

Interview with Ana Espeleta

Maggie Froh, Interviewer

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DeWitt Wallace Library

MF: [0:01] Hello everyone, my name is Maggie Froh and I'm here with Ana, a friend of mine from Macalester College. I'm going to be asking her about her 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're comfortable with all of this? Thank you. Okay, to start, can you just paint me a picture of what your life looked like before the pandemic? Just where were you located? Were you in school? Or even just walk me through your daily routine?

AE: Yeah, sure. Back in March 2020, I had already graduated high school because our calendar runs the opposite. I started my senior year in February and ended in November. And then I had my whole summer break. And I had planned to before coming here to Macalester, I wanted to enroll at the University of Costa Rica to take a few courses. And so around March is when classes started there. And it was literally the week of my first day of college, there, and it was in person. I had my orientation kind of day. And I think I had like, one more day in person. And then everything got shut down and we all got sent home. It was kind of set in, I guess for everyone it was. But yeah, I guess my daily routine wasn't really set up yet. I would take the bus and then just come back after to my house.

MF: Do you remember how you found out that COVID existed? Was it right around the time that your school was closing? Or did your teachers warn you before? Or did you hear it in the news?

AE: I remember hearing about COVID first in January, I just heard stuff about China and how they had this virus that was taking over their whole country. And I was like, oh, more fake news or whatever. That sounds so bad. But yeah, I was like, Oh, yeah. It was around the time when there were wildfires in Australia. That was really bad, too. So lot's of other things were happening, and I wasn't super worried at all. And then, I guess I found out it was more serious.

Yeah, when everything got shut down. And even still, I was like, No, this cannot be that bad. Costa Rica did not have a case until a month later. So it seemed like it was not real at all. But yeah, that's how I first heard it.

MF: [3:27] Yeah and then you mentioned some of the actions that were taken when your school was closing. 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 temporary?

AE: So if I remember correctly, I think when we got sent home classes were suspended, completely nothing online because they didn't have anything online. And some of the students it's a really big school. So some of the students don't even have access to Wi Fi, or computers much less. So they suspended it for about a month until I think it was Yeah, it was like around mid April after Holy Week, which is a big holiday break for us. And yeah, then we just like, slowly went back into it. I had, yeah, basically all of my classes condensed into like, two to three months. And completely online on zoom. Of course. And yeah, it was it was weird.

MF: Do you remember how your friends and family reacted when your school was closed? Just when things were shutting down?

AE: Yeah. So my mom's a teacher and she got sent home around the time right around The time I got sent home. So she was pretty anxious, she was really nervous because teaching kids is hard enough in person. The school was already going through a lot. It's a private school, they were already going through a lot of financial issues. And so the shutting down was just like, on top of that terrible. So my mom is really nervous. And my dad is currently and was back then unemployed. So he was cool with it. He was very invested in the whole science part of it. So every single day he'd update us on information he got. And yeah, a lot of statistical analysis, which I did not really understand. But very important, very useful things.

MF: And then you said your courses did continue online? How was that? And how did your teachers handle everything?

AE: Yeah so I was taking computer science courses, I was taking an introductory course, just general computer science and a math course. So they were both very content heavy. And honestly, I don't think they handled it really well. I couldn't judge compared to in person classes, because I only have them once. But yeah, it was super impersonal. The classes were huge. It was at least 50 people on the zoom call. And asking questions was hard. Understanding the material. It's hard, no office hours, basically. And still, exams every two weeks or something. And a lot of the students and I did not meet many of them. But with a few that I did speak to they were also feeling the same way. So yeah, generally not good.

MF: [7:28] Yeah. And then at the time, were you isolating with your family? or others? And how did that go?

AE: Yeah, so my family is basically my parents, my grandma, and my brother who actually lives here in the US. He came back right before the borders closed, because Costa Rica did close their borders. My brother came back and he decided to quarantine with us. So yeah, and we live in my grandma's house. So we were definitely isolated completely because we did not want to put her at risk.

MF: And then did you pick up any new hobbies or activities during this period in quarantine?

AE: Probably not. [Laughter] I mean, I really baking and I always have but I just did it a little bit more, because there was just that much time. We also so the gyms closed Of course. So my family and I kind of set up a gym in our backyard. And we had a cycling bicycle. And we do routines and things every single day we mix it up. And I guess that was I mean, it's not a hobby, but it was our form of entertainment for the day. Try to not go crazy. Yeah, yeah, for sure. And then how did you stay connected with your friends and family that didn't live with you? Um, so yeah, basically FaceTime um, every so often. My other grandma and my extended family. We did not see even after I just left for college. I literally just saw them back when I went for winter break this past few months. Yeah, that's the last time I saw them. Yeah, they were Costa Rica was super strict, like, as long as I was there. So yeah, I did not see anybody basically in person. It was hard.

MF: [10:15]

Yeah, yeah. Um, do you think that your relationships with your friends and family changed during this time?

AE: Yeah, for sure. Especially. I mean, yeah, in high school, you see everybody every single day, like, it's a lot of interacting time. And like, I'm a person that interacts with people, like, in person a lot more than through texting, or through like, FaceTime or anything, I'm not good at setting up and being super intentional about my relationships, which is not great, especially during this time. So yeah, a lot of the relationships I had back in high school just kind of faded away, I'd say. And then, in terms of family. I'm not super close to my extended family. I'm the youngest. I'm in another life stage as most of my cousins and other family members. But like, in terms of my family that I lived with, I probably feel like I got a lot closer to my brother. And like, I haven't seen him in a really long time. So it was really good. And then my parents, yeah. They're pretty cool. [laughter]

MF: I know, you also had friends living in the United States. In general, did you notice any differences with how COVID was being handled in Costa Rica versus in the United States?

AE: So I remember one friend who lives in California. And California was crazy for a long time. Yeah. And I yeah, it was for most of the time. So I was always like, super proud to like, talk about Costa Rica, and how we handled everything over there. Because they were super quick to put restrictions in place. And people were really good at following them. Like, you see everyone outside, even outside, like, wherever you see people walking by themselves in their car wearing a mask. They do not care if they're social distancing, or whatever, they would wear

the mask. And yeah, I would like to flaunt this ideal at them until I guess, more recently, the tables have turned. And now the US has been able to buy all these vaccines and people are starting to vaccinate and history goes not. We were barely able to vaccinate the population 65 and over. So that hasn't been super efficient for reaching herd immunity, which is still something we're trying to get here. And we're not even close in Costa Rica. And the restrictions are lifted, people started relaxing and going to parties and the younger population especially is just not super conscious about it. So yeah. Now it seems it's the other way around.

MF: [13:40] Interesting. Yeah. So have your parents and grandparents been vaccinated?

AE: So my grandma did. She actually had a really bad reaction to Pfizer.

MF: Oh no!

AE: I think it was the second shot. And she had to get checked out by a neurologist. So we got a little scared about that. But now she's doing she's kind of getting better. But it really did, hit her. And then my mom unfortunately, has not been given permission to vaccinate yet. Even though she is the teacher and she needs it so bad because they have been going in person now. And they've been doing this whole system where they go two weeks in person, two weeks online. Which is supposedly better for controlling, contact tracing, and everything. But yeah, she's not vaccinated but then neither have most of the kids or parents in the school. So no, my mom has not and my dad of course hasn't either. So yeah, I'd be the only person and my brother did get vaccinated. So that's good.

MF: Your brother is in the United States?

AE: Yeah, he did get his vaccine at his school. So kind of the same as me.

MF: Yeah. And then I just have a couple questions, and they might trigger certain emotions. So if you don't feel comfortable answering that, it's totally fine. First, I just want to talk a little bit about mental health. And how did you cope with mental health during this time of extreme isolation?

AE: So interestingly, I feel like this is not the case for most people. But coming from high school I did not have the best mental health in high school. I would just classify it like that. So I feel like I really needed that time to just like, go back to my roots and reset myself before college, it kind of came at the right time. If there was a time that this had to happen. I feel like, for me, it came up the ideal time. And I, yeah, it was hard. It was definitely like, the monotone kind of every single day, the same thing. You see the same people, you talk about the same things. That definitely takes a toll on your, like, overall motivation to do things. But I feel like I'm keeping in mind that I was going to college soon. And this was going to be over at some point. definitely helped me. And if it was very different, I'm sure for a lot of people that weren't moving out of their house in a few months, or, like, moving countries in a few months. So yeah, I feel like my mental health was not at its worst during COVID and are in quarantine.

MF: [16:53] Yeah. And then did you experience any grief or loss during isolation? Or have any close friends or family that did? And then if you're comfortable? Could you just like, tell me a bit about your experience?

AE: Um, so no, I actually didn't even know anybody who had gotten COVID until pretty recently.

MF: Oh, wow.

AE: Which is weird. Um, and no, I actually have not had a loss or anybody that I know really who has died from COVID.

MF: So when you were in Costa Rica, you didn't know of a single person that had COVID?

AE: No, not not until I was here. I had heard like, my parents talk about some people that we know, like, random people scattered throughout the country. They just mentioned Oh, yeah, this person has COVID or whatever. But no, I know, never.

MF: Interesting. 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 just becoming so real? Or was it that transition to college, or those summer months?

AE: Um, let's see. I feel the hardest. Yeah, I feel like the hardest for me came either when I moved, and I couldn't move in with my parents, and everyone else had their parents here. And it was this whole celebration of like, I'm going to college. Even though I did have my brother, my brother did come for a little bit to drop me off. I guess that part was a little lonely, kind of like, melancholic, I guess, in a way. And then also by like, after November, when everybody left after Thanksgiving. That was pretty lonely. My roommate left for a while. And she left earlier before the module even ended. So I feel like that was probably kind of like, the hardest part because we just weren't sure what to expect, the vaccines weren't actually out yet. And COVID was kind of getting worse in a way. There was the second wave. So I think that was probably the hardest for me. Yeah, it was just winter and general. Fatigue of school.

MF: [19:45] Yeah, yeah, for sure. And then, as an international student moving to Macalester for school, there are a lot of unknowns about what your next fall would look like. And can you just kind of tell me about that transition to college?

AE: Um, so yeah, I did not get to move in with my parents. So, actually, I, I had this mentality that I was gonna buy everything I needed for college once I was here in the US, and it ended up not happening, I stayed with some really close family friends. And I was like, a little too scared to like, make them go on so many different trips to buy everything I needed. So honestly, I probably bought half of what I needed. And I was living the first few months of like, the same thing. But now, yeah, eventually, I just got used to it. And I went back home and got everything else I needed. But yeah, it was. I felt like it was a lot of like an adventure feeling I was just

conquering this new thing. And yeah, it felt kind of heroic and not not heroic, but like, Yeah, I was, I was going off in an adventure. And I got to tell my parents all about this new cool place I was looking at and people I got to meet, and yeah, it wasn't, I didn't have much time to sit down and process at all, just because like, as you know, it was so fast. And the classes were so at the beginning, especially like, it was very overwhelming. So I, I was stressed. Yes, but I wasn't super anxious about the future, because I just couldn't think about the future. There was not enough time for that.

MF: Do you remember what you were thinking before moving to Macalester?

AE: Um, yeah, I was. I was generally very excited. I knew I was coming to a place where I would find a lot of people like me, and in like, similar situations. I had that idea. But I, once I actually started meeting people, I was like, wow, this is real. I am meeting people that are a lot like me. And yeah, it was. Yeah, it was a little nerve wracking. I guess I was entering a team that I didn't get recruited into I like, reached out to the coach to join. So I was like, Oh, I was a little nervous about that. I didn't know like, if I was going to be good enough, or if the team would like, welcome me as an international student. I also didn't know if there were going to be other international students on the team. Probably questions I could have asked, and didn't ask. But yeah, that's probably what I was thinking.

MF: [23:08] Were you surprised with the COVID precautions that McAllister was having students and staff take.

AE: I wasn't super surprised coming from Costa Rica, when we had those crazy restrictions at the beginning. At some point, it felt kind of like a lot. And like, I didn't really leave my house at all. And so I was not used to wearing a mask at all. When I was living here with my host family, I would walk outside without a mask. I'd go on walks without a mask, I'd go on runs all the time. So I just wasn't used to wearing a mask. And yeah, coming here, it was like, Whoa, yeah, we really do have to wear masks even to the bathroom. Which now it seems like wow, I cannot even fathom not wearing my mask to the bathroom. But yeah, and the COVID testing. I feel like at the beginning, it was even less than it is now or that it has been in the past few months. So it wasn't super overwhelming. And yeah, at some point, I had first met I had, one in person class. So I guess that was moving pretty fast. But yeah, I think I think they did have a lot of restrictions, but they weren't necessary considering how bad it was. And how little we knew.

MF: Yeah, And was it hard to build friendships while obeying all of these COVID rules?

AE: Yeah. So for us, especially, that we're on the cross country team. We got put into a dorm with only athletes. Although they're all Macalester students, and they're like, I'm sure, great people, there's less diversity there. And for me as an international student, I guess it was hard to find, like, people that are also coming, in a similar background situation, who also were leaving their family couldn't see them for COVID reasons. But yeah, I guess building friendships in general over zoom is, oh, different. Like, I can't think of really any friendship I made over zoom at the top of my head. I really can't. Yeah, which is kind of sad. But yeah, and eventually,

when I did start having in person classes, I did meet some people, and those were the people that became my friends. So in general, I can correlate how, how I made the friendships, which was in person. And, yeah, I guess, having to have a strict pod can be also intimidating for other people to approach or leave a pod or all of that is just so much the dynamics, and like complexity, and social relations that has yet to be studied. Well, we still don't really know what the exact implications of that were.

MF: [26:53] Yeah. And then do you feel like you are really a part of the Macalester community or not yet? Because this year was just so different from a normal year? You kind of touched on this already...

AE: Yeah. We don't really know what it is like to be part of the Macalester community like I tried to think of how we feel on our team. And I feel like that kind of relates a little bit to how we feel in general, as being part of the school, I guess, and how, like, I know, I belong there. And I know I really like, like, the structure and everything we do, but I just don't know, the people who are involved. And yeah, so it's hard to know what the Macalester community really is when right now it's just a bunch of first years who are all trying to figure out what they're doing. But yeah, for sure, Macalester is still made up of all the people who come together from so many different places. And I feel the first years can do that, regardless of like, knowing who the other people are to. So in a way, yeah, I do feel a part of the larger community.

MF: And then I just wanted to close by talking about kind of this new stage of the pandemic that we're in. I was gonna ask, have you been vaccinated? Or do you plan on getting vaccinated?

AE: I get to flex my vaccine.

MF: [28:27]

[laughter]

And then, has your daily life changed at all now that things are kind of opening up?

AE: Not yet, I feel like they will soon. Yeah, well, soon. We got to compete with that. And that looks so weird. But yeah, I I'm hoping it will change a lot of things. I haven't yet but it's coming.

MF: And then kind of what do you hope happens these next few months?

AE: Yeah, part of me just wants everything to be normal again. Like, forget everything that happened. And try to start off again. But at the same time, it kind of like, gives me a little bit of anxiety to go back to normal. There is this part of me that fears that professors, for example, in the academic environment, professors won't be as understanding or as flexible, as compassionate as they have been for the past year. And that, there won't be any excuse if I, I don't know, can't turn it paper in on time. And they'll just be like, well, this is what other years were like. Yeah, just turn it in. Um, and yeah, and then there's competitions a lot more. You have

to schedule everything. So yeah, even though I'm really excited. It's also, as always, there's implications. And that's one of them.

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

AE: I feel like I've just gone through so many different stages in this past year, that Yeah, of course, I just learned so many new things like coming to college, in a normal years already. So much information and so many social relationships going on. Yeah, I definitely learned I mean, living with another person in a dorm. That's, that's something you learn I had never lived with, like, someone that's not my family before. So that is something I cherish a lot. And, of course, something that will carry throughout my life. And also, finding out things about myself. How I need my alone time, but also, like, it's so unnecessary to like, leave time in your day to just like, eat with other people at least or Yeah, just have fun. relax a little, even if you have so much work. But yeah, that's one of the main things that I've taken. Yeah.

MF: [31:46] Yeah, Awesome. Thank you so much for letting me interview you this afternoon Ana!