

Daniel Rodriguez
“The Singing Policeman”
Opera Singer

To those who have come to love him as the “singing policeman,”—Daniel Rodriguez was the New York City cop who helped bring America through the hard hitting times of the September 11 terrorist attacks with his stirring operatic rendition of “God Bless America.” After his 9/11 tribute, Rodriguez quickly rose to fame, and has had many career highlighting performances. In 2002, he performed for the Opening Ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games, in Salt Lake City Utah. That same year, he sang at the PBS Memorial Day concert in Washington, D.C. and the Tournament of Roses Parade. He has made frequent White House musical appearances and performed at the 2004 Republican National Convention and at President Bush’s “Celebration of Freedom” Inauguration concert in 2005. Rodriguez has appeared on various news and talk shows such as “The Late Show with David Letterman,” “Larry King Live,” “Live with Regis and Kelly” as well as “Oprah.” Currently he is on a cross country 117 city concert tour across America and has released three successful albums within the past few years. As a Kingborough Alumni, becoming an overnight sensation wasn’t something on Rodriguez’s to do list.

In the heart of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn during the 60s, Rodriguez spent most of his youth playing stick ball and hanging out at Manhattan Beach with his family.

“Brooklyn was great. An absolutely amazing place,” Rodriguez fondly recalled.

Born May 24, 1964, Rodriguez was the musical product of a multi-cultural family, where his Puerto Rican roots fused together with his seasoned life in New York City. As a teen, Rodriguez spent a lot of time training his voice in an operatic style with his father, who was also a singer. He continued perfecting his singing skills throughout high school and well into his college career, which he spent at the 'College by the Sea,' Kingsborough Community College.

“Kingsborough was great. It had a lot of good programs, was in the neighborhood and the tuition was affordable,” Rodriguez recalled. “My family couldn’t afford the big name colleges.”

Rodriguez, a Liberal Arts Major during his attendance at Kingsborough, developed a growing interest in the field of Computer Science. He spent his free time working in the Environmental Science lab. “It was because it was next to the Early Child Care Center, that’s where all the girls were,” Rodriguez jokingly stated.

Like many Kingsborough students, Rodriguez not only went to school full time, but divided his time with work.

“I earned a living working various odd jobs during college, stated Rodriguez, “I was a delivery boy, a catering chef, a cab driver, cabinet maker. Those were really tough years.”

During those often difficult years, Rodriguez’s Kingsborough journey was unfortunately cut short because he was, as he stated “thrown into the world of adulthood.” Due to a

growing need to support his new born child, Rodriguez was forced to set aside his school career as well as his music career to take care of his familial responsibilities as a new dad.

“It was very arduous. I was literally thrown into the world of adulthood,” stated Rodriguez. “I had to struggle just to make ends meet and for about four years it was a big struggle to try and find out where my life’s journey was going to take me. I had to find the road that I really wanted to travel [versus] the road that I was forced to travel.”

When recalling those difficult times he experienced during his post-Kingsborough journey, Rodriguez stated some words of wisdom.

“Many times, we are forced to travel many roads because of the responsibilities we are given as adults, but it is important to remain true to our dreams so that we can go back onto the road that makes us whole,” Rodriguez stated. “My post Kingsborough journey was finding my way back to the road that made me whole, which was my music and singing; a gift God gave me.”

It was at Rodriguez's next day-job where his career began as a member of the New York Police Department. After working at a job that wasn't going to take him anywhere, Rodriguez took his fathers advice and his former job at the US Post Office, and began looking for something more rewarding. His search led him to the front door of New York's legendary Police Department.

“I had this sense that policemen were like Superman. I have always been a fan of police officers and knew you could always depend on them,” stated Rodriguez as he recalled his admiration for the ‘boys in blue’ as a child.

Though he was an officer in training and father, Rodriguez was still able to dedicate most of his free time to his passion of singing.

“I sang at night clubs and made bookings for myself with a pianist,” stated Rodriguez. I even was part of a quartet for some time. I was a leader of songs in various churches and rehearsed and booked shows for myself over the weekends”

While balancing both lives, a friend of Rodriguez’, who was an organist as well as a Detective in his department, helped elevate him within his academy. This boost brought a new found recognition of Rodriguez’s singing talents to his fellow officers.

While in training, Rodriguez discovered that there was a Ceremonial Unit which performed the National Anthem at the yearly graduation ceremony held at Madison Square Garden. Determined to showcase his talents to a larger audience, Rodriguez made it his priority to join the unit.

“They usually use a cadet to perform in the ceremony, stated Rodriguez and I didn’t want to approach the ceremonial unit, so I used one of my friends to make a phone call. That’s how everything was done in the police department. If you want something, you find what we call a ‘rabbi’ and you have your ‘rabbi’ call to get you out of bad assignments and put you in good assignments. The higher you know people, the better off you are as a police officer. That’s the politics of the police departments.”

Rodriguez's mysterious bearded rabbi stayed true to his word. Calls were made and he was given the opportunity to try out for the upcoming Graduation Ceremony.

"I tried out a month before graduation and they loved it," said Rodriguez. "Before I knew it, I was at Madison Square Garden with over 2000 of my fellow police officers singing the national anthem and then I became an overnight celebrity."

Following the event, Rodriguez was assigned to the police department's ceremonial unit, where he began singing the national anthem at many official ceremonies and civic events. He performed for Mets and Yankees, two of New York's most popular major league baseball teams and was personally called up by Yankees owner, George Steinbrenner, to sing at the World Series game against the Diamond Backs. Rodriguez was regularly flown to the White House to sing for the President and was becoming known for his unique operatic style and his kind humble spirit.

"I had more connections in the police department than the police commissioner," Rodriguez stated in a jovial tone.

His road to success took a sudden detour on a day no police officer in New York City could ever forget.

"I was at ground zero when the towers came down, stated Rodriguez. It was sheer terror and there were moments where I made my peace with God because I was sure these were the last moments I would live."

Rodriguez's voice became more reflective.

“One of the things I realized was that all my life, I had been a singer and that was my first love and passion, but at that moment the only thing I wanted was to be by the side of my fellow officers doing my job at Ground Zero,” stated Rodriguez. When the second tower came down, I honestly thought everything was going to end. At that moment I asked myself ‘Have I done enough in my life? Have I taken every opportunity to do a good deed to help another person?’ “My answer was, I don't know. I wasn't sure. From then on I made sure to spend my life being a positive example to the people that I meet by using the gifts that God gave me. My outlook was to do things to the fullest.”

After September 11th, 2001, Rodriguez's voice became a symbol of hope, and healing for New York City. Some weeks later, Rodriguez sang what he describes as his most memorable performance ever.

“It was huge, stated Rodriguez. Oprah hosted. James Earl Jones read a poem. Bette Midler sang “Wind Beneath My Wings” and my soon to be mentor, Placido Domingo sang the “Ave Maria.”

The September 11th memorial performance set off a chain of events, including an invitation for an audition with Placido Domingo that forever changed his life. The brief audition, held at the Met, led to 18 enriching months of opera training with Domingo. Rodriguez's dreams were materializing in reality.

Since then, he has performed his most notable role as the Clown Canio, in the dramatic opera *Pagliacci* and also performed at other various high profile events both nationally

and internationally. As his success as a singer grew, Rodriguez decided to hang up his uniform and officially retired from the NYPD in June of 2004, to pursue his music career full time.

“We are the conductors of our own symphony,” declared Rodriguez. “You have to ask yourself the question: How do you want your life to be? What is the work that you want to conduct? And how are you going to make it happen?”

When summing up his Kingsborough experience, Rodriguez stated, “The experiences I had in Kingsborough helped me to grow and gave me what I needed in life. It was the idea of not completing my education, which made me realize that I need to complete the things I love. If I came back, I would love to share all that I’ve learned by mentoring students at Kingsborough. Now that I’m older and wiser and can look back at things, I strongly believe that our gifts are the sums of our experiences.”

**Interview completed by Kingsborough Student, Ruth Udoh
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