

Regional

Romero's curiosity rooted in undersea world

Oct. 5, 1957 was a momentous day for the world, and, in a unique way, for a 6-year-old boy in Venezuela. It was on that day that the world found out about the Soviet Union's launch the day before of Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite and a major volley in the superpowers' race to space.

For Aldemaro Romero Jr., it was the day that he decided to become an astronaut "I asked my father to buy me some books about astronomy and then Santa brought me a telescope," said Romero.

His father, who he said was 'realistic,' told him that he would have to be either Russian or American to be an astronaut. "With that, my dreams were dashed," Romero added. But not for long.

A trip to the movies to see a film by the French underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau showed the young Romero that space was not the only world to be explored.

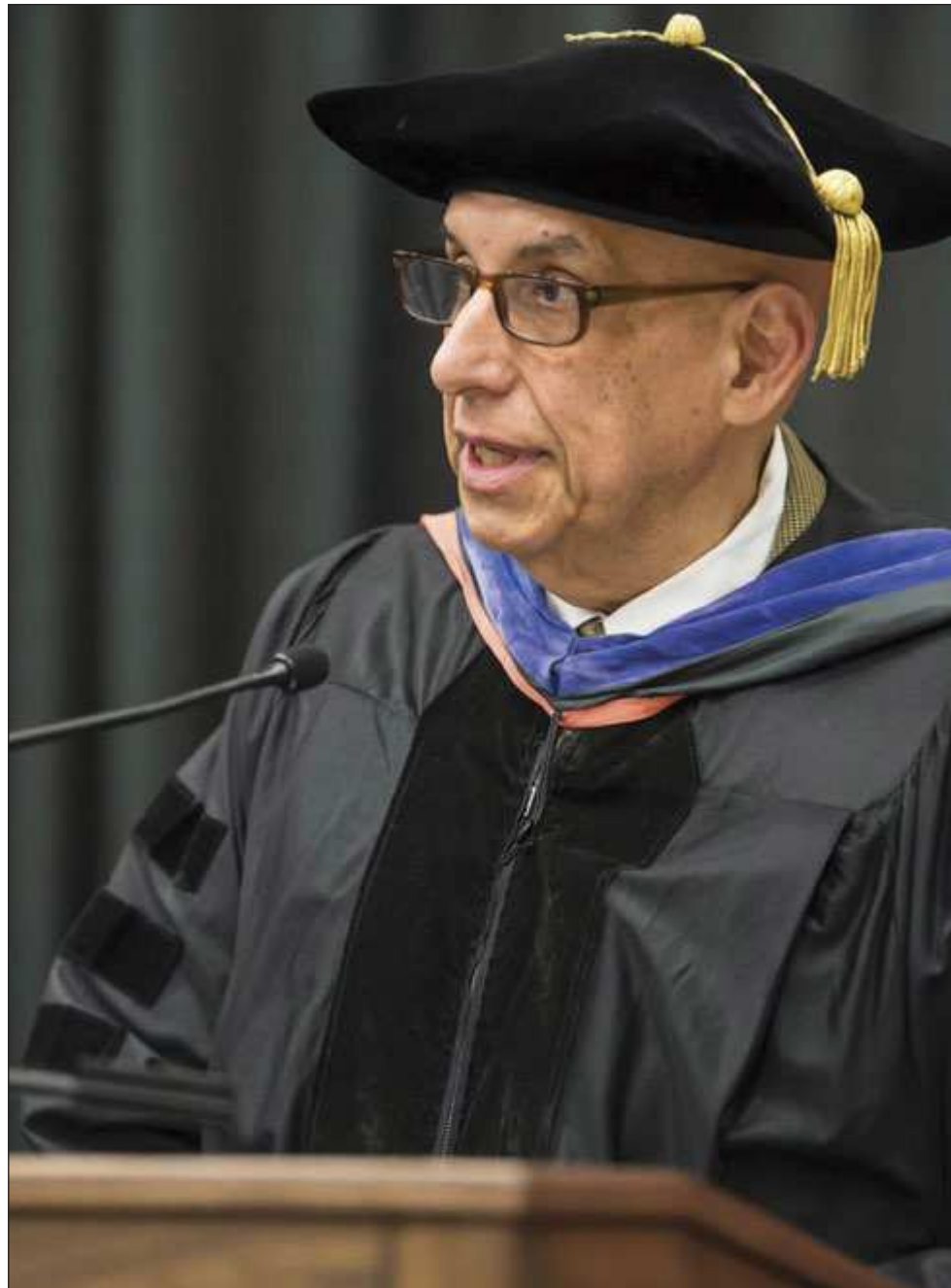
Romero's father was no stranger to ambition either. He was a famous composer and orchestra leader in Venezuela who gained worldwide acclaim and worked with the likes of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin.

In Venezuela, he hosted the equivalent of the Ed Sullivan show in the United States. Romero would sometimes accompany his father to the studio and watch the live performances. At home, he would oftentimes mimic his father's mannerisms as he was playing or writing music.

"He said to me, 'Oh, you have an ear for music. I am going to get you to conduct my orchestra on live TV,'" Romero said.

"So I became famous as a conductor, so to speak," he added. "In fact, I was asked to conduct an orchestra for a full-length movie in Venezuela called 'Papalepe.' If you go to the Internet, either it is on YouTube or Vimeo, you can actually see a video of me conducting that orchestra."

And while Romero remains active to this day in music, it is biology that led to his own fame – and to threats of death.



SIUE photo

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr., speaking at a commencement ceremony at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

He received his bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Barcelona in Spain, and his doctorate in biology from the University of Miami in Florida. It was after completing his Ph.D. that Romero took a position with the Nature Conservancy in Washington, D.C.

The organization was expanding its operations in Latin America and sent Romero back to Venezuela to be program director. He and his staff began work on a biological inventory.

"I discovered that dolphins were being killed by some fishermen in order to use their meat as shark bait, which doesn't make any sense because those sharks will bait after anything," Romero said.

He and his crew videotaped the slaughter and reported the dolphin killings to the Venezuelan government.

He even testified before the Venezuelan Congress, urging them to educate the fishermen that the dolphins would be more valuable to them as part of eco-tourism. The government, he said, did nothing.

"I was later invited to give a guest lecture to a conservation biology class at the University of Miami," Romero said. "In the audience was someone who belonged to a conservation group that specialized in dolphins." Romero gave the man a copy of the video he had made of the dolphin killings.

"Two weeks later when I was back in Venezuela I got a call from CNN International. They wanted to do a piece about it," Romero said.

"Once the piece was shown internationally, including in the United States, the Venezuelan consulate in Miami and the Venezuelan embassy in Washington claimed to have received over 50,000 faxes and letters from very irritated Americans. That is when my problems started."

Romero said that he began receiving phone calls at his home, threatening both he and his family.

"They detailed the names and school schedules of my daughters," he said.

Gary R. Hicks

College Talk

"When that happens in those countries, you better leave."

The family fled to the United States where they were given protection by the U.S. government. "Something my family and I are very grateful to this country for."

In absentia, Romero was indicted by a Venezuelan court for treason to the motherland.

"I had given the country a bad name," he said. Even once in the United States, he received threats of kidnapping, so the FBI provided the family with protection.

"My father had a meeting with the U.S. ambassador in Caracas, who told him, 'We are going to protect your son. The enemies of your son are the enemies of the United States,'" Romero said. It turned out that different fishermen – those catching tuna in the Pacific Ocean – were also killing thousands of dolphins in the process.

To help save the dolphins, the United States had placed a moratorium on fishing in those waters as part of the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act.

The fishermen turned to another line of work.

"The fishing boats were actually transporting drugs and the drug dealers thought that I knew," he said. "I didn't."

Romero, who stepped down as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville at the end of last year, will no longer write this column.

He will, however, begin a new column in the Intelligencer titled "Letters from Academia," in which he will give his perspective on issues related to higher education in Illinois and in America.

Gary R. Hicks is the head of the Mass Communications Department at SIUE.