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Detroit ready, happy to return to lead Michigan's FBI operations

He aims to make everyone's job easier

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BY DAVID ASHENFELTER
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

When some residents are bailing out of Michigan because of its gloomy economy, Andrew G. Arena is eager to come home to the Mitten.

Arena, 44, a top FBI official in New York City, plans to return to Detroit on March 1 to take over the FBI's operations in Michigan.

"I have a lot of pride in where I'm from. It's who I am," Arena said in a phone interview last week from his Manhattan office, which is adorned with Motor City memorabilia like a Detroit Red Wings stool and framed photos of the Detroit skyline and the old Tiger Stadium.

He will replace Daniel Roberts, 46, who stepped down as FBI director in Detroit to become deputy assistant director of the FBI criminal division in Washington, D.C.

In post 9/11 America, as the FBI shifts its focus from primarily investigating bank robberies, the mob and white-collar crime to combating terrorism, FBI Director Robert Mueller is sending someone to Detroit who has an expertise in all those areas and is one of Motown's biggest cheerleaders.

"My job is to make everyone else's job easier, to give them the tools they need to do their jobs and to foster an environment so they'll enjoy coming

to work," Arena said.

Craig Morford, U.S Attorney in Nashville, Tenn., who got to know Arena while investigating the mob in Youngstown, Ohio, in the late 1990s, said Arena ran a good office. Morford served as U.S. Attorney in Detroit in 2004-05.

Morford said community leaders and law enforcement officials will like Arena "because he's such a nice, likable guy, down to earth and humble."

Arena used to take a lot of ribbing in Youngstown about the Detroit memorabilia in his office -- especially the Red Wings stool. Morford chuckled: "He was never shy about showing off his Detroit roots."

The grandson of Sicilian immigrants, Arena grew up in the Springwells-Vernor area of southwest Detroit. His dad was an assembly line worker who eventually became superintendent of an air-conditioning factory near the Ambassador Bridge. His mom was a secretary for R. L. Polk, a data collection company.

Arena's family moved to Brownstown Township when he was 11.

After graduating from Gabriel Richard Catholic High School in Riverview in 1980, Arena enrolled at Central Michigan University to prepare for a law enforcement career. Several members of his family are former Detroit cops.

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(SHIHO FUKADA/Special to the Free Press)

FBI special agent Andrew G. Arena grew up in Detroit and Brownstown Township, and attended Central Michigan University and the University of Detroit Law School.

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He spent two semesters at Cambridge University in England on an exchange program before receiving his bachelor's from CMU in 1985. Arena then enrolled at the University of Detroit Law School, hoping to become a prosecutor.

But his next-door neighbor, an FBI agent, persuaded him to become a G-man after getting his law degree in 1988.

In the years that followed, Arena investigated bank robberies, organized crime and violent gangs in Cleveland; Los Angeles; Youngstown and Syracuse, N.Y. He spent two years in the organized crime section at FBI headquarters in Washington.

In Youngstown, he supervised public corruption investigations that resulted in the prosecution of judges, lawyers, county officials and former U.S. Rep. James Traficant, D-Ohio. "I don't think I ever saw law enforcement have an effect on a community like those investigations," he recalled. "It was amazing. That community stood up and took back their city."

In 2001, Arena returned to Detroit as an assistant special agent in charge of the Michigan field office, where he supervised counterterrorism and counter-intelligence cases.

The next year, he was promoted to chief of the International Terrorism Operations Section at FBI Headquarters. A year later, he became a special assistant assigned to the FBI director's office. In 2004, he was sent to New York to run the administrative division there. He took over the criminal division in March 2005.

Arena said he immediately raised his hand when word went out about the opening in Detroit, though he'll be supervising about half as many agents as he does in New York.

Joe Finnigan, a retired Detroit FBI agent who became acquainted with Arena in the mid-1990s, said Arena helped Detroit agents cut through red tape when agents needed quick OK for repeated wiretap requests for a major mob probe.

"In a situation like that, you need someone in Washington who isn't a bureaucrat," Finnigan said. "He was very good."

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