

Michelle Joseph interviewed by Dajour Carbon
May 22, 2022
Crown Height, Brooklyn

Dajour Carbon: Hi. My name is Dajour Carbon and I'll be interviewing Michelle Joseph, through zoom on May 22, 2022. Do you give permission to have this interview with you?

Michelle Joseph: Yes.

DC: Yeah. All right. Can you just give me some basic background information on you, like where are you from, what language you speak, and things like that?

MJ: Okay, my name is Michelle Joseph. I'm 22. My current job is driver/admin. I live around the Crown Heights/Ocean Hill area. I'm born and raised in Brooklyn. English is my first language. I'm Haitian American. My pronouns are she/her, and my sexual identity orientation is straight.

DC: All right. Cool. How do you usually get around New York City?

MJ: What this job now I currently drive. It's way more convenient, but before I was just taking the train and bus.

DC: Taking the train and bus which one do you prefer? You preferred driving, right?

MJ: Driving, it's way safer.

DC: Do you have any wild stories about the train like anything crazy going on.

MJ: Before I got this job, I remember I had got off of work and I was at the Grand Army Plaza station. So, I walked out straight to the platform like towards the front, and some lady she was next to me, but like, two like, five feet over. And then all of a sudden, she screamed, and then I turned around, it was a homeless guy jacking off behind the grid like two feet away. And I didn't notice. And then when he got caught, he ran onto the train that was there at the platform. And yeah, and I ended up seeing the same guy the next day on the train. So yeah.

DC: I would imagine it doesn't make you feel safe at all right?

MJ: No, not really. Passively looking over your shoulder is not a good feeling.

DC: It's hard out here being a woman in the city I can imagine. Do you think law enforcement could help with anything around you? Or would that issue in the subways at all? Would it make you want to take the train?

MJ: Like, even while when that incident happened, like you still, I still saw like NYPD in train stations daily, but they don't really pay attention. And if they are paying attention, it's for fare evasion its nothing. It's mainly not for anything else.

DC: Concern for safety and community shift. Shift that of the community functions in your area. Like, do you guys have anything going on in your neighborhood and things like that Or, is it not safe enough to have functions?

MJ: Do you mean like community gatherings?

DC: Yeah.

MJ: I'm where I'm at, I don't think were like that together as a community for anyone to have any gatherings. If there are gatherings it's within people, like small parties, with people that they know, it wouldn't be like a huge community thing.

DC: You say you were born and raised in New York City.

MJ: Right.

DC: And you're well, are you well aware of how it's like, you know, it's well diverse and stuff like that?

MJ: Yeah, it is. It's diverse, but like nowadays, it's hard to tell whether it's diverse if the neighborhood is diverse, or if it's gentrified. So, there's a really thin line between that.

DC: Would you consider New York City generally, and your community racially segregated?

MJ: No, because like I said before, gentrification is really infiltrating into our neighborhoods. So, it's you're starting to see a mix-up of people. So, no.

DC: What's the experience been like in the public education system as a student?

MJ: Sorry, can you repeat that?

DC: Oh, sorry. What was the experience like in the public school system in New York City, like as a student?

MJ: As a student, I felt like it was pretty alright. It wasn't nothing too hard. We did have resources, it wasn't like it was anything scarce and stuff like that. Yeah.

DC: All right. Well, what are some of the personality traits of like New Yorkers that you think you've come across?

MJ: The whole minding our business thing. That's a big one. Because it ties back into like Public Transportation and Safety, like we were, we were taught to, like, not look at anybody in their eyes, or like, you know, mind our business when something crazy is happening on the street or on public transportation. But like recent days, like you have to mind your business now, like you have to react. So, yeah.

DC: How well do you know your neighbors and the people in your community?

MJ: Um, I just moved here in January. So, I don't really know a lot of my neighbors. But as so far, I'm really acquainted with the corner stores and the businesses around me.

DC: So, what public support systems have you experienced in your community?

MJ: I don't think I really experienced that all. To be honest.

DC: No public support systems, nothing no public assistance at all?

MJ: No, I never qualified for anything like that. So, I yeah, I don't know.

DC: Okay What are others you know, about, that aren't available? As a community you would say, other like public? How would I say?

MJ: Public assistance programs? Like what's available that people don't know?

DC: Yeah, in your community?

MJ: I feel like this community, the neighborhood that I'm in, I'm pretty sure they know all the public assistance programs.

DC: What does good housing mean to you in terms of like in your neighborhood, or your space or just they just like the whole environment around you? What does that mean to you yeah?

MJ: I would say good housing is a nice, you know, something, it doesn't have to be too renovated. But something that's that you would feel comfortable calling home. A decent amount of space. We know NYC is known for like small apartments, but space is really big. A really big thing I should say. And safety wise, I feel like any neighborhood around New York City is like it's not really safe. But it's not that good either. So yeah.

DC: What about like transportation?

MJ: oh, yes, transportation is a big thing. I've always made it. Like when I'm moving, made sure to have like, at least one train a couple blocks away from me, because you don't want to be stuck with just bus stops around you. They will never come on time.

DC: Oh, yeah that's really important. Have you ever been worried about not being able to afford rent or anything like that?

MJ: Yes, and no. Yes. Because, you know, I'm only 22 is, you know, experience is not really there. So I could just really take what I can get right now, based of what I've done, job wise in the past and no because good money management skills, I guess I should say or priorities.

DC: Would have been what have been some of the impacts of gentrification and or the community dislocation in your neighborhood that you see?

MJ: yeah, so since I'm in the Crown Heights, Ocean Hill area, it's like borderline East New York. So when you think of East New York or Brownsville you think of like that, and only African Americans over here, but my neighborhood is pretty much gentrified, like it's over the Eastern Parkway line. So it's starting to get a mix up over here, I guess.

DC: Is homelessness, crisis in New York, affecting you in any way in your community?

MJ: No, it's not really affecting me in my community or neighborhood. I don't really see that much homeless people where I'm at, but it's still pretty big, the numbers are still pretty big. Even when you hop on the trains, public transportation, just random places.

DC: So, what do you think contributes it to be like such a big number?

MJ: These ridiculous rent prices. Not enough jobs, like actually taking people in and showing them, like taking the chance on people. Like you have to have experience to get a good job or a good salary to make it. Like everyone is literally living paycheck to paycheck. And if you don't manage your money right, you could be homeless any day. It could be me, you, your teacher, anybody.

DC: Yeah. What is it that they say? Like, you like two paychecks away from being homeless.

MJ: Yeah.

DC: Yeah. What do you think society or the government should do to curb this crisis at all?

MJ: I feel like the resources that they're so quick to send to other countries, they could easily pour that into a city, like New York City, or other major cities like Los Angeles, Skid Row. And easily fix that, give them shelter, and mental health assistance because of course, especially since my job is with working in shelters as well. So you see it firsthand. Mental health is really big. So if there's no resources for mental health, for the homelessness, they don't want to be in shelters anyway, so you got to start at the root cause basically.

DC: Right. Now, speaking of root causes, we are about to head into the BLM protest section of the interview. How do you feel about BLM and the protests?

MJ: I don't really follow that stuff. Because you know, I try to steer clear and be positive. So, I try not to read up on those things in general.

DC: Alright. Okay, and you say you just don't feel comfortable talking about it?

MJ: Yeah, not really.

DC: Alright. No problem.

DC: Do you have? Let's see. Let's talk about COVID-19 for a little bit, then.

MJ: Oh, that's part of my job as well. So.

DC: Oh, how's life been changed financially since COVID-19?

MJ: I haven't had any job. I mean, any problems with having a job? So, I worked throughout the whole pandemic? Yeah, it's been pretty steady, I would say. I've been fortunate.

DC: And how has your workplace shifted since March 2020?

MJ: So what the jobs that I've had now, and from when the pandemic started, it required me to be in person. And like, when March 2020, I was working for the post office. So postal mail was backed up, like crazy, like bins and bins and bins, like wall to wall. So I had to show up. And, you know, do what I got to do. And then doing COVID testing that and now with COVID vaccinations in shelters, and sites and family shelters. Yeah.

DC: And how has your life changed personally since COVID-19?

MJ: I think it made me appreciate outdoors more, even though I am an introvert. And I do like to stay inside, but now it taught me to like just do what I want to do. And because you never know

DC: That is true. Now, while being inside though, like spending a lot of time inside. Have you found any new hobbies while you're inside at all?

MJ: yes, but I feel like I've gained too many hobbies to the point where I can't keep up.

DC: Okay, so then what about the old hobbies? I'm guessing you just got rid of that right?

MJ: I would say my hobbies are like a cycle. Once I get tired of it. I'll just stop and pick up something else until I get back to it.

DC: What about your relationships with your friends?

MJ: They're even stronger now. I would say. It taught me to be a bit more, you know, open and less shy be more outspoken because you never know if someone's thinking the same thing as you, or share the same hobby as you speaking up, gets you somewhere.

DC: Okay? Do you feel like your relationships have changed with your neighbors at all?

MJ: No. I moved in the beginning of the year. So, the last neighborhood that I was in, I was in East New York, and it was pretty, it was a pretty close, tight-knit neighborhood. You know, everyone on the block knew each other.

DC: And then what about your relationship with your family has COVID affected that in a negative positive way, you know?

MJ: I would say in a positive, negative way with some family members, you know, we express our love for each other now. And we do look out for each other more, because it is really dangerous here. And we do have elders that we're looking after, that still lives in New York City. So just taking precaution with each other.

DC: How did COVID impact your health and the health of your family?

MJ: Thankfully, I haven't had COVID ever yet. But, no one in my family has had it. So, I think we've been pretty lucky.

DC: Yeah, you guys. I'm really happy to hear that for real. What if, or if there are any benefits to your life for two-ish years in the quarantine? Is there any benefits at all that came from the last two years?

MJ: Yes. The benefit of the whole quarantine in the last few years? It really, I think it really helped people to really sit down and think like, it really helped them sit down with themselves and think about the things that they've been avoiding. You know, because before COVID, and before quarantine, everyone was so busy, got multiple things to do. But when you're home alone, with four walls, you just, you can't help but think you got to address certain things that you was trying to avoid.

DC: Is there anything you learned about yourself or your family?

MJ: I'll say more myself. The whole outspoken thing again. I don't really know how to explain it, but it ties into that.

DC: It's all good as long as you understand it, right?

MJ: Yeah.

DC: Is there anything I should have asked or anything you'd like to add at all?

MJ: No, we jumped around and we hit it on the head.

DC: Alright, that's good. Are you still comfortable with making this oral history public?

MJ: Yes.

DC: All right. Thank you, Michelle Joseph we appreciate your contribution to our oral history tradition we got going on.

MJ: All right. Thank you for choosing me.

DC: Thank you. Enjoy your day alright.

MJ: You too.