

Changing the System One Lecture at a Time

Gil Zamora, a professor at San Jose State, shares his experience as a retired police officer and sketch artist and what it was like to change the system with how police officers question people in investigations.

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Cameron Stickney

University Student



Gil Zamora, a current professor at San Jose State, was a professor at the University of New England during the fall semester of 2024 where he taught a Forensic Eyewitness class. In this class, Professor Zamora taught his students how to properly interview eyewitnesses, suspects, and victims during investigations.

Through this, he brought in officers to do “interrogations” to the students to show the difference between proper investigations vs inappropriate investigations. Students also learned how to properly conduct these investigations through many practice sessions they held outside of class with people, fake scenarios they’d write as a sort of script, as well as a final in front of the whole class where they conducted an investigation type of scenario.

Professor Zamora was born and raised in Eagle Pass, Texas before his family moved to San Jose California in 1963 where he would grow up for the remainder of his childhood. Despite growing up on the West Coast, Professor Zamora’s wife grew up in Portland, Maine, so now Zamora and his wife travel to Bath, Maine (since 2015) where they have a rental and “stay there for six months at a time (since 2022)” according to Zamora.

Professor Zamora was previously employed for the San Jose Police Department in 1985. Before working for the police department, he was an electrical engineer and “enjoyed a side gig as a graphic designer”. It was only when Zamora felt a “desire for civic duty” that he applied as a police officer. Zamora was a patrol officer which he says “resonate(s)” with him as he found it “both exciting and rewarding”. It didn’t matter if he was “arresting people who were victimizing innocent people, or helping people enhance their neighborhoods; everyday was a new day and each one brought amazing experiences.” says Zamora.

However, despite the joy his job brought him, Zamora was involved in an “on-duty vehicle accident” which he says “changed (my) life” and is the reason why he turned to art. During his recovery time, Zamora decided to train to become a police artist so he could combine his love and passion for art as well as civic duty.

During this time, there was a police sketch artist at the department that was nearing retirement, so Zamora expressed his interest and the man was able to mentor him for about 2 and a half years before he applied for the job 6 months later. In 1995, Zamora had been appointed the police sketch artist, which also happened to be only the second artist in history for that department.

Due to being the police sketch artist, this made Zamora be involved in “every major criminal investigation where the suspect was unknown”. Being the police sketch artist for the San Jose Police Department also opened lots of doors for Professor Zamora in many different areas. Zamoras work was exposed to media appearances locally and even made its way onto the Oprah Winfrey Show.

After Zamora retired from the police department in 2011, he was “asked to be the forensic artist on the Dove Real Beauty in 2013”, says Zamora. This experience ended up presenting Zamora to some Hollywood opportunities as well as “over 180 million YouTube views”.

Since 2000, Zamora has been training police officers in the art of interviewing, especially focussing on the “cognitive interview technique” that was created by Fisher & Geiselman. During this experience, it had given him the confidence to understand the foundations of the cognitive interview and “considered its limitations when it came to gathering reliable statements from eyewitnesses.” according to Zamora.

In his teachings, he highlights things such as: the concepts of eyewitness memory, advanced interview strategies, and the systematic variables that had the possibility of influencing eyewitness recollections. All of these concepts Zamora knew firsthand were not exposed during initial training due to his experience as a trained police officer.

Zamora was able to share his experience and knowledge to an audience that wasn't always the most receptive for an entire decade. During this time, he was able to deliver his ideas through mock interviews so that way they could try out the techniques, see how they worked, and then take them back with them to work.

Zamora became Professor Zamora after many years of going to schools for career day, including high schools and universities, due to being a police officer and a sketch artist for the police department. After receiving his graduate degree in education, Professor Zamora accepted his invitation from San Jose State to join their justice studies program in 2017. Zamora reflects on this experience in education as “rewarding and challenging”.

During the academic setting, Zamora says it “brought (me) opportunities to review book concepts in criminology”. Taylor & Francis had asked Zamora if he had an idea for a book which led to him getting a contract and publishing his book *The Mindful Interview Method: Retrieving Cognitive Evidence*. Zamora reflects on his overall experience as a professor saying, “Being called a professor is an honor and one that is filled with opportunities to help others, as they find their way to their chosen path.”