

COVID-19 Oral History Transcript

Israel Herrera: My name is Israel Herrera Jr. Today's date is March 9, 2021. Today we will be discussing about the experience of people during the Covid 19 pandemic. I am in San Antonio, Texas and you are in?

Joel Chirinos: Brownsville, Texas.

Israel: I am here interviewing...if you could give your name.

Joel: My name is Joel Chirinos.

Israel: In what year were you born?

Joel: I was born in Fort Cope Louisiana. Israel: And what was the year?

Joel: It was [born] November 2, 1975.

Israel: And what is/was your occupation?

Joel: My occupation is the Head of Research and Regional Services for the University of Rio Grande Valley. I am a librarian.

Israel: Okay. When and how did you first hear about the virus? And if you could explain your experience.

Joel: Around the beginning of the year in 2020, we started hearing in the news and different sources of information about an illness occurring literally on the other side of the planet, in China. There were conflicting stories as to where it had originated from and how it originated. And we started sort of hearing about these things and listening to the illness from the people in the area were contracting that illness. And scientist and medical profession were a little stumped as to why it had occurred and become so prevalent so quickly and it had spread. Us being from the united states, especially being down here in Brownsville, Texas, we didn't concern ourselves with something going as I mentioned on other side of the planet. And whether that is egotistical of us or us being a little self-centered, it didn't affect us in any way on the onset and when it started. So, we kind of just took it as something that is going to pass, something that will get caught before it spreads even further. But as we know, it didn't and this would have been probably mid-January, early February, and late February when we were sort of hearing the rumbling of this.

Israel: Can you how the Coronavirus affected you and your family or friends?

Joel: Yes, again it was something on the other side of the world. It was something that we were not really concerned with. I think when I started becoming a little concerned or started to think a little more serious about it when you started hearing about cruise ships that were full of passengers that there had been an outbreak in the cruise ships. And as soon as they arrived [on land], they had to quarantine the people there. That is when you started to take a bit of a closer look and maybe this thing is spreading a little more. And then, after tom hanks was one of the first one celebrity, at least publicly, and said he has contracted this while in Australia. So, then we started to worry that okay maybe this is spreading a little faster than we thought. We continued with our own lives, we continued with our daily lives and for me, when it became a little bit more of an issue, was at when at work at the library I started hearing some of my colleagues begin to ask to work from home. At that point, the university still hadn't made any decisions about working from home and that option of being able to work from home. So, when more and more employees, not only at the library but whole university started to ask the university for the ability to work from home, that's when it became a little more more serious than I thought it was going to be. And then some of the employees I supervised started asking if they could work from home and so mid-March they started leaving and I still held out, I still held out and I still continues to work from the library until a guy I that personally knew, a computer technician, that I know had come back from a building that they had found somebody with covid. And that was the first person that the university had

announce had been affected by covid, and he had been in the dorms, the student, the student had been in the dorms. And this computer tech had just come from the dorms and that afternoon I saw him. And this would have been late-March. And so, I had spoken to him, I had been in close contact with the computer tech that had been in the dorms. And so, he was being asked to quarantine, and that's when it became a little more real for me. And that's when I proceeded to work from home and ask if I could continue to work from home which I have been told since March last year. And again, Israel as I have mentioned, it was something that we didn't think, on the other side of the planet would get here. But I personally was affected by it because of two family members that contracted it. One of them being my brother-in-law and another one being my daughter, and again this is something that originated from China or Asian province somewhere and now all of a sudden it is literally right next to my bedroom here, where my daughter contracted it. So, it became a bit of an issue where you know what, my daughter now has to be in quarantine and be worried and concerned. And then you started having these people that became little panic stricken and started to hoard all these different essentials such as toilet paper and water and that started adding a little to the stress level we were already under because of this illness and this airborne disease. And so, all that psychologically, mentally, physically, it has an effect on you when you know a family member is going through it and then on top of that you have this strain of sometimes not even being able to meet your necessities when it comes to toilet paper, water, food and all these different things. And I know we saw this a couple of weeks ago when the freeze came into Texas and that panic stricken attitude when you begin to hoard and you begin to worry and concern yourselves because at some point the infrastructure just fell apart and it just adds a little bit more stress to us, it adds a little more of dire attitude amongst us. So yes, it did affect me, it did affect us in a profound way because as I mentioned my brother-in-law and my daughter both came down with it and we were so close and there was the potential that it could have spread amongst the family. It didn't but there was always that possibility.

Israel: And as you said, your own family members have gotten infected with the virus, how would you say that infection, overall, it's so close to you, how would you say it affected your daily life like spending time with those family members, or shopping that affected you?

Joel: Absolutely and going back to the effects it had on me, 2 of which personally that I know, one of which was a teacher, and he contracted it last summer right before they were supposed to go back to work in September, late-August. He contracted it mid-August and he passed away and I know him from back in the day. And that was a bit of a shock because he was my age, maybe a year or two older than I was. And I knew him, and I knew he was a teacher, I knew where he was a teacher. And right before the school year started 2020, he passed away mid-August he passed away. And so that had an affect on me and people that I know, and an elderly gentleman that I know also passed away and I had an opportunity to go to his funeral and there were a lot of questions. A lot of questions from the family as to why this happened and why this continues to happen. So, yes, you were asking really quick about, what was the second part of your question, I am sorry.

Israel: How it affected your daily life, the little things we don't think about, like shopping or washing your car?

Joel: Yes, it did affect the daily routines where in the past, pre-covid, we could just up and go and not worry about gloves or not worry about face shields and masks. And all of a sudden when it began, when this whole thing started, it started to get more serious, the sudden mandate of masks it did affect me and it did affect my family and those that I know. Because now the daily run to the store to go pick up dog food or go get bread and as I mentioned toilet paper and disinfectant, now you have to wave through these horde of people, everybody wearing masks everybody picking and grabbing things from the shelves. And I remember one time when it first started early-April, going to the store with my wife and my sisters-in-law, and we went to HEB and there was nothing on the shelves. Nothing another than chicken quarters, chicken legs were the only things left, because again of this panic-stricken attitude to needing to hoard because we didn't know what was going to happen, how long we were going to be quarantine, if the infrastructure was going to fail. So it became from pre-covid going to the store to now

we're preparing ourselves with gloves, masks and you would go and come back, at least in my family, I would be the one to go to these store runs and I would come back and literally my wife would douse me with Lysol as I came in and I would take off my clothes and wash it and then I would take a shower, my masks I would dispose them. So, it did affect our daily lives and it did affect our routines to the point where it was a bit of a disturbance but now it is so normal to go to HEB and go to Walmart and see people wearing masks. I know there is a state mandate tomorrow I believe where the Texas senate [about making allowing people to otherwise not wear masks] but a lot of the people I have spoken to are stating they are not going to discontinue wearing a mask and I think I am one of them. I know there might not be a mandate in place but at least myself and my family will continue wearing masks. But it did alter our daily lives, obviously now my job is being done virtually and I did have to learn how to utilize how to use some virtual tools that I would normally not use in a day-to-day bases and in a face-to- face environment. Now I am being tasked with assisting students that I work with in the library and supervising a staff all done virtually and it does put a bit of a kink I guess on what you normally do. But we adapt, we always adapt, we tend to figure out a way to work through it.

Israel: Yeah of course. And just to continue off where you ended, as you had to transition from in person to virtual, do you feel like your responsibilities were a lot harder to manage than before, and how to do you feel about your responsibilities right now?

Joel: Well, it was a little different because when I am at the library and I get a complex situation where I get to assist somebody or help somebody, it is so easy to go to colleague next door, or across the hall, or downstairs, pick up a phone and call someone to assist you or support you. Now everyone is at home, everyone is doing things virtually. Now if you get in a situation where you need to talk to somebody and you don't have all the necessary resources at your disposal as I would have at the library, it does make things a little bit different. Again, we do adapt, we do find alternate ways to assist students in this virtual environment. It does change things where I had full accessibility to an entire library of information, in a physical sense, now I am directing students in a virtual manner. And yes, we are staying safe and keeping safe, keeping our distance, but you lose a little bit of that personal touch, you lose a little bit of that emotional connection with the student and find out what they need. What we are hoping for in the library in the university is to go back to some sense of normality so we could sit students face to face but we also know that they are going to be weary of face-to-face interaction and so would the staff but we will adapt. But to answer your question, yes it has been a bit of a challenge and we just go with it and we adapt.

Israel: Alright, let's talk back about the winter storm in February. As it was happening, were you still worrying about the virus or mainly focusing on the storm? Why or why not?

Joel: The storm brought about another set of challenges because as we are still dealing with COVID, that's in the back of our mind. You start hearing false information, people start to believe it because they heard it from the internet, that COVID doesn't like the cold weather so when the freeze is over, COVID will disappear. On the contrary, COVID is still here, it is still infecting people, the numbers are still on an even knell as they were in the past, even before the storm. So, I think that the storm just added another bit of learning opportunity for the state of Texas on how to deal with the failed infrastructure and where things fell apart, so we can fix it moving forward. But yeah, the storm was the storm and it was here for about a week and we were not in a position where we could let down our guard, regardless of what we were hearing about COVID illness did not like the cold weather, that it was going to freeze over, that people were going to get less sick. As I mentioned, hopefully it can be a learning experience for the state of Texas and us as individuals know that we need to be a little more prepared and be more aware of what's going on in our communities to protect ourselves and our families.

Israel: And as a final question, like the Spanish flu, it was super serious people lived through it, we have their letters, their notes of what they went through and that's how we learned and that's what we were told. What would you tell our future generations about this pandemic?

Joel: I would tell future generations about this pandemic to not trust everything you may have read on social media and to listen reliability to credible sources and not your friend you have on Facebook about their opinion on COVID. I think when history writes about COVID, it is going to write a declaration a hook about as us as a society and as a global entity how we failed a little bit in our responses and how ill prepared we were. You're right the Spanish flu should have been a bit of a lesson and maybe we did learn from that. There are countless improvements that have been made as a result of handling the Spanish flu or mishandling the Spanish flu and great technological and medical advancements occurred from the Spanish flu and maybe we can learn from that. But when we look back at COVID, I think we are going to see that the world changed Israel, that what we were doing before is not going to be the same anymore. The simplistic of shaking of hands, I think some things are not going to be able to reopen and I know this is a bit off of what you were asking but let's take a look at bowling for example. When you look at back at bowling, what were we doing? We were all sharing the same bowling ball, putting our fingers in these bowling balls, then turning around and eating snacks and food from the bowling alley. At least here in Brownsville, bowling alleys haven't reopened and other businesses are also going to be affected. I know religious institutions have changed, a lot of businesses that unfortunately depended on social interaction will not be able to be revived. Looking back on this, we are going to reflect on how ill prepared we were and how we tended to listen to the internet, to unreliable sources, to unreliable information to make decisions rather than focus on what was rather real. Instead of listening to the medical professionals, the doctors, the government that was trying to steer us to the right direction, we tended to listen to our Facebook friend who said to go do this or visit these people to take care of COVID in some other way. I hope we learn from this as an opportunity to trust reliable and credible sources.

Israel: Alright, that is the last of the questions. Thank you very much for taking a part of this interview.

Joel: Yes, by all means, thanks for the opportunity to meet with you and talk to you if there is anything else then by all means don't hesitate to contact me.

Israel: Thank you very much.

Joel: Have a good rest of the day and hope to talk to you later.