

Javier Clemente interviewed by Giuliana Cabreja
April 14, 2021
The Bronx, NY

Giuliana Cabreja: My name is Giuliana Cabreja and I'm interviewing Javier Clemente. Do you give me permission to record and distribute this oral history?

Javier Clemente: Yes.

GC: And I want to remind you that you are not obligated to answer any of these questions. If there's a question that makes you in any way uncomfortable, you can refrain from answering. Do you understand?

JC: I understand.

GC: What is your occupation?

JC: I am a maintenance slash construction worker in a woman's shelter.

GC: Where is your neighborhood?

JC: Bronx, New York.

GC: What is your place of origin?

JC: My mother is from Puerto Rico. My father is African American.

GC: What is your first language?

JC: English.

GC: Your racial identity?

JC: African American.

GC: Your gender identity?

JC: Male.

GC: And your sexual orientation?

JC: Straight.

GC: Tell me how, just briefly, how did your family end up in New York City?

JC: My grandmother moved here and brought my mom with her... and also they came for a better life.

GC: Now I'm going to ask you questions about the pandemic. How are you coping with the pandemic? Like do you have a self-care routine? how are you coping?

JC: The way I cope is from working out.

GC: You were working out?

JC: Working out every day and keeping myself busy.

GC: What was your initial response to COVID and has it changed over time at all?

JC: Well, my first thought of COVID was that it was just another disease that will blow over but then I realized that it was serious. And I took it way more seriously.

GC: How has the Coronavirus changed your life?

JC: It made me appreciate being outside living a normal life way more.

GC: Has you or anyone close to you got this Coronavirus? And if they did, how was it?

How did that affect you?

JC: Yes, my mother actually got the Coronavirus very late. And it affected my family pretty badly. We were very scared. And thank god she was okay.

GC: Did you lose anyone close to you?

JC: No, I didn't lose immediate family, but I did lose coworkers.

GC: Could you tell me a little bit about them? Did you know them personally? Or was it just like an acquaintance thing?

JC: Well, I didn't know them too well, but I knew them as acquaintances. I saw them every day at work. And yes, it hit me a certain type of way.

GC: How are you coping financially?

JC: Well, the pandemic never really affected me because I'm an essential worker. So I never stopped working.

GC: What was it like to be home so often?

JC: It was very boring and depressing.

GC: Did this impact you socially, mentally, and emotionally? If so, how?

JC: Only mentally, it made me appreciate things more. Socially, I haven't spoken to certain people that I usually would speak to.

GC: How did it impact your family?

JC: It made my family very paranoid and very anxious.

GC: Are there people in your household that are working?

JC: My mom retired. I'm the only one working.

GC: What have you learned about yourself and your family since the beginning of this crisis?

JC: I learned from myself that I'm stronger than I thought I was, and what I've learned from my family is that they can leave this earth in the quickest second.

GC: What has been the hardest part about this pandemic for you?

JC: Staying home.

GC: Has there been anything positive to come out of the pandemic for you?

JC: Yeah, yes. What was positive is that I started working out and I gained a couple of pounds. I gained a whole lot of pounds that I was always trying to gain by staying home.

I ate more. And I realized that I appreciate everything around me more. I appreciate being outside, I appreciate doing the little things that our lives were normal.

GC: So it's safe to say that your favorite thing to do during the lockdown was working out, right?

JC: My favorite thing to do was working out and watching videos on my phone and focusing on my family. And really, you know, being focused on myself for the first time in my life.

GC: How has COVID-19 changed how you think about the relationship between our health as individuals and our health as a society?

JC: It made me realize that my health is very important and that there's always something that can come out of the blue that can kill us. And it was proven, and it has made me really realize that I have to actually consider my health as a young 24-year-old man and consider my family for the first time in my life.

GC: How do you think the government handled the COVID crisis?

JC: I think they handled it all right. I think they could have done a little better. I think that they could have come up with a cure and gave it to everybody. I think that it's a conspiracy in a certain type of way for me.

GC: So... How would you grade...The job? Like on a scale of one to 10? One being horrible, 10 being really bad, How would you grade the job the government did rolling out the vaccine?

JC: I would say a 4%?

GC: Will you be getting the vaccine?

JC: Only if my job requires it.

GC: So why wouldn't you do it just for free will?

JC: I wouldn't do it...I have no problem with getting the vaccine. I don't think the vaccine is making us sicker. But the only way I'm going to get it is if my job requires it. If my job doesn't require it, then I'm not going to get it willingly.

GC: How are you feeling about the world reopening again?

JC: I am completely excited because I've been quarantined by myself in my room for the past three months. And I am so excited for the world to reopen again, and I appreciate it way more.

GC: So what's the first thing you're gonna do when you have your freedom from this pandemic?

JC: I'm going to go have a great time with my friends like I normally would have had before the pandemic.

GC: So how do you think the world will be changed when we come out of this pandemic and everything cleared up? Do you think it will change at all?

JC: Honestly, I don't think the world will be changed at all. I think everyone in the world is going to finally be like we got over this, yes we passed it. And they're gonna go right back to normal. I don't think it's going to change at all.

GC: Okay, well since you were an essential social worker, I want to thank you for your services during a bad time.

JC: You're welcome.

GC: Now I will be asking you questions about the Black Lives Matter protests. Again, I want to remind you that you are not obligated to answer any questions you're not comfortable answering.

JC: I understand.

GC: Okay. So, do you remember where you were? And what your first thought was when you saw or heard about George Floyd and the Trayvon Martin stuff.

JC: I was exactly where I've always been, where I grew up, at my house, during the pandemic. Nothing...this is not anything new. Finally, people are making a change.

GC: Explain to me why you think these anti-racist protests erupted?

JC: I think we erupted because we always had enough, but it kept happening constantly and constantly and we saw it on video. So, you know, finally, we're trying to force people to understand.

GC: So what are some reasons, some of the reasons that you think protesting Black Americans and their nonblack allies are angry about these conditions in the United States? Why do you think we're so angry?

JC: We're angry because it takes the millionth and tenth black men to get killed for you guys to really understand and you guys wouldn't understand If we didn't force you guys to understand.

GC: Do you believe that there are issues with the criminal justice system in the United States that help flame these protests?

JC: Not only do I believe, I know that there are so many issues with the criminal justice, with the police, with the court systems. This is nothing new. It's always been like this. It's been like this.

GC: So, what do you think are some of those issues?

JC: The issue is that we are looked upon by the authorities as a threat and as a certain type of person. They categorize us as these horrible people, and they don't allow their minds to think that there are actually good black people.

GC: So, when did you become aware of these issues? When did you know that there was an issue with the criminal justice system?

JC: I knew from the first time I got stopped and searched when I was 12 years old, standing on the street waiting for my brother.

GC: Do you think that the history of race and racism in the United States impact the Black Lives Matter movement?

JC: It didn't impact of Black Lives Matter movement, it made the Black Lives Matter movement.

GC: So like, in what ways? So you think that because of the history, this is why we have such a problem?

JC: Because of the history, this is why we're like how we are right now.

GC: How do you explain the persistence of racism in the United States? generally, and New York City specifically?

JC: I can never explain that question. That is a question for the opposite race.

GC: Why do you think New York City became an epicenter of all these protests?

JC: I don't think that it became an epicenter. I think that New York City has always been the spot of racism, especially because NYPD policemen target, you know, black men in, you know, lower-income places.

GC: How have the uprisings across the country shifted? How do you think about your ethnic identity and your place in US society?

JC: Nothing ever... This had nothing to do with how I think I've always thought like this and I'm going to keep thinking like this. But I think now that finally, it had to take this much. Now, we as people, black people are coming together. That's all I think.

GC: Do you have any stories you are willing to share about encounters you have had with racism or the police?

JC: I will be glad. First, one story. I got out of work. My boss and my supervisors are right outside. I'm walking across the street. The detective police, undercover, Stopped me. They use their car to stop me, close to hitting me. I have my bookbag on, I'm a

13-year-old kid, and they're asking me what's in my bag. I'm just trying to go home. I just got off of work. They asked me what's in my bag, pressuring me to show them my bag. Show them my bag, show them my bag. Luckily, my boss, which is my brother, and the rest of the workers were outside and they helped me to my defense in that problem. And that's just one of many of those encounters.

GC: Have you learned about an experience of anybody close to you that you're willing to share? That you can remember?J

JC: I can't say that I've learned from the experience of anybody close to me. I've learned from the experience of what I've experienced. I've experienced it all. I'm a black man in the Bronx. I grew up here trying to make a better life. And, you know, police expect you to be that normal dude that they expect. So I've experienced it a whole bunch of times.

GC: Were you active in the protests at all in a digital or in-person way over the last six months? If so, how...why did you decide to get involved?

JC: I was never involved physically, I will never go to the protests. I will never buy the shirts. I will never be physically there. The only thing that I've posted was the blackout Tuesday. And I honestly don't feel like I need to be just another protester. Just to add on to the crowd, for nothing to change.

GC: So you decide not to get involved because you feel like it's not going to do anything?

JC: Yes, I feel like I wasn't going to be another man over there physically getting involved in the protests because I've dealt with these things already. Black Lives Matter is new to everyone else. This has always been a thing my whole life. I don't have to be involved in that, I just have to make a change in myself. And that's what's gonna make a new life for everyone.

GC: Has Black Lives Matters shifted the culture?

JC: Honestly, I feel like it didn't. It definitely made a real impact on our culture, it made us come to a little bit more together. A little bit more together, I can't say a big change has happened. But we definitely are finally all agreeing and moving as on this one thing.

GC: So, how have the past few months changed how you think about police and racism in the United States?

JC: The past few months just gave me the right recognition. It gave me the reassurance that, you know, this is like finally, people want to understand, Finally. people weren't understanding. But it didn't change anything of how I thought. This is always how my mindset was, this is how I lived my life as a black man.

GC: So did you learn any more about the history of racism in this country since the protests have started?

JC: I really don't think I've learned anymore. I really don't think it's um... about learning anymore. I didn't learn anymore. Like, I've known all this and it's really not about learning anymore.

GC: So what have you seen your peers doing that inspires you?

JC: Well, when you ask “my peers” I don't say as my friends or my co-workers. I say my peers, you're asking what inspires me, I look at my family. I look at my brothers, I look at my mother, I look at how they dealt with this their whole life as black Latins in this world. But them being black, they still had to deal with it back in the day, so it was way harder for them. And it just makes me stronger and makes me want to fight even more.

GC: So why do you think there's so much backlash to the back lives matter movement?

JC: I think there's so much backlash for the Black Lives Matter movement because white people that... I'm not gonna say from a white person saying all lives matter, that's not every white person that's just trying to be racist, some just don't understand. They're just saying like, Oh, wait, all lives matter. But I feel like it reacts with them because, you know, they can never see us as equals.

GC: So how do you explain the looting and the destruction of property the took place during the process?

JC: This is a great question. I explain the looting as something that we're not proud of doing. You know, there are always bad apples in every race and every ethnicity and every human being in this world. But the looting was something and the rioting. The looting and the rioting had to be a thing to force you guys to understand?

GC: How do you explain people who respond to Black Lives Matter with all lives matter?

JC: I respond to them as, you know, just very ignorant. And usually who say All Lives Matters are white people. I feel like, you know, they think of us as like we don't already know all lives matter. Obviously, every life matters. Doesn't matter what color, but they are feeling left out and they're not understanding where we're coming from with Black Lives Matter because white people don't go through that. And they will never understand. So I'm not even surprised by that rebuttal from them.

GC: How would you like to see this movement resolved?

JC: Being a black man from the Bronx my whole life, you know, I already know that this will never be fully resolved, ever, in eternity.

GC: Yeah, but how would you like to see that?

JC: Yeah, I was getting to that. I would like, you know just for us blacks to be equal to everyone else in this world. That's the solution. I want equal equality.

GC: So, do you believe that we're any closer to, you know, are we any closer to equality than we were before George Floyd was murdered?

JC: I don't feel like we're closer to equality. I feel like we are, you know, we're getting given certain things that we wanted, like commercials with more black people, you know, just being spoken about black people and Black Lives Matter. But, I don't think stuff is going to change.

GC: Is there anything else about the anti-racist uprisings that you'd like to share?

JC: I feel like we just need to try to understand other people. I feel like we need to try to, you know, realize that everyone's trying to make a better life for each other, for themselves. Realize that it is harder for black people in the black communities because we don't have the schools that are provided, even when it comes to getting certain foods, we don't have the salad bar that we could just go to if we want to eat healthy that day. We don't have a lot of things that white people do have and I just want... I'll never stop fighting, and you guys need to understand that we will never stop. We will never be quiet, and if it takes the looting and the rioting for you guys to understand until you've changed it and fix it. Then, that is what it's going to take.

GC: Now I'm going to ask you a couple of questions about the US Capitol being invaded by the Trump supporters this year?

JC: Yes.

GC: So, what was going through your mind when you first heard about the US Capitol being invaded?

JC: Well, if you want me to be honest, what was going through my mind was that since it was full-on Trump supporters, for me to be fully honest, what was going through my mind was nothing because I didn't care. It had nothing to do with black.

GC: What do you think, led these people to attempt to violently overthrow the government?

JC: I think what led them was Trump having that speech that day saying, "we're going to march, I want everyone to come over here, to the Capitol, and we're going to force our way because it's unequal. And I feel like they knew they were losing and they finally got

a taste of the old times of how, you know, racism really was. They got a taste and they didn't want it to just leave that fast.

GC: Were you surprised by how they were treated by the police?

JC: No, I wasn't surprised at all. they glorify that one white woman that got shot and, they worship her and say, "oh, rip to her" and, you know, I'm not a horrible person. Yes, let her rest in peace. But what I'm saying like, I don't feel bad.

GC: So, there were reports that members of the Trump supporters that were invading the US capitol were elected officials and police officers and US military or.

JC: That was in the crowd?

GC: Yes. So what should we do as a society with that information and what do you think we should do about that? What do you think the US law enforcement should do about it? Do you agree with the police officers overthrowing US democracy?

JC: Well, first of all, it's not about what we should do. It's about what we can do as black people. And literally, I don't think that when it comes to the Capitol being ambushed like that I don't feel like that's a question for us black people because they chose to do that. It was trump supporters that swore they were the right ones that did that to your capital, to our capital. Whenever went that far we were the ones being tear-gassed and killed. One person got killed.

GC: What do you think about Trump's reaction to the invasion?

JC: I wasn't shocked by it because if you listen to what he said before, that was the plan all along. I wasn't shocked at all, like, Trump is focused on winning and he's gonna make himself heard.

GC: What do you think about the impeachment trial of our former US President Trump?

JC: Well, there were two impeachment trials on President Trump. And you know, I feel like I understand the impeachment trial and all that crap. But, I honestly feel like, as much as you guys were trying to get him out of the office, you could have put all that energy into actually making things better for black people.

GC: So, if Trump was a woman or a non-white, how do you think the impeachment trial would have been? Would have been the same or would it have been different?

JC: Well, if Trump was, for instance, if Trump was a white woman, I think that impeachment trial...I mean, I don't know I feel like it would be the same if Trump was a white woman. Or maybe there would be a little harsh, harsher on her. But it never compares to if I think it's a black man, or a black woman because I think they would just kill him. They will kill that black man or woman.

GC: Many say that silence is violence. Do you agree with the statement? Why or why not?

JC: I definitely agree with this statement to the max, I think silence is violence. The more you just try to ignore it, it's never gonna change anything. But it's kind of a double whammy for me because certain things, certain situations are better off if you just don't say anything.

GC: So, I remember earlier in this interview you said that you didn't participate and you didn't contribute to the Black Lives Matter movement because you felt as if it wouldn't do anything. So do you think you're harming this movement in any way by not contributing?

JC: Just because what everyone's definition of contributing to the movement is by walking outside holding a Black Lives Matter sign up? That's not...I'm an actual black man, born and raised in the Bronx. I've been going through all this. It's not about protesting and holding up a sign for me.

GC: Do you believe that the Black Lives Matter movement is one step closer to ending racism in this country?

JC: I feel like it's definitely a big step. It's definitely a big step. I don't feel like it's one step closer to ending run racism, but I felt like it's a big step for at least getting white people to understand where we're coming from.

GC: So, about the COVID pandemic, has it affected your income in any way?

JC: No, as I said before earlier in this interview, I'm an essential worker and I've been working the whole time. So thank God, I've got blessed that I didn't have to experience losing a job like everyone else.

GC: So, I know you feel as if racism is never going to end, and this isn't gonna solve anything. Do you think we're gonna hit harder? Or do you think things are just gonna be like this?

JC: Well, I think we're hitting harder than we ever have and I feel like we're gonna hit harder and harder until they understand.

GC: If you plan on having children, how would you explain this thing that's happened? As a 24-year-old,, how would you explain the Black Lives Matter movement to them that you personally went through?

JC: I wouldn't explain it to them, because I want my child to have as much innocence as they can. Until, you know, we get older and they go through it. That's when I'll explain that it doesn't matter what people say. Realize that you're beautiful. Your skin is beautiful. And you can focus on that stuff.

GC: I would like to greatly thank you for answering these questions for me. I know some of them were touchy subjects and I can tell you were passionate about it. So I am very grateful that you came in and had this conversation with me and this interview with me.

JC: Well, thank you. I appreciate it. And I'm grateful for you guys to inform everyone that doesn't understand.