO: I had three years of college. I don't have a degree.

DEBORAH: Okay.

BENITO: 90% of it was part-time because I wanted to go back. I missed out on the fact that I didn't take up the opportunities for scholarships when I was a valedictorian. Plus, I had some sports scholarships, too, because I was pretty good at football. Basically, it was part-time.

The courses that I was taking were related to law enforcement just from the standpoint that, you know, I had an interest in it, but not because I had something that I wanted to accomplish. It was just something that I was interested in, and I started taking pre-law. If I gave any thought to being an attorney, it was brief. And that was basically the kind of people that I was surrounded by. I had an uncle that was a deputy sheriff, so that was as close to law enforcement as I had gotten.

DEBORAH: And I interrupted you when you were talking about riding with the Highway Patrol.

BENITO: The governor at the time, I believe it was Price Daniels, he started something called Operation Lifesaver. Literally during special holidays like Labor Day and all these special holidays where you have the long weekends, there was a lot of traffic fatalities in the state of Texas. He created this program where he activated National Guard officers, National Guardsmen, that would volunteer to spread out the troopers that he had at the time. He could double them on the highways to be more present.

So, they literally asked for volunteers statewide to be a highway patrolman's partner so they could enhance the presence of troopers on the highway. I raised my hand, and I got selected. So, even after I did those details, the local troopers got to know me. So, every now and then they'd call me to see if I wanted to ride with them and I'd say, "Sure."

DEBORAH: Okay. I see here you also worked for the Department of Public Safety in Texas as a communications operator and supervisor. Did that help you in your career with like Parks and Wildlife and Fish and Wildlife Service?

BENITO: Well, briefly, having worked with the highway patrolman, one afternoon we were at an accident, one of the guys said, "Do you ever think about working for us?" I said, "Not really." "Well, they're going to be hiring an Academy." Quick - I went to Corpus Christi. The man takes a look at me. He sees I'm wearing glasses. He says, "Let's go check your eyes, your vision." We go down to the local driver's license office. He checks my vision uncorrected. My vision was 20-200. He says, "I'm sorry, to be a trooper you need to have 20/40 vision uncorrected." I said, "Okay." It was no disappointment. I said, "Okay. Well, I

didn't know that." Then he says, "But we have this opportunity. They're looking for a dispatcher, a communications officer for McAllen. Would you be interested in meeting that supervisor to see if you have an opportunity to get that job?" I said, "Sure." So, he took me right off the bat. They administered a bunch of exams and tests and typing tests because I could type 70 words a minute. One of the valuable courses I took in high school. So, he evaluated me.

I said, "Okay." "Well, I'll let you know." Three weeks later I get a call. I'm doing some security work, just part time with Stanley Smith Security Agency, which was basically just something I did on the side, going to college at the same time. He says, "Well, you got selected. We need you in McAllen, Texas" on such and such a day. And I said, "Okay." "Well, you're going to be a one-man DPS station, but you're going to have to train in Harlingen. So, you need to move wherever you're going to move." By that time, I had a child and I said, "Okay."

I had a mobile home. Back then, they weren't manufactured homes, they were mobile homes. Moved my mobile home to McAllen, worked in Harlingen. [Got] promoted. I was a unique one-man DPS communications officer in McAllen because they had revitalized their communication station and they had a gap. So, they needed somebody to cover the night shifts. Only the night shifts for eight hours in that part of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. And that was it. I did that for three years. The Border Enforcement Task Force was initiated by the governor at the time. I [was] promoted to the supervisor of that same facility that I opened. So, I actually was the first supervisor of the DPS office in the McAllen Communications Office. And that definitely was a lead-in to continuing in law enforcement because I wasn't a trooper, because I didn't meet the minimum eyesight requirement, even though I was physically capable.

Having associated with Texas Parks and Wildlife game wardens that would come by and visit us at the state police headquarters in McAllen, I got to know them. They'd asked me to go ride with them. And then one day they said, "Hey, we got an academy coming up." This was in 1978. So, I applied, and I got selected and I went to the Texas Game Warden Academy in 1978, finished it in 1979, and I was a Texas game warden in the lower Texas area, Cameron County, and then eventually San Patricio County.

So, getting back to what you asked me. Yes, my initial actual joining in the National Guard and then volunteering exposed me to law enforcement quite a bit more than the courses I was taking. I wasn't someone that woke up one day and said *I want to be a law enforcement officer*. It just evolved.

DEBORAH: So, when did you start working for Texas Parks and Wildlife?

BENITO: 1978. 1973 DPS to 1978. Interagency transfer to Texas Parks and Wildlife, 1978. So, I didn't lose any state time. Then I went and attended the Game Warden Academy in 1978.

DEBORAH: What was it law enforcement that made you want to go with TPWD (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department) or an interest in wildlife?

BENITO: It was both. I had grown up outdoors in the rural area. I hunted with everything from a BB gun to a .22, mostly rabbit hunting, not real big game hunting. And fishing as much as we could. And then it

just seemed to jive. I didn't have this ambition from any time earlier in my life to say, *I want to be a game warden*. It just evolved. The Y in the road was, yeah, I really wanted to be a highway patrolman, but the system wouldn't allow me because I didn't qualify because I didn't have a minimum eyesight requirement.

Parks and Wildlife just needed it corrected. So now when I applied to be a state officer as a game warden, you're a state police officer. The eyesight was irrelevant. So that's when I applied with them and ultimately got selected in the 33rd Game Warden Academy.

DEBORAH: Well, in your ten years that you worked there, do any of your cases stand out that you're most proud of or that you were most satisfied with?

BENITO: Texas Parks and Wildlife opportunities as a uniformed law enforcement officer - high visibility marked patrol car in uniform. I did a couple of things. I did a lot of things. Water safety - we dealt with drownings and everything else. So, the experience of dealing with the public and dealing with people.

The one thing that happened to me from a detrimental side is I was responding to assist a local county in a flash flood. They had like 18 inches of rain within about two hours and I got washed off the road in my patrol car. I was in the water for about eight hours but ultimately ended up helping the National Guard rescue people. And that was one thing that was pretty significant.

I really enjoyed the outreach that we did to high schools and conventions where they wanted somebody to man a booth. Investigative wise, I worked a lot. I worked a lot around the deer hunting protection areas for night hunters. I was involved with the federal Fish and Wildlife agents at the time on a peregrine [falcon] trapping opportunity on the beach where peregrine hunters try to evade the law by going and doing their own trapping of peregrines down on the lower Texas coast. That was really my first major exposure to a Fish and Wildlife Service agent and what they did. In fact, Joe Ramos was one of them that was down there helping. He came in from Arizona because this was a group that came out of California. So that initial exposure, we overlapped with the federal agents, but there was very few of them.

And then they got to know me and what I was able to bring as a uniformed officer, and the liaison started. And then that's kind of how it continued. The agent in Corpus Christi one day he says, "Hey, we're going to hire an agent class, would you be interested?" And I said, "Yeah, probably." So, he mailed an application, and I filled it out and I sent it in with no expectations of getting hired because I was happy doing what I was doing. I never left a job I had before because I was unhappy. It was always because there was a better opportunity, and I threw it in. I threw the application in. It took them months before they hired a class.

So then eventually the state job had a lot of interaction with a lot of different kind of law enforcement officers. Fish and Wildlife Service was just one of those agents that I worked with as a uniformed state police officer. And that's kind of what took me there. And I can go from that point if you want me to.

So, I applied to get selected as an agent and I reported to FLETC [Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, Glynco, GA] and we go through the Special Agent Basic School and what our agency does and still does to this day, the Office of Law Enforcement. Back then, it was the Division of Law Enforcement - because a law enforcement officer at the time - we'll get that eventually. The selecting official calls me, says, "Well, we got a job for you if you want it." The agency didn't tell you where you were going to go until you were done with training because they made a significant cost investment in getting you through training. Then they tell you, "By the way, you're going to New York City" and you say, "I ain't going there." So, a very good practice was they tell you where you're going before you ever even accepted the job because they didn't want to waste time on you because they had hundreds of applicants to choose from.

I'm fortunate. There was over 3,000 applicants when I applied for the agent position and they hired a class of 22. I was one of those. I get the offer for the job. He says, "I've got a job for you. It's in Gardena, California. Aah, don't bother to look. It's Los Angeles." (laughter) Los Angeles, to me, sounded like another planet. "Will you take the job?" And I said, "Sure. Yes, sir." "All right. You'll be hearing more. You got to go see a doctor. You got to pass a physical. You got to X, you got to Y, you got to Z, and you'll be getting more information." I said, "Okay." And eventually, all that material came in. I went and got my physicals and reported to FLETC for criminal investigator training and then followed with our own training Special Agent Basic School and got shipped off to Los Angeles, California.

DEBORAH: I don't mean to interrupt, but how would you compare the training you got with the state versus what the initial training was you got with the Fish and Wildlife Service?

BENITO: Well, I can compare the two to my military training because I was an infantry soldier. There was nothing handed to you when I was a Texas game warden. It was very physical, hand-to-hand and all kinds of things. You had to complete these obstacles and so on and so forth. Fish and Wildlife Service training at FLETC was a little bit structured differently because Criminal Investigator School was where you got all the hand-to-hand combat and training and had a PEB -physical efficiency battery. It consisted of five events, and you had to basically - it could be used as an elimination of your being able to do the job. Obviously, you couldn't be defective. So, the physical demands and the training itself.

The primary difference - the Texas Parks and Wildlife Academy - was scholastic training, if I may. And the legal training was to me just as significant and important as the Fish and Wildlife Service Criminal Investigative Service training, because FLETC's who trains you. The Fish and Wildlife Service Law enforcement doesn't train you till you go to the Special Agent Basic School, but they were equally as challenging. Fortunately, from my perspective, studies and reading and doing that has never been a challenge for me as much. But I did study, so the training was at the same level really. Pretty demanding because there was no guarantee that if you didn't graduate, if you didn't make the grades, if you didn't pass the physical challenges, you weren't going to be an employee anymore, you were going to be terminated.

DEBORAH: Well, that's good to know that the training across state and federal was so similar.

BENITO: I could favor the state of Texas. That was 26 weeks of training and it was non-stop. Plus, we got three weeks of training at Texas A&M University in Rescue and Recovery to be certified as a rescue

person, dealing with disasters and so on and so forth on top of that. So, there was no expectation that you were going to graduate just because you were there.

DEBORAH: Well, I don't know. I just find that good to know because sometimes there's jealousies between state and feds and you're shaking your head no.

BENITO: Not in my circle of influence.

DEBORAH: Right. Now, you said that you then became a special agent with the Fish and Wildlife Service, and that was in the branch of investigation?

BENITO: Back then, it was a law enforcement office, and I could elaborate. My station, Los Angeles, basically Gardena - one of the most significant differences for me going from a uniform law enforcement officer with a high visibility patrol car and being a special agent in plain clothes, was that opportunity to dissimulate or the anonymity that came with being a plain clothes investigator as opposed to being high visibility. I equate uniformed officers and patrol officers are preventive in nature generally, even though they pursue their own particular violations.

As an investigator, there is a way to react. I used to do that as a uniformed officer. I'm reacting to something that already happened. The big thing for me was I can now pursue at the federal level the people that I knew as a uniformed officer that I was walking away from that got something over me. They got away with something because they saw me coming or because I'm in my car. Now, I'm a plainclothes investigator and I was chomping at the bit to do some proactive investigative work into catching bad guys, basically; pursue those criminals that were impacting the resources that were getting away with it and focus my attention on that. As a criminal investigator special agent, you got a caseload of investigations to follow, just like a detective would. This crime happened. It's not a uniform thing. Now you need to investigate it.

So yes, we had those, but the biggest initiative for me, the biggest excitement for me as a special agent was, I let my hair grow. I grew a beard. I dressed in plain clothes. I was having that anonymity where I'm not walking into a restaurant and somebody's asking me, "Hey, where's the good fishing" because I'm wearing a game warden uniform. People don't know who I am, and I'm going to do the best I can to go for places where I couldn't go as a uniformed officer and see what I can accomplish. That was the biggest difference for me is getting from going from uniform to a plain clothes investigator in Los Angeles. It was everything going on from A to Z when it came to federal law that we enforced.

DEBORAH: I've heard the term case agent and I don't really know what that is

BENITO: Basically, it's you're the person responsible. A case agent is, for example, an assigned case that you're liable for it. Basically, it's on your ledger. *So, okay, we got this thing happened. Here's case number one, two, three, four, five, A, B, you're assigned to it. You're the case agent.* Now, I might recruit agents to follow my direction to conduct this investigation. But I'm the case agent. Okay. That's all that is. It makes one person responsible for completing that investigation or undertaking this particular operation. That's all it is. Basically, the case agent is a person to hold accountable for what goes on.

DEBORAH: Well, we'll focus, I guess, on this first ten years when you were in Los Angeles and Dallas. So, do you need to differentiate between those two locales, because I'd like to ask you, when you were a case agent, which cases did you feel you accomplished something that was greater than just solving the case? Or your favorite case or? I don't know - you tell me.

BENITO: Well, I'll be maybe not too cute about what I'm about to say. My favorite cases were when we ended up catching bad guys, people breaking the law. And people break the law at different levels of degree. So, I'm not saying that I just went after people just "because", because you still have to be able to prevail in court. The thing that I was looking for is the opportunity to do something that I didn't do before because now I'm a plain clothes investigator. So, it's really simple, the more you work, the more you work. You can be an investigator just like you are a shoe clerk and work 8 to 5, put in your eight hours and go home. I got a caseload. I've been assigned these cases. That's what I'm going to do. I didn't do that as a game warden, and I certainly wasn't going to do that as a special agent. So, you can take a violation of something that's fairly significant and evaluate it and say, *You know what, I want to gather more intel on this. I want to gather more information on this.*

One of the first cases I got literally within a month evolved into a major case that ended up being an FBI case. Not their case - I gave them something they hadn't solved in ten years because I got a call from a company in LA. I'll be brief. They say, "We just had a funny call." This was a conscientious employee who said, "We got a call from a guy that says he's got sea otter pelts to sell, but he wants to sell them to somebody in Asia. Do we have a market?"

DEBORAH: Sea otters?

BENITO: Sea otters. "He called from somewhere in the LA area. He has access to sea otter pelts and he was looking for a market. We thought that was kind of odd". I said, "Well, send me what you got". I got the information. I took the information, talked it over with my resident agent in charge and said, "Hey, I want to I want to pursue this." Long story short, I got ahold of the guy in my undercover capacity because we all by that time I had a fake undercover ID and so on and so forth. I'm not going to tell my undercover name because I might upset some people. But anyway, I took that. I have a case load, but I took that and I found out who the person was that had called. So, I called him out of the blue. Of course, all this is technologically being recorded and so on and so forth. I needed to get enough to open a case. What's going on with this sea otter pelts? So, I started talking to this very elderly sounding man, told him who I was. *I'm interested. I got a referral from this company*, which is what he was expecting. But in fact, they ratted him out more so than say, *Hey, you guys know somebody that'll buy pelts?*

Anyway, long story short, I got in with this old man. I went and saw him. He turned out he was like in his 70s, old like me now. Well, as we evolved, he started to tell me these sea otter pelts are coming from his source in Alaska. I said, "Well, what's the black-market value of one sea otter pelt?" \$9,500 at the time because the sea otter pelt itself, it's skin, are used for fine clothing or fine hats. "The black-market value of one sea otter was \$9,500," he said. "I got 65 of them, but I got them in Anchorage." So, we started talking. I was a manager of a trucking company; that we transport anywhere, anytime, anyplace. I told him that's who I was.

One day we're talking, and he says, "Hey, would you be interested in salmon?" I said, "I don't know. What do you got?" He said, "Well, I've got 40,000 pounds of salmon. You know, they're bringing them down from Alaska, and I'm trying to find a place to sell [them]." Of course, by this time I know this guy. Everything this older man is doing is shady. There's nothing legitimate about what he has said. So, "Sure, I can get my trailer's over." He said, "All right, let's get going." So, we got it started going. I said, "Let me see what you got." So, they actually brought some salmon to LA, and we met in a non-discreet place. I recruited an Asian National Marine fisheries biologist to play the role of an orient Asian buyer. I talked to her, trained her, I gave her direction. "You go act as an interested [buyer.] Look at the fish, see what they give you. We'll be on surveillance to protect you." She had an associate with her. She came in. Long story short, we did the surveillance. She got some documents. Well, this fish was supposed to be coming from the Sitka cold storage. We got a piece of paper. Well, this is all from Alaska and so on and so forth. And got it all, collected it all. That's all she did, and she went on her way.

As I followed up with Sitka cold storage, [I learned] they had burned down five years before. There was no Sitka cold storage. A lot of things pointed to the fact that something else is going on here. In the process, there was a connection made with my guy, that he was an informant for the FBI. I contacted the local FBI office, and they had 500 special agents as opposed to our six. I contacted one officer and he meets me. And I said, "Here's what's going on." He says, "You know, the Seattle office has been after a group of people that are actually stealing truck tractors full of seafood out of the refrigeration facilities. I mean, acres and acres of refrigerated trailers are being stolen. And they don't know, they know it's coming down south, but they lose it." I said, "Well, I'm on the other end of it." I said, "I'll tell you what. Do you want me to continue to take it?" In other words, being more interested in buying fish also, and not just the sea otter pelts because those hadn't been delivered yet.

Long story short, that evolved. I got more and more. They offered to sell me three trailers full of salmon. The FBI was already involved; we had one of our agents pose as a New York buyer. We started to realize this was organized crime. When they researched who this older man was, he was an FBI informant who was in fact, giving them false information and leading them on.

They recruited him out of Terminal Island Federal Prison to be an informer for them for organized crime. Well, he was informing them but he was throwing them off the track. So, they've been trying to solve this case for ten years because of tractors full of seafood, Alaskan king crab, you name it, [were being stolen.] They were going to bring me three tractors of Alaskan king crab from Alaska. But in fact, they were going to hook into this facility. And they did. The FBI got involved. And I told this case agent, the FBI case agent, Manny Ladsus, who was a Frenchman, but he was also an FBI agent.

I said, "Look, I'm giving up a lot" because I hadn't culminated my investigation. "I'm giving up a lot. So, all I want is if you have an in for me, if you have an in for me to be able to get what I'm after, which is sea otter pelts or that connection to Anchorage, I want the first shot." He said, don't give it a second thought. Bottom line - people broke into the facility. The FBI is on surveillance. 'Cause they are bringing me, in LA, the trailers. I said, "I've got it all set up. The FBI is surveilling them." They let them get on the interstate. They break in. Well, they have somebody on the inside of this facility. They break in, in the middle of the night. They hook up three tractors full, three trailers full of Alaskan king crab, and they

start heading down Interstate 5 to California. They let them go to the point that it's obvious this is interstate commerce. The stuff is being stolen. And they busted them. I mean, they had airplanes.

So, okay, the FBI is done with their case, now we start putting things together. One of the guys involved in the case decides to cooperate. I said, "Okay, here's what I want you to do. I want you to tell him, tell my original old man I have a connection in New York City. He's coming through Seattle. We're going to meet him." Long story short, one of our agents comes to Seattle. He's a typical New Yorker, meets him at the hotel to look and buy these sea otter pelts because he knows what he can get for him. So, the old man comes in. Come to find out he has a son that's a Seattle police officer, but that's beside the point. He's just doing counter surveillance in the parking lot. Sorry. We're going to run out of time here. Bottom line is, where are the skins? My guy is there, and we have however much money he's expecting to get for 65 sea otter pelts. We have \$100,000 in a bag. We flash it to him.

He says, "I've got to go get them." "Fine. Go get them. I'm here another two hours on a layover. I'm getting out of here." Of course, he's typical New Yorker. I mean, he's like, right in his element. He leaves, comes back. Of course, I then – sorry - backtrack. I go to Seattle because we're trying to get this organized and the FBI director in Seattle who has like 600 agents, the case agent from LA, introduces me and he practically jumps over his desk, he says appreciatingly, Agent Perez, and he says, "I know what you got doing. You tell me what you need. You need an airplane. You need technical support. You got it." So, we had surveillance in the hotel room. We had an adjoining room. I had an airplane in the air, all FBI assets, because of what I brought them indirectly because of that one phone call that happened months before. So, the guy brings the 65 [otter pelts], they go down and look at it and go "Aaah." All right, and this is all on video - he dumps the money in front of him. Yeah, because we have the three boxes of sea otter pellets in the back of his truck that we can see on surveillance and everything else. And he starts counting it, and he's already starting to figure out. *Wait a minute, this isn't enough.* He never sees me again. So, our agents go in and arrest him and then we go finish the search warrant at his house. He doesn't know we have a lot of leads that go back to the people that are actually poaching the sea otters in Alaska and so on and so forth. So that was within a month after I hit Los Angeles as a special agent.

DEBORAH: We're going to pause for a minute. This is Deborah Holle, and we are now returning to Benny's interview. So, I guess we dropped off in Los Angeles and then what did you do?

BENITO: Well, I can tell you, Deborah, that any case that I did in LA, I did everything to the best of my ability. That particular case led into a couple of others just to mention - the Asian arowanas, for example - the black market in Asian arowanas was again started with somebody that got busted. I called him up, I recruited him as an informant, then I started an undercover case. The proactive aspect of what I did as a plain clothes officer, plus the fact that I was successful, particularly very early on in my career, just gave me more impetus.

Now I'm in LA three years and people are calling me because they have a vacancy available in their locations.

DEBORAH: I want to interrupt - what was an arowana?

BENITO: An Asian arowana is an exotic fish.

DEBORAH: Oh.

BENITO: It's black-market value at the time was about \$8,000 for a little two-inch fish because the Asian community viewed it as a prestigious and a lucky charm.

DEBORAH: Oh.

BENITO: So real estate agents would get those for people that bought houses from them because an Asian arowana had a connection to prestige and luck, and it would have to be on a certain side of the house in a certain aquarium. It was just one fish. But the black market in LA at that time was about \$8,000 for one little fish. People were bringing them in on their ankles and their knees and we busted this guy with just that variety. The inspectors got him at LAX. So, they turned over the seizure. And I said, "I'm going to call this guy." Here's a Chinese real estate agent educated in the US. And I said, "I want to talk to you more about this." And I recruited him as an informant. So, two months later, he's introducing me to different places in Chinatown in Los Angeles.

Why? Because that's what I wanted him to do. I wanted to pursue that avenue of the black market. And I can give you an example after example. As an investigator, obviously you have to feel comfortable doing that. I was there. I had the resources. But what wasn't there, I pursued, I recruited, [just like] I made the call to the person that called about the pelts. I called this guy, and we started talking. I brought him into the office and I recruited him as an operative.

And he started helping us to infiltrate the market. The trade on Asian arowana. That became a whole other major investigation. Now, I choose to put in for Dallas. I transferred to the DFW (Dallas/Fort Worth) Airport. I had three years' experience dealing with CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) and import/export. Import/export and CITES - a lot of people think a special agent says ducks. *You're doing duck work. You're doing duck work. You're doing duck work.* Yeah, I've done plenty of that as a plain clothes and as a uniformed officer. I didn't want to pursue ducks now. We did that and of course we worked on the season openers.

I did the open checking of duck hunters and so on and so forth, commercialization things. But the real deep down, I got to get into this to do uncover work into the black market or whatever.

So, I moved to I moved from Dallas, I'm sorry, from Los Angeles to Dallas. I was at the DFW airport. I had three years' experience with import/export. I was the only agent in the Dallas office and I was their resource for dealing with their seizures and so forth, which every inspector does seizures. We had wildlife inspectors right there. They wear uniforms. That's what they do. They work like a customs inspector, but they focus on the fish and wildlife legitimate trade. What they uncover, everything from the passengers to everything else like you see on TV, to catch a thief or to catch a smuggler, our inspectors are doing that all over the country as we speak. Those cases, those seizures get turned over to an investigator, a special agent to deal with, to follow up. And you see this on the shows now. They say, "We'll refer this to a customs investigator to follow up on it." Well, we got all those kinds of cases, and I

had a share of those things that I [was] also involved in in the Dallas area. So, I moved to LAX. I'm sorry, from LAX airport and that particular generation of cases and follow up to DFW, which was just as active.

I had full access to the airport, always liaised with counterparts-- Customs worked a lot with customs agents. They become a resource for you; you become a resource for them because you're exchanging information intelligence all the time. Dallas/Fort Worth was awesome. I'm from Texas, but North Texas was like another country to me. So, we settled into Dallas. I was there for several years and I can tell you I did a couple of major cases.

Probably the most significant one was I infiltrated, again, with a source that I cultivated because my boss in Oklahoma City said, "Hey, we got this call from this guy, and he started talking about people [who] offered him some feathers" and so on and so forth. I was in Dallas at the time. Anybody interested? I said, "Yeah." So, I called him, started to recruit him. Within three months he becomes an operative of mine. We go through all the processes and we go all over Oklahoma and North Texas. He's introducing me as a person interested in Native American art. *I had collected a bunch of cow skulls and I'm looking for artwork. I'm looking for people to do artwork because I'm an entrepreneur and I have a business. Here's my business card. I'm in North Texas, here's my address.* And in the process of going to these places or these individuals to do all this artwork, which was beautiful artwork, the subject of feathers would come up. I did that. That was my in. An Oklahoma investigator joined me occasionally because they had certain interest in that too. And I cultivated 20 defendants, not only in Oklahoma and North Texas and also, after about two years working with the operative who was a Kiowa Indian, I passed as a Native American. People would ask me.

The only thing I couldn't do - because we have to ask permission to do undercover work from the Department of Justice - you describe what you're going to do. If we're done with this case, okay, will you support prosecution? And, and you write a proposal for an undercover case. It goes up through channels. We have different levels of undercover work. So, this is all policy regulated. Benny wasn't inventing anything. When I proposed an undercover operation or an undercover investigation, it got formalized into a proposal. It went up through the chain. And if it was going to evolve into potential defendants, that package had to go to the prosecutor's office, and they would evaluate it and they'd say, *yes, if you succeed in this that you're describing, we will prosecute.* You're getting an up front, *we'll support you.* And I never had one turned down.

But it wasn't Benny deciding to go out there and start working an undercover case if it was going to evolve into other than a buy-bust. Differentiating, like somebody selling a piece of ivory at the local flea market, you're in there in plain clothes. You say, "Hey, I'll buy it. How much you want?" "150." *Here's the badge. You're busted.* That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about investing your time and energy and effort, recruiting other agents or other officers to help you. That had to get written up as a proposed undercover investigation. It went up the chain. The Department of Justice would then look at it and say *we'll support this.* So, I had gotten this 100% support for a case I initiated in North Texas [and] Oklahoma. Ended up with 20 defendants. We had defendants in different states.

DEBORAH: I don't want to interrupt, but I want to backtrack about the Native American.

BENITO: That's my informant?

DEBORAH: Well, no, that you, that they thought...

BENITO: Oh, yes, I'm sorry, they would ask me. One of the things the proposal said was you can't pose as a Native American. So, don't pretend to be a tribal member because I wasn't, although my ancestry was Chickapoo. My ancestors from Mexico were Kickapoo. In Mexico, they're Chickapoo. I had long hair and you can imagine other than the beard, they'd say, *hey, what tribe are you with?* So, my response was, "I don't know. I'm some Mexican tribe. I have no idea what it's called, but that's the only tribe I'm associated with. My grandfather used to tell me I was a Mexican from Mexico." Ha ha.

They'd all laughed. So, I wasn't claiming to be a tribal member of any association with tribes in the US. Say, *hey, what tribe are you?* I said, "Some kind of Mexican tribe. I have no idea." I said, "I don't know. That's what I'm told." And that was my in. And I've got asked that all the time. So that is what I would tell people. So, we evolved that investigation and culminated and brought in a -in fact, I was working in that case when the tower, the bomber, Oklahoma City bomber -I had just been in the courthouse three days before. I knew several of the officers that died in that bombing. The Murrah building was next door. I had been going there forever.

We were already starting to indict people in my investigation to go do arrest warrants and search warrants. We culminate these things with a takedown. We bring in agents and officers from all over to help go out and do arrests and go out and do search warrants. I was in that stage already planning. I had gone before the grand jury and presented all these by myself and got all these warrants. And of course, the prosecutor's already on our side. *Oh, wow. Yeah, absolutely.* It turns out that the grand jury that indicted all my defendants was in session when the bomb went off. And I can tell you stories of their experiences when the bomb went off next door that killed all these people. But anyway, that was all going on. In fact, the day before we actually did our takedown, which was our roundup, is when they imploded the Murrah building.

Everybody saw the building imploded. Fish and Wildlife Service - I'll tell you this briefly - a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist. I'm not going to say his name because I don't remember it. He worked in Tulsa. He would take his son to that nursery, and he said, "Yeah, that day, for whatever reason, I just didn't take him. And that's when the bomb exploded." I knew him personally, and he had the little boy with him. I said, "Does he know?" He said, "No. Every now and then all he does he just asks for his playmates." He didn't take him in that day.

So, okay. So anyway, from there then I'm evaluating career wise—DC, DC, DC and whether it was somebody like Jerry Smith who was an incredible key person in my life and you have people here that you have a question about who, who is your examples and so forth. I'll get to that in a minute. But they developed this 30-day opportunity for anybody interested in coming to DC to do a 30-day detail, just to get a sense of whether you ever want to work in Washington.

In the field, you thought, well, if you want to be a boss, you got to go through Washington. You know what I'm saying? That kind of deal. So that was kind of the perceived and all federal agencies are that

way. You have the sense that if you do some time in DC, you're going to be able to get out. So, I volunteered for a 30-day detail. I say, "I'll go to DC", again, with the support of my wife. I go to DC; I do 30 days as a desk agent handling their stuff there. I come back and say, "Yeah, I'll consider it." Things didn't open up yet. I had another opportunity a year later and you would go and you would stay in an apartment that they had rented.

It was an awesome opportunity. Who dreamed it up? I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't Jerry Smith. He was very key in my life, only because of the opportunities he offered to me. He didn't tell me, but he was in Washington. He would call me and say, "Benny," for example, "would you be interested in being a rapporteur at the CITES Conference in Fort Lauderdale, California [correction, Florida]. He called me for some reason.

DEBORAH: What's a rapporteur?

BENITO: I didn't know either. I said, "I don't know, Jerry." I never even heard of the word. Basically, you take the minutes. "Rapporteur. Look it up and let me know." I said, "Well, yeah, I'm interested in it." So, and when the conference happened in Fort Lauderdale, I'm a rapporteur working hand in hand with the CITES secretariat staff, taking notes of the sessions; you work in teams. The long story short, I didn't say no. I said, yeah, kind of like the bailiff job I'm doing now. I said, "Yeah, sure." I didn't even know what the word meant. But here I am in Fort Lauderdale as a rapporteur on the CITES secretariat staff.

DEBORAH: Did those contacts that you made at that meeting help you as you went further up your career ladder?

BENITO: Not help me from the standpoint of advancing myself but having the resources when I was a resource to say, *Hey, I know somebody* because there's the official way to communicate, especially when you deal with the international arena, because we worked a lot of joint international cases. There's the official and there's what we call the "extra official". By the time I finished my career, I could pick up the phone and talk to the boss in Mexico City, directly and say, "Hey, here's what we're looking at. You're going to see the formal stuff coming your way." "Oh, yeah, we'll get somebody right on it" because I also know who they could trust. I could do that with England. I could do that with London. I could do that with Australia. I could do that with New Zealand. I could do that with Bolivia because I worked a case in Bolivia--that was a whole other story. So that's what I brought - those contacts. Like the way you ask me the question is knowing those people and them knowing you and then of course not being stupid about what you were there to do, doing the best job you could and asking and learning and just absorbing it all.

That's how those varied circumstances, like contacts in the FBI. I could say, "Hey, Manny, I'm looking for somebody in Washington, DC. What do you think?" "I'll get back to you. Hey, I've got this agent [in the] Fish and Wildlife Service. He's doing this. He's doing this one." Boom. Ten minutes later, I'm getting a call from this guy because of the contact I had. In that way, those contacts are invaluable. So that's how, not *hey man, if you need me for a reference*. No, not at all.

But it's the networking and the credibility of who they know you are and who they are; and to say, *hey all I need you to do is put me in touch with the right person*, especially in foreign countries, put me in

touch with the right person because I made the CITES contacts. I would go to these international conventions. We formed the Trilateral Committee between Mexico, US and Canada, and the NAWEA, North American Wildlife Enforcement Group. Same thing. My counterparts in Mexico and Canada - can you imagine if all that had to be done through the formal channels and we had something coming in from Mexico City or from Anchorage or from Canada or vice versa? *Hey, this just left New York. It's going to Toronto.* Yeah. So that's how those things were valuable.

DEBORAH: Well, what was your next—

BENITO: Well, I'm in Dallas. I go to these 30-day opportunities. I get asked if I want to be the acting supervisor in Miami because Jorge Picon, the agent at the time, he's going somewhere, and he said, "Hey, ask Benny Perez if he'll come take over for me." I said, "Okay." So, I go to Miami. I do that.

I know my way around an international airport, right? So, I'm out with the inspectors and I'm supervising the office for almost three weeks. So, then the opportunity comes up for DC and it was like, *you want to apply?* Of course. I'm applying all, the do's and don'ts, and can I afford this? And how long I'm going to go there as a GS-12. I'm sorry, as a GS-13. In the process, okay, I'll get there. So, I applied for Washington DC, and I went to Washington DC, October of 1998, as a staff senior special agent to work as staff for the chief and the deputies and the agent in charge of investigations.

I went to Washington DC as a staff agent to start supporting that which I dealt with them, so I knew - kind of, sort of. Plus, I had been there for two different 30-day details because I chose to. And that's what basically I went to DC for that. In the process, I get an occasional call from Jerry Smith who says, "Hey, we've got a team going to Mexico City for training. We'd like for you to join us." "Okay." And the people on that team were Ed Dominguez, Chente Bustamante, Jorge Picon, Joe Ramos and Jerry Smith. And here we are as field agents going to Mexico City to put on a 2- or 3-week training course on how the CITES works or whatever.

Yeah, I'll go. And of course, my boss supported me. Yeah, sure. Well, they're getting the notoriety of having somebody be on this team to go help train Mexicans or I did training sessions all over the world. But that's all stuff that - it's so easy in addition to your caseload and what you're in the middle of to say - *no, can you call somebody else?* I don't know what it would have taken for me. Not, again, not because I'm overly ambitious. Just because. *Yeah, sure, I'll make it work, you know? I'll give it a shot. Yeah. Let's go.* So, you become the resource. And then after that, I was being called by the CITES secretariat because I was their point of contact to say, "Hey, who can you put us in touch within the State Department or in the at the embassy in Mexico City? We heard you've worked there." "Yeah." So that's how that works, that networking. Did I ever use them as a source, as a reference on my applications for any of these jobs? No.

Were they talking about me? Was I familiar to them? Probably no more anymore than I was to them as they were with me—to say, *yeah, you know, hey, do you know somebody, or can you do this or can you know that or say, hey, or...* We developed a seizure, for example, in Dallas-Fort Worth that was coming from Brazil. I pick up the phone and I call the guy in Portugal, I mean Paraguay, because I've been there, to Paraguay. So, I say, hey, you work with Brazil? Yeah. Who can I trust? So-and-so.

Okay. Call him on the phone. *Hey, here's what we just intercepted. It's X and we're going to send you the information. "Okay." And we'll do that. And they do their own case, their own investigation. Six months down the road, they'd say, hey, thank you. That's the very thing we were waiting for. We knew they were getting the stuff out of the country, but we never knew it. Now we got them, and we busted them.* That's the kind of stuff that I loved, that I thoroughly enjoyed.

But I didn't train for it. I didn't plan for it. Again, I just want to catch bad guys. I just want to do as much as I can because I used to tell people that when you're a uniformed officer and I saw this with troopers, one thing doesn't happen. The laws in existence, they weren't "Benny Perez's laws". They were state laws, and they were federal laws. So, they're not your laws. So, one thing you have to do to survive, or you burn out, it's like a trooper out on the highway burning out after two years because "they're" speeding on "my" highway. If you personalize what you're doing and your profession, you're going to burn out. Because guess what? It's not your law. It's the state of Texas law. It's the US Fish and Wildlife federal laws. They're not your laws. Yeah. Wrap yourself in them. Know them inside and out. Read case law and read your agency policies so you know where you stand. And you say, *yeah, I know exactly what to do next. Yeah, I'll give it a shot, or I'll look into it further* because it's easy to say, *Yeah, I'll get to it, I'll get to it...*

Twenty percent of the people did 80% of the significant investigative work. I wasn't the only one doing that. Don't misunderstand me. I had people that I looked to that were proactively all of a sudden involved in something because they made those calls, or they got those sources developed. I went on other people's takedowns that they had been working this case for two years or a year or five years. And we've taken it down. And I'm thinking, *I want to do that. I want to be the person that brings people in to go make arrests and search warrants.*

And then they're all going, *Oh, man, this was great. Let's do it again.* Well, it didn't happen overnight, you know? So, we do the Oklahoma thing and then Washington. I apply; I got hired. I go as a desk agent and within a year our SAC of investigations - special agent in charge - gets promoted. He leaves and the position comes open; I apply for it. It's like they say, well the, the overnight sensation, so to speak. There were other people there that applied for it, too. I was selected as a SAC of investigations just after being a year in Washington. Okay. Now, was anything that was being done by that division or that program strange? Was it foreign to me? Absolutely not. I knew my profession inside and out. I knew the policies. I knew the laws. I wasn't intimidated. I got selected. It's not like, *oh, now what am I going to do?* It's kind of like the dog that chases the car. What are you going to do with it when you catch it? I didn't approach things that way. Okay, here's what's going to happen. I got the job. I was selected by someone else. I got the job. I did that for a while.

The most significant thing to happen to the Office of Law Enforcement back then, to the Law Enforcement division under refuges. I'm not sure we talked about that on the tape or not. Law enforcement was under Refuges. Refuges had law enforcement officers. No connection between the two, no hierarchy, no chain of commands. They were separate. Plain clothes investigators versus refuge law enforcement officers, of which you may have been one.

Jamie Clark said, "I want law enforcement to be its own program." I want to move the chief of law enforcement to the directorate level. At that time, the chief was Kevin Adams. I was an SAC of investigations; Tom Riley was his deputy. So, Jamie Clark is who aligned the law enforcement division as the Office of Law Enforcement [and] elevated the chief of law enforcement. Everybody else was called assistant directors of/assistant directors/refuge assistant directors. She wanted to make sure that law enforcement was recognized as the law enforcement arm of the Fish and Wildlife Service, which a lot of federal agencies have a law enforcement arm. We were the law enforcement arm in addition to refuge law enforcement.

And she gave our program its own identity and raised the chief of law enforcement, who was a GS-15 to an SES position and gave us, the Office of Law Enforcement, a seat at the directorate table. That was the most significant thing to happen when I went to Washington about that time.

DEBORAH: Did that action improve? Or no, what did it improve?

BENITO: It improved the approval process and the recognition of, for example, in some cases we would have to take an undercover proposal as an example to a non-law enforcement person. And they're going, "Well, what do you think?" She's asking the special agent in charge or she's asking, "Well, here's what I think, but you're the one that [has to decide] because you're in the chain of command." It took that person out of that level of, *oh, man, do I really want to do this?* It was a relief to non-law enforcement managers having to make those kinds of decisions because they had no concept of *what is all this undercover? What is that?* And literally, I'm not overexaggerating. We took the civilian overseers out of the ultimate responsibility. And we've heard about vicarious responsibility, understanding that if a law enforcement action takes place. *I'm a civilian regional director. I agreed. Now I'm in the middle of it, and I didn't know anything about it. I had to rely on my person, which is not a problem. That wasn't ever a problem. Suffering from that perspective, because I like to say our folks are conscientious enough to understand, look, here's the thing. Here's. But anyway, it cleaned up the chain of command right through the Washington office.*

So, now we still had the mandate of liaising with the regional directors, our special agents in charge of region 2 or 1 or whatever, or 7. It was a liaison to let the regional director know about certain things within the context of, *okay, you need to know about this. FYI, why you got it? Yeah, I got it.* But any operational decisions, major management decisions, assignments, reassignments, they weren't being handled by the regional directors anymore. They were being handled by special agents in charge because they also got bumped up, bumped up the GS-15. They were all just GS-14's. They were running the program in the region, but they were GS-14's.

So, when I went to Washington, the most I could expect if I promoted to one of those positions was to be just a GS-14. And I was happy to end my career. If I get a shot. But I didn't go to Washington, DC with the expectation that I'll be able to pick and choose where I want to go. I went to Washington, DC with the expectation that *if this is where I stay because this is where the opportunities are—I'm okay with it.* And that's exactly how it turned out.

The opportunity to be a special agent in charge of investigations was right there. I applied for it. I got selected. Okay. The next thing that happens, the deputy assistant director comes up. DADs - we all had them. Now Kevin's already an assistant director, changing his title to chief. And I applied for that job, and I got it. So, I became his deputy assistant director. So, we have a SAC and ASAC retiring simultaneously out of Portland, Oregon.

Jamie calls me. Kevin comes and sees me. He says, Hey, Benny. Jamie wants to talk to you. And he didn't want to lose me as his deputy. I assume, I mean, Kevin and I had a great working relationship. Even to this day, we still communicate. He said, "I think she wants to see if you'll go to Portland." I said, "Okay." "Are you okay with that? What about Noelia", my wife. I said, "I'm not worried about Noelia." Next day I'm seeing Jamie. She says, "Well, here's the deal, Benny. You know, the SAC and the ASAC - mandatory retirement at 57. They're both at the door the same day. Will you consider moving out there?" I said, "Sure. Is it a lateral?" She said, "Yeah." I was a GS-15. "Yes. Lateral." "Okay. Sure." "What about your wife?" I checked it over with my wife before I went to see Jamie and she said, *of course*. I had already been in DC over three years. And Jamie said, *okay*.

So, we decided, I'm going to lateral as a 15 to be the SAC of the Region 1 law enforcement program. So, then the ASAC job is open, the assistant, the deputy, the regional assistant. So, I go and see Jamie. I say, "I'm curious. What are your plans to fill the assistant... the ASAC job?" She said, "I don't know. What do you want to do? You know somebody? You got somebody?" I said, "Yeah." So, one of my counterparts, Paul Chang, had been a desk officer longer than I had. He was originally from Hawaii. All he wanted to do was go back to Hawaii. "So, do you think he'll take it?" I said, "I don't know. I just want to know do you want to advertise it?" "No, no, no. Why don't you go talk to him and see what he says?" I went and saw Paul and I said, "Hey, Paul, let me ask you something." He wasn't upset because I got his boss's job instead of him. He wasn't. So, I said, "Hey, here's what's going on. Would you be interested in being my deputy or my ASAC?" "What?" I said, "Yeah." So, he said, "Let me go talk to Doreen." Doreen was also from Hawaii. I said, "It'll get you closer to Hawaii." The next day, he says, "Yeah, man." I said, "Okay." So, I went back, told Jamie. I said, "I know who I want as my ASAC. Paul Chang." "Okay, well make it so." So now, I will allude to a major event that happened. I leave Washington a month ahead of Paul. I dropped in to Portland, Oregon as the SAC.

Dave McMullen is on the way out. The suckerfish and Klamath Falls Lake start to become a major issue for the Service because of the water levels of the lake and all the people that use that water to irrigate downstream in Northern California. That's starting to stir to the point that the community starts to threaten action to destroy the dam that controls the headwaters of Lake Klamath because the water level at Klamath Falls Lake had to be kept at a certain level for the survival of these two species of suckerfish.

Sorry, I'm not a biologist. I couldn't tell you exactly what suckerfish they were. That's just starting to boil when I hit the ground. The week that I hit the ground, Dave McMullen, says, "Well, you know, this is going on in Klamath Falls. You got it." At the end of the week, he's out the door. So here I am running to Klamath Falls, Oregon, and there's eight US marshals guarding the head gates at Klamath Falls Lake because the community is staged to go in and destroy it.

So, I show up as a Fish and Wildlife agent. Paul gets there a little bit earlier than me and they go, "Oh, okay, good. You're here to take over." It's like, uh, duh. So, hey, young Bush, Bush, not the old guy, but the other guy, W. Bush, he's just in office. He doesn't have a Secretary of Interior. This is all unfolding at Klamath Falls Lake. You can imagine. We don't have a secretary yet. I think I know who ends up being a secretary. Anyway. So, I'm coordinating with the law enforcement program and says, "Okay, we need an incident commander." I knew what all that was, because we had all that training for fires and everything else. We had that. So, you're going to be the Incident Commander for dealing with this for us. Like we're going to send you officers from different parts of the country, park police officers, so on and so forth. So bottom line is within a week we're guarding the Klamath Falls head gates from being destroyed by the community that became a magnet for every antigovernment organization you can think of in the country.

And you've got 1 or 2 pictures of that there. It pales in comparison. So, we're faced off against the community. The local district attorney, he's not supporting us in any way, shape or form. You know how the state is. They say, *hey, that's a federal thing*. But I can tell you one thing. I showed up as an Incident Commander. We started getting 40 to 45 officers from different organizations, and I was the Incident Commander. They would fly in the local airport there. We'd bring them down and we'd start to assign 12-hour shifts on and off.

We were staying at the local hotel. We were manning this location. We fortified it to the best of our ability. We're guarding it from somebody threatening. Well, I started to network and through the DA I got to talk to the main troublemakers, so to speak, from the community. I said, "Look, here's the thing. The best thing you got going for you is the fact that we're here. But if somebody does something stupid, that's not going to go well for you. So as long as we're here and we're present, you've got an audience."

Okay. The local police department, the sheriff's department, the state police, they weren't involved, but everyone - their chief, the sheriff and the local state police, Oregon state police captain, or whatever he was - they came to me personally. They would come to me as the Incident Commander and say, *here's our situation. We're not, we can't... because people are going to know. We're not involved. This is a federal thing. But if they hurt a single one of you guys, if they hurt a law enforcement officer, we're coming in*. Every single one of them told me personally, *if something happens to one of you guys, we ain't going to hesitate - it's an officer needs assistance. You need to know that*. I said, "Fine, I appreciate that." So, they had our back unofficially, but nobody knew that and that never happened.

I was meeting with the community. I was meeting with the DA. He was a mediator. He was very involved, but he wasn't involved. So here we are going into the 10th week and you'll see that they're ten weeks. It seemed like it was ten months, but I'm still not manning my desk in Portland. Paul and I only go home like one week and we're in temporary quarters. My wife is there. And guess what happens? 9/11.

I'm in my hotel room; my phone rings. It was one of the guys. "Hey, Benny, are you watching TV?" I said no. So, I turned it on and I got to see the second plane hit the second tower. The second plane hit the tower live on TV, if you remember that. I was like, *What's going on?* Oh, man, it's this and that. So, he starts telling me. So, I said, "Okay, I'll go downstairs." I went downstairs. We're still there. We started to get all this [information.] Everybody's getting everything. Okay. Flights have been stopped. And I've got a

crew; I got 12 of our agents from the New York Office and they are there because we're manning it [the headgates]. We rotated officers. Of course, they're from New York, so they're there with me on this assignment. They'd been there already almost three weeks. We were rotating.

So, all this starts to evolve and we're still there doing this detail, right? All of a sudden, the DA comes over - three days, two days later. No, I take it back. Probably the second day, the district attorney [comes.] *Hey, the DA's here. He wants to talk to you.* He comes over. There are some people with him. They stay in the car, and he comes over to me and he says, "Benny," because we're on first name base. He says "There are some key community leaders that want to talk to you. Will you let them in?" They won't come in with me. I would go see them where they wanted to meet. "Sure." So, three of the main community leaders came in. We sat around the circle, me and the DA. [One], says, "Mr. Perez, we know that you guys got better things to do than to be here at this head gate because of what we're doing. We're going to step away to let you guys go do what you need to do." And the DA said, "You can take them at their word. In fact, you look over there, literally, they were on the other side. They're already breaking down their tents and everything." They had set up a community on the other side of the canal.

And I said, "Okay." He said, "You can start planning to let your officers go do what they need to do." And nobody knew what that was going to be. That's what broke up our Klamath Falls confrontation. So, I woke everybody else that was at the hotel because we were working to say, come on over to the head gates. We're having a meeting which happened often. We always regroup. I said, "Here's what happened, guys. The community came over and they said they're going to withdraw because we got to go do something else. Now we got to go work somewhere. We've got to do something more important. So, start getting yourself geared up, check out of your rooms and start making arrangements." Nobody was flying home. So, the guys from New York rented a car, they rented two cars, and they drove all the way back to New York City. So, the community held up to their promise.

But before we all started to disperse, I saw the guys, you know, doing a commotion and getting together. And I'm sitting there, and they say, "Benny, you're not leaving, are you?" "Well, no, I want to make sure everything's [cleaned up.]" We had camera equipment and all kinds of things. I said, "No, I'm going to be here until we can clear this place up and turn it over back to the Bureau of Reclamation." They had gone like this to, you know, make sure everything's okay, because everything was functioning. No water was really being released because of the suckerfish. Right. No rain, no nothing. Anyway, I said, "Okay." "Well, we don't want you to go." "Okay."

So, the guys got together. We had a flag that had been flying the whole time we were there. Ours wasn't upside down. Theirs was. You know about that, right? And they had folded it up and they presented it to me. It was, I have it in a presentation case, and they said basically, they all said, *for your leadership you get this.* I didn't do that. I was watching out for them. I was watching out for the community. I was watching out for the organization. I was watching out for all the higher ups in Washington because they were always calling me. The White House was calling me to get insights. *How is it? How is it? How is it?* Well, I was getting those calls every day.

I have my daily log of things that I was doing. Incidents that would come up, we would deal with it; hotheads that would start this and that we would hold our own. They actually inched all the way up to

the edge of the canal and we stopped them right there. We were barricaded. They started out on the other side of the fence. Then they jumped it. We didn't, we didn't react. Anyway, when it's all said and done, they presented me with the flag. Our guys finally made it back home, eventually. The ones that could drive, drove. Well, 9/11 is ongoing, right? I'm trying to find a place to live.

So, during 9/11, the aftermath, we actually, as a Fish and Wildlife Service special agent, we contributed. Of course, then we find out Rich Guadagno is on one of those flights. Okay. Rich had been with his dog at the head gates. He had been at the head gates with us in that course of time with his [dog.] He was a K-9 officer from the refuge in the San Francisco area. We all knew him. And then we find out he's on this flight. So, what was he doing? Well, he had gone home to visit his family. I don't know if you know that story, but this is the plane that's going to the White House, allegedly, and that they took down. The passengers in this airplane took down. What role Rich may have played, we'll never know. But what we do know is when they're investigating the site where Flight 93 went down, they found his badge on a tree. Rich had been with us at the head gates. So that was very personal, very impacting.

So anyway, so here I am then, starting to try to run a region, but they start asking for agencies to put up law enforcement, special agents, plainclothes investigators to fly as air marshals all over the world. So, from our region of 35 agents at any one time for about two years, I had ten agents gone flying on airplanes as air marshals - in plainclothes, obviously, and kind of like incognito. So, we put up agents to go continue the 9/11 situation and so on and so forth. That was an experience.

So, I'm managing the region. There's a variety of things that happened there and now as a special agent in charge and even in Washington, as a special agent in charge of investigations, my goal was to support proactive and even, not risky, but to say, *yeah, go for it, do this, do that, evolve policy, evolve policy. You're policy police, right? Evolve policy that just make things simpler, make things more effective, make things safer for officers.*

You know, if there's certain things, the processes and the investigations. Now we're also developing policy to link ourselves as the Office of Law Enforcement to the Department of Interior's law enforcement program, because they took a lot of active roles in what they were doing, especially when we were doing Klamath Falls. Their chief of law enforcement for the Department was coming down personally to visit me, say, *how's it going?* And I'd give them a briefing and so on and so forth. He was taking the briefing back to the then Secretary, whoever it was at the time, and then right to the White House. The White House needed to know this. They'd call me and I fill them in on this confrontation nationwide. Anyway, I don't want to regurgitate.

I'm in Portland. I always tell Kevin. "Oh, I'm sorry." He was apologetic because Jamie lateraled me but with my approval. Right? I said, "Sure, I'll go." I said, "Kevin, just don't forget me. If you ever need a deputy, give me a call." So, his deputy he brings in from Minnesota because he's going to retire. So within about three years, two and a half years, Kevin calls me, and he says, "Did you mean coming back to Washington?" A lot of people want to go out and be in the region and that's it. I said, "Yeah." "So, I'm not even going to ask you about Noelia because I know what she's going to do." I said, "Yeah, why?" "Well, so and so told me he's going to retire." He says, "I want to bring you back." And I said, "Okay, do I need to apply?" "Of course not. I'm just going to bring you back as my deputy, when all this [happens.]" I

said, "Okay." So, three and a half years in Portland as a SAC, I lateral back as a 15 in Washington. 15 to Portland. GS-15. (laughter) For a lot of people, that's a lot. And it was. It was very rewarding for us to match every other program in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

So, I go back to Washington as Kevin's deputy chief. Of course, the program is evolving with the challenges of law enforcement and policies and working cases all over the world, basically. And we're doing this and we're doing that. And then one day, the Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Law Enforcement, actually was the lead in workforce planning. We were one of the first programs that started workforce planning and strategic planning because we had priority investigations. We had a policy, a body of policy that gave direction to our agents.

We have priority one cases. We have priority two, priority three. Priority three, for example. Real quickly. A white-tailed deer gets poached in Texas. It gets taken to Louisiana. You get it's not a fairly protected species. It's a violation of the Lacey Act. It's priority three. But you had a whooping crane shot in Victoria. Okay. You're working the white-tailed deer case. That's okay. But you got a priority one case. So that tied into our evaluation. So, we had clear direction to our agents. You want to do high priority work that lines up with the Fish and Wildlife Service's goals and the mission.

And nobody had a problem with it because it existed within our ranks. So, when I invested my time as an agent, I'm doing priority one, priority two cases, commercialization of wildlife, you know, an outright destruction of a grove, of nesting whatever. All that stuff in California was full of endangered species, everything from the kangaroo rat to you name it. So anyway, I was not unfamiliar with the Endangered Species Act. And I would tell our agents *don't be intimidated by our laws. You have to understand them and then read the case law and then support the law, support the Service. We are an arm of the Fish and Wildlife Service. We don't work for the Marshals Office. We don't work for the FBI. But we need to make sure we bring that value to a biologist in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that had a bunch of chameleons or whatever destroyed in this habitat or whatever the species might have been. I'm going to call law enforcement. We're their tool.*

And that's exactly what you need to portray. We are a Fish and Wildlife Service arm of law enforcement to do what the priorities are of the Fish and Wildlife Service for the conservation of our resources. And I'm getting mushy with the mission. But that's what we do. Enjoy it and consider yourself blessed to be able to do it. Do it to the best of your ability. That's all we're asking. Do the best you can. Cultivate resources, do whatever, whatever, whatever. So that's kind of like how it went with me.

And I go to Washington. Okay. The Fish and Wildlife Service needs a special something for the director, a consultant or something. So, they approached Kevin because Kevin was an incredible asset to having common sensical ideas, and they want to make him the special assistant to the director. So, they came to me and said, "Hey, Benny, do you think you could take over? Would you want to take over Kevin's job?" I said, "Does "he" want me to take over the job? You sure?" He says, "Yeah." So, they filled me in. Kevin was lateralled out of being the chief of law enforcement, and I put in for it. No, they make me the acting chief of law enforcement. The Office of Law Enforcement. Okay. No salary increase, no nothing. I'm still a GS-15. It goes a year because an SES job has to be advertised. Okay. So, Kevin's vacancy, he was still with the Service. He was special assistant to the director, I think. I forgot who it was at the time. Right here.

So, I became the acting [Chief]. They advertise it. OPM advertises it government wide because this is an SES [Senior Executive Service] position.

So, I compete for it. I put in for the job. Maybe I'm going to get it, maybe I'm not. I'm acting. Put in for the job. SES positions, you may know this, they not only get selected by the agency, then the selection has to go to OPM, and they have to concur with your selection. See, I didn't know that. But anyway, so in other words they don't say, "Well, we know Benny, so we're going to give him the chief's job." No, that's not how it works. But I had, I had a good product to turn in. You've seen a little bit of it, but not all my products. But anyway, I have a few days off and at home south of here and I get a call from Dale Hall at the time and he says, "Hey, how are you doing?" "Well, actually, I'm still in bed, Dale. I'm about to get up." "So, I just want to let you know, Chief Perez..." I said, "Oh I got the job." "Yeah, you got the job. We just got the official word from the Secretary's Office. They concurred. Everything's approved." I said, "Okay, see you in a few days." So, then I become the chief of the Office of Law Enforcement for about the last four years.

DEBORAH: So, when did you retire?

BENITO: Well, here's what happened. We're all mandatory to retire at 57. That would have been in about 2009 when I had my 57th birthday. We're selling houses. We're preparing to move because I'm looking at, okay, I'm going to be 57. It's mandatory. Six months before Dale Hall comes into my office. "Hey, you got a few minutes?" I said, "Yeah." He's the director. He sits in front of my desk and he says, "Benny, what about – you think you'd be interested in staying past 57?" And I'm looking at him like, "Well, I don't know." I said, "Well, Dale, actually, that's not even in your purview. If that's going to happen, the Secretary has to approve it." They can approve an extension for a special agent in any organization up to age 60. He says, "Yeah, I know, I just want to know." I said, "Well, you know, we were already trying to sell" and this and that and the other. I had my house on the market." Let me go talk to my wife." So, I went back. We said, "Yeah, yeah, sure." I came back and said, "Well, Dale. Yeah. I said I'd be interested in staying. Sure." Unheard of. An extension for a special agent position.

He comes back a few days later. He says, "Well, you're okay. You can stay." I said, "Okay. So what?" He says, "Oh, you can stay till your 60 if you want". 60 is a cutoff by law. The Secretary of Interior had to approve my extension. There're all kinds of rumors as to why it happened. I had no idea this was happening. I had worked for Dale here in this region when he was in Albuquerque. And of course, I don't know. I mean, I described some of what I've done, but there was a lot more. Always to the best of my ability, and they extended me to age 60 and I continued doing what I did.

My job as an administrator was to support the field, not the other way around. I tell staff in Washington, *you're here to support the field, not the other way around. The field is not here to support you. We're staff. We're a staff of 40 people here in Washington, everything from admin people to us. We support the field which is where the work takes place. That's where we enforce the law. It's never the other way around. They don't support Washington. You understand that?* And they got it. They understood. I said, "So yeah, we're going to find ways. We are going to know the policy. We're going to know how to approach something. We're going to have the assets. We're going to have the contacts. So, this overnight sensation had all this, as I went through the ranks, going through different parts of the world, events,

training, you name it, I brought all that with me, but shared it. It wasn't like, *Okay, here's how I'm going to get mine. Here's how I'm going to get mine. I know all this, and if they want any of it ...*No, that was never my philosophy. It's like, *Hey, what do you got? Well, this, this, this. Okay, okay, hold on here. Okay, let me make this call. And then after that, I'm going to put them in touch with you. Boom, boom, boom.* And it would go and it didn't matter if it was the, the Services Director's office or it was a refuge department because they wanted to talk to somebody in Canada about something. It didn't matter to us. I said, "Hey, we're going to support the Fish and Wildlife Service with our assets, whatever it is."

"Hey, can you help us? We're going to do a little task force on the Laguna Atascosa during the deer season opener. You got...?" I said, "Yeah, we'll send a couple of agents just to help out." And we had the high-visibility jackets that we would wear. I said, "Okay." So, we were the asset of the Fish and Wildlife Service from the investigative side, what we did independently as an investigator. And then that's basically what I brought to the table as a senior manager from the time I was a SAC in the field. When I showed up in the field, I basically told the agents, I said, "Hey, it's a proactive thing, guys. You know the law; you know the policy. Go catch bad guys". And almost to a person that's like, *wow, it's refreshing to say, go catch a bad guy.* I said, "Now I know which one of you guys can do that very well. So don't be lazy. Right?" Oh, man. And we had some - I said I wasn't the only one doing those kinds of cases. But again, it's the people that the more you work as an investigator, as an employee, the more work it generates for you, especially when you get into the sensitive areas and cultivating informants, for example, having to be available to work with an operative or those kinds of things as an investigator administratively being available all through the weekend, even though I was off because somebody is trying to reach me or somebody needed something. I was available to not only the Fish and Wildlife Service management and being on the Directorate, you really understand how somebody is and what they are.

They say, "Wow, we never thought of it that way." "Hey, I'm your footstool. We are your arm, we are yours. You understand that?" "Well, you guys are always working with the FBI". "Oh, that's not how it works. You may have heard that. Have you ever worked with a special agent? Have you ever called them about this?" "Well, I never thought to." So that's the evolution of bringing value, of having the chief of law enforcement as a member of the directorate to the major table to say, here's what we are, here's what we do, to the point that even the budgeting circumstances which we were involved in all that to say, here's what law enforcement is. So, we have a discussion and say, well, *and oh yeah, you know what? They did one of these kinds of cases and it was awesome. Yeah, we can kick in a little bit, you know, that kind of stuff.* It's just the dynamics of trying to do the best you can with any job you have. You know, it's like it's that simple. And that's all I ever did in my career. And I'm extended to age 60. My wife has a medical issue when I'm going into my 59th birthday.

DEBORAH: What year was that?

BENITO: My last day on the job was January the 11th. I'm sorry, January 31st of 2011. Okay. Because my birthday was in the middle of January. So, I would have been able to stay till January of 2012. My wife had a medical issue a few months earlier, and I had told Dale when they extended me, I said, "Here's what I'll do. If I, for whatever comes up - I didn't expect anything to come up - I'm going to give you at least six months leeway so you can advertise for a chief whether it's going to be internal or external."

Because when you have an SES job, you can't just do an internal hire. An SES announcement has to go government-wide; you can't restrict it. So that becomes problematic. Of course, someone within the ranks of the Fish and Wildlife Service or Fish and Wildlife Service law enforcement should have some very competitive qualifying factors. So that plays a role. But other people have to agree. You're just not going to make your SES selection and that's it.

So anyway, so that's kind of how it went. And my wife had that little medical issue. She was living back home already because we were anticipating her being here more than we were, because I was in a studio apartment because we had already sold our condo. So, we made it work. And I said, "No, you know what?" I said that it wasn't a critical, debilitating kind of an illness or issue. She's diabetic and she had an episode. And I said, "You know what? I don't need to be there anymore." And I was okay to stay another year. And I told Dale in the middle of the summer, I said, "Hey, Dale. Here's what's going on." Then they knew. I said, "Here's what's going on." And he said, "Okay." "So, I'm giving you six months." Every now and then, he'd say, *Hey, you know, what about so-and-so? What about so-and-so and other chiefs in the in the department or other people?* I said, "Well, yeah, I worked with him." I said this and that and the other. I said, "Okay." So, they had six months to start.

And then who took my place was Bill Woody - William Woody. Bill Woody was the chief of BLM. His dad had been a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist in Region 2 for years. He was in New Mexico, I believe. Bill Woody. Did you know him? Ever hear of him? Okay, Bill took my place laterally. The Secretary of the Interior, they didn't advertise it. He had the authority to just move somebody from another agency of the department to the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, Bill Woody became the next chief of law enforcement.

And what happened after that? Well, I left the agency with the understanding of telling everybody that I knew that I worked for and worked for me. I said, "Look, I said I'm not the kind of guy that's going to stay involved or engaged asking this about this or telling you that about that. All I want to be kept informed of if something happens to somebody, if we lose somebody or somebody gets hurt." I thought, *if you guys want to tell me anything, don't call me up, because all my senior staff, most of the senior staff that was all over the country, I had a key role as a selecting official. I mean SACS and promotions within the ranks in Washington, D.C.* So, it was easy to communicate. I said, "Look, I don't want you calling me to tell me, hey, guess what's going on?" And I told them that and I had learned that from Kevin. I said, "Well, I'm not going to do that with any agency [person], so don't call me to ask me." One call I got from Bill Woody and I even told Bill, "Hey, Bill, don't bother me. It's your deal. It's your headache." He called me one time to ask me if I knew where these files were, and I said, "Yeah, look, in this cabinet, they're going to be in there." "Oh, okay. Thanks a lot."

So that was that was a rule with all the senior staff that I had. I said, "Look, you want to call me and BS, that's fine, but don't call me for anything that is work related, not because I don't care, because I don't want you to start whining to me or start this or start criticizing it because, you know, I just don't want to deal with that. But if you get hurt, if somebody gets hurt. I know who they are. As a courtesy, let me know because I want to reach out and make sure everybody's okay." So, I didn't keep my nose in Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Law Enforcement business.

And every now and then I'll get on the website and see what they're doing and the kinds of cases they're working on. So, I couldn't tell you today the status. I'm not even sure I think my last deputy became the chief eventually. Gary Mowad was my deputy most of the time I was there. Oh my God, he's going to hate it. I just called him the other day. He's about to retire. He's the current chief and I suppose the Service is going to advertise his vacancy. But he was my last deputy. He was a former Florida officer, great investigator. [It was Ed Grace.]

We did a case jointly when neither one of us were bosses. I was on staff [in Washington as a desk agent.] We had developed some cases, and they flew me to Nairobi, Kenya, to help the Kenya Wildlife Service develop some information that was coming across international borders of people that were falsely commercializing antiquated elephant ivory, rhino horn and so on and so forth. And there was a group of people in Nairobi, Kenya.

Dr. Richard Leakey was the head of the Kenya Wildlife Service. I don't know if you ever heard of him. I met him face to face. Long story short, we went there. I'm examining. You see one little thing where we found the key. We did search warrants in Nairobi of offices and so forth related within their framework. I had boxes of files. I started looking through papers. And we know there's a stash of these products somewhere. So, I'm looking through papers ...

DEBORAH: What was that word that you used? Defrauded? That's about the elephant ivory. You said you look through the papers.

BENITO: Oh, it was a fraud.

DEBORAH: Oh, fraud.

BENITO: Yeah, it was. It was being falsified as antiquated articles of the Maasai tribe, the lost Maasai tribe. But it was all new ivory that they were trying to make look older. They were smoking it, and they were selling it to different types of art places in LA and New York. In London. This group was pushing. They even wrote a book to support [their scheme.] "The lost articles of the Masai tribe." You could probably find it online, falsifying all this freshly killed stuff as antiquated and being distributed and sold at high dollar values to these places as a false artifact, which in fact was freshly killed, poached elephants and rhino.

Anyway, we're in Nairobi. I'm looking through these files and files and files. I found a little piece of paper of a late notice from a rental place in the middle of Nairobi. And the guy's name - I look at it. Instead of "Walter," its "Retlaw" or whatever the case is. And I said, "Oh, my goodness, it's this guy's name spelled backwards." So, he had a storage facility. There was a late charge. It came as a notice. *Hey, you owe us your back rent.* One notice, one piece of paper, in these volumes and volumes and volumes of documents that we're looking at, me and Ed Grace. Ed Grace was my [last] deputy, probably still right now the current chief. He may have just retired, I think, because of mandatory. But nevertheless, Ed Grace and I are in Nairobi. He joins me from New York City. He's an agent in New York. I'm a staff agent. And they send me to be the lead. We're helping Nairobi get to the bottom of this. They didn't even know what was going on. Okay. I find this paper and it's this guy's name spelled backwards.

Like me instead of Perez, its Zerep. Look at that. So, he looks at it and says, "What?" I said, "Spell it backwards." "Oh, my goodness". So, then we called Adan Dulo in, who was the chief law enforcement officer for Kenya Wildlife Service, and he looks at it. I said, "Look at that. Spell it backwards." "Oh, my goodness." I said, "Send somebody to that facility." Where is it? It's in the middle of Nairobi, a major storage facility. They send somebody there. One of his investigators, they come back, says there's 20-25 trunks stacked up. Oh, my goodness. So, they come back. They go through their process to get a search warrant for the facility. We go in there; we uncover the fact that every one of those foot lockers is jam packed with products of giraffes and zebras and rhino.

And you'll have a sampling of those pictures. I have a volume, but none of that, none of that at the time was on your camera, I mean, on your digital. So, it's hard. So, I scanned a few of those pictures. You're going to see some of that when it says Nairobi. That's what that was. I was a desk agent. I mean, you know what I'm saying? I was a desk agent in Washington. I'm in Nairobi. We're doing a search warrant in Nairobi. Kenya Wildlife Service officers, which are predominantly [patrol officers] and they didn't understand the value of search warrants because they weren't investigators. We oriented them afterwards because Adan said you need to give my supervisors an insight of this.

And so, we actually had made a copy. I said, "You guys all just did this." They went to different places and seized all kinds of stuff; separate from the ones that we got. Plus, we cleared up some stuff. New York seized stuff, LA seized stuff, because it was all false. Long story short, *see all this stuff that you just did, all these things you seized. You know why we did it? Well, give me an idea. Why do you think we were able to do that?* And these are all supervisors. There was about 30 people, and they called Dr. Richard Leakey. We have pictures of him. You might have a picture of me and Dr. Leakey.

This piece of paper. And they're like, "What?" "This piece of paper is why you all just succeeded." And they were all excited. "That's why you all just did what you did in the last three days." And then I explained how it evolved and, well, it's like, wow, you talk about a lesson, right? It's like this little piece of paper uncovered this whole conspiracy that had been eating Dr. Leakey for years. He'd been living with this group he knew was getting the best of him.

Anyway, that's just one example of the stuff, and you can see how excited I am about telling you.

DEBORAH: Yes, I can.

BENITO: And that's the way I approached pretty much everything I did. Administration was not anything I ever dreaded. Supporting them. Those kinds of things was my priority. Telling staff we support the field. They don't support us, make the best of our dollars and hope that the money that we're given as a budget, we can make it worthwhile for the benefit of the resource, obviously indirectly, the benefit of the Service.

DEBORAH: Well, I guess that kind of wraps up your list and my list. And I'll tell you, it was a pleasure interviewing you.

BENITO: Well, thank you. Anyway, there was a lot of things that can be filled in, but nevertheless, if you need any more or ever want anything else, just give me a call.

DEBORAH: Okay. Thank you.

End of Interview

Key words: Artifacts, budgeting, dams, endangered and/or threatened species, game wardens, international affairs, law enforcement, leadership, training, wildlife refuges