

RuizNancy\_20201023

KIMBERLY KRATZ: Here, there we go. Okay. So, good morning.

My name is Kimberly Kratz, and I'm here with Nancy Ruiz from Casa Guadalupe to talk about her experiences in Allentown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our goal is to collect oral histories of people's unique experiences during the COVID-19 quarantine and the reopening of the Allentown area. And to preserve that information for future generations to access. Our project has funding [00:01:00] from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium, and we're meeting on Zoom on October 23rd, 2020. Thank you so much for willingness to speak with us today. To start, can you please just state your full name and just spell that out for me?

NANCY RUIZ: Sure. So my name is Nancy Ruiz. R-U-I-Z. Most people have a hard time pronouncing Ruiz.

KK: And can you spell that for me?

NR: R-U-I-Z.

KK: Okay, thank you. Sorry about that. Would you be willing to share your birthdate, please?

NR: Yeah. It's August 19, 1986.

KK: Okay, thank you. So this interview is expected to involve no more than minimal risks in answering questions about the past, but some questions might make you uncomfortable. In recounting the past, there may be risks of emotional impact. There's no obligation to answer any question. If you have concerns about your own mental health, please contact the National Alliance on Mental Illness [00:02:00] at 1-800-950-N-A-M-I, or 6-2-6-4, or email them at info@nami.org. Please be mindful that if you use names of individuals other than yourself, you might be violating their privacy. So instead, please just try to refer to those individuals as "my friend," or "my coworker." So for the consent portion, do you consent to this interview today?

NR: Sure, yes. I do.

KK: Do you consent to having this interview being transcribed, digitized, and made publicly available online in searchable formats?

NR: Sure.

KK: Do you consent to having this interview be stored in the archives of Allentown Public Library, Muhlenberg College,

and the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium's digital archive?

NR: Sure. Yes.

KK: Thank you. Do you consent to the Allentown Public Library and/or Muhlenberg College and researchers using your interview for educational purposes in other formats, [00:03:00] including films, articles, websites, presentations?

NR: Yes.

KK: And do you understand that you will have 30 days after the electronic delivery of the transcript to review your interview, identify any parts you would like to delete, and/or withdraw your interview from the project?

NR: Okay.

KK: And do you understand you are not receiving any monetary compensation for your time today, and you are not required to participate by your employer, Allentown Public Library, or Muhlenberg College?

NR: Of course.

KK: Okay, thank you. This project has been approved by Muhlenberg College's Institutional Review Board. You may contact Dr. Erika Iyengar, the current head of Muhlenberg's

IRB Committee, at erikaiyengar@muhlenberg.edu with any questions or concerns. So that got us through that part. Thank you so much for that. And so first, Nancy, if you'd just give me a brief idea [00:04:00] about the organization of Casa Guadalupe and your role there.

NR: So Casa Guadalupe Center is a community-based organization that has different services for the community here in Allentown, from WIC services, health, social services, senior program. We also have an education program, where I work as a parent liaison and an afterschool teacher. So we have an afterschool program for students who are in the Allentown School District schools around the area. We receive funding for -- from the government to support students, to move forward students with different skills. We provide an enrichment program. We offer parent programs, from English classes, financial aid classes for parents, to just empower them and educating them as they, most of our community, are immigrants, Latino -- large Latino community, [00:05:00] and other -- it's just a diverse population from the Lehigh Valley. So that's my role. I have -- I teach the afterschool program. I have about 25 students, kindergarten and first grade students,

that come every day to receive that extra support that the school would normally provide. Now that that is all virtual, the things are different, but we're still having an in-person program here.

KK: Okay. Great. So tell me a little bit about what your impressions were from either media coverage or just some of your contacts before the COVID-19 cases started arriving in the United States. What were you thinking at that time?

NR: So it was absolutely very confusing, because unfortunately social media uses a lot of algorithms that sort of keep you in a bubble. So it was very confusing to know what exactly was going on, [00:06:00] and to understand from a trustable source what was the regulation and sort of protections that we -- precautions that we had to take in place. At the beginning, it was sort of a sense of panic, and of fear. That's why a lot of people started, I guess, buying things at the store, and we all know the toilet paper situation, where you knew that you had to get it just because you don't know if it was -- it was just in high demand. Like, you had to get it. So yes, I would say that it was confusing and chaotic.

KK: At what point did you kind of come to a realization that things were just going to be different?

NR: When we had to shut down our program, we were informed that the school district had made the decision to keep students now in a [00:07:00] virtual learning setting, so I just realized, Wow, this is really serious. It's a virus that we don't know what -- how it's impacting our health. We just have to take this sort of measures in order to keep everybody safe. So yes, I had to work from home, and it was just a totally different routine.

KK: And how was your routine, your daily routine, once that shift happened? Can you tell a little bit about how you felt, and what was going on in your life at that point?

NR: Sure. So I had to stay home and work from home. What I would do is to mentor students via online. I would have also had to do assessment with parents about their needs. A lot of the parents lost their jobs. They were looking for resources in the community, mostly food, [00:08:00] how to feed their children. It was just a lot of misinformation about what was happening, and all this idea of what you could go through with -- it's just so much unexpected -- uncertainty, right. So my routine would be

getting up every morning. I would make calls to parents and sometimes, the calls would go for hours, because they would just sometime vent of how frustrating was to be home and not knowing what was going to happen the next day, how to help their kids with homework. Just having their kids -- some of the families that we have live in very small apartments, and they had to stay inside. All of them together. I mean, we're talking about -- I have families that have seven kids, and they have to all stay together in a room. So it was a lot of anxiety. [00:09:00] I would normally just end up my day, sometimes I would have to work 15 hours a day, but I would not hang up on parents knowing that I was going through same things as well.

KK: That sounds like you had almost a level of social work that was unexpected as a result of that.

NR: Yeah.

KK: Do you feel like that sort of helped you in a way, to feel a little bit more comfortable knowing that you weren't the only one going through that?

NR: Yes. I realized importance of social relationships. And now we had to turn into online, or phone calling, and yes, we were all living the same feeling, but we had each other

in that aspect, like listening to each other and being empathetic with each other. So yeah, it felt good knowing that we had each other. [00:10:00]

KK: That's good. What aspects of your job demanded the most focus from you? Like any particular incident that stands out, or a particular phone call? And obviously, not naming names, but just maybe a particular instance where you were just like, Wow, this is a big deal.

NR: So I know the families that I work with. I have families that I knew there were cases of children being reported for physical violence or neg-- for abuse of some sort, and I knew that they were not -- the kids were not being well taken care of, or nobody was following up with their situation, and just knowing that a child was at risk, it was just very concerning on my behalf. I know a lot of the families, what they go through, [00:11:00] and I know who sort of have a structure at home and families who don't have a structure at home, and how much it was impacting to those kids, to all of my students, knowing that they had no routine. Just in general, the things that they were missing from not coming to our program and not having a schedule, like going to school and being with people other



than their parents. Nobody else was taking care of them on that aspect, so it was -- it gave me a lot of an anxiety.

KK: And that's to be expected. Absolutely. Did you know anybody who became ill from COVID, or unfortunately may have passed?

NR: Yeah. Yeah, we had families who have parents and grandparents that passed away, and it was a big thing in our community here at Casa. [00:12:00] Yes. It was hard not being able to support families on other than just calling on the phone, and just not being there, it was tough.

KK: Understanding that the numbers of people who've become ill or passed away from COVID-19 are far too great, in your opinion, are there any silver linings to the shutdown and the gradual reopening?

NR: Can you expand on that question?

KK: Sure. Like, just knowing that as difficult as times may be, is there anything that maybe is positive that has come out of it unexpectedly? And that's not to discount that anyone became ill or anyone passed away, but to just say, there is some positive thing here.

NR: Hmm. I'm just trying to think. [00:13:00] (pause) Yeah.  
We would have to skip -- we skip that question. (laughs)

KK: Absolutely. Absolutely. (laughs) How do you think that,  
in general, people are treating each other during the  
pandemic?

NR: From my point of view here at our center, we see people  
from the community coming in and out, utilizing a lot of  
our services, so I think people have adj-- wearing masks,  
keeping their distance, just being cautious about each  
other. I think that has been seen as soon as somebody  
walks through the doors, what's expected to do. In terms  
of our work, I think that right now we have an in-person  
program, and we see the need [00:14:00] from parents to  
have their kids to do an in-person program, like doing  
activities that the computers are not giving them. Like  
for example, fine motor skills that are developing through  
using a pen and paper, or socializing with others, other  
kids. I have students who are in kindergarten, that's the  
basic foundations for life. Right now, the Zoom is not  
allowing them to share a toy, or learning how to share in  
general. So yeah. I'm not sure if that answered your  
question well. (laughter)

KK: That's okay. No, that's really great, actually. It's good to know that information. Based on your experience, [00:15:00] is there any advice you would give to future generations that might experience a pandemic?

NR: To be kind to each other. And it might sound like a cliché, but we live in a society that it's the common good, right? We should make decisions based on taking care and protecting others. And we definitely should be more empathetic, maybe just think what the other person is going through, instead just to jumping to conclusions or assumptions.

KK: Thank you. Is there anything else that you would want people to know about what the experience of COVID-19 has been like?

NR: I think that we will realize in a few more years, and data will show us, how much it impacted children being at home, kept at home, from school, not going to school, [00:16:00] and having to do virtual learning. How much of their brain development has, I would say, changed because, again, social skills and emotional skills are not really being taught on a computer, so we will see that, and I'm curious to know how we see that impacting our future generation.

KK: Well, I appreciate you taking the time for this interview today. I know you're really busy, and it's been a busy morning for you, and so I do really appreciate that you're willing to participate in something. I think we're experiencing something that is historic, and I don't think it -- I don't think we even really understand what that impact is, but for future generations looking back on this, in my mind, this will be similar to what we look at now when we say, Let's look at [00:17:00] the pandemic in 1918, the flu pandemic, and influenza, and how that affected the population, and all we can look is at still photographs and a few articles, where we'll be able to -- future generations will be able to go back and look at these videos and have a little bit better sense of what it was really like from real people, and that's why I think it's so important to do these interviews, so thank you, thank you for that.

NR: Thank you for the opportunity, yeah.

KK: Have a great day, and --

NR: You too.

KK: -- good luck with your continued work.

NR: Thank you so much. Bye bye.

KK: Bye bye.

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