ASSISTANT FEDERAL PUBLIC DEFENDER VITO DE LA CRUZ, 51, TALKS TO HIS WIFE, MARIA ANASTASIA SEFCHICK-DEL PASO, 47.

Vito de la Cruz: My mother and my father were not together when I was born. He was married to someone else, and when I was born my mother dropped me off with a neighborhood friend and left a note with my father's number on it. So my father picked me up and left me with my nineteen-year-old aunt, Iris de la Cruz, who I've always called Nena. Nena had just graduated high school when I showed up on her doorstep, but she embraced parenthood—and she didn't have to. She was wonderful. Even though I didn't meet my father until I was fourteen, my nena told me where I came from and who my father was, and had pictures of him in the house.

Our family—my aunt and uncles and my grandmother—

we used to travel from the barrio in San Benito, Texas, up to North Dakota and do the migrant farmworkers' circuit in the summers. We relied on the money that we would make during the summer migration to live off of for the rest of the year. And then Nena would also work part-time, and her income supplemented whatever the family earned on the migrant trail.

Maria Anastasia Sefchick-Del Paso: What was it like being a migrant farmworker?

Vito: Well, it was exciting because we were always going somewhere new. We passed through all these different states, crossing rivers and prairies and mountains. It was an adventure—all the family together, working side by side. On the weekends, we would make *barbacoa* in this pit in the ground out at these migrant camps, and Sunday mornings we would open up the pit and drag out the *barbacoa* and eat together.

But it was also equal parts hardship and poverty. I remember when I was thirteen or fourteen, there was an immigration raid in the tomato field where my family was working. Many of the crews were citizens, like we were, or resident aliens, but some were undocumented aliens coming across the border to work. This caravan of about six or seven green vans just stormed into the field, and people started stampeding. To this day I can smell the dirt and the fear. I could hear the noise the batons made as the border patrol beat them over the heads and on their bodies. And when I was about ready to turn and run, my uncle grabbed my shoulder and said, "Stay still." And I

remember they just passed us by. They were chasing people who would run.

The good thing about my family is we stuck together. And when we were confronted with the raid that day, the family made sure that we stayed close. Some of them—to this day—talk about how afraid they were. I mean, people were being herded into a ditch, and then they were beaten and handcuffed and dragged away. It's been thirty-eight years, but it's still vivid in my memory.

I didn't know exactly *at that moment* that I wanted to go into law, but I saw people being afraid of other people with authority. It struck a profound chord in my being, because that's not the way we should be.

If there's one thing that my nena gave me, it was a desire to learn and to succeed in school. Against all odds, she was the first in our family—of either gender—to graduate from high school and eventually from college. And I ended up going from San Benito, Texas, to Yale, which was a culture shock to the extreme. I went from an environment where we were essentially surviving below the poverty line, to where our entire family could probably have existed for a month on all the food that was thrown away in just one dining hall at Yale. But I graduated in 1981, and then I went on to law school at the University of California, Berkeley.

After law school, I wanted to go back to where I started. So I started out working as a staff attorney focusing on

employment issues, migrant housing, and migrant farmworker law. And now I'm a public defender in the Reno federal court.

Maria: Well, I think your family is very proud of you. I can tell in Nena's voice.

Vito: Thank you. The work is really an ongoing struggle. You know, there is a role for law enforcement—laws should be enforced; folks who violate them should be apprehended and prosecuted—but there is a dignity that sometimes gets forgotten, a human dignity that gets trampled on. And if we forget that, we forget our own humanity. And so, if the things that I do while I live this life help improve somebody else's life, then for me, that's enough.

RECORDED IN RENO, NEVADA,
ON MAY 1, 2010.