

Miguel Tejada interviewed by Tejandra Rosado, Edwin Pastor, Shania Alexander, and Claire Wilgus
October 14, 2021
Claremont Village, The Bronx

Claire Wilgus (0:00) Um, so thank you again for being here and being with us today. Um, so just like for the sake of recording, we're interviewing Miguel over zoom on October 14 2021. He's a worker at a bodega located at 1465 Bryan Avenue in the Bronx, New York. And Miguel, do you just give us permission to record and make public this oral history?

Miguel Tejada (0:27) Yes, I do give them permission.

CW (00:29) Thank you. And we're just gonna ask a few questions. If there's anything throughout the interview that you're uncomfortable with that you don't really want to share a lot, like, feel free to we can move on and you know, to share whatever you're comfortable with. And then I think Tejandra is going to start us off.

Tejandra Rosado (0:50) Yeah. Hi, again, my name is Tejandra. So, a quick question like how do you identify yourself as it's just for an icebreaker?

TR (1:00) Oh, I identify as male, Latino, I go by his skill. And yes.

TR (1:10) What's your ethnic background?

MT (1:12) Oh. Latino, Hispanic Latino.

TR(1:17) Can you tell me a story about how you and your family ended up in New York City?

MT (1:22) Um, it was a it is a long story, but to make sure. My parents moved to the live from the Dominican Republic to New York. When I was six years old, they came first and then like, after three years later they brought me, me or my two siblings to New York.

TR (1:50) When did you start working at the bodega?

MT (1:52) I started working at the bodega when I was 16 or 17. That was around year 2016.

TR (2:05) Is it just your job or is it a family business?

MT (2:09) It is a family business.

TR (2:13) How long has it been in the family?

MT (2:15) For nine years.

TR (2:18) Wow, thank you. Do you want to go?

CW (2:24) Yeah, so um, so is there like any sort of history behind the business? Kind of like how did you guys get started? How did you guys choose the location? Just the information about you know how you guys got going?

TR (2:28) Oh, for my understanding, my parents decided to like to have the bodega laid down location because it was the first place that they, you know, they found it was convenient for them. And like, they serve for life from zero and beans over there. Like that was the first business they have here in the United States. They like they just start from there.

CW (3:11) I think Shania?

Shania Alexander (3:16) My name is Shania Alexander, I am a student at Guttman community college. I will be asking you two questions. My first question to you is, Were there any memorable events that took place at your store?

MT (3:36) Like in terms of like?

SA (3:38) Like any situation that occurred in the store?

SA (3:48) For to me or like any other member or?

SA (3:51) Any other member of your store member?

MT (3:54) So, I have not like I haven't have like any memorable experience, but for my parents I could say that there was a probably like issue in the store with one of the customer that really had a big impact on their life. Like the situation got out of control, like they have so far with the customer is that was a big problem that they have in their life and somehow impact my life because I was, I was in shock and I didn't want to go to them when they go to work anymore because like all the stuff that was happening around so it.

SA (4:39) Was there a fight or something that occurred? How did that make you feel?

MT (4:46) Um, I was shocked because I didn't know like, because like how to be added or like on that because the problem is started because my family they don't speak English. Well, his language and their arguments are because they there was a misunderstanding between the customer and the EMI and

customer service in this time was my mother and they have a misunderstanding in they have a fight with them the police was called and everything.

SA (5:27) So, what happened after the situation?

MT (5:30) I mean, nothing happened after that because the thing was like, they're misunderstanding guards who like to be clear and like none of the none of them were involved. Like meaning that they they didn't go to jail because you know, it was not something big something huge, but I wasn't it was a little bit awkward for me because. I was thinking, Oh, if that happened to them because they didn't have they didn't speak that same language. How like, that was when I just got here to New York. Like, it was when I was leaving, it was like a month after I came from my home country to Dominican Republic. And I was like, oh my god imagine me now how not, I mean learning this language in like not being fluent. So, imagine you've been working over there you have an argument with the customer because we can barely understand each other.

SA (6:41) So, it was a problem because you didn't speak English or?

MT (6:46) Yeah, I will say that he was because die because the misunderstanding, but I was shy I was like it was uncomfortable for me because I was thinking, no, how am I gonna how am I gonna work over there is I just got here and I don't know the language so it will be like it will be difficult for me working over there.

SA (7:13) Okay, my second question to you is have you or how have you had to adapt to the changes in the community since the covid 19 pandemic?

MT (7:26) That's a good question, because I'm thinking pre COVID, like the community like the in the area where the dollar store is located right like there are a lot of people in the street. My god, like interacting with each other, like because of COVID they had like change, like not everybody isn't outside, going to the store because you know people are scared to go out. Like the area was a little loud on the summer during the summer and because of COIVD, is not the same, like you barely can see people there.

SA (8:12) So, how has adapting to the new changes made you feel?

MT (8:16) Oh, yeah. So, changing like mainly for like, oh probably, because before like at the beginning the of the pandemic people were scared, I was scared, too, but seems like we have the vaccine and everything like right now getting more comfortable to go out and buy. So, I just you know just wear my mask every time I'm in the store and try to keep some distance, social distancing. But, like is not like I will say is not the same thing as it was before because I was scared of being working over there and

getting infected. But now I'm just doing the social distancing where like I'm better I'm doing better or the store.

SA (9:11) Is everyone else in the store doing better or they're still adapting to change as well?

MT (9:18) Well, I will say that most of the worker, yes they are doing better because now we are interacting with you know with other people, but like as I was saying, in the beginning of the pandemic was not the same. So, we like we though, like I will say the customer regulars, like we are isolated and but now we are like getting back together.

SA (9:49) Okay, thank you so much for answering my questions.

CW (9:56) I just had a like a follow up question on that. So, I guess, kind of from what you were saying, I was getting that the sense of community and, like you know being surrounded by people, is what was kind of the main thing that COVID effective for you? Um, do you have like any regular customers that come in that you know you miss during that period of time or like has it been nice kind of seeing all your regulars come back since things have started opening up a little bit?

MT (10:22) Yes, definitely. Yes, I have customer that I made during the during the pandemic because they, like, they stopped going to the to the store because of the COVID. And mostly, I like a few, but there is one lady I remember that she always go to the store and say, "Hi, good morning" every day. Like it was shock not seeing her going to the bodega every morning to say, "hi, say good morning". And when like when things were getting better she start going back to the store. And I was like I was, "oh I miss you during the pandemic!"

CW 11:04 That's really sweet.

Edwin Pastor (11:16) Um, um, hey, Miguel, my name is Edwin and I have three questions to ask. So, my first question is, are there any economic, technological, environmental, cultural, or legal challenges you have faced?

MT (11:33) That was the question?

EP Yeah.

MT (11:38) Uhh any challenges? I will say now because, like since the bodega it was considered to be an essential place during the pandemic, like you haven't had any big impact on me because in terms of economy because I was working during the pandemic. Like, when it was the outbreak, I continue to be working and like you haven't have any big impact on my economic status.

EP (12:24) So, what like with the whole COVID outbreak going on, has the government stepped in to offer support at any moment?

MT (12:35) Um, I don't know because I am just a regular worker and I have to ask my parents to know if they got any help from the government. But for my understanding, no.

EP (12:55) All right, um, I think I'm going to ask my third question at the end. And I think Claire or someone goes next.

CW (13:06) Okay, I guess is there anything else that you know you'd like to share regarding your experience? Or anything that you wish that we kind of would have asked that you think is important?

MT (13:25) I mean, something else that I would like to share is that like working at bodegas is not an easy job, because I don't know if you heard in the news that a lot of bodega workers got into a fight with the customers. Because either they were asking or required customers to wear the mask during the pandemic and they refuse to wear them and so they have like I guess I have seen it in the in the news the worker fighting over like with a customer because of that, like customer breaking out the whole store like is not an easy job. Yeah. You have to be patient because you know, customer service in general. Ilike are not easy because you can deal with good people or you also can deal with like you know, people that are having that are going through a bad day or anything any other situations that like can just have big impact on like on your life or other people.

CW (14:39) Yeah, it's really understandable especially since you said that, you know, when the outbreak for COVID first happened, like you were working all the way through it. I'm sure it was extremely frustrating if people weren't being cooperative when especially when there was no information about COVID whatsoever. So yeah, that's really scary. I guess another I would start another Quick question to ask, Are you guys like a 24 hour? Like do you ever work you know, kind of in the middle of the night when just you know just the most random people come in or are you mostly just kind of there in the morning and afternoon?

MT (15:13) Morning afternoon so from Monday through Friday is up and 7am to 11pm and from Saturday, Saturday from 8am to 12pm.

CW (15:38) Gotcha All right. So, I think that pretty much concludes all of our questions and everything thank you again for you know, taking the time to meet with us. I just needed just because we have to ask one more time. Are you still comfortable with donating this oral history to the public collection?

CW (15:58) Yes. Okay, great. And did you guys have any other questions that you wanted to ask?

TR (16:03) Yeah, I have a few questions. How has COVID financially impacted the business?

MT (16:14) Oh, I would guess since we like we never shutdown because of COVID like I will say you know a lot of customers are going to the bodega so somehow, they have like a big impact on the on the you know, in the business like for most of the time I will say because of you know, a probably went down but I like comparing with other businesses that shut down due to the pandemic like is not the same amount of money that went down.

TR (16:58): What time in a day are you the busiest, like are you do you get more clients in the morning or in the afternoon?

MT (17:07): Oh, that's a good question. So, guys, I actually I usually work on the morning at from in the morning sometimes when we have since now, we have a school that like you know school our students are going back to school in the morning time, like around seven to ten, we get busy because you know, all those students are coming to the bodega to get their breakfast and go back to school. And, then after that, like around 7pm, it is busy as well.

TR (17:48): And how have you overcome these challenges over these past two years? Since the outbreak of COVID? Or what are the steps are you taking to overcome these challenges?

MT (18:01): Like in terms of?

TR (18:10): It could be anything like, say for example, the protests that's been going on? I know that it took toll on a lot of businesses. So, it could be anything that you have trouble with that you face? Like what steps did you take to overcome it? Or how are you dealing with it?

MT (18:27): Oh, I will say just the challenge that I have has been telling people to do is to wear their mask to go inside. Because in New York, there is a policy that people are required to wear masks. And like, I am tired of telling people 'Oh, you need to wear masks to come in.', but like for most of the times I just, when they come to inside, and they don't have a mask, I provide them with one. So, that's like the steps that I'm taking to reduce the argument between the customer and the worker or just to continue in a safe place.

TR (19:19): Is there anything else that you would like to share that we didn't touch base on?

MT (19:25): No.

TR (19:26): Thank you.

EP (18:27): I have a question I wanted to ask, with your bodega owner, you're like you're required to wear a mask. But how about if they are vaccinated? Is there like an exception or does everybody need to wear masks?

MT (19:44): Like yes, there is definitely not a problem but everybody needs to wear a mask inside of being in a close place. They have to wear a mask, even though if you are vaccinated, because I am vaccinated myself and when I go out with like whoever to the restaurant or other close places, I have to wear a mask, because it is mandatory when you are inside.

CW (20:21): All right are we all good? Shania did you have anything you wanted to add? Are you okay?

SA (20:26): No, that was all.

CW (20:27): Okay, all right, I think that concludes everything. I just wanted to thank you one last time for letting us talk to you today. It was really interesting to hear about your experience and thank you again for getting these photos to us, it is just that we have to turn this in on like Sunday. So, if you can get it to us like Friday or Saturday that'd be great and just whatever you can get would be really helpful for us. So, I think that's everything.

MT (20:57): Thank you guys.

CW (20:58): Thank you enjoy the rest of your day. I'll stop recording.

CW, SA, TR, EP (21:01): Thank you.

CW, SA, TR, EP (21:18): Yeah.