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What happens when rivals meet face to face

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Aspen

From his second-floor deck, peering through binoculars, he called out: "Are you with the CIA? (He laughed.)

How do I know who you are? Where are your press credentials?" He laughed again.

An echo of hee-hee-hee dissipated into the thicket of white aspens surrounding his apartment complex.

At his door, he stopped the wisecracking.

"Welcome," he said, letting me enter his apartment - all 480 square feet of it, which also serves as the headquarters for the Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform.

I was face-to-face with Mike McGarry, a man synonymous with the anti-immigrant movement and someone who considers me a nemesis.

I needed to understand him, and after spending five hours with McGarry I learned he's a lonely man with a sensitive side who has forsaken a social life to focus on an issue that's consumed him.

Before our meeting, I knew him through e-mails like this one, which he sent to me April 4: "You, however, really ought to be pedaling your written wares out of a sleazy red-light motel room on Colfax Boulevard, where your prostituted journalistic standards and trashy ways are soaking into a dirty, stained mattress."

Four months ago, I wrote about how McGarry ambushed Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper at a breakfast fundraiser for a day-labor center in Denver. During the videotaped ambush, where he and Colorado Minutemen surrounded the mayor, McGarry poked Hickenlooper in the chest.

McGarry is a regular at protests denouncing illegal immigration and calls for drastic reductions in legal immigration. A favorite line of his: "America is full."

In person, he was cordial. He pointed to his African gray parrot. "This is my daughter, Strawberry."

I looked around and felt like it was 1972. Or would that be 1962? Crocheted blankets covered the backs of two worn brown chairs. A plastic rainbow hung from a wall, arched next to a window.

In his office/living room/bedroom, McGarry sat across from me in a white plastic chair. He wore a red turtleneck under a black flannel shirt, jeans and faux sheepskin slippers that were torn at the seam.

He's a proud conservationist and a thrifty spender. He doesn't eat at restaurants. He doesn't own a car. He doesn't buy new clothes.

He pointed to his compact-fluorescent light bulbs. "I challenge you to find someone who lives more frugally than me," he said.

It helps that his apartment is rent stabilized by the Aspen/Pitkin Housing Authority at \$675 a month. The market rate is closer to \$1,000.

Friends had warned me not to be alone with him, but I wasn't worried. I knew he had a good side, and it didn't take long for him to reveal it.

I asked about a photograph on the wall. Is that your mom? It was.

McGarry said his mother sacrificed everything to make sure he and his two sisters succeeded. She waited tables, but also cleaned and cooked and made sure the children did their homework.

"She was a saint," McGarry said, his voice cracking. He remained quiet for a few seconds as he wiped tears.

The rest of his family - his sisters, cousins and nieces - live far away, most in his native California. He counts a few friends in town and says he is glad he's not in a relationship.

A significant other would distract him. "I wouldn't be able to do my work," he said.

He's not talking about his day job as a janitor. He's talking about his anti-immigration work.

Rising at 3 a.m., keeping the lights off so he doesn't disturb Strawberry, McGarry scours newspapers online, looking for articles related to immigration. He fires off letters to the editor, sends e-mail alerts to people urging them to call their senators and is a frequent guest on radio talk shows.

Then he heads to his job at A-1 Maintenance & Building Management. He returns to do his work. He says his boss gives him time off, without pay, to attend protests.

McGarry seems obsessed with illegal immigration. Even in his bathroom there's a poster that says "Six billion miracles is enough." (It's outdated; the world population now stands at about 6.5 billion.)

He says his work costs him time he could be spending with others: "My social life is narrow. But what I am doing is way more important."

At times he gets frustrated. "So many times I say I can't do this any more and quit," he said. He'll quit for a few weeks. One time, he said he quit for six months. But then he'll read something in the newspaper that angers him, pulling him back.

His contention is shared by many: People need to wait their turn and come into the country legally.

But he also is against legal immigration. He thinks the U.S. should reduce legal immigration to 200,000 people a year from the current 850,000.

Illegal immigrants are "nothing more than criminals and they should be rounded up and deported," he often says.

Some people cheer his views and the language he uses. Others are turned off. He's lost two friends in the past five

years because of it. They found out about his activism and stopped talking to him.

"That is wrong, what they did," he said. "I was offended and hurt."

He shrugged his shoulders, stood and walked out onto his deck. The mountains topped with snow looked like something out of a Thomas Kinkade painting.

"When the weather is nice I will sit out here, read a book and have homemade soup," McGarry said. "Strawberry will stay on this perch, and I'm set. I don't need anything else."

Cindy Rodríguez's column appears Tuesdays in Scene and Sundays in Style. Contact her at 303-820-1211 or crodriguez@denverpost.com.

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