

Professional Speaker Magazine Oct '06

Courage Required Drug Traffickers, Hit Men and Professional Speakers

It takes courage to face great danger, and it takes great courage to take a stand against evil. Prosecuting murderers could easily have cost Manny Medrano his life, but for him it was a matter of the harder right versus the easier wrong. Will you have the courage to take a stand when it's your turn? When you're confronted with wrongdoing, remember the sacrifices and courage of Manny Medrano and federal agent Enrique Camarena. And remember their sacrifices when you need courage to face audiences with the truth about circumstances in their own lives — Courage Required Column Coordinator Dale Collie, MA, CSP



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Sometimes a single, unexpected knock at the door can change your life forever.

Mine occurred on a spring day in 1989 in a Los Angeles office where I worked as a federal narcotics prosecutor. I was in the middle of preparing for trial in a case charging drug cartel leaders with the murder of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena in Guadalajara, Mexico. Agent Camarena was kidnapped in broad daylight by traffickers and corrupt Mexican cops, tortured for 36 hours, and died when his interrogators drove a tire iron through the top of his skull. Camarena, 37, left behind a wife and three kids.

I looked up from my notes to see a somber DEA agent. "Manny, I've got bad news. We've just learned there's a contract out on your life."

And so it began. Twenty-four-hour U.S. Marshal protection, I was trained to be proficient with a firearm, and I packed a Smith & Wesson .357 revolver.

Life had presented me with other challenges before: growing up in abject poverty as the son of an immigrant mother; dealing with racism in west Texas; graduating with honors from Harvard. But this was different, if not surreal.

I successfully convicted several traffickers for Camarena's murder, who are now serving life prison terms. I then embarked on a new chapter in my life and am now an Emmy-award-winning network correspondent for ABC News. It's a prestigious job, but by no means the apex of my professional career. That distinction goes to my days in the trenches as a federal prosecutor, vindicating the heinous murder of a courageous drug

agent who sacrificed his life in the service of his country.

As a professional speaker, I often talk about Camarena and other “life moments” I have experienced — events, largely unforeseeable, that strike with tsunami-like force and compel choices that define you, determining your destiny. In the end, these life moments – if we heed the lessons they proffer – build character and make us better human beings. To me, that is the essence of being a professional speaker. We are given the privilege of a platform to entertain, inform, elucidate. We get paid. But what is the point if we do not also embrace the opportunity to raise the character bar and the consciousness of our audience?

To that end, we must have the courage, like Agent Camarena, to put it all on the line for something we believe in. As speakers, we must open our hearts and share with complete strangers a piece of ourselves, however raw and painful that can be. But from that pain comes liberation – for ourselves and the audience we are trying to impact by sharing our stories.

So, 17 years after that fateful knock on my door, I have no regrets. On the contrary, I am grateful to have experienced yet another of life’s moments and the opportunities for growth that spring from them.

Manny Medrano is the Supreme Court correspondent for ABC News who provides legal analysis for all ABC News broadcasts. A Harvard Law School graduate, he is also a professional motivational speaker who challenges people to conquer fear and self-doubt as a means to reach their personal and professional goals. Contact him at manny.medrano@abc.com.
