

Oral History interview with Julie Mendosa, retired DEA Intelligence Analyst
Interview conducted August 5, 2026, at DEA Headquarters

Question: Can you tell me when and where you were born, where you grew up, and what your parents did?

Julie Mendosa (00:06):

I was born in Portland, Oregon. So I'm from a rainy, beautiful place. And my parents did nothing to do with government. My mom worked in the grade school and my dad designed early computer programs. And I got all the way out here just by sheer curiosity.

Question: Where did you go to college?

Julie Mendosa (00:33):

I went to upstate New York to Cornell University because it was far away from the home I was used to. It was going to be different. And I knew I would meet really interesting people there.

Question: What did you study at Cornell?

Julie Mendosa (00:49):

It was an independent major that was all about humans. So sociology, anthropology and psychology, basically how people learn and grow and think about the world.

Question: How did you start your career with the DEA? What drew you to the organization and to the intelligence analyst role?

Julie Mendosa (01:08):

It's a good story. So when I was in school and we were nearing graduation, my classmates would talk about what their job prospects were and where they were going to interview. And I heard people talking about recruiters coming for DEA and CIA. And I didn't really know anything about either of those organizations. So I asked around what did people know? They didn't know anything either, but it sounded cool. And I didn't actually meet any of the recruiters because I must have missed their visit, but it gave me the idea. And at that time, the only way to find anything out was to write a letter and ask about it. So I had to find, I think it was a brochure about federal jobs and I found some jobs listed and there's 1811 special agent. And I thought, "Well, that's the one I heard about. I'll apply to do that." So I did.

(01:59):

And then I found out because a very, very kind person in HR contacted me and said, "Well, listen, agents have to have this really good vision requirement and you don't meet it." So I said, "Oh, well, what do I do now?" And he said, "Well, guess what? There's this job that probably does something very similar. We have an intel analyst role and you might try it and we're hiring." So I applied. That was late 1988 and the hiring process took a really long time, but that's how I ended up in DEA.

Question: How did you start your career with the DEA? What drew you to the organization and to the intelligence analyst role?

Julie Mendosa (2:43):

So at the time, analysts were coming into a new status, I guess. So I was with a wave of people who were hired specifically to have college degrees because before that it hadn't really been something that was looked for all that seriously, I guess. And so number one, training was the degree. And then we went to our jobs and I started at the El Paso Intelligence Center and I was there for several months before they had an analyst class available at Quantico. So we all went to the basic analysis class six weeks at the time, up from two weeks, not too long before that. And we learned a lot of real basics to get us going on the job, such as the databases. We learned drug identification.

(03:32):

We got to smell what cocaine and marijuana smelled like when they were burning and a lot of legal information so we could spot a conspiracy case. There was a story about a giraffe and an elephant and they were different characters in the conspiracy. I will always remember that. And we wrote reports. We practiced writing reports because all that business you hear about just the facts, that's what we had to learn. And it's a style all its own to just say what you have and what you know and what can be documented. So we learned how to do all that. And the rest was on the job.

Question: So you were one of the first groups of new analysts to get a more expansive training.

Julie Mendosa (04:14):

Yeah, it seems as if it was expanding over time for many years. So not too long after I went through the six week program, it became longer, seven, eight weeks. And at one point it might have been 12 weeks. And there was talk about trying to blend the analyst training with the agent training so that they could learn how to work together. I don't know whatever

came of that. So it was always an evolving process, the same as the expectations for analysts were evolving throughout the time that I was working at DEA. So sometime before I came on, the story was that analysts were converted secretaries. There were a few people who had done that, but I started out at Epic and we had a lot of folks who'd come in from other federal jobs. So a variety of different backgrounds of people who were now becoming intel analysts.

(05:10):

And over time, at least with DEA, in the early '90s, we got classified as core employees. So agents, analysts, chemists, and diversion investigators all became core, which meant that we had a professional status. We were all recognized as being equal to each other in importance and status. And even though rules like that don't really change culture all that quickly, it made a big difference over time because we had a professional recognition of being someone who mattered. And I think that helped with the growing role and the growing expectations because at the same time when I was hired, I was told, "Well, you could be asked to do anything on any given day. You could have to working at your desk on something and then somebody comes in with something that's really fast and in a hurry and they need it right now." And then you go back to something that's different and then you have to go to a meeting.

(06:10):

And I thought, "Well, that sounds pretty cool. I like that." But some of those projects were just information processing and some of them were a lot more complex. And so over time, I think we got more involved in more of the complex issues and not quite as many of the basic information processing questions.

Question: What kind of databases and computers did you use?

Julie Mendoza (06:36):

We had NADIS, which was a very basic record keeping system, and it would have only the information that was available in investigations. So in investigative reporting, which is just the facts, observations from an investigation, things that were found, things that were seen. So it didn't have a lot of information that could really give you a sense of the bigger picture. So we had to connect that sort of thing by hand. So we would look for things like cars or associates that people had and see who those associates were associated with and try to draw out a network and understand what was going on. But also we had seizure data. So a lot of working with data, take a particular place in time and look at all the seizures and what

was different about them over a year period. But yeah, the information that's available now was not readily accessible at the time because there was no internet.

Question: Were there many other female intelligence analysts when you started? Has that changed?

Julie Mendosa (07:45):

So it always seemed like there was a pretty good balance among analysts between men and women, but we were always working with agents and the agents were largely men. And the culture in DEA is really operational and I would say it's fairly masculine. It's a place where people know what they're doing and they want to get things done and you need to be serious about what you're doing and telling people what you're doing, which is something that I guess as a woman I found it very valuable and it wasn't foreign, but it was an interesting balance working with all the guys because there were some things that we as analysts would come up with that they didn't have time to listen to. They would be busy. They want to know, well, what does it mean to this effort I have? What does it mean to this policy I'm working on?

(08:39):

What does it mean to this investigation I'm working on? And so we had to learn to put the point up front, the part that they would care about. And I think that's a very valuable ability to have in life is tell people why they should care about something. But there were other challenges to working in an environment with lots of guys, but mostly we had a really good time. The essence of being in that environment was let's get good stuff done. And so we did.

Question: What was Operation Snowcap, and why was it important?

Julie Mendosa (09:03):

Snowcap was an effort to go after the growing regions and the locations where drugs were being transported out of to come to the US. So the trafficking groups, the growing areas, the transit routes all came to a hub in places like Bolivia and Peru in the early '90s and before that. And so Snowcap was an effort to have our people down there working with other US counterparts and with foreign partners to see if we could make a difference in those points of origin for the drugs. So we had teams in Bolivia and we had teams in Peru from DEA investigators who did 90-day rotations. I wasn't part of that, but I did a 30-day temporary assignment to support Operation Snowcap in Bolivia.

Question: Where in Bolivia did that assignment take you, and how long were you there?

Julie Mendoza (10:15):

So I was part of a group of analysts. We were young. We were adventurous. We were excited to get out of the office. We had been told you're going to Bolivia, Bolivia is different. You'll be struck by how it's different. And we said, "That's good. Let's go." So five of us went for 30 days and there were about four, five, six months' worth of these rotations, eager people like myself and my colleagues. And so we went to La Paz. We flew into the airport there, which is at 13,000 feet of elevation. So you can't breathe when you get off the airplane. And then I did three weeks of my time in the embassy office in La Paz, and then one week down in the Chimore Base Camp, which is in the jungle, sea level or below, jungley, humid, triple canopy, tall, tall trees, medium trees, and then confusing mess of plants and animals on the ground. And that's where I spent a week trying to help out the Snowcap teams.

Question: What was a typical day as an analyst like on Snowcap?

Julie Mendoza (11:23):

So the visiting analysts who had been at the base camp the week before I was there had done a full assessment of what they had and didn't have. And so their plan was to see if we could give them a searchable ability with their records because they had these standalone computers where they stored records of all their operations, but they couldn't really do much with it. They could scroll through the records and say, "Well, on this date we went to this place." But it wasn't able to help them understand the trends or the patterns or to be prepared when they did a new operation. I found out that they would often go back to the same location because if there's a growing area or if there's a place that can be used as an airstrip, traffickers would keep using it. Even though it had been bombed, it had been eradicated, there'd been an enforcement action there in the past, it would come back into use.

(12:17):

So the teams rotated through for 90 days at a time and a new team would come in. And if those people didn't remember that particular location, they might not have a sense of what was dangerous about it or how to do their planning other than the official geological and weather and aeronautical information that they might have. So we were trying to give them access to something a little bit more for safety, for planning, and just to understand the impact of what they were doing. Because if you can't go back in and search your records, then you can't really do much to compile things. So this was a very low-tech effort and we spent the week just trying to sort out the data. So there was one computer room in the base

camp. It was the one air-conditioned space that was, I guess, a safe environment for the computers.

(13:16):

And that's where we were during the day. And it was important because even though it was really basic, we were trying to give them something that would protect them. And the program too, I guess protecting the program and why it was valuable. So that was during the day. Then just outside that doorway was the little common area where there was a TV and some videos and the communal table where all the agents ate dinner and the Bolivian woman who did the cooking and she was so accommodating to work with all these guys and make these huge meals. And let's see, other parts of the day, I got up early and went for a run on the base camp's airstrip because that was the only safe place. I wasn't allowed to leave the gates of the compound. And so back and forth on the airstrip multiple times.

(14:17):

And it was a Bolivian National Police base camp. So the Bolivian police were there as well. And they were all men and I didn't speak much Spanish at the time. They had one woman who did their laundry and they probably had a cook as well. And that was it. So it was a few women and all these guys and just doing our work and then watching some videos in the evening. But I did get to go with the guys when they did some of their basic visiting, not really in operation, but just going around the neighborhood to see what was going on in the drug markets. They would get samples of the cocoa leaves that were for sale in the markets, which were the same markets as where the vegetables were sold and the meat. And so there's a hawk of ham hanging in the market with flies buzzing around it.

(15:10):

And then next to it is a stall full of bags of cocoa leaves. And so they would buy a sample of leaves and they would have it tested at the lab to find out the trends and patterns in the purity of the leaves. And we would get to see what the local area looked like. And it was fascinating again for me because I didn't get out of the office much. So I was rumbling along with the agents in a big serious four-wheel drive on dirt roads. There was not much pavement in Bolivia at the time. And we would see people walking because most everyone had to walk and they would be carrying things on their backs. And I saw the homes that some people lived in. It was a warm climate, but they didn't have windows, they didn't have solid walls. These were little structures that would provide some shelter from the rain.

(16:02):

And it was a window into something that I would have never known. This was where the cocaine came from and these were the people who found it, that they found themselves compelled to produce it for various reasons. And it was really valuable to see that. I don't actually remember if there was a distinction between the local usage markets and the larger scale, but there were bags and bags in these marketplaces.

Question: Tell us how you met your future husband, SA Larry Mendosa, during this time.

Julie Mendosa (16:38):

Well, there's a saying in DEA, if DEA wanted you to have a spouse, they'd issue you one. So this is an unauthorized story probably. Yes, he was the person in charge of the Cochabamba office in Bolivia that was a permanent office, but his office oversaw the Snowcap operation that they hosted, the Snowcap team in the Chimore base camp. So he came down pretty regularly and he was there the same week that I was there. And he invited me to go on a fact finding mission in the really ancient helicopters that were, I think, rolled over from US efforts in Vietnam, and they were still using them in the early '90s. So we went up in the helicopters to a location where some traffickers had taken over an airstrip for a few hours, a few days before that. And the people who lived there were naturally a little bit worked up and worried about it.

(17:35):

So they were hoping someone could come and take a look, find out their information, see if it could be prevented in the future. So it was considered safe enough for a civilian to go. So three helicopters rose up over the misty jungle floor and we went to this location along the river where they had an airstrip. And what I remember was seeing something that no one normally would ever get the chance to see. So how are people living in that jungle with the airstrip is the only way to get in and out. That's how they flew out to get to any kind of town or village to get their supplies in and out. And to know that traffickers had held it up at gunpoint and they had children living there, there were lots of children and chased everyone away at gunpoint from their airstrip for several hours while a plane came in, loaded drugs or offloaded drugs, made a transfer of some kind and then flew away again.

(18:35):

And on the way there, I could see the rivers, they go like this. There's just river everywhere. And we were flying above all this jungle and the top of the canopy and those trees come up to about a hundred feet above the ground. And then the mist is up there and the trees just barely come out of the mist. And it's such a dramatic place and then such a dramatic event

for people who were just trying to live their everyday lives. And it was really striking and I'm glad I got the chance to go. But back to the Larry story.

(19:10):

So after that, when I was back in the embassy, he came up for a visit to the embassy because he had to do some business there. So we went out to dinner at the nicest restaurant in Bolivia, which was the place where the embassy would say, "This is the one place in the country where an American can safely eat the lettuce. You won't get sick there." So that's where we ate. And it must have been a very romantic experience because we agreed to keep seeing each other, even though he lived in Cochabamba, Bolivia and I was in the DC area and here we are today.

Question: What was the Kingpin Strategy, and why was it important? What was your role?

Julie Mendoza (19:49):

So this was also coming along in the early '90s. And at that time, the Colombian groups were really getting to be significant as a presence in the US. We were starting to learn more about them, realizing how much they were bringing in and really getting serious about trying to address it. So the Kingpin Strategy was the sort of, I guess, a follow on to Snowcap, their natural partners where Snowcap looked at the growing area and Kingpin looked at everything that DEA as an enterprise could do with all of our partners in the US and globally and try to go after the biggest targets who were really emerging as significant at that time. So people like Pablo Escobar and Miguel Rodriguez and all the Cali cartel, the Medellín cartel and just all those amazing, scary things that they were doing. And so at headquarters, I was with DEA headquarters at the time and a group of analysts were tasked with looking at the financial angle associated with the Kingpin Strategy.

(20:53):

So a key part of it was to go after the money because that's where the traffickers would hopefully notice it the most. And so we learned very fast about the very elaborate money laundering activities and the presence of this kind of person called a money broker. And I'd never heard about this before. Crime was not something I learned about in school. And these networks, they were very elaborate and they were ingenious. They would do things like have currency exchanges where there might be a black market peso exchange in one location, but they might not just use the black market exchange that went outside of their country's legal financial exchange. They might use the legal exchange market as well. They would use the black market if their country had limits on how many dollars you could

exchange. And so then they would need to go to people who would exchange them off to the side somewhere else.

(21:51):

But there was a tremendous use of both legal and illegitimate financial networks and systems. And so our job was to look at records seized from financial brokers. So this end of the kingpin strategy meant that it was targeting the cartels, the big leaders and their networks and seizing financial records of their transactions. So there was an elaborate network of wire intercepts and investigative efforts that were a combination of US and our foreign partners identifying who these money brokers were, finding out where their offices were. And then there were search warrants where the documents would be seized, file cabinets full of records because that's how they were stored at the time. They weren't much on computers. They were mostly in paper files. So cabinets and cabinets full of transaction records. And my team of analysts went on trips to, I guess we went to two different locations.

(22:52):

I think I went to... Mostly we went to Colombia, but there was activity going on in other parts of the world that other folks were looking into. So we were the travelers to Colombia. So we would go down for a few days at a time when there was a seizure and we would be the people stuck in the warehouse. There was an embassy warehouse in a warehouse area of Bogota and we would be stuck there for days with 10 rented photocopiers, a bunch of voluntold people from the Colombian National Police, and then our team of about five analysts. And there we were putting transaction records in the photocopier one after the other. But at the same time, we were looking for anything that was actionable, meaning if we saw something that was a transaction that had happened recently and the money might still be on its pathway somewhere, it might still be in the banking system, it might be seizable, we were highlighting those and passing them immediately off to the investigators who were on the scene.

(23:55):

And so when I think about what we were doing, it's the back end of something that some people will have seen on TV. If you saw the Netflix show "Narcos," there's a scene where the agents and their Colombian counterparts come to an office building in Colombia and they're going to do a search warrant of an office that's a few floors up. And the person at the security gate wants to call the office upstairs and tell them that the law enforcement people are on their way. And the agents say, "No, don't do that." And the security guard is picking up the phone. He's about to call them. And so they have to restrain him from doing

that. Meanwhile, they've got people racing up the stairs, people holding off the elevators. They're rushing upstairs to get there before the people in the office have the chance to burn the records.

(24:42):

So they made it upstairs, they seized the records, they found cabinets full of stuff. And the work I was doing with my colleagues in the warehouse was the result of that. They got upstairs successfully, they seized the records. And so there we were in the warehouse with our Colombian National Police partners eating carry out pizza two or three times a day, 12 hour shifts, and then riding in the armored SUV back to our hotel at night. And these were the days when car bombs were going off, so we had to be really secure. There were Xs on the windows of... Almost everybody in Bogota had a big plate glass window and they had tape X's across them so that if there was a car bomb, the glass wouldn't shatter in and kill them.

Question: What a terrifying environment. Were you scared?

Julie Mendoza (25:37):

I think at the time, we just knew we had to follow the instructions we were given and we felt limited. We couldn't go walking around on our own. We could only go eat in places where the embassy had already approved them. We could only stay in a hotel the embassy had already approved. And so as long as we followed the rules, we wouldn't get in trouble. So it was really more for us about not getting in trouble. I've learned since then, I didn't have a partner or kids at the time. And as soon as I acquired those wonderful and important things in my life, it all changed. So when I was doing the visit in Bolivia, I was in a small DEA aircraft and we flew over the Andes Mountains to get from La Paz down to the base camp in Chimore. And it's craggy peaks, it's glaciers, it's just icy things jutting up toward the airplane and we flew over them and it was exciting.

(26:31):

I was looking down and then the pilot had to point out where there was a crash and it might've been one of those really famous crashes where people were cannibalizing their mates. And that was a funny anecdote because it was so long ago that there it still is 20 years later and it shocked me, but it was still part of the adventure. So when we were in Bogota, we knew that there were motorbike assassins called sicarios in Spanish who were going after people who were prosecutors and Colombian police and political officials. And we just did what we were told. They told us to ride in the embassy armored vehicles. We

weren't allowed to take a taxi. We didn't go anywhere on our own and we made it back home.

Question: So you were not concerned that a sicario would get you at the time?

Julie Mendosa (27:30):

I don't think I really felt that. I was aware that those things were happening, but I think maybe this is what people do in those kind of situations. We carry on and we take the precautionary measures, not really feeling the weight that it could happen to me today. That's how those prosecutors and police in Colombia carried on, just believing that today's a new day and I'm going to keep on doing my job.

Question: What kinds of things were you looking for in the seized financial documents?

Julie Mendosa (28:03)

You're taking me back to something I barely remember. We would be looking for one thing for dates that it would need to be recent, but financial transactions are done in usually a series of transfers if it's a wire transfer. So there would be movement that was from the place of origin and then it would go into a bank and then there are corresponding accounts that belong to different banks. And so the money would get moved into the account of a bank that it needed to go to and then down the line it would get moved into the destination account.

(28:38):

And the point of origin and the destination were the really important ones. Those places they passed through in the middle, everybody's money passed through those places. So we couldn't do much with that unless we had all of the details to find that particular transaction and stop it along the way. So the important things were to know who's going to get it because that's part of the criminal conspiracy and where did it start? Because that very well might be part of the conspiracy as well. It might be a front company and somebody is pretending that that money came from legitimate business when in fact it came from drugs. So we would be looking to put all these pieces together and figure out this transaction shows us which part of it. Is it a part that's actionable and is it recent enough that anybody can do anything about it?

Question: Talk about being evidence custodian during those years.

Julie Mendosa (29:31):

Yes. Yes. So this sounds interesting. It's an important responsibility, not as glamorous as it might sound. So when we came back from Colombia with those boxes of photocopied documents, those were, well, the copy we brought back here was an official evidentiary copy for DEA to use and keep. So if anyone in the US was going to do a Prosecution based on that stuff that was seized, they would need to use this set of documents that we brought back. So we would have them specially packaged as we left Colombia, specially picked up when they got here, and then we stored them in our office in a specially secured closet that had a special lock on it. And I was the evidence custodian. So I was responsible for signing people in and out. I had to know who had access to those documents because they were evidence and they couldn't be tampered with.

(30:32):

So I had the code to the door, to this super secure closet, and had to keep track of who came in and out in case the documents were ever needed. So I did that for maybe two years. In that time, we weren't lucky enough to have anybody need those documents, but trust me, it was a very important role.

Question: Tell me about your work at the New York Field Division, and pursuing the Cali cartel.

Julie Mendosa (30:56):

When Larry was done with his tour in Cochabamba, I was at headquarters and DEA saw a wonderful opportunity for us to get more law enforcement experience that really mattered in the New York field division. It was the only place that they would really let us both go together as a married couple. So we went to New York. I highly recommend the experience for anyone who's working with tough issues that have to do with people, because everything is interesting in New York. You really learn about how the world works and not always its easiest ways. So this was 1995 we arrived in New York. And Queens in particular was an area where a lot of this trafficking activity had its home base, I guess. There were a lot of front companies there. There were a lot of people in and out traveling to do things that had to do with moving money or moving drugs.

(32:05):

And Queens had really emerged as a hub for where the New York Field Division was needing to put a lot of attention for investigations of Colombian cocaine. And there were some money launderers who were trying to stay out of sight and they had agreed to cooperate with DEA. And so we met them in an undercover storefront basically in Queens. So I went with the agents and we just spent time talking with these guys about their

experiences and the different ways they had moved money. So I was getting an education. They were doing a mental dump and all that information could go back into reporting that DEA and wider law enforcement in the policy world could read about, here's what they're doing. So here's what we all need to look out for so that regulations could be in place for how to look at the banking industry and what people in that industry can look out for, and then how we in law enforcement can be more effective in our investigations. So we were just learning a lot.

Question: How did the money brokers launder funds for traffickers?

Julie Mendosa (33:16):

So the one I most remember at the time was just the peso exchange. So a money broker would have their hands in different markets and they would understand the daily exchange rates, which used to get printed in the newspaper once a day for the exchange rate for Swiss francs or pounds or just currencies all around the world. And so they would monitor that. And if they saw that something was going to go up or down, they could purchase that currency expecting a change that was going to be in their favor. So if a trafficker says to the broker, "We need this value, this much value. I've got a million dollars here in the US and I need a million dollars worth of value minus your 10% fee to reach such and such a destination wherever it might be." And it didn't mean that the money had to actually move.

(34:10):

It didn't have to be a bag of money transiting, but there had to be some sort of transaction that would allow a million dollars' worth of value to show up at the other end. So the broker had leeway to do it however he wanted. So he would do stuff that gave him extra gain along the way. So these guys were telling us about how they'd play the market and they would take that million dollars and they could buy a currency that was on the rise overnight. They'd sell it again the next day and pick a different one that was on the rise overnight. And if they had three days before that money had to be in the hands of the other end, they had three days to make a profit on it. They were rolling in money, but not anymore. By the time we talked to them, they were pretty destitute.

Question: You volunteered to analyze seized Cali cartel records from Queens. Describe that. Why was it important?

Julie Mendosa (35:00):

To go back before that, some prior awareness that I had gained before moving to New York, I'd been part of an effort where we were asked for volunteers and people used to say, "Don't volunteer for anything. That's always bad news." But I volunteered and it turned out to be

one of the best things I ever did. So at headquarters, we were aware of a vast amount of seized information that came from the New York Field Division and it was from what they were calling a communication center in a stash house for Cali Cartel connected traffickers. And it was a really big deal because this was the time when we were still learning what they were doing and how they were set up and where they were. We had no idea the volume they were moving through, the frequency. And so the New York office had found this location where somebody had been the center of their communications, so telling people where to go and when and how to drop off loads and make their transactions, but it was the same location where they were moving the drugs through.

(36:04):

So they had everything all in the same place and they had records. They had those little paper notebooks, record log books like an accountant might have used a hundred years ago. They had those books and they had these penciled in transactions. So I volunteer for a team that gets dumped with this pile of records and we didn't know what any of it meant, but we had some very clever people on our team. And so we persevered and we kept looking at it day after day. And finally we realized, oh, these are drug transactions. These are kilos in and out. It doesn't say kilos, but you've got a mark that says 12 or 15 or at the most, maybe 30 in or out. We couldn't really tell. And then there might be a notation that looked like a dollar amount maybe. And then there would be a nickname like Kiko or Lalo or something like that.

(37:00):

And we finally realized, oh, Lalo was checking out 12 kilos at that price. And then we added it all up because it had a date and we could see how much they were doing over the course of a month and a year. And that was the biggest thing at the time because nobody had any idea how much was coming in. And the way we get excited about these things, we'll never know if that was only the biggest operation like that, but it suggested that there could be more like it and there could be this massive amount of cocaine coming in with hundreds of kilos through a given stash site per month. And if you add it up across just New York City, how much might that be? And it was tremendous. So that project informed an awful lot of, I guess, the global world of law enforcement's awareness of how the Colombians were doing their operations.

(37:57):

And they changed right after that. They no longer had their communications in the same place as their drugs and they no longer brought so much through the same location and they no longer kept written records. But that gave me a lot of insight into how they were

functioning. So then when I was speaking with the money launderers, I could put the pieces together and picture. So the money comes in for those kilo transactions and there's a massive amount of cash stored in that same location and bags full of it. So what do they do with it? Well, they take it to businesses that are either completely front companies or were cooperating with them, cash businesses that took in a lot of cash transactions all day long and there was no way to know exactly what was accurate. So they would add \$100,000 in a month to the amount of cash they were taking in and then that money could get wire transferred through a series of transactions to different accounts and a money broker would eventually receive it and do his peso exchange business or perhaps buy merchandise and have the merchandise show up somewhere and that's how they would transfer the value. So it was all these different pieces of the same system and it was fascinating.

Question: That sounds like fulfilling, exciting, and probably frustrating work. How did it impact things at the policy level?

Julie Mendosa (39:16):

It was. It was all of those things and it was helping. We wanted it to help at the daily investigative level, but I think that more of what we did was helpful at a strategy and policy level. So what we were dying to do was be right there hands on with the agents who would say, "Got it. Going to make a seizure." But what we had to settle for was knowing that the senior member of our team was going around to different agencies, briefing them on how much cocaine had come in and out of this location and how much might be coming through New York City because even people on Capitol Hill were going, "Wow, we better get on top of this."

Question: Can you give a general trajectory of the rest of your career with DEA?

Julie Mendosa (40:00):

So after New York, we came back to headquarters. I ended up getting involved in some stuff that I can't talk about here because it had to do with national security intelligence beyond DEA. And so I did some things in special rooms where you can't take your telephone in and can't talk about what you do and have to sign in guests very, very, very carefully. But then we went out to Dallas, and I worked in the Dallas field division with a lot of club drug cases there at the time. So working directly with investigators.

Question: What year?

Julie Mendosa (40:42):

2000 to 2002. And I made a trip to Las Vegas, a trip to Los Angeles because of people who were trafficking club drugs. And they're printed out in machines, pill press machines, and then they're put into packs. And people would actually wrap these packs of pills around their body and wear big bulky clothing and just travel on a regular airplane. And so we were working on a network of people who was moving them around. There was a connection to Israel and connections across the US and Dallas, Las Vegas, all fueling the club drug scene with MDMA, which it can be very dangerous because about 10% of people I understood at the time can't process it in their bodies and so they end up having an overreaction. So it was an important priority at the time. The scene was far different than working on cocaine and heroin trafficking and the things that we did in New York.

(41:49):

So it was a different window into other parts of the drug world. Then we moved to California, to San Francisco, and I was the intelligence supervisor for the High intensity Drug Trafficking Area, which is otherwise known as the HIDTA. And I don't think they still exist today by the same name. I'm not even sure. So it was an inter-agency environment. Basically it started as a pot of federal funding to encourage task forces so that state, local, tribal partners, even prosecutor's offices would get together in an effort where we combined resources and we had funding for overtime and things like that. And so we would go after whatever the issues were in that region. So I was in charge of the intelligence team there. That was my first supervisor job. And we had people representing different parts of California, different organizations tied to different sheriff's office and police departments.

(42:48):

And it was a really great experience to see who can do what and how we can do things together because as the federal partner, we had resources that they couldn't even dream of. And compared to say the corporate sector, we still weren't that well-resourced, but we could do things, we could compile data that our state and local partners couldn't do because they just didn't have the programs, they didn't have the computer capacity, they didn't have the tech support. So we got to bring some good things together. And then I came back to headquarters and was doing some more secretive type stuff. Yeah, a lot of secretive type stuff.

Question: Tell me more about your work with HIDTA. What drugs were you targeting most?

Julie Mendosa (43:45):

Yeah. A lot of the threat at that time was methamphetamine. So there was this important distinction between the east side of our country and the west side of our country and the drug picture was pretty different. So there was black tar heroin that mostly came from Mexico and methamphetamine that was largely made in small labs. And a lot of them were in the US and some of them were in Mexico and that was a shifting growing pattern as we got more serious about enforcement on this side of the border. They moved more and they got smaller, but lots of people producing methamphetamine. And so I think one of our task forces was a response team for clandestine labs and investigative efforts going after those kinds of groups of suspects. Yeah.

(44:41):

There was a lot of difficulty and sadness around it too because we would get stories about how there was a production facility, they'd be in houses or garages or in somebody's shed in the backyard and there would be children living there. And then we came to learn about the chemicals that were present on those scenes and they could cause cancer in people from just being exposed for a short amount of time. And so these children were living with these fumes. That was the big effort at the time.

Question: What do you remember most about the DEA community during your career?

Julie Mendosa (45:17):

Yes, because even in the secretive stuff, there was this underlying theme of collaboration and working together. And so I feel like my whole working life was about bringing people and information and ideas together so that we could understand more of what was going on, so that we could go after what we needed to try to stop.

(45:40):

And the resources of any one given organization are never enough. So when we bring people together and we talk to each other, at the regular working levels, we always wanted to get stuff done. As people got higher up, then the politics and the legalities got to be things that had to be worked out at those levels. They got a little more complicated. But as long as we were free and legal and authorized and had the processes to work together at ground level, we got a lot done. And so an inter-agency environment was something that I was very used to and it felt very natural. And I guess the community spirit, that we always had something in common. And that was true of DEA, but it was also true of the larger environment that I worked in where we were people who were serious about wanting to do something that was important and we were trying to get it done.

(46:43):

And so accomplishing things was really important. But at the same time, because we knew it was so serious, we were also serious about being friends and having fun and laughing. And so we always had just these strong connections to each other over our shared effort to get things done and make it something manageable on a day-to-day basis.

Question: What were the other government agencies you interfaced with most?

(47:12):

I've worked with so many. So in the beginning, I started at the El Paso Intelligence Center and we had immigration and customs people and some military counterparts who would look at the... Well, they had resources that we didn't have. I guess that was the primary set of folks there. And then the people who sent in reports would be from an even wider array. There were people who did fisheries in game who sent us in reports because people were out on the waters in fishing boats, but picking up drug loads. When I was in San Francisco in the HIDTA, we had, I don't know, hundreds of police departments across the state and I could potentially work with any of them on a given day. We had all the different counties and they sometimes had intel people, but they definitely had investigators. Sometimes people from the mayor's office in the City of Oakland, for example, would have said, "Hey, look, we've got this real high priority." So we would be trying to respond to that.

(48:17):

So you bring in the political needs. When I was in New York, we sometimes looked at information from health departments and records of where the overdoses were and the drug abuse concerns and I guess the statistics and rates on where people were having the most challenges with staying off of something. And so that played into how we were looking at our strategy and where our efforts should be. So there were partnerships of all types all over the place.

Question: Is there anything else you'd like to add about DEA's workplace culture?

Julie Mendosa (48:57):

It was always fun. Some of what I noticed is probably not fair to say because I think we had more fun than a lot of other agencies who were not so much law enforcement or... Well, we had certain colleagues we'd run into who were a lot more buttoned up and serious. And I think to tell you the truth, that made it harder for them to do their jobs. How so? Because for one thing, it's hard to do a surveillance if you're expected to be dressed business casual, but also because somebody who's... The training, to do law enforcement work, it helps to have a background that matches up with the kind of crimes you're investigating. So to be fluid enough to be one week in an environment where there are people who get into

bar brawls and move small amounts of something, but then in another part of your career, you might have to be working on something that has these people who exchange pesos on the currency exchange market.

(50:10):

It takes a certain amount of versatility and just being mentally flexible. So I think it helps in DEA that we had a culture of doing that. I guess maybe sometimes we were not as strong on having field agents show up in a suit and tie unless they had court that day, but they could show up for everything that needed to be done.

Question: Why is the global nature of DEA's mission important?

Julie Mendoza (50:44):

Ah, this ties right back to the whole collaborative element and how none of us can do this alone. So something I learned that's really important from working on these transnational criminal networks is the complexity of all the issues that affect us in terms of security and even things like economics and trade and migration, that everything is interconnected. And if we try to oversimplify and just look at one little piece of something, we miss so much of what we need to know about understanding how to fix it or how to address it, how to make it not quite so dangerous for people. And so when DEA has relationships around the world, those are people who want to get stuff done. The counterparts, even if our governments at that higher level have things they have to negotiate, at the working level, people want to get stuff done.

(51:42):

So they do as much as they can. What can we share? What can we do together? What can we find out about? And they do what they can, and that is so much more than we would ever have if we didn't have those people there and have those relationships. So having a global network and being connected to counterparts and working carefully and closely with them gives DEA access to understanding what's going on in a way that helps us at home and it helps everybody else in other parts of the world too, because you can't try to solve something that's globally interrelated by staying at home.

Question: How do DEA's international operations help improve the American people's safety and security?

Julie Mendoza (52:28):

Yeah, it's bringing all of this together. So for example, if you didn't know about black market peso exchanges and how trade could be used to launder criminal proceeds, you might not

ever be able to uncover a human trafficking ring that's bringing young people into an exploitative environment and keeping them there without any escape. Because sometimes the way to find that out is through things that are a few layers out. If we understand how these things work, we have more signs and signals and things to look for, more people who might spot something and be part of the effort of trying to address it. So most everything that happens is tied to something else that happens and to other people. So the more we're interconnected with counterparts who can work with us, the better we're able to protect the US and everyone else to the extent that we can from threats that are transnational.

Question: Why is Administrator Cole's Fentanyl Free American initiative important?

Julie Mendosa (53:43):

I was just downstairs in DEA headquarters seeing the wall of beautiful young faces of people who had died from fentanyl overdoses. And if I wasn't concerned about it before, I am now. It's very, very touching. So attention to fentanyl is really an effort to try to reduce the number of young faces who are up on that wall. It's a threat that people don't take seriously enough until it's too late and they're already dead. They can't do anything about it then. And so the attention and the effort to work closely with partnerships of this effort is super important and probably the only way to keep on trying to address fentanyl effectively.