

Community Conversations: NJ YMCA State Alliance COVID-19 Storytelling Project

Participant 129

Interviewed by M. M. on November 9, 2020

Translated & Transcribed by C. V. J. on December 7, 2020

Interviewer: Well, greetings, Mr. Miguel Hernandez. My name is Merlis. I am an independent consultant for United Way. And, on this day, we are here to collect--what we spoke about before the interview, the experiences that you and your family have lived during the pandemic. If you would like to introduce yourself, tell me your age, and how many people are there in your family?

Participant: *With pleasure. I really appreciate the opportunity. My name is Miguel Ángel. I am 44 years old, and I am the father of two children and we are four people here.*

I: Very well, and where do you guys live?

P: *We live in Elizabeth, New Jersey.*

I: Perfect. Okay, ready? So, let's start with the questions. The first question would be, how has your life and that of your family changed as a result of this pandemic? Since March, we can say.

P: *Quite a lot, because I already had a very stable job. I was a manager of a restaurant. I mean, I had already been in that restaurant for many years. Due to the pandemic, they had to close some establishments because one has only been open for two months, so almost twenty people were unemployed from the different restaurants that they owned.*

I: The greatest effect, then, can be said that it was in your area of employment--economically.

P: *Of employment and health, because I also got COVID.*

I: Oh, really?

P: *The restaurant, one of the ones I managed, was very close to the [hospital], so that's why they closed it. Also, because the city told them that for health reasons they had to close it. And COVID got me--but yeah, it hit me very hard. There are many aftershocks leftover.*

I: Really? Oh, wow.

P: *My kidneys were harmed but thank God, everything is fine now.*

I: Everything is good. So--your symptoms can be said to have been moderate?

P: *Moderate, yes, and no, because I was in bed for three weeks.*

I: Did your family also test positive?

P: *My wife also got it. Her sense of smell went away.*

I: Interesting. But the good thing is that you are all well now, healthy.

P: *Of course. Thank goodness that is over and now, we move forward, yes.*

I: Good. So, what was the main or most reliable source from which you received information about COVID-19? When COVID-19 started, who was your most trustworthy source of information?

P: *First, because we worked next to a hospital, the nurses would come to get coffee and they would inform us. My wife was also in a program, and a friend of hers who was a nurse was the one who informed us of your help. That's how we found out about it, because we had not applied for any other help before.*

I: Good, good. So, when you started hearing all this about the virus, how did you react? What was your first impression? What did you think?

P: *At first, it made me really nervous because many friends of mine got sick, and some even died.*

I: Wow.

P: *Some people thought it wasn't true. We realized that it is. People have passed away. That has a very strong impact, those cases make you nervous.*

I: And, in what way can you explain that you handled the situation [sic]? Based on how you received information about people who passed away and how you yourself got sick, how did you handle it?

P: *What I said to my wife was, to pay attention to what was on the news. That included not going out and waiting for quarantine. We stayed two months inside the house. We pay attention to what the news says, not only to see a problem but also a solution, right?*

I: Exactly. So, we face challenges, right--during these months? Of those challenges that we face, which ones do you think will remain?

P: *To take care of ourselves, and be very diligent with others. To think that if we get sick, many more people will get sick because right now there is no vaccine. So, we have to have love for others because if you get sick, there is a pretty big chain of people who could possibly get sick as well. I think that we have to become more aware of the seriousness of the matter.*

I: Good. Who were your allies? Who did you trust?

P: *First, God, and second--well the truth is, God was taking us to where help could be found because we did not know about your help, especially. It was the nurse, a friend of my wife, who suggested that we contact you and that is how we began to receive aid. And, my closest friends also got it. So, my friends that are here, more than one, were in quarantine due to the virus.*

I: Wow, okay. Where or when did you feel the least strong?

P: *In the third week. That's when you don't know whether to breathe or stop breathing because the pain is so horrible. COVID gave me very horrible pain. Unbearable.*

I: I also had the virus but thank God my experience was very mild. I say that each symptom lasted about a day.

P: *No, it was different for me. My mistake was that since I was asymptomatic, my wife had it first and I took care of her and then I got it. In other words, it was a two in one, so that's how I got hit so hard.*

I: Right. Is there something that has surprised you about the pandemic?

P: *Yes, what--as I say, human beings believe we are indestructible, but we are nothing.*

I: That is true. At any moment, any minute, everything can change.

P: *The thousands of things--the thousand clothes, the thousand pillows there are--and in a situation like this, it is all useless.*

I: Exactly, you are very right. And based on that question, what would be your biggest fears from now on?

P: *My biggest fears? The truth is to pray to God to have mercy and stop this. Because not everyone thinks this is serious. Just on October 30th, I worked and I was surprised by how irresponsible people are. They think that it is a game. They think that this will not affect certain people because of their age, but that is a lie. I have a friend who died at the age of 28. And he was relatively very young, don't you think?*

I: Young and healthy, I imagine.

P: *COVID attacked his kidneys, and that was what got him.*

I: Wow, what a shame. Describe an act of kindness that someone did for you during this time.

P: *The neighbor where I lived, I don't know how she found out, but on one occasion she brought us over a remittance. It seemed very nice to me.*

I: I have heard a lot about that. Many times, people are helping each other or spreading information about help sites. I have received similar stories from various people.

P: *It's something really nice because you don't expect that.*

I: Good. What are the COVID-19 resources that you know about? You mentioned at the beginning about having received some help.

P: *Yes, we receive help with food, and the help we receive from you guys, but other than that, nothing else. We're very grateful.*

I: You have received a lot of information from these places.

P: *Yes, and I'm very grateful because your help came to me when I needed it most.*

I: How great, I'm very glad. So, do you know where to get tested for COVID?

P: *Well, I'll tell you that I'm working right now with a friend who is a fumigator and we coincidentally fumigated two pharmacies. For being a fumigator, we get tested every 15 days. I got my results on Friday and I came out negative again.*

I: How great that you have that benefit there from the pharmacy.

P: *And thank God, because there are many people who have to call in for stuff like this because cases have gone up I hear.*

I: Yes, cases are going up. Yes, and perhaps the centers that do testing for free may require appointments or long waits. Well, let's keep going. Do you think that all communities have been helped equally during the pandemic or do you think there is one community that has benefited more than others?

P: *I think it has been the same. Why? Because when we would go to get the food boxes, there were people helping everyone out equally. It was wonderful, right? I think it was equal.*

I: Everyone has had access to different types of help and what is being given out. For example, in regard to assistance, many people who do not have legal status in the country have also been able to benefit from things that the state was not offering before. That's why I think it has been quite fair. What do you think New Jersey could have done better?

P: *No, I don't like to judge.*

I: Or maybe--let's rephrase the question then. What would you have done differently?

P: *I would have put in place stronger rules for people to take care of themselves.*

I: Like adding more restrictions so that people then--

P: *How was it that they put the--I don't know if it's true or not, but a friend called us, he is a police officer, and he said that anyone who goes out without a mask starting tomorrow will receive a \$50 fine or something like that.*

I: No, I have not heard of that.

P: *Yes, well they said they are going to put it in place because cases have increased a lot.*

I: Very good idea, maybe people will be more careful that way.

P: *Yes.*

I: So, well, anything else you would like to share? Anything that I did not ask about your experience during the pandemic?

P: *No, you asked me the most important questions.*

I: Then we already discussed them?

P: *Exactly.*

I: Well, that will be all, Mr. Hernández. Really, what we wanted to do was to collect the experiences from the families with whom we have interacted with during this time. I really appreciate the opportunity you have given us to talk about you and your family's experiences.

P: *Thank you as well.*

I: As I said, this is a collaborative project with the YMCA, so do you give verbal consent for this interview to be used with what they are working on?

P: *With pleasure, of course.*

I: Well, thank you very much.

P: *Have a good night.*

I: You too, thank you.