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20th Century Shining Star:

Capt. Gary De Los Santos

My full name is Gerardo Javier De Los Santos. The nuns at the Catholic elementary school I attended could not pronounce Gerardo, however, so they called me Jerry. I did not like, Jerry so I changed it to Gary, and it has been that ever since.

I am the third of five children, and I was born on the Fourth of July, 1957, in Laredo, where my brothers and sisters still live. My older brother and sister are Frank Jr. and Sara. Frank is a supervisor with U.S. Customs Department and Sara is a registered nurse. My younger sister Norma is a fingerprint analyst with Border Patrol and younger brother George followed in Dad's footsteps and is an area manager for Borden's Milk. My father, Francisco "Frank" de los Santos Sr., was only sixty-six years old when he died in 1993. My mother, Olga, is eighty-one years of age and still lives in Laredo.

My wife Leslie and I have been married twenty-five years. I am very proud of her. She recently earned her master's degree in business from Webster University in San Antonio. Our son Gary Jr. received his bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Texas at San Antonio and has been accepted to the Marine Corps Officer Candidate School at Quantico, Virginia. As for me, I graduated from United High School in Laredo in 1975 and got an associate degree from Central Texas College in Killeen in 1971. I am now working on my undergraduate degree at Wayland Baptist University in Lubbock. Hopefully, by next fall, we will be a family of graduates!

I have always had an undying love of the great outdoors, and I have always wanted to be in law enforcement, though I have no explanation why. Today, I have a brother and sister in law enforcement, but in the mid-1970s, I had no relatives in the field.

After earning my associate degree, I decided that if I could become a game warden, that would satisfy both my interests. But I had not done my homework. Only when I tried to apply did I learn that you had to be twenty-one to even submit an application. I had just turned twenty. I was really mad at myself for not making the necessary inquiries.

Needing something to do until I turned twenty-one, I went to work for my father at Borden's Milk, where he was the distributor. About a month later, my life changed forever. Dad and I had worked a long day and were driving home when we met a black-and-white (Highway Patrol car). Of course, Dad knew I wanted to be an officer of the law, and he asked me, "Why don't you become one of them?" I remember telling him, "Hell, no! All they do is sit on their ass and drive around all day."

But Dad's words must have struck a note somewhere. On December 7, 1977, I checked into the DPS Academy in Austin as a member of Class B-77. I weighed 235 pounds; eighteen weeks later, I graduated at 183 pounds. Those weeks are a blur. I kept thinking, "What in world am I doing here? All I wanted was to be a game warden, not a policeman." But I stuck it out and graduated on April 8, 1978. I was still twenty years old—not old enough to buy bullets for my weapons!

My first duty station was Starr County, not the safest place in Texas. In 1978, Rio Grande City was one of the leading dope counties in the United States. It was a little bit chilling when several of my classmates offered me their bulletproof vests! But I did not pay any attention to their talk. I was single at the time and just looked forward to being the best Highway Patrolman possible.

Talk about starting off with a bang—I did! On my second day, I got into a fight with the sheriff's brother. Normally, a rookie trooper will just observe for the first few weeks. Oh no, not me. My senior partner, Gene Falcon, had stopped the sheriff's brother and realized he was drunk. Gene told me to arrest him, so I did—and got an earful as he proceeded to tell me that he was the sheriff's brother and no @#\$% was going to arrest him!

I was greener than grass, but I had the foresight to know that sometimes politics will come into play during any incident. I ask Gene what he wanted me to do. He told me to go ahead and arrest him. Still trying to follow proper procedures, I told the man to turn around so I could search and cuff him. He refused. I then grabbed his arm to assist him in turning around, but he pulled away, so I grabbed him again. This time, I spun him around and applied a very light chokehold (not done anymore). I then felt the suspect trying to grab my weapon from my holster, and I applied the chokehold a bit harder. After only a few seconds, the suspect became very heavy—he had passed out. I felt panic and let go of him, causing him to fall face-first to the ground. Long story short, he was out of jail before we completed our paperwork. Sadly, our relationship with the sheriff became non-existent.

Six months later, Gene and I received two rookies from the Academy to train. I was still a rookie myself, but I assumed that six months' experience was enough to instruct someone else. I was assigned Rolando Castaneda, now a Ranger sergeant stationed in Brownsville. We may have been the blind leading the blind, but we got by, and everything turned out okay. Even more importantly, the time I got to work with Roland is one of the best experiences I had during my uniform years. It seemed like we were always cutting up and laughing. We enjoyed working together and got into a lot of scrapes together.

During my first year in Rio Grande City, I got to be good friends with the local game wardens and started thinking about leaving the Highway Patrol to pursue my original plans. I rode around with the wardens every chance I got.

It was towards the end of the first year that I met my first Texas Ranger, Frank Holger. Frank was in Rio working a murder case. I knew of and had read about Texas Rangers, but never gave them much thought. To me, that was one of those careers that only a few lucky men get to have.

I do not know what it was—maybe the badge, the name Texas Rangers, the western look—I do not know, but that's all I started thinking about. Before completing my first year, I set my goal to become a Texas Ranger. I knew that before I could even test, I had to the best job I could for the next eight years. (You have to have eight years with the DPS before you can test to be a Ranger.)

That was only the first step. The competition for entrance into the Ranger force is fierce. Assuming you pass the written test, then you have to go before a board and pass an oral examination. If your combined test scores put you among the very few at the top, you are placed on the eligibility list. Once on the list, that sure does not mean you are going to become a Ranger. Unless a Ranger retires in the next twelve months, you fall off the list and have to start all over.

I spent two years in Rio Grande City. The opportunity then arose to transfer to Laredo and be closer to my family. The only souvenir I left Rio with was my wife Leslie.

In May of 1982, after three years in Laredo, I transferred to the uniformed DPS Narcotics Task Force as a Uniform Trooper (called CLE Troopers). We worked to intercept illegal drugs being transported on our highways. My lieutenant at the time was Ray Coffman, currently the assistant chief of the Rangers. I wanted to be a Texas Ranger and believed that the more investigative experiences I could gain would be a step in the right direction. I also knew that doing narcotics cases would help me. It did!

Three years later, I tested and promoted to sergeant in the Narcotics Service. It is common when you promote within the DPS that your duty station changes. I was lucky and was able to remain in Laredo.

Even though I had enough time at this point to test for the Rangers, I wanted to gain more investigative experiences. It was a right move because I hit the ground running when I became a Ranger. I had a great time as a narc, working undercover and participating in numerous wiretaps. The drug route into the United States usually started south of the Rio Grande and since most of the people we were monitoring spoke only Spanish, I spent most of my time monitoring the wiretaps.

It was during this time that I became friends with Ranger Doyle Holdridge. He guided me and greatly assisted me in becoming a Ranger later on. In early 1987, I took my first Ranger promotional exam. Even though I scored a 458, which is very good, it was not high enough to make it to the oral board.

I was so discouraged. I felt I could not compete and almost believed there was no use in even trying to promote again. But, deep down, I wanted to be a Ranger more than anything. In early 1988, I took my second Ranger promotional exam and made it to the oral board. My foot was in the door, but I

still could not get in. I was only thirty years old. Six months later, the Rangers tested again, and I made it to the oral board and scored high enough to make the eligibility list.

I recall one of the board members asking me if I was willing to go to Decatur. I said yes, but being from South Texas, I had no idea where Decatur was. I found out soon enough!

Four of us eventually promoted into the Ranger Service. Earl Pearson was number one on the list. Today, he is Chief of the Rangers. I was number two and am currently the captain of Company C in Lubbock. Gary Henderson was number three and, after a very distinguished career as a field Ranger, retired in 2003. Today, he is the Gray County sheriff. Barry Caver was number four and is now the captain of Company E in Midland. This was a pretty good group and a great year for future captains!

On March 1, 1989, I promoted to the Texas Rangers. I was assigned to Company C and stationed in Decatur, northwest of Fort Worth. Even though it would still be a couple of weeks before my promotional date, I proceeded to Decatur to look for a place for my wife, son, and me to live.

While looking for a house, I was told a double homicide of two Mexican women had occurred prior to my arrival. Talk about hitting the ground running! The grand jury was meeting right then and the witnesses were all Mexicans. Only a couple of folks knew Spanish, so I was recruited to conduct interviews. The previous Ranger in Decatur, Phil Ryan (later the Sheriff for Wise County), had retired a few months earlier. He gave me his badge to wear since I would not get mine until the promotional ceremony in a couple of weeks.

It turned out that I was one of only three officers who could speak Spanish in a three-county area, a skill which worked to my advantage many times. The others were a state trooper and a Decatur police officer. I continued working on that case well after promoting and eventually made an arrest.

My family and I were in Decatur for two and a half years. I investigated many homicides, which I loved working, as morbid as it sounds. I cannot pick just one to talk about because they were equally important. All were victims and all had loved ones. The same amount of hard work was put into each and every one, no matter the victim or suspects.

In the summer of 1992, I transferred to McAllen and Company D, but I only stayed there for a year and a half. It was during that time that I was one of the unfortunate (or fortunate) Rangers selected to work on the murders of the ATF agents in Waco during the Branch Davidian investigation. That is one investigation I will never forget. Every Ranger there worked very, very hard and put in many long hours every day. Even worse, we spent a long time away from our families. We were told to bring enough clothing for a week. Three and a half months later, all of us were still there. Nobody anticipated that David Koresh would hold out for so long and torch the compound, resulting in the deaths of so many people, including women and children.

I recall being near the site when the FBI introduced gas into the compound. When I saw the first flames shoot out from an upstairs window and then several other areas, I looked at Ray Cano, now a retired Ranger lieutenant, and asked if he had seen what I had seen. I recall looking at my watch; the time was twelve noon. Thirty minutes later, the whole compound was burned to the ground.

All of us were desperately looking to see people run or jump out, but only a few were spotted. We prayed that Koresh had the decency to have placed all the children in the underground bunkers, but he did not. However, we soon found out that the coward chose the easy way out for himself. We believe he had one of his lieutenants shoot him while many others burned to death.

The Rangers did a tremendous job on the recovery of evidence, search of the crime scene, and interviewing of witnesses and suspects. I was never prouder to wear the famous star of a Ranger than during that investigation.

In January of 1994, I transferred to San Antonio. Again, I got to work on some interesting homicide investigations, three of which have been aired on Dr. G: Medical Examiner, A & E's New Detectives, and Court TV. Two of the cases were made into books: Every Breath You Take and Blood Brother. The first book, by Ann Rule, is scheduled to be a TV movie. The second describes a case in Decatur involving a serial killer. I was not the only Ranger involved in that investigation. Many were instrumental in the eventual arrest of four individuals responsible for the murder, including Rangers John Martin, Ray Cano, Marrie Garcia, Joe Hudson, Sal Abreo, Ray Coffman, and Brooks Long.

On October 1, 2001, I promoted to lieutenant and was assigned to the startup of the first-ever Texas Rangers Cold Case Squad, officially named the Unsolved Crimes Investigation Unit (UCIT). I was lucky enough to have the UCIT office located in San Antonio and did not have to move, as is the usual case with any promotion within DPS.

During my two-and-a-half-year tenure there, the number of Rangers in the squad went from five to eight. During that time frame, we solved eight cases. Six ended by arrests and two concluded by exceptional means. In these cases, exceptional means referred to suicides that the families believed to be homicides, but eventually proved to be suicides, as first ruled. Suicides are very hard for any family to accept. Wrapping up a case brings closure to some families, and the relief is beyond words. Knowing at long last what happened and who was responsible is something that victims' families deserve. The UCIT unit still continues to solve crimes. It is now supervised by Lieutenant Tony Leal.

On April 1, 2003, I promoted to captain, but since there was no field opening at the time, I was assigned to the office of Audit and Inspection. That first day, while nailing up the first picture frame in my office, I got a call from several Rangers. They told me I was lucky. Senior Ranger Captain C. J. Havrda was retiring and, therefore, I would soon be out of A & I and into a field command. Since this was April 1, I had to keep asking myself if I had fallen for an April Fool's trick. I walked into headquarters, looked at Chief Havrda, and just asked if it was true. He said yes, and the following month I was stationed in Lubbock as captain of Company C. Talk about lucky!

I have been in Lubbock ever since. Even though I would love to go back to South Texas, just the thought of leaving here is heartbreaking. I have grown to love Company C and all the personnel in this unit.

I owe my success to following the examples of many Rangers, past and present. Most of all, I owe it to God. My dad and mom are my heroes, who instilled in me the values that have guided me through life. Without that foundation, who knows where I would be? Thanks, Dad and Mom!



Editor's note. Since Gary wrote this article, the Cold Case Unit has been placed under the command of a captain. Gary has transferred from Lubbock back to San Antonio to again assume the leadership of this special unit.



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