

Interview with Mateo Useche Rosania

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MF: [0:00] Hello everyone, my name is Maggie Froh and I'm here with Mateo Useche, a friend of mine from Macalester College. I'm going to be asking Mateo about his experience during the pandemic these last 12 to 15 months. So first, I'm just gonna let you read through this Oral History Agreement. And could you just sign your name here if you are comfortable with all of this? Thank you. Okay, so to start, can you just paint a picture of kind of what your life was like before the pandemic? Where were you located? Were you in school? And maybe just walk me through your daily routine.

MU: Okay. So before the pandemic, maybe this was probably a year before the pandemic. Maybe a year and a half or two, I was living in the US in a suburb of Boston. I was living there basically through most of high school, but then I moved back to Ecuador for my senior year of high school. That was 2019- 2020. That was basically the year that the pandemic started, so right before senior fall. That was the first couple of months that I was in Ecuador after being back. I was in Quito, which is the capital of Ecuador. I was finishing up high school in Ecuador. I was thrown in halfway through an International Baccalaureate curriculum when I hadn't taken International Baccalaureate classes before. In the US my school used to do AP. So it's sort of a big culture shock, just with the school but also with in terms of talking to my past friends I had before and then the interactions with teachers were completely different. Just basically, everything about it was completely different to what I had grown accustomed to in the US. So basically, my routine would be, I would wake up at 5:45 to 5:50. And then I would shower and then get breakfast. And then the bus would pick me up at 6:20. And so since inequity, the public school system is, is not ideal. So most, most kids that have the means to they probably go to a private school. I lived maybe 40-45 minutes away from my school. So that's why the bus had to pick us up so early. Because the commute was very long. So then I go to school, and then I have class until 2:45. And I started at seven. And then I did cross country and track in Lexington. But

I wanted to continue that in that quarter. But the track team was...the best way to explain is it was mostly kids that didn't really want to do physical activity, but their parents forced them to. So the program was not the best. I would still go to practice and practices were for 45 minutes. And then we'd have to then we go to the bus again at four. And then I'd probably get back to my house at 5:10 to 5:20 or something. And that was basically just my day. And then I also probably do work and have dinner with my family.

MF: [4:24] And then do you remember how you found out that COVID existed? Did your teachers warn you or did you hear it on the news or something?

MU: So actually at this point, I don't think it was called COVID. But I do remember one of my friends told me around December or November that she saw in the news that there was this weird virus coming from China. And I remember her telling me that she was very scared about what this could mean? And I I did not have that same reaction. I remember being like, oh it's okay. This thing is in China this is not gonna get to us, you know? So that was the first time I actually heard about it, but no one knew back then. So I, it's not it wasn't really the first time. The first time I actually heard about it and in the context of COVID and a pandemic was probably around early March. And I remember that. No, no, actually I think that back it was probably early February, late January. And I remember hearing that there were cases in the US. There were cases in, I think it was Brazil at that point. And all of us in Ecuador knew that COVID was a thing. But we were short of holding on to hope that it wasn't going to get to us because at least from what we were seeing it was taking a really long time for it to get to us so we were almost hoping that it just wouldn't ever get to us. I remember sometime in mid February, we heard on the news that there was the first case of COVID in Ecuador, but it was on the coast. So the coast is probably three or four hours away from where I live. So even then we were still separated by a lot. Then the mayor blockaded the coast from the Andes, which is in the middle part of Ecuador. Then he blockaded the region, from the coast in hopes of containing COVID. But back then, we didn't know how it was read or anything like that. We didn't have that many details. So even though he did that it eventually found its way. But our teacher didn't really know much more than we did. For all we knew we were gonna have a normal school year after a little bit.

MF: [7:34] Wow, that's really interesting. So getting back to the school year, do you remember when your school first closed? Did you think that it would be closed for a long period of time? Or did you think that you would be returning? And it was only going to be temporary?

MU: Yeah. So let's see. This was probably early or mid March. And I just remember that vacations were going up in that quarter. We're talking about it during passing time, some teachers would talk to us about it. And I remember my history teacher, this was even before it was the norm to have hand sanitizer everywhere. And he'd literally before we would walk in, he'd make us hand sanitize our hands and he would and then he'd be like, all right if you touch anything

you need hand sanitize. Because he was researching a lot about COVID. He was trying to be as careful as possible. But most teachers also didn't know that much. So I remember that just one day, I think it was, it was a Wednesday. That night, we get an email from the school and they were saying that we were going to stay home for the remainder of the week. So Thursday, Friday, so then most of us were just like okay this is really cool. This is great. We have a long weekend. And then I remember, I was just playing video games with my friends. And it was all okay. But then once like Sunday came, they sent another email, and they were like, we're gonna cancel school for at least two weeks. So then again, we still weren't that paranoid or anything. And we were like okay we two weeks. We'll be back in two weeks. Because it was our senior year and I think a lot of us were all like, okay yeah, we'll be back. We were hopeful that things were going to get back to normal. So, yeah, and then it was sort of once the two weeks happened then it wasn't a school decision, but it was sort of nation wide that the president was like, all right, we're not going to go back for at least a month. And then at that point, once they said a month, all of our teachers, because we'd talk to teachers, they'd all be say "Listen guys realistically we're not going to come back." Because they would also talk to the board of education in the government and basically yeah, it was, there was just no chance.

MF: [10:35] Do you remember how your friends were reacting at that time. Were they excited that school was going to be cancelled?

MU: Yeah. So a lot of my friends were very excited. Mostly because a lot of them had not done their work. So there are basically extensions. And a lot of them tried to organize parties, during, the weekend and stuff. And I'm pretty sure that they did. They did have a couple parties. But my, my parents, honestly I didn't really want to go, but also my parents were like they would not have let me go even if I asked. But yeah for the most part, I think most people thought it wasn't going to be as severe as it was and that and that we're going to go back to normal in like, very short amount of time.

MF: [11:46] And then did your courses continue online? They like? Did you? How did your teachers handle everything?

MU: Yeah. Online school was awful in Ecuador. And I think it was harder for me because I had friends in the US. So I sort of compared their experience with mine. And at least what it seemed to me was that, in the US, the teachers were a lot more understanding that there was a global pandemic going on. And that maybe it wasn't the best idea to have grades or tests, or stuff like that. I remember a bunch of my friends telling me that for the rest of the semester, they didn't get grades and it was pass/fail. So, yes I did hear from my friends that it was harder for them to stay motivated and do work. Because at the end of the day, all you have to do is pass. But from my perspective it was starting from March, the way my school handled it was we had, so I had maybe seven periods of classes every day. And my school decided that it would be a good idea to

basically carry out the same schedule that you would in person. So let's say I had Spanish, Math, and English in the morning. In class if I was in person, you know, classes are at 7:45 and then I'd have a 50 to 55 minute chunk of math. And then I'd have five minutes and then I go to Spanish and then 55 minute class then five minutes to get to English. So we did the exact same thing. But you were looking at a screen. So it was a synchronous zoom call for 55 minutes, and you got a five minute break. And 55 minutes, five minute break. So you were basically, looking at a screen for like seven to eight hours a day. And that was just class, because then you would still get homework. So you were really looking at 12-13 hours of looking at a screen per day. And we did that from March all the way to June. So online school was very rough for me, especially because at least my from my experience since they weren't going to cancel grades, my grades still mattered, especially because I was applying regular decision for a bunch of my college applications and I was still on the waitlist and stuff and at that point I got to know but I was eventually gonna get waitlisted, so I had to make sure that I kept up, good grades. But at the same time, it was so hard because, you know you're looking at a screen for so long. And then the government required the schools to still give you tests and stuff. So we would have tests where they would video Proctor us and then we'd have assignments. And then part of our grade was attendance. So you would have to take attendance, they would do that every day for all your classes. So it wasn't that you get scared, because if you skipped, that would reflect your discipline grade, and then also your actual grade. You really had to be there from seven to three every day on computer. So it was definitely very stressful. I honestly thought classes were harder online than in person, I was struggling a lot more and I had to do a lot more work online.

MF: [16:11] Wow, that sounds really challenging. And then during this period, What was that first month of isolation, for you? Or the first couple months? Did you isolate with your family? How did that go?

MU: Yeah, so I have two siblings, but they live in the US. So in that quarter, it was just my parents and I. So just the three of us in our house. And the way living works in Quito is sort of an apartment complex except with houses. And then you have walls surrounding all the houses. And it's sort of a compound or something. And then you have a guard that looks over the entrance of a pedestrian entrance or the car entrance. That is just for safety, so no one really comes into steal or anything. So, because of that, we were very much confined to our house. And I remember that I didn't leave my house until July. So I was in my house from March to July, I didn't step outside for a while. And the only person that would go out was my dad. And he would go out every two weeks or something to buy groceries. And then I remember I was at that point. The information about COVID wasn't the best. So we didn't know that touch is not not really the main worry in spreading COVID so I remember, my mom would make my dad basically, take off all his clothes as soon as he got to, the front door and then my mom would put all that into the laundry room and then my dad would run upstairs and take a shower. So basically every time someone left the house, we had to have this whole procedure where you weren't allowed to touch

anything. You'd take off all your clothes and you sprint to the shower. And then once you shower it then you can interact with the rest of the house. We would do the same thing with our phones. If you took your phone outside, then you have to sanitize it and these are like preventative measures. Honestly the first month it was honestly kind of nice. Besides school being really challenging. I really enjoyed just you know, not having to deal with all the I don't know not drama, but like I don't know just the same routine of school. I guess I just found a little more comfort in staying home and actually going to school. I would play video games with my friends any time I was free. So that was definitely a plus that I enjoyed. But yeah the tough part was with running I couldn't really run. So I think the first month, I tried to pick up , what's it called, jump rope. I started off doing it based on time. I guess I would count my jumps. But then you know that you would start with 1000. And you'd work yourself up to 10,000. Then I would just do that and be like, alright well, hopefully this is better than no cardio. But yeah, that was basically my first couple months.

MF: [20:41] And then you kind of talked about this earlier, but I know at the time you had siblings and close friends in the United States. In general, did you notice differences in how COVID was being handled in Ecuador versus the United States?

MU: Yeah, I remember. In retrospect, probably jealous is not the word I should probably use. But at that point, I was, I was jealous. I was very jealous. Because I remember, hearing that my friends were able to run outside. And especially with me wanting to run in college. I knew that I had to be in good shape, over the summer and spring. So all of my friends were training really hard, as you should. But I couldn't. Because there was a full blown lockdown in Ecuador. So if you went out, the only reason you could go out was for essentials. It was medical needs or food. You couldn't exactly walk out and go for a run every day. The police would literally find you and you'd go to jail. So I was very upset about that. I was upset about life. Because my situation was so different from others. And then that was just with running, but I could also knew my friends would see each other socially distanced with a mask. I couldn't even do that. I was in my house alone with my parents for six-seven months. And I didn't really see anyone outside my family.

MF: [22:43] Do you think your relationships with your friends and family that you weren't living with changed during that period? Because you weren't seeing them everyday?

MU: I think I actually would have to say they didn't change that much. Since I moved to Ecuador, my senior year, I got pretty good at doing FaceTime calls and texting and just calling my friends whenever we wanted to be involved in each other's lives. So I think that extra eight months that I got a headstart from everyone else really helped me. Because it was sort of people were basically just trying to figure out how to deal with that. How to get used to sort of doing long distance with all your friends. And I had already gotten a good idea of how to do that. So I think most of my friendships stayed the same. If anything, I was able to talk to them more

because now, they were also more available. I do think one thing that I did change was that with my sister, I hadn't really talked to her the entire time I was in Ecuador, my senior year, because we just had different schedules. But once quarantine started and I had all this free time. I remember that my sister one day she asked me if I could do yoga with her because she got this Nike Free Trial. I don't know, 15 minute yoga session or whatever. So we would facetime and then we did the 15 minute yoga video and I was like, alright, this is okay. Do you want to do this tomorrow? So then. We started doing it three or four times a week. And then by the next week, we were actually as soon as every day, so then we basically just started sort of discovering videos and channels. We started to look into meditation. And that, that really made my relationship with my sister a lot better than it was because I felt like I had been so distant from her. In that quarter, but then I was literally calling her every day, and we would do yoga. And then we talked for 20 minutes afterwards. That was probably the most involved I've been with my siblings, like ever. And we did that for eight months. So it was a big chunk where we were really involved with each other.

MF: [25:56]

That's really cute. So you talked about yoga. And I know that running is often a way to relieve stress and anxiety, especially during a period like this. When you weren't able to run outside, Did you find anything else that helped you navigate this difficult period?

MU: Yeah. So I think I tried a bunch of things. Let's see.. Probably the main one I would say is yoga, I would do that everyday with my sister. A lot of times when people think of yoga they think it's just stretching. And that's how I thought about it too. But then the more I did it, the more I realized that there are these different types of yoga. And then a lot of them are really challenging. The more you do it, the more you can experience with different poses that are more and more difficult. So I remember my sister and I tried doing a headstand for the first time. And then we would try to do it and do it. And then we would with the wall first. And then after a week or two, we both could hold the headstand for minutes at a time. And then once we got the headstand down, I was like okay I want to try a handstand. So then we would slowly start showing progress. We would do all these different 15 minute videos, and we were doing 60-70 minutes. It was great because you just a big part of yoga is focusing on your breath, and focusing on the present. So you don't think about everything that's going on around the world. Everything that could happen, or everything that has happened. You forget about all of that and just focus on how your breath is going in and out. So it really grounds you. And then that sort of led my sister and I once we started getting into the breathing part of yoga, we also started meditating. We will start with five to ten minutes. We would do it after our yoga sessions. And then we'd do guided meditation. That just helped us with staying focused and grounded. Yoga definitely helped especially because I couldn't run, because I remember back when the pandemic was in the thick of it. If I was ever stressed or angry or I just needed to blow off some steam, I'd go on a run. And it always seemed like the angrier I was, the faster that would go. Because I just

wanted to forget about everything. And when you run I feel like that's what happens a lot of the time. Where you're just so focused on moving forward and sort of like if you're in pain you're so focused on that actual pain of running that you forget about everything that was bothering you before. So when I didn't have that outlet, I had to go into other things. So I went to yoga. As I mentioned before, I wanted to jump rope. That whole experience was fun except I would hit myself with the wire a lot. But same thing with progression, I put on some music, I listened to so much music and I would jump rope and then I really got into working out. So I'd do a bunch of body weights. I really got into doing pull ups then I didn't have anyone to play spikeball with but I would to set up my spike ball net and I practiced my serves or something. I was just trying to do anything to keep myself busy. I also, made an effort to cook with my mom. So I would cook lunch for my parents every day. And we would just experiment with different recipes. I remember by May or June, we knew how to make dumplings from scratch, I'd make the pizza dough from scratch. And yeah, we just completely changed our lifestyle.

MF: [30:39] Wow, that was really cool. And then what part of the pandemic would you say was the hardest for you? Was it the beginning? When everything was shutting down and kind of becoming real? Or was it the transition to college, or those summer months?

MU: I think the hardest part for me was actually the ending of summer, I think almost going into college. And that was just because, I could see all my friends going to college, and all of them would go into college in person. Or even if they weren't in person, they were doing online school. But they were in a country that allowed them to go outside and see their friends. So it was, it was very challenging from August to September, when the pandemic had been going on for a little bit. And seeing the snapchat and instagram stories of my friends, you know, hanging out together. And then I was just, you know, in my house, alone. And then at that point, what March, April, May, June, that was six months already, of being in my house for a while without seeing anyone besides my parents. So that was probably the hardest because I wanted to go to college so badly. For a really long time. I wasn't even sure if I was going to go to college. And then once I finally got in. I was so excited to go to college. And then I remember that I couldn't plan. As soon as I got in was like , Okay, I'm gonna go to college in August. But then all the embassies were closed. So then I couldn't get a student visa. So then I couldn't attend college in person. You know, that's what I really, really wanted. So that was a very big blow. And I remember I would ask, my dad if he knew or if he had any contacts that could tell them or could help them find a way to give me a visa. And my dad was just like, no, it's closed. The US Embassy said it's indefinitely closed for a really long time. So then it was, it was almost like I had hope to go to college. And then it was taken away because of visas. So then I sort of came to terms with the fact that I would have to do the first module online. And that was okay. I sort of had my routine down with school and playing video games and stuff. And doing work but it wasn't ideal. And then it was just a whole process of me having to go to a different city to get my visa. I got to fly out and do the US interview for the visa. But yeah it was definitely that period.

It was probably August- September. Those were the hardest months and hardest part of the pandemic because then then at that point it was almost the final stretch. I was in October I'll be in college, I'll be at Macalester. So it was easier to see that then. But in August, I was really feeling hopeless.

MF: [34:41]

So then you moved to Macalester and you're living in the dorms at this point. Was it hard to form relationships with your peers and professors at Macalester?

MU: Because I was part of a team it was, it was nice to have that sort of security blanket, where I knew, if I didn't want to eat alone, there was a good group of people that I can count on to eat with. But it was really hard to actually make those connections because I feel I was behind, I was like two months behind everyone else. And I feel like everyone already went through that stage where everyone was introducing themselves, I'd been really nice and extroverted and trying to find that group. And by the time I got here, I felt like everyone had already had their pods and everything. And I was just sort of trying to play catch up. And it also didn't help that, I was taking a night class then. So then my schedule was very different from the rest of my peers. But I would definitely say having the team helped me out a lot in, in creating these relationships. And then it was, it was sort of like I relied a lot on my friends from back home. I would FaceTime them a lot. And then I would also try to make an effort with the people here and get to know them more. But I really don't think that that really started picking up until the next semester once I was feeling a little more acclimated and I was finally starting to meet more people.

MF: [36:43] And were you surprised with the precautions that Macalester was having students and staff take?

MU: Yeah yeah, no, I think I understand. I was not honestly, coming from a place that was so restrictive, Macalester seemed almost like paradise. Obviously, yeah, there were a lot of precautions. And it was very state by state, but to me it felt like I had so much more liberty. The fact that, I don't know, I could go on runs with people, or I could go out and get takeout or something like that. Restaurants didn't really open in Quito until late summer even early fall. And then even then, no one was really ordering because everyone was scared. So then once I got here, I was like, Oh wait, you're telling me I can be inside with people in the library or something with masks on and do work and not have to be confined to my room all the time. I definitely did not see it as restrictive or surprising. I was like you know this makes sense. It's totally okay. But yeah, I'm sure I have a very different perspective compared to what other people might say.

MF: [38:24] Yeah. Do you think because things were a lot looser, and rules were a lot more loose? Do you think your overall anxiety towards COVID got worse after moving to campus, or your parents anxiety, about COVID

MU: I actually felt a lot more safe in terms of COVID here than I did in Ecuador. Because in Ecuador, the health care system is not ideal. It's sort of the closest thing I could compare it to the way it works in the US. I guess to put it crudely, it's like you need to pay to get access to health care and good doctors. So in that Ecuador, it's sort of the same thing. Where you have to pay because basically their health care system was molded by the US and their whole policies back in the 20 century. So Ecuador has a very similar way of setting up their healthcare system. But the difference is that even if you can pay for the actual medicine and doctors, they're not very good. My parents would always tell me, we'd rather you get COVID in the US. Because the chances of surviving COVID are a lot higher if you got it in the US. And so, I also felt like I was sort of in the Mac bubble. And I felt like people here were very safe. I would hear other universities already shutting down, and you know, throwing parties, and everyone getting infected. That just was not the case here. I would tell my parents, yeah, no people here are actually very careful. And it just, it gave me sort of a sense of safety and relief. Yes, okay, we have to be very careful and here are a lot of restrictions, but at the same time we are in a bubble where even if you did go back to your house over break, you can see the differences. It's like oh, you can't see your friends inside. You always had to be outside. I honestly felt safer at Macalester.

MF: [41:17] Do you think your overall mental health is better now that you're surrounded by people all the time?

MU: Yes, I definitely do think so. Because I think it's not so much like, okay, yes, people are definitely a big factor. It felt to me that in Ecuador everything I sorta valued or that made me happy, was sort of taken away. And I had to completely readjust and try to, find other ways to bring me happiness. And different coping mechanisms, even if you didn't fight with your parents, usually when you needed a break from your parents you could usually just go outside, go for a walk, hang out with your friends. I was in constant interaction with my parents. It seems like an exaggeration, but I literally didn't see anyone besides my parents for eight months. I was within four walls of my parents for eight months really. We didn't see anyone else, we didn't really go out. So my mental health was not in a good place. I remember not being motivated to do anything. That's what I didn't really run for two or three months or even try to run later on. I tried running in one of those compounds but that took me three months of not doing anything related to running because I just couldn't find that motivation to do stuff like that. It was really tough. Because whether it was running or seeing my friends or just having any sort of outlets, it was just like not there. So it almost made me go into survival mode or acceptance mode. It was almost saying that if terrible news happened, I was just numb to it. So I would be like, okay, yeah, this happened. It's terrible. All right, let's move on. You know, you whatever. But then at

the same time, if something good happened where I should be happy, I wouldn't even allow myself to be happy. I just take everything. Sure, like very factually based and was I this happened cool, let's just keep moving forward. And I didn't allow myself to enjoy things or feel things as much.

MF: [44:29] That sounds really hard, I'm sorry to hear that. And then I just wanted to close by kind of talking about the new stage of the pandemic that we're in. Have you been vaccinated? Or do you plan on getting vaccinated?

MU: Yeah, I have been, I'm fully vaccinated.

MF: And has your daily life changed? Now that things are opening up?

MU: To be honest, I don't think they've changed that much. Because I don't think I've changed my routine. I've heard from November to how it is now, I think, you know, we're all still pretty much doing the exact same things we were doing in sort of the Mac bubble. The only thing is just the introduction to actual track meets and stuff. And the different COVID restrictions, which have been really nice. So I think that's probably the main way that my life has changed now with this new stage that we're entering. So I'm just excited to see how the summer unfolds and what it brings. And then even how the fall is going to look.

MF: Yeah, yeah, so you were touching on the fall. How are you feeling about next school year? Do you think things will look different COVID wise?

MU: Honestly, I'm not sure. I think we're doing in person. I think that's the plan. And honestly that just makes me a little stressed. Because I feel like we've been doing online school for so long. And having to take a timed exam in person without open notes or anything like that that we get now just seems very daunting. But I'm sure we'll all get used to it eventually. But yeah, sort of the only thing that's really worrying me right now. about the fall, because I feel like besides that, hopefully, there'll be less restrictions, and it'll be sort of more return to the new normal.

MF: And then just summing things up. Is there anything that you learn from these past 12 to 15 months, that you had not really thought about before? Or do you feel like your views on anything have changed?

MU: Yeah. So I think I was touching on this a little bit before, but when I was very unmotivated I wasn't really seeing the good things that can happen out of things, I was just focusing on getting through, and how everything was going wrong. So after you know these 12-13 months I think, if anything, it has helped us. It has given us a lot of time with ourselves. And a lot of time to self reflect and just look at ourselves, and just think about what we what we want to change. And I

think personally I just think that the way that I was thinking about it was why did this happen to me? All my friends are doing this, why why am I the only one that's feeling this? So sort of changing this narrative of playing the victim. Really taking charge and changing that and seeing how okay, yes, this is going on, but being grateful for all the things that you do have. And that's something I'm actively working on right now. I'm seeing how privileged and how thankful I am to have all these opportunities. Even despite the fact that there are a lot of bad things going on right now. Focusing on those things that you are thankful for.

MF: Yeah, for sure. That was very well said. Alrighty, thanks so much for sharing your experiences with me! That is all the questions that I have for you today.