

Manuel Morales interviewed by Nicole Recio Bremmer April 6, 2023

Description:

Manuel Morales, a farmer originally from a small indigenous town in the state of Michoacan, Mexico. Due to NAFTA he was forced to move into the state of Arizona in which he now lives and works. This interview was conducted through zoom on April 6, 2023, by Nicole Recio Bremer, a member of the COVID Memory Project being conducted by Global Citizen Scholars Cohort V. Manuel expresses his experiences as a farmer, father and Mexican during the covid-19 pandemic. Manuel also shared what covid means to him and how God has helped him through the journey.

0:00-0:21 Good Morning Manuel, I hope you are doing well. I appreciate your agreement to participate in this COVID-19 memory project. My name is Nicole. Today is April 6th noon here in the eastern time zone.

0:21-1:34 I am going to read the consent form and a little about what this project entails. (reads consent form)

1:34-1:55 Do you give us permission to record this interview? You can answer yes or no.

1:56-1:58 Yes- Manuel

1:58-2:03 Do you give us permission to include the interview to our data base? You can remove this permission at any point.

2:07- 2:08 Yes, that is fine

2:08- 2:11 Okay thank you

2:11-2:20 On this means you accept to the interview here is where you can sign your name and date

2:20- 2:25 Can you please let me know if you sign and approve

2:25-2:26 Yes of course!

2:26-2:28 Perfect thank you.

2:28-2:34 If you want a copy of this form I can get it to you again. It was sent to you by email but I can surely send it again.

2:35-2:38 No that's okay I have that one thank you.

2:38- 2:45 To jump directly into the questions of the interview let me ask you the first question

2:45- 2:52 What is your name? Tell us about yourself and what you do. (question 1)

2:54-3:30 Well my name is Manuel Morales Sanchez, I am originally from a small indigenous town in the state of Michoacan. I've been working on the border because of circumstances. I think that the economy, NAFTA was what made most of us farmers migrate. Some to the cities where there were more job opportunities and some like me to the border.

3:38- 3:47 When was the first time in which you were aware of COVID-19? What were you thinking and what were you feeling at the time?

3:48-5:53 When the COVID pandemic situation got here. It was very impactful for society in general. Personally, I thought it was going to be something temporary. But as days went by I learned it was something that was severe on a global scale. Personally, I think we were a little scared because of the current situation. Many deaths in all the world. When it started the fear that it would eventually get to Mexico and what the repercussions would be from Mexico. There was a lot of uncertainty, and logically a lot of fear in all families. In particular, in mine. To think what could possibly happen, and all the information that the media was publishing, I don't know if it was to scare people or I don't know but the media made people very scared. I'd never, in the years I've been alive, I've heard anything about a pandemic like this one.

5:54-5:57 Thank you so much for sharing.

5:58-6:08 A lot of countries had a lock-down at the beginning of the pandemic. Did you experience a type of lock-down? In that case, how was it?

6:09-9:18 Yes, When the official start of COVID-19 happened. It was a matter of confinement, everyone got confined. Especially here in Nogales, many sanitary measurements. You couldn't leave your house. Thinking about how you could get infected if you left your house. There was a lot of fear. They closed the border between Mexico and the US. I don't know if I can say this but, us here were like a little, let's talk about Mexico we were very restricted. Because the US-Mexico border was only closed for us Mexicans. The United States had all the freedom to cross into our country. I saw this situation in a very personal way: Why are we not allowed to go? Why so many restrictions, if the pandemic was coming from the U.S.? There was a lot of uncertainty because everyone was taking care of themselves. Not being able to go out, not even to bring groceries home. This was something very impactful. More because they would say you can't cross to the US because you can spread the virus. But how was it possible that we were the only ones that could spread the virus? What about them? Maybe these are governmental things, but it was very impactful. The other thing is that we couldn't go to

convenience stores. These things were happening because of COVID: there were shortages, we couldn't buy even the basics, they were always running out of these products. Americans would come down to purchase all their stuff. It was scary to think that because they would buy all our essentials and take them back home, we would go without. Most of the times we would be the ones without toilet paper, or this or that. This had a big impact and more importantly because of the information we got from our media and the government.

9:23-9:34 How was life affected by COVID-19? What was the hardest thing about COVID or just overall during COVID?

9:34-13:00 Yes, I think that we were affected economically because work became hard to find. The factories *maquiladoras* had to close. Temporarily at first; the government announced that it would last a month—that for people working, they would get a month of salary even when not working. The wait was very long, so at one point the companies couldn't afford to pay their employees anymore. Economically speaking we were very affected and there was a constant fear of being infected and of the amount of excess deaths there were. A lot of times there were times in which you had a low temperature and all of the sudden you were hospitalized. You were told that you had COVID-19. Some of my friends passed away when in reality they didn't go to the hospital because of COVID but instead just another sickness. My brother in law passed away but he wasn't there for COVID. The testing that they did to him was not because of COVID. I don't know if it was the fear that we had. It was just very hard for everyone, I lost a lot of friends because of COVID. They all had different illnesses--like asthma or illnesses of another kind--and when they got to the hospital, they didn't come out anymore, or if they did, like we say here, they came out in a little box. All of this affected us economically and our morale because we kept thinking that if anyone in my family including myself could had symptoms, for example, we were afraid to go to the hospital because you couldn't tell if you really had COVID or not. The tests were not accessible for the general public so we couldn't really know if you were walking in a hospital positive with COVID or if it was something else--there was constant speculations, uncertainty. But to answer your question, the hardest thing was having lost friends and family members due to this pandemic.

13:00- 13:22 I am so sorry to hear that. The pandemic was something very tough for everyone. I don't know if you would be able to tell me since you had personal experiences with close relatives in the hospital. How do you think the health system in Mexico affected the pandemic or the mexicans in general through these times?

13:24-14:41 Look, I think I couldn't explain clearly what the situation was or how the health system was working because in reality this was an unexpected event. A lot of times, I got sick before the pandemic and I got sick very severely. It was a type of flu, it was stronger than the symptoms that were supposed to be for COVID-19. The

government, I don't know what their function directly was about the health systems. We only knew that if you went to the hospital, you were not likely not to be able to make it out. I don't know how the government acted or what their protocols were when it came to the health system during the pandemic.

14:41- 14:54 Thank you for sharing. At the beginning of the pandemic where did you obtain your information from? Has this source changed throughout the years?

14:56-16:48 Look, I think that the information that we got was very general from the media. The media was the one constantly informing us. Believe me, personally I was trying to look at other programs at home because by watching TV the only thing you could see was COVID and more COVID. COVID was ingrained in my brain, such that we were sick not only physically but psychologically because we were hearing much about COVID. For example, in X part of Mexico there were this amount of deaths from COVID, In Nogales you can't go out because there are so many infected people; the *maquiladoras* and factories that were open had X many deaths and people infected. That was all we heard, and it was worse because they would say how many people were in the hospital and how many were dead because of COVID. It seemed like on some occasions the media was trying to sell or market it--I couldn't tell you--but there were situations in which supposedly people would leave the hospital still positive and they would spread it to other people. It was chaos! And the media, I think, was influential because of the way it spread information.

16:49-16:56 How have things changed in your community thanks to COVID-19?

We became aware of our health. There were many who would go out in public without protecting themselves. Personally, my family and I reflected a lot about what our jobs were during this time--to protect ourselves and others by using the tools we were given. When we were diagnosed as positive, we thought we might die! My wife was positive, one of my daughters who was pregnant gave birth a week after finally testing negative, me and my son also tested positive, and I felt bad, because when I told my doctor all he said was "Go to the hospital!" "How old are you?" At that time I was 62, and he said I should go to the hospital right away because of my high blood pressure, etc. Fortunately, we've worked in places where there was a support system that suggested other ways of caring for oneself rather than going directly to the hospital... The pandemic united us as a family, we were very attentive to each other, and also to be honest with respect to work, for example, what I do, give presentations for an organization [Borderlinks], I would not give a presentations for my if I felt ill, until I was absolutely sure I wasn't testing positive. That's what's changed personally and in my family, we've become more aware and responsible about our health for the community.

20:47 Do you think that COVID has affected different communities differently?

Well, I might be repeating myself, but I think we were all affected economically, here in Nogales and in my small town in Michoacán. There, if you can't sell the food you grow, you are without food. Here in Nogales, many people lost their jobs, so here, I think we were affected more psychologically. Even today, even though we have vaccines and the symptoms are not as serious, whenever we feel ill, we make sure to get tested because I think psychologically we've been more affected by the pandemic.

23:32 In the last three years, what have been the challenges to keeping your life on track and has COVID played a part in not being able to reach goals you may have had?

I think one of the challenges to keeping on track has been that as we become aware of health risks, we as humans learned a lot of things, and we can't let our guard down, we should continue, get vaccines—that's been the challenge, to keep our guard up when it comes to COVID.

24:17 What is the most important thing you would like us to know about your experience during COVID-19 on the border?

Well, that is complicated and could take a long time to explain. But, one of the things I personally would most like to share is the experience that we've shared losing so many people. One day you're chatting with a person, and the next, you hear that they've died. That's one of the things that COVID has brought to us—a sensitivity to life. Of course we realize we won't live forever, but to think that because of some medical negligence, or who knows why, I don't have any proof... but just knowing that all of a sudden you could get the virus and then that's it, you're dead... When it's your family, like my wife, one of my kids, who's positive... it is so painful to be apart: not going into the room, bringing food to leave at the door, like –It's an odd thing to say– like they're little animals, then having to sanitize everything... We don't have a lot, we have to share a bathroom, for example, this was the hard part... I wasn't too scared, I've lived my life, but them, trying to protect themselves and me, when I was positive, so that there wouldn't be any spread. Fortunately, we didn't all get COVID at the same time, first one then another. I had my wife and pregnant daughter isolated and then another friend came to quarantine to protect her small children – I was responsible for them. I'd taken first aide classes at work, so I could check blood pressure and oxygen levels... It was a very grave situation. I don't want to blame anyone for it... God is great, knows why he does what he does, and what he does is perfect... The ones he took were meant to go, and we who remain... we're just here to keep fighting the good fight, going on. It personally made me more united with my family, feeling our mutual support was a positive thing for us, to be looking out for one another. My mom, god bless her at her 80 years, looking out for her, she is all right; worrying about my family in the U.S, that are undocumented, my family in Michoacán—trying to keep up with everyone, physically here, and spiritually with those who are far away, praying, phone calls, and just making sure everyone was okay. That's it, it was a terrible time, the COVID-19 pandemic.

30:05 Thanks so much for sharing. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Well, just knowing that we are not exempt– and I'm not just talking about COVID-19, I believe the world–life brings with it many unexpected things. The only thing we ask here at home as we pray, for all of the people who are migrating, so many who are migrating to the U.S., or who have left their families... We just pray for the health of everyone in the world. We've seen so many things at a global level that we... I believe that even for those who are not blood-relatives, we are all children of God, praying on the same channel... with the tragedies that have occurred here in Mexico, lots of people keep us in their prayers... I think we should just ask God to guide our governments to open their hearts and look out for everyone and all of us– in reality, a government without people is not a government, the population is what maintains governments.

31:59 Thank you, Manuel, for accepting this interview and sharing your story with us.