

Name: A.J. Bellido de Luna

Profession: Police Lieutenant

Number of years in this line of work: 19

Native Language: English, Spanish

Other Language(s): Arabic



1) What languages do you know? How did you learn them? (At home, At school)

My parents came to the US in 1962 from Cuba and so they spoke Spanish but they wouldn't let us kids speak Spanish in the house because they wanted us to learn English. There is a lot of bigotry because of race, so many people try to assimilate and learn English. My parents would speak to us in Spanish and we would respond in English. I didn't speak Spanish until I was 12 and my grandmother came from Cuba and taught me how to speak, read and write in Spanish.

2) What is your profession?

I am a police lieutenant.

3) Describe a "typical" day as a police. How do you use your languages in your work?

As a police lieutenant I command about 70 employees and manage a division of the police department. We reach out to the community and are involved in dances and events.

4) What do you enjoy about it?

I like the opportunity to help people.

5) What language do you think in?

That's a great question. People sometimes don't understand when I say that I think in Spanish. But I think in Spanish and then I translate into English.

6) What opportunities have knowing another language provided you that you may not have had otherwise?

There are many advantages. I can interact with groups of people that I wouldn't be able to if I didn't know Spanish. I just take it for granted. People are envious of people who can speak another language, especially since it is harder to learn as you get older. My mother has been in this country for over 40 years and she has taken many classes in English and she still struggles. When I graduated from law school I had a few minutes before the ceremony and my mother, who is diabetic, ran into a Burger King to get something to eat. I heard the clerk behind the counter say to her "Why don't you learn how to speak English?" Here was this 20 year old kid telling her she couldn't speak English.

I've traveled to Israel, South America, Canada and Asia. It's amazing how many people speak Spanish. Twenty years ago I was in Paris with my future wife and we couldn't get a hotel because the Tour de France was going on. My wife was trying to ask for a room in French and the man at the hotel couldn't understand her. Finally I spoke to him in Spanish and he understood me and we got a hotel room there right away. If I didn't know Spanish I might not have gotten a hotel room that night.

7) If you had the time to learn another language now, what language would it be? Why?

Can I give more than one language? I would like to learn Arabic and French. I know a little Arabic that I picked up on the streets, not that I could teach at a university but enough to get by. I would like to learn French since it is such an international language.

8) What do you think you would be doing if you weren't a police lieutenant?

I would be a lawyer, well actually I am a lawyer, since I went to law school, but I would be practicing law.

9) What advice would you give to somebody who wants to be a police lieutenant? Are there any specific languages they should learn?

Learning another language is important, education is important. People don't realize how educated police are nowadays. Smaller agencies are more selective, because they can afford to be more selective than larger police departments that just need bodies, but a college degree is extremely important. I didn't grow up wishing to be a police officer, some people do. But I didn't know what I wanted to do until much later in life. I think that it is a very admirable profession.

Any language is helpful to be a police officer but Spanish is very useful. There are people in this department that speak Farsi, German, Russian, and Cantonese. We maintain a list of names of officers who speak different languages so we can call on them if we need to.