

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)[< Previous](#)[Next >](#)

UNCLASSIFIED

1. Couple Were CIA's Masters of Disguises

Mendezes discuss their careers as spies during the Cold War years.

Michael W. Freeman, The Ledger, 16 May 2010, Page R9

ORLANDO -- Tony Mendez likes to joke that his general appearance is so ordinary, so nondescript, that he could actually make a great spy.

"I'm practicing playing the role of the perfect spy - the little gray man," he laughed.

The joke is that Mendez, now retired, has so many years of experience as a spy for the CIA that he now spends his days either on the lecture circuit, or as the author of books like "The Master of Disguise: My Secret Life in the CIA," which chronicles his experience as an undercover agent. Curiously, his tales actually correspond with what a lot of people might assume the exotic life of a spy entails, including overseas journeys in covert operations that are dangerous and exciting.

"In order to do espionage, you've got to get out of your chair and go out to corners of the world and collect your intelligence," Mendez said. "Committing espionage is something you have to do in foreign lands."

On May 4, Mendez and his wife Jonna, who also was a CIA agent, came to the Orange County Regional History Center to discuss "Disguise, Deception and Illusion: CIA Masters of Magic," chronicling their careers as chiefs of disguise for the CIA. Jonna Mendez recalled the challenge of going undercover in the former Soviet Union in the 1970s, at the height of Cold War tensions, when the Communist government had spies everywhere closely monitoring them.

"In Moscow, it was tough," she said. "We had teams of surveillance following us all day. In your apartment, you couldn't even have an honest husband and wife fight, because someone was always listening to you."

The Mendezes were invited to speak at the history center as part of its ongoing "Lunch and Learn" series. The history center was thrilled to have them, said Sherry Meadows Lewis, its director of marketing and public relations.

"We found the Mendezes through the Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.," she said. "We're always on the lookout for something interesting we can bring to the community, and they are fabulous."

Interest in hearing the couple was so strong, Lewis said, that reservation requests far exceeded the seating capacity.

"We had to turn down around 300 people today," she said.

Tony Mendez got his start on the lecture circuit after he was honored by the CIA on its 50th anniversary in 1997 as being one of the agency's 50 "Trailblazers." He was encouraged to go out and speak about his past experiences - something Tony Mendez always thought he would have to keep hush-hush. So, following 25 years as an undercover agent who could change his identity and who used clandestine photography and spy cameras, he went public. Jonna Mendez said they decided to accept that request as a way to humanize a federal agency that a lot of people don't fully understand.

"Tony was called out at the end of his career as one of the top officers," Jonna Mendez said. "What we say is the CIA started this, and we're happy to finish it. We're happy to un-demonize the CIA."

Jonna Mendez worked in the CIA's Office of Technical Service for 27 years, being overseas much of the time.

"The work of the CIA is not here in the U.S.," she said. "You are collecting intelligence on the plans of your enemies. We made a variety of devices for our officers, putting in audio devices around the world and collecting intelligence."

In the fashion of a true James Bond movie, Jonna Mendez noted that they used cameras concealed in shirt buttons and pens, guns made to look like flashlights, and microdot cameras. But it wasn't all like the movies.

"Unlike the James Bond movies," she said, "we didn't just hand our gear over to James. James might lose it."

Their main skills focused on "identity transformation" - eliminating any semblance of who they really are and becoming someone entirely new.

"Tony and I were very interested in disguise," Jonna Mendez said. "We really had a capability that is unmatched anywhere in the world."

She was quick to admit that women may have an advantage in this field, since they cannot only disguise themselves, but even hide their gender.

"It's very easy to change a woman into a man," Jonna Mendez said. "It's much harder to change a man into a woman. We were never able to change a U.S. Marine into a woman."

They were able to teach agents how to transform even ordinary clerical staff members into someone new.

"If each person had a disguise, he just doubled his staff," Jonna Mendez said. "We were also really involved in Hollywood with our work, and I can tell you there are a lot of true patriots out there, giving us ideas on how we can do it."

Tony Mendez noted that in the 1960s, he was working as an artist/illustrator in Denver when he noticed a recruitment ad placed by the CIA, and sent in an application.

He recalled sitting in a hotel room, shades drawn, with a bottle of Jim Beam on the table, as the recruiter told him, "Son, this ain't the Navy."

He was hooked.

"I ended up as the chief of disguise," he said, "right at the time we were going onto Moscow."

Copyright © 2010 TheLedger.com -- All rights reserved.

UNCLASSIFIED

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

[< Previous](#)

[Next >](#)