

Jacinto Maldonado Torres Oral History Interview

DC Oral History Collaborative

Summary

Local DC organizer for ROC-DC, Jacinto Maldonado Torres, reflects on his high school years and how he first became involved with Many Languages One Voice through their S.M.A.R.T. program which informed many of his current views on immigrant, student and worker rights. He also talks about his experience working in the restaurant industry all throughout his high school career in order to support himself and the ways that those experiences inform his current organizing strategies while working at a national organization, Restaurant Opportunities Center, in their DC chapter. He describes the ways in which he has helped restaurant workers overcome the health and economic challenges the COVID-19 pandemic posed and his own challenges during the pandemic when his brother was unexpectedly deported to Mexico, as well as his hopes for the future after overcoming those adversities. *Note: The following interview transcript has been translated to English.*

Narrator Bio

Anonymous narrator, using the pseudonym Jacinto Maldonado Torres, is a local DC organizer who came to Washington, DC in 2010 at the age of 15. Originally from Mexico City, Mexico, he attended DC public schools and recently earned an associates degree in Early Childhood Education at UDC. His involvement in the community started early when he began organizing in high school after he started attending youth empowerment meetings at Many Languages One Voice where he became aware of his rights as a student and as an immigrant. He also learned about the disparities in the level of education and access to opportunities for himself, his peers, and other immigrants across the district. He wants to empower others to do the same, and as his roles expanded in a number of campaigns, including Cancel Rent and Excluded Workers, he has been using popular education as a primary tool for change. He also points to important changes in organizing as well as a shifting narrative regarding Dreamers.

Narrator: Anonymous narrator, Jacinto Maldonado Torres

Project: Hola Cultura - Dreamers: our voices and dreams

Date of Interview: July 5, 2021

Interviewer: Delia Beristain Noriega

Interview Location: Columbia Heights

Interview Length: 01:34:27

Neighborhoods Mentioned: Columbia Heights, Petworth

DBN: Hi, thank you very much for being here with us again and for continuing with this interview. I know we talked about many things last time and we said we would talk a little bit more about what you are doing now as an organizer, but I wanted to go back a bit and ask you how was the transition from graduating from high school if you recall?

JMT: If I remember correctly, last time we were still talking about when I was in Mexico. So are you asking about my transition after high school?

DBN: Yes, once you graduated from high school, what did you do after graduation? What plans did you have when you graduated?

JMT: Oh yeah, so I think this comes from high school when I was in the 11th grade because I was failing several classes in the tenth grade. At one point I thought I was not going to finish school but I came to know this organization, Many Languages One Voice, and I got to know it through my brother and some friends. I remember that before at school .. we were doing .. sorry we would get out of school and go directly to my house to play video games or do other things. So one day my brother and my friends did not come and a week passed, well not one week, about three days and I asked them where they had gone. They told me that they had gone to an organization, they did activities, met more people so I decided to go with them. Then I realized that it was like a youth meeting and at that meeting they were talking about immigration policies, about things that were happening in schools, so it seemed interesting to me but at the same time a little boring because I was not like... my mentality was not open-minded at that time so I went for about a week and then I decided not to go because I was also working at the same time. So at 17 years 15..16 sorry I was already working and well I was focusing more on work and other things. So going to this organization, I don't know how I decided to go there again and they started to talk again about my rights as a student, immigrant rights, and I started meeting more people as well. Then I decided to stay and spend the 11th grade going to that organization and my last year in high school also. So I was very involved with that organization doing different campaigns, working on different things and learning from different organizers. So I think that's where my passion for being an organizer grew, here in the city, one because I wanted to know my rights and I was also working in a restaurant so to know my rights as a student and to be a worker, and to see how I could continue [00:05:00] going to school because in high school for example, well at least in the classes that I had, I was taking English as a second language classes, and they did not tell us to apply to universities in any of those classes. Our teachers didn't talk to us about it and we went to other classes where they would ask "have you applied at a university? Which university are you going to? Have you already taken your SAT test? " We did take it but we didn't give it any importance because in fact some of the teachers said "no, you don't need to," "it is not necessary to take those exams," but if we had to go by force or if they told us to go to these classes knowing English as a second language classes did not count. Going to the organization, I met several people or several of my friends who started talking about going to

college. So that's how that idea grew and I said to myself well if they go why not me? I would also like to go to college so by taking this path with the organization I began to meet more people, I connected with this other small organization that are now my mentors. Working with them, working with other organizers and at the same time working in the restaurant and seeing other opportunities though once I left high school, I did not go to college. Well, I did go to college but only to take a free class and from there I didn't come back until three years later. I just took that free class and still didn't feel ready to be there after that. What they had taught us in school or at least in the classes that we had was not enough preparation to be ... well I did not feel prepared for the things I had to do or how to navigate them because it was completely different to be in high school. In high school I could fill out paperwork on my own and in college I could also do it alone but it was or is a completely different process. The first time I went to UDC and then I met another person in another organization from the Latin American Youth Center. I went there ... They had a program through Bard College so in this program they gave us six credits and these six credits were like in preparation to go to college because they were basic credits but at the same time they prepared you or at least they prepared us. I remember that I had literature, history, English, philosophy and I remember two of the teachers very well. Professor Igugil, I don't quite remember his name, but something like that. I remember very well because he is the one who introduced me to another type of literature [00:10:00] so the literature that he chose or the little essays they gave us, or the little stories, I felt very connected to those because I also felt connected with the stories and with him a little because he also had an experience that was familiar to mine, although there times were different. He had told me that when he came here he had no one, he was an undocumented person, he worked night and day and still he went to school. I felt connected to him, not only because I was going to high school, but I was also working when I was taking these classes from Bard College at the same time. Those times were hard because I was having to pay rent at that time. I was 17 years old and I already was paying about 700 dollars in rent so I had to get that money somehow to be able to pay my rent like my brother. So I did feel connected to the readings he assigned us and then the other class that developed my values a little more was a philosophy class that also guided me. The organization gave me the tools, or offered things that I could do and other places where I could ask for help and connect with people. But this kind of philosophy also helped me to see what my values were and what was the reason I wanted to go to school. Why do I want to go to school? Just to have a role, to do something else, or do I want to be rich or whatever? So during his classes he made us write and listen all the time, it was like what did we want? What kind of life did we want to lead? Or what problem do we want to solve? As I told you, the organization provided me with tools, things that I could do and that class gave me different values. For example, one of the things that I wanted to do, and I think that was when my mind refocused on education as well, which is what I really wanted to study. So I decided well I'm going to study education. And one of the things that I realized is that I spoke a lot about poverty in my essays and that I touched on it sometimes without realizing it. So I decided to focus on education because I said well that is the problem I see, that rich people or maybe not rich people but people with more knowledge or with

more hopes of getting ahead by having a better education or knowing something. The other thing was to make education more accessible [00:15:00] and also to dispel the stereotypes that exist in different people. Through those essays, looking at education, seeing what my education was like in Mexico, seeing what my education was like here in the United States, watching videos... To this day, I am still watching videos of where I lived, I am still seeing the schools where I went. I keep thinking about that to see the things that I want to change. Then I ask my brothers who are in Mexico, or my nephews, to tell me about the things that have not changed and that have changed, how are people trained or how people use their power or what they know for good or bad and to become part of the capitalist system, which is what Mexico has, in fact what this whole country has--capital is more important than the well-being of the people. After I got out of high school I decided to go into that program. I finished the program and I decided I was going to take one more year and then go back to school so I decided to take one more year off and decided to enter a computer academy. I entered that program because I was thinking I already know how to use basic computers and do different things but I wanted to learn a little more about computers and the things I could do and how to handle maybe a microphone or different technology that could help. I went to the computer academy. I was there for a year. I took classes to take the A + test and from then on I decided that computers were not my thing. I decided to go back to school. I went back to UDC again but this time I applied for a scholarship, a scholarship because that was the other issue at the beginning. I did not have enough money to pay for school or I did not know how to pay for school so all this time I took classes at Bard College, or while at the computer academy I not only gained different skills or learned or I learned different things but I also learned how to find some local scholarships for undocumented people so I had the accessibility to get some scholarships and I decided to study early education eventually. I wanted to study secondary education for middle school students but they did not have the program at UDC since there was not much interest for that department so I decided to go into early education or early childhood education. I also thought I could change my major or stay there but I decided to stay there because I said yes, I want to practice and grow in this field. I also want to have different perspectives from early childhood education and how early childhood education impacts the development of your childhood [00:20:00] and how you grow and how you are forming as a teenager, as a young adult because our childhood impacts our entire lives. So to be able to understand that, to be able to understand how my childhood impacted my education, how my childhood impacts my abilities, whether physical or mental, how my childhood has impacted all of this also gave me a greater understanding as to why I behave like this, why I surround myself by these people, because I decided to get together with those people. So thinking all this, having different theories and living different experiences I realized what I wanted to do, continue in the field of education and at some point to be able to open a school and become a teacher, that's my goal.

DBN: And before going back to this education program that you entered, I just wanted to clarify a few things. What year did you graduate from high school and at what age?

JMT: I graduated at 19 and graduated in 2015.

DBN: And then after that you entered Bard College through LAYC, right?

JMT: Yes, I entered in 2016. I did one more program. I entered Bard College, I was there in 2016. In 2017 I did River Corps which focused on the environment and I worked in the different areas, in small bodies of water that are here in Rock Creek going to monitor the temperature, not the temperature, the water level each year and in 2018 I started doing .. between mid-2017 and 2018 I entered the computer academy and at the end of 2018 I was starting to do my essays to apply to college again and to apply for scholarships.

DBN: And how did you sign up for the River Corps program?

JMT: I think I entered because I also had not a mentor, but what would you call it, a person who motivates you.

DBN: Coach?

JMT: Like a coach but he wasn't a coach. It was like ... he also helped me fill out documents and look for other things.

DBN: Counselor perhaps?

JMT: He was like a counselor.

DBN: Or case manager?

JMT: He was actually like a case manager and his name was Pibe or his name is Pibe and that was through LAYC. They assigned me that case manager in high school because they wanted to see how my grades were, if I needed any kind of help, and this woman named María from El Salvador matched me with him. So this lady who was at the school had a department at the school in a classroom. She recommended me to him and this Mr. Pibe is the one who, through so many conversations or check-ups, [00:25:00] told me “there is this River Corps program” and well that's how I found out.

DBN: What did you think or how did you feel entering that program? In other words, did you have an interest in the environment when you entered or did you become interested once you entered?

JMT: Well, I've always had an interest in the environment, maybe I don't show it all the time but I've always had an interest given that since I was little, my dad would take us to Puebla and we went to the mountains or we went to the volcano and we went climbing, or walking, or we would go to the lakes. And in fact before I entered the River Corps in 2016 I got my first and only tattoo of some mountains. I was walking with a friend and I told her I wanted to get a tattoo but I did not know what to get. Before entering, my friend and I decided to draw something, these mountains that came out from my experience with the environment but without doing too much. I entered the program and found it interesting, one because another person, another guy and I were the only Latinos in that program. The other guy named Fulanito and I were the only Latinos at the time and our other peers were African-American. It was on the other side of the bridge from Northeast D.C. This was interesting because we were the only Latinos, it was my first time that I was sharing a room with all African Americans. I went to school with some African Americans but the majority were white. I don't know, it was fun, it was a little strange to connect and for them to connect with us, and that both sides could trust each other because sometimes I would say I don't trust them and they would also say they don't trust me. So how do I talk to you? Should I talk to you? But with all the work we had, what we did was we put on suits and would go inside the bodies of water to check how much they had risen over the months, how much the water level had risen over the months, how strong a storm had been, or studying the different winter gardens and rain gardens, going to houses to test the drinking water and other little things, so all that seemed fascinating and I also found it very very good because from there I had a connection with other people, with other friends who were African American [00:30:00] and it was fun to meet them and that they met me, and that experience was very interesting.

DBN: So do you think that trust was also born from your collaborative work?

JMT: Yes, it was born from collaborative work, from the hobbies we had because they also like to play video games. We also had many talks about having the same mentality, maybe we did not have the same mentality but many of the discussions we had were like well I do not believe in racism and they were also like I do not see racism this way. You have to talk about both sides with an open mind to be able to talk about what had impacted the city because in fact when this person was elected or when this person was in the presidency, several of them were saying "I hope you are okay, If you need some kind of support, we don't have money but we can speak on your behalf and do other things," and to know that I had that kind of support from them and that they also wanted to move forward, all of that brought us together--collaborative support, ideas, video games, music, being able to share our culture, food and all that.

DBN: And since you mentioned racism and different perceptions about it... when you said "that person" you mean Trump, right?

JMT: Yes.

DBN: How did you see these perceptions of racism differ?

JMT: Between us or how?

DBN: Yes, in the conversations you had, what realizations did you have in other words?

JMT: That they also wanted to move forward, that they did not support Trump. In fact, they also cursed him out because they knew that what this man was doing was causing more hatred between them and us and between other populations. One of the many conversations we got into was that we were in the same boat with them, that in reality what this man wanted was for white supremacy to grow. So in all these conversations we would say well why do we have to look further to get ahead when other people are handed opportunities? So I think the question of racism came up in the talks on classicism and economics that we had.

DBN: And well, going forward, once you started applying to UDC, you mentioned that you were able to find assistance for undocumented people who wanted to continue studying, so can you tell me a little more about that? How did you find those resources, what was the scholarship you applied to perhaps?

JMT: Well it happened like this. You remember when I was talking about the Bard College program so when the Bard College program ended they told me that I could apply [00:35:00] to this New Futures scholarship. At that moment I said well, I'm going to start the application but I decided not to turn it in until later. New Futures is a non-profit organization as well, but it is specifically for education programs and supports low-income people or immigrants, so their mission is to help people or young people. And I met a person who worked at New Futures, Griselda. I met her because she was also the program coordinator for Bard College. When I was at Bard College, she was the coordinator of that program. And from there I went when she changed positions at New Futures. That's how I applied, talking to her and to other people. After talking with her, we also found the Mayor's Scholarship that is a scholarship by O.S.S.E. which is especially for education. So I had those two scholarships.

DBN: And how did you feel about finding that kind of help? Or were you well aware that there was that kind of help available in the community?

JMT: Well, I only knew a little about New Futures. I didn't know much. I felt very good when I found it and they were able to explain it further because not only was it the money that helped me but they also helped me in other ways through different trainings and I also got to know the other people who were applying or who applied there.

DBN: And you told me that you feel very passionate about education then. Well, you said that you were more interested in secondary education so I wanted to know more about that. Once you entered the early childhood education program, did you still have the same level of interest in secondary education?

JMT: Yes, well, I went into education because I wanted to be a primary school teacher or middle school teacher, but they didn't have the program and as I told you. One of the things that I realized was that I needed to be able to understand the different systems, the different things about why early childhood education matters so much, and how it affects the development of a child, a young person or an adult. So, as I told you, I decided to stay there in order to understand all that and at the same time be able to take it to Mexico because I want to return one day. And being able to become a teacher there was what led me to this. And one of the reasons that I want to return to Mexico is because a teacher has to know or has to be able to travel to be able to meet different people, know different places because that is a skill that also helps you as a teacher to develop yourself and to be able to teach to people. If a teacher cannot go elsewhere, cannot travel, the level of education is only retained at a single point. So in order to grow or expand [00:40:00] in your career you have to make different types of trips or meet people and not only travel or not necessarily travel to other countries, or to other states, or other places. In fact one of the things that I realized in high school and the teachers that I have had in college is that the best teachers I had are those who have been able to travel the most, perhaps not to super famous places, or super expensive places or they may not have traveled the world but at least they have been able to travel to two or three places or travel to other states or teach elsewhere. And that is when I realized because through education, the teacher has a responsibility not only to teach but also to teach values since school is the second home of any person so to be able to differentiate or be able to provide different expectations or different subjects in a classroom is what enriches the conversation or the class.

DBN: And now that you mention traveling and the importance of traveling or simply being exposed to new environments, what places do you imagine visiting here or in Mexico when you return?

JMT: Well, I want to travel here at least, to go to other states that I have not been to. I've been to New York, Philadelphia and Virginia, maybe Virginia and Maryland just for a visit or on some quick vacations. In New York I went to a dance institute where I met quite a few people, and in Philly I went to marches or matters of social justice. So those are the places that I have been and I have only been to those places because they are close to D.C. But yes, if I could travel I would travel to another state a little further away. I would like to go to California. I would like to go to North Dakota, I would like to go to I don't know Washington state and I want to go to other states. As I mentioned, I would like to be in Mexico, to go to Mexico to know a little more about Mexico, to know a little more about Puebla since I lived there most of the time because as I said,

I spent my childhood in Mexico and I couldn't go to many places by myself just because I was with my family but now as an adult I would like to go to more places, meet more people and also be able to go to another country.

DBN: And do you have a country in mind where you want to go as well?

JMT: Yes, I want to go to three countries and these three countries are in South America. In fact there is a fourth country but that is for another time but I would also like to know it. I would like to go to Ecuador, Uruguay and Argentina but the part of Argentina that is close to Patagonia. So those three places I would like to go to and the fourth place would be Russia. [00:45:00] There is a really beautiful forest out there. I just forgot the name but it is one of the coldest places in the country and on the planet since it is connected to the North Pole. So yes, that's one of the places I want to go to, especially the woods.

DBN: And now going back to your college life, how many years were you at UDC and what did you graduate from? When did you graduate?

JMT: I was at UDC for three years or over. I got my associates in early childhood education and it took me that amount of time because of the scholarships, because I could not speed up my scholarships so that they covered all the expenses and also because I had to work. I have been on my own and because of work I got my associates, which is supposed to take two years, I had to do it in three and a half. But I'm fine, I graduated this year in 2021, when was it? In June, May I graduated in early childhood education.

DBN: And you mentioned that you were working the whole time you were in school. Can you tell us a little more about what jobs you had and how did you balance those two things?

JMT: Yes, the jobs I had were as a dishwasher, it was at the bar. Most of the time it was a dishwasher, busboy, food runner and then I was barback at the bar .. And from there I started working as an organizer. But jobs in the restaurant industry were tough because I had to balance them. I had to work all the time at night from five in the afternoon to one, two in the morning. Sometimes it was every day from Monday through Thursday. On Friday and Saturday it was from five, four in the afternoon until three or four in the morning so they were a little tough but I had to do it, otherwise I couldn't eat.

DBN: And when did you make that transition from working in restaurants and then continuing to organize or started organizing?

JMT: I think that transition was already underway, and the more formal transition was in 2019 when I began to work more officially at the organization and I left the bar. So in 2019 I was already working in the same organization Many Languages One Voice.

DBN: And how did you come back there more formally in this job? Did they themselves tell you that they were looking for someone or did you on your own become aware of that or looked into opportunities?

JMT: Right, how did I know about the job. I mentioned that since I was in the ninth grade I already knew the organization, I was already working with them in the summer through summer jobs with them, I went to meetings with them, we passed a law with them. [00:50:00] I think that is when I spoke with my mentors and said I am doing a lot of work and I have contributed a lot. They have taken part of me and I have not received compensation; I have not done anything to address that. So in speaking with my mentors and speaking with the director of the organization, I told her well, I need to have some type of resource or support here or something, some type of support because I am contributing too much and I decided to create a work plan for myself that focused in communications and how to develop a formal database for Many Languages One Voice, how to handle the media, how to do intakes with them, how to do different things with them and also supporting the youth group. So that was one of the proposals that I presented to the director and she told me "ok I'll think about it." After a while she told me "you know what, we just got funding and yes, we can hire you as the communications person."

DBN: It's interesting what you are saying because from what you tell me, you began to realize your own contributions but not only that, but to value yourself and make the people with whom you had been collaborating also realize your value, the value of your work. And even though it's not like there was an open position or that they offered you something, you were the one who approached them and said, yes I have contributed all of this, why am I not formally part of the organization? So I am very interested to know how they perceived that.

JMT: One, they told me that yes they could help me and gave me the job and one of the things that happened when I proposed this work plan was that one of the missions should be to create new organizers, or not to create new ones but to create new energy among organizers and give opportunities to young people who had grown with the organization to be able to have a role in the organization. So it was not only me, it was also another of my coworkers who was there. She was also an organizer, part of the board of directors like me, and in fact my other colleague had a position as interim director during one summer for some time. But that was the mentality, that was what we wanted because one of the things they had also told us was to "take and reclaim" the organization as if it were yours, and to have that clarity, have that clarity and be able to speak and talk to people it was like we had created those bonds since we had already known each other for so long, for so long we had already done a lot of work and we had done various things. So for

us to be able to create our own work plan, to be able to execute our own work that we wanted to do was something that in fact they liked.

DBN: And in the time that you were there, how did you feel, and do you feel that you were able to carry out those ideas and goals [00:55:00] that you proposed?

JMT: Well, I felt good but no, we couldn't carry out everything, one because I didn't have a coach to be able to do the work that I had proposed, the job that I created. Because one of the things when we decided to create this job, one of the things I said was that I wanted to have a coach who could help me do all of this and also who could help me, I don't know, get to another level and take on another role, but different things happened and like any other organization, the industry of non-profit organizations, what they do is they also want money. How do you maintain a position, leadership and have money if there is no mindset, if there are no regulations, or if there are no people willing to do the work, if there are no people who understand what's going on, that is what needs to change and in the end is that is what we want to change. What I want to change also in education is to change that mentality of capitalism because that is what everyone wants. That is what any other organization wants, no matter how good they are, they all want money in a way that destroys or takes advantage of other people. So if an organization is not well directed, in good standing, they do not have good leadership, it does not matter that your workers are the best or most efficient. If the director is not in a leadership position that can direct and create alternatives, that work disappears and that is what happened or at least in my experience what I saw in that organization that after a while, I could have already done my work, and could have done other things, but in the end of the day things were upside down. They paid me and I had to pay my taxes so at the same time I said to myself, I need to see if I can find a pathway to become legal here so I have to do things correctly and keep up with my paperwork or at least bring them up to date and be mindful about that. So while in that job, and also because I was pursuing a college career, I had to do my taxes. And with this organization they paid me fifteen and it was a part-time job, I did not have health insurance, they did not deduct anything, at the end of the year I paid a lot of money. So that was one of the ways they couldn't help me and even though we talked, it was like, we'll talk about it later. And so little by little the organization was changing. Then the director or the founder decided to resign from her position because she was unable to provide transparency [01:00:00] which affected the organization and the employees. The new interim director also did not know how to manage us, and it was not that we were difficult to manage but that he did not know how to adapt to people's energy. Then the new director who was there came from academia, he was a teacher without any values, and that is the other thing... there are different types of teachers, different types of educators so you can be an excellent educator and be focused but if you cannot give perspectives have values, you cannot transcend any more because you have not been able to do different things, you remain close-minded and stagnant and that is what this teacher brought, or this new director brought. He couldn't see beyond what could be done. So it was this year or last year when I resigned from

that organization Many Languages One Voice because the environment felt hostile, I did not feel safe, I did not feel motivated to work with them, the pay was very little, although I gave too much. So I got tired and left.

DBN: And apart from what you just mentioned that it was very difficult to carry out different changes, why do you also say that it felt hostile?

JMT: Communication was not good, and I will say it again, the level of power they have... people felt they had a level of power in the organization, so communication did not feel good, the work was not productive, it did not feel productive, I did not feel free to create my own things and I also did not feel supported.

DBN: And once you left where have you worked since?

JMT: Well I have worked with ROC. I started working with ROC last year at the beginning of 2020. I started working with them. I did start working with ROC DC through a fellowship as bilingual organizer. I already knew Sophie and Candace who are my co-workers through different trainings I had with my mentors since they work with Movement Matters so I already knew them. We had had some trainings and working with them felt completely different because the work did not feel hostile, it did not feel tough, in fact it started to feel like I want to get together more or I want to learn more, and learn new things. The work at the organization Restaurant Opportunities Center. I began to be fascinated by working with them and I was working with MLOV at the same time [01:05:00] and that's when I decided to leave MLOV and decided to dedicate myself to ROC and then I was talking to my colleagues telling them that I was going to leave ROC [MLOV] and well they also supported me in some talks to find out how I could work with them since we also had to do different things because at the same time ROC is a national organization and they wanted to hire a bilingual organizer but they had not found qualified organizers capable of doing what I was doing then with my mentors. After talks with my colleagues, a contract was designed so that I could work with them. And well, I'm working with them right now. We are doing different things, we are working on different campaigns, the campaign of excluded workers with a collision of different organizations and the other campaign of cancellation of rent with another collision which at the end of the day everything is interconnected with the restaurant workers and with the people who are affected.

DBN: And now that you mention those campaigns that are due to the pandemic, can you tell us a little bit about what you have lived through the pandemic, what have been the challenges that you experienced and also the challenges with which you are helping the people now as organizer?

JMT: Well yes, in fact the pandemic also helped me to grow a little at work and to meet more people. At the beginning of the pandemic I began to meet a group of women who are restaurant workers through marches and we were having meetings. And what happened is that it kept me busy, I stayed busy this pandemic. But what I was saying is that I was working with them because these people are restaurant workers and were affected by the pandemic since they do not have federal or local support. And the support they had was 1000 dollars which took almost a year. From there, for a while I was personally a little ... I was affected by a situation. They deported my brother but with the help of other people and my partner I was able to overcome it and be able to continue with my work. It was painful but it happened. Now my brother is in Mexico, but the pandemic continues. Well, as I was telling you, this group of ladies who have been affected by the pandemic...the restaurants closed, they were fired, spent their savings to be able to pay rent, electricity, gas, food, internet, so many savings disappeared and they may have not received assistance or they only received 1000 dollars this year. So to know how the city [01:10:00] is not taking better initiatives to be able to help the residents here. Cancel rent and the excluded workers are campaigns that we are trying to pass right now. Last year, we were working with cancel rent and we were able to get 14,000 million dollars [14] for excluded workers that include undocumented people, workers who have been released from prison, people who work in the cash economy, sex workers and street vendors so they could get that 1000 dollars. Now we are fighting again for 200,000 million dollars ... 200 million dollars for them since they would be given a thousand dollars every month so that we can help them but also use those campaigns as a way to create a path in case that in the future something like this happens money is already available to help people.

DBN: So you saw that there was not much help from the city as you said and from other places?

JMT: Well yes, the city has not been providing much help. And the small grants that they gave were very small and ended up going super fast. And the city, although especially the mayor, is focusing on housing development but on development to create displacement for low-income people in this city, that once was chocolate city or they called it chocolate city, is now whiter than anything. I came to this city in 2010. I have been here for 11 years and I have seen the change that has taken place. All this time that I have been here, I have lived here in Northwest. I lived on Columbia Road and 18 and Columbia Road. From there I moved to 16th street next to Mount Pleasant, and from there I moved to Petworth. From there I returned to Columbia Heights and right now that I am living here again. I just moved here to 14th and Meridian which is also part of Columbia Heights. So I have lived in this area and I have been able to see the change in the city at least until now. Knowing several people with whom I went to school that we have lived the change, and we know what it's like living here in D.C. I sometimes get upset when people come here to study or live outside of D.C. and they say they are from D.C. without knowing what it's really like is because they did not have to resort to public insurance or perhaps it is not necessary that they resort to public insurance but to live on these streets, to live what

happens every day on these streets, to be able to feel the [01:15:00] level of stress, the level of work that exists because here the level of work that is developed, the level of poverty that there is, the rent prices that increase every year... So there are different things that are happening.

DBN: And going back a little to the pandemic, right now that you talked about how many people did not feel supported, did you feel supported in any way in all this?

JMT: Well, I felt supported by my acquaintances, by the people I know, so these people were able to help. There was a time when I needed a computer and I did a little fundraiser and was able to buy it thanks to the GoFundMe that I did. I was able to have a little help either from gift cards or other things and also I was able to keep my job. Not everyone who is undocumented was able to keep their job and be able to continue earning the same and have more work. So I had that opportunity to keep my job, earn a little more money and have other types of help. I did feel very supported.

DBN: And you mentioned that during all this in the middle of the pandemic your brother was deported and I don't know if you want to comment a little more about that and what happened.

JMT: Yes, well they deported him in an unfair way. He fought his case and when he was leaving the Virginia court some I.C.E. agents grabbed him and took him to Farmville in Virginia. I didn't hear from him. In fact it was an intuition that I had because when that happened I had talked to my brother the day before. He was at my house and we were talking, he stayed, we were playing video games and that same day he had arrived early ... I don't remember what day it was but he had arrived early. We had breakfast and we played some video games and he said to me "can I come over to your house later? I need to do laundry. I don't have a washing machine where I am." And it was a bit difficult for him to find a job since we were in the pandemic, in the toughest moments of the pandemic. So I told him yes, that he should come and do laundry here at my house. And we had spoken again on the phone that same day around four in the afternoon. He told me that he was eating and that in about two hours he was going to come to my house to do laundry. So I said okay, hurry and we had already talked at four. It was already six o'clock, seven o'clock and then I began to call him on the phone again and he did not answer me, he did not answer me, he did not answer. I kept calling him two hours later. He didn't answer me. And I spoke to some friends who told me that they had not seen him, only that he had gone out to buy something. [01:20:00] It was weird to me because he did not answer the phone and from there I started calling him on Facebook and Facebook said that the last time he had connected was at five thirty, when we agreed that he was going to arrive here at my home at six. So I said well, okay, maybe he stayed over at a friend's, he left and went to visit a friend, I don't know. So I was worried but I thought okay he'll be back tomorrow. So I kept calling him and from there I realized that the time on Facebook, the time that he had connected last had not changed. By then 12 hours had passed. I called my mentors and told them that I felt something, that I had no

contact with my brother. I called other friends, my partner helped me look in other places, in hospitals. And I don't know, everything happened so quickly that I contacted a colleague, or a person who makes surveillance of the police so this girl helped me and we made a flyer that we were distributing. We put it on social media. A day had already passed and at precisely three, four hours I received a call. Well, three, four hours had already passed, sorry, and that's why I told my friend "I don't know what else to do" and a day has already passed and I told her I think I'm going to file a missing person's report . So when I decided to file the report I told other colleagues, other people that I did not feel comfortable going alone to the police station and they accompanied me. And when I filed my brother's report, the police told me that he had been arrested, that he had gone to the D.C. jail. and that I had to call the jail or call the court to get more information about him. And I asked why he was detained, and they told me that they could not give me or they could not share any of that information until I called. So I decided to call and they told me that they had sent him to an I.C.E. detention center. And well that happened. Even so, it took me about five days, almost a week to be able to communicate with him since he did not remember my phone number and finding him was also difficult because they had not taken his correct name so it also took a little time to find him. It took about two days until he was able to communicate with me, he told me what had happened. It was a lot. He was desperate, he was telling me what was going on, what he witnessed inside, the people he saw and I could hear the fear in his voice [01:25:00] when he told me these things. I don't know, it was difficult. After a month they transferred him and all this happened super fast. Not two months passed when they took him to Georgia when I had already found a lawyer, when we had already spoken with someone and given him a lawyer. He had already spoken with different people and precisely on the day of his court where he was going to appeal, they pulled him out of the Virginia detention center. He told me they took him out at two in the morning. They put him on the bus and sent him along with other people to Georgia. And what the lawyer told us is that when people are immediately removed one day before their appeal, it is a strategic way for I.C.E. so that people will give up and no longer appeal their deportation. So it was also difficult because it was a bigger detention center, the place was much farther away, the call costs were different, the costs to send him money were different where they took him. And he also decided that he was not going to fight his case because one of the issues is that it was going to take at least five months for him to have a kind of result and after being there for a month was driving him crazy. He said that they did not give them blankets, they turned on the air conditioning, or they did not have many changes of clothes, or they only had a little food and they woke them up super early to take showers and all that ... so it was difficult for us when he decided and to make that decision that it was best to return to Mexico.

DBN: And how did you feel about all this, and not only with your brother and the kind of inhumane treatment they were giving him but also with the thousands of people who were detained during the pandemic?

JMT: I felt super bad, I felt devastated with sadness and well also knowing that many of the people had been arrested. For example, I was able to move a little faster and find my brother, but knowing that other people were having a hard time finding their relatives who had been arrested was difficult to know. My brother told me that when I sent him money, he also shared with other people a little bit of what he had because other people could not receive that type of support or they did not have that support because they could not even find their family or their relatives could not find them. It was hard.

DBN: And in those moments where did you find hope? Hopes of maybe getting out of that situation or looking for a solution that gave you hope?

JMT: Well, to be able to get out of that situation, I think that to be able to ensure that he [01:30:00] came out of there, that he was no longer locked up.

DBN: So the hope for you was to find the fastest way out of that place?

JMT: Yes.

DBN: And once he got out, how was that transition from here to Mexico?

JMT: It was also a bit difficult because when he left it was also unexpected. When he left there, supposedly they had given him a deadline, they had given him one more week in the detention center. So when we talked, I said okay you have one more week, I'm going to send you money and so when you leave you'll arrive in Mexico with a few dollars or a few pesos and so you can move around. But when I sent the money it was like I don't know what happened but right when I had already sent the money, he stopped returning my calls and after three days I realized when he returned my calls that he was already in Mexico, that he had already arrived in Mexico without anything on him or any way to get there. So he had to travel with another person he knew, go to the other person's house in order to be able to meet up with my relatives.

DBN: And after all this that has happened with your brother and the pandemic, how do you feel, what vision do you have for the future?

JMT: Well, my brother was able to reintegrate there in Mexico. The situation in Mexico is also difficult with the pandemic so that is another thing that I don't know how he's dealing with. It was a bit difficult for him to reintegrate but he is already working but it was a little difficult to reintegrate. And on my end, the vision that I have ... the pandemic has also been difficult here or to be able to move forward. Since then, I feel much better now that I know that my brother is with my family but I still miss him because we had lived together the whole time until just this year that we did not and my vision is to be able to return one day to Mexico and see all of them

not only him but my other brothers and also continue with the vision that I have of becoming a teacher in Mexico, to be able to bring my knowledge that I gained here and take it and share it.

DBN: Thank you very much for everything you shared with us in these conversations. Do you have anything else you want to talk about from all of your experiences and what you've learned?

JMT: Well, I don't have much to talk about. Yes, I would like to talk a little more but I would like to do it at another time. Right now I think that's it. That would be all.

DBN: Well thank you very much.

JMT: You're welcome. Goodbye.

[End of interview] [01:34:27]