

Interview with Paul Cosme
Corgan Archuleta, Interviewer
May 1, 2021
St Paul, Minnesota (Interviewee and Interviewer)
Conducted via Zoom

[0:00] C.A.

This is Corgan Archuleta here with Paul Cosme. Thank you so much for joining me Paul. Today is May 1st, 2021. The time is 2:38 PM and today's recording will be transcribed and submitted to the Macalester College Archives. Paul, first could you just kind of tell me a little bit about yourself such as your background, and maybe just a bit about you as a student at Macalester?

P.C.

Yeah, I'm a junior, I'm in the class of 22' and I major in International Studies and music. I minor in economics, and I focus on critical theory. Generally speaking, those labels don't really mean anything to me in terms of how I am as a student. I mostly view myself as a student of culture, of music and of composition, so that's mostly my thing here at Macalester as a student.

P.C.

I also call Quezon City in the Philippines my home.

P.C.

I guess those are the salient things that I think about when I have to describe myself.

C.A.

Yeah, I'm really interested to hear about your experience especially as an international student here at Macalester. To start, I was wondering about your student life or kind of your average day before the Covid pandemic?

P.C.

Well, before it was just similar to everyone else. I mean you wake up, you go to classes and you do your homework. There's really no variation from your typical student, whether it be your regular domestic student or your international student. I might have more workload than others due to the nature of my field, a lot of papers you have to write, a lot of readings you have to do, and generally as a cultural organization leader, or as a person who is engaging with cultural orgs

with the DML [Department of Multicultural Life], of course I just have that stuff happening. But I really don't think that being an international student makes it any more special... your daily experiences here at Macalester.

[2:42] P.C.

Of course, the lens of how you view student life might be different. For example, certain habits inside the classroom. You just see certain differences with how you do it from back home.

P.C.

The thing is, I'm not really alien to that type of idea because I did school in Germany, so there's really no such thing for me as something that is unique... a unique experience just because I am an international student

C.A.

And I also know that you were living on campus your sophomore year. I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about that. Where were you living and then also how that may have changed as the Covid pandemic shut down schools?

P.C.

All freshmen and sophomores have to live on campus during that time, but I lived in the cultural house, so it's a type of specialty housing at Macalester where we have to face a certain amount of focus and engagement with the values of internationalism and multiculturalism. At least that's how the mission works in terms of the C House [Cultural House].

P.C.

When I was living there, I have to be honest, it's not much different than when I was living as a freshman. Perhaps because as a freshman, I was already involved with those things, but if there's one thing that I do appreciate living in there is that it's a locus for many cultural events on campus. Many cultural orgs booked the house because it is also a space for cultural orgs to host their things. It has a big kitchen, a big multipurpose room on the first floor where all these events happen. I think that's the most important part of me living in the house...you get to see all the cultural orgs do their stuff in real time because you live there.

P.C.

As opposition to me as a freshman where I lived in Turck, I didn't see all these preparations happening because we don't share the same kitchen. The residents of the C House [Cultural House] share the same kitchen as the cultural orgs when they have events. And of course, we're primed when they are going to have these events. It's all coordinated, but it's just useful to be close with them in that sense, but you can only really get close to them if you want to because there are people inside the C House [Cultural House] who may choose not to engage with their cultural origin and that's also fine.

[5:43] P.C.

It's all about how I want to shape my living situation before Covid. In which areas do I want to pour my energies and where do I want to invest these things? That's what's more important.

C.A.

And were you still in the Cultural House once a lot of Mac students went home due to Covid? Did you return home? What was your living situation during that time that schools started to shut down and everything?

P.C.

Yeah, so it had to be the C House. Of course, I stayed there for the first half of the spring semester and when they announced it, that students will be going into a longer period of spring break, many of my friends and I stayed in the C House [Cultural House] and then slowly many of them went home because they are domestic students and I stayed inside alone at the C House [Cultural House].

P.C.

I really liked it...being alone in the C House [Cultural House] because it was just me. Although it's eerie to some extent because it's such a huge house. But there are also... sometimes it's kind of a bit sad that I'm cooking food and it's just me, but that's just for the first few days.

P.C.

But after that, I got really comfortable with it. It was just exciting because it's a different way of living. I've been living with other people since I was 15 so I never really had that notion of privacy since when I was 15. That was the first time I was *like Oh my God*, this is how it feels to live alone again.

P.C.

Nothing was happening. Everything was shut down. More things were happening inside people's heads then was really happening outside. I think that's quite true for many people. We were thinking *OK, what will happen in the next few months?*

P.C.

There's no virtue of planning. There's no idea of when I can go back home because of the different medical situations in the US and in the Philippines. Those two things have to be coordinated if I want to go back home. If I go back home, will I be able to go back to the US? Those are the things that I was thinking about and my parents and I just decided I should just stay here.

[9:07] P.C.

It was really nice to be living in the C House alone [Cultural House] now reflecting back on it.

P.C.

What was quite abrupt was when I had to move to a traditional dorm. Macalester offered to pay for my meal plan because I wasn't on the meal plan when I lived in the C House [Cultural House]. I always cooked for myself.

P.C.

While in traditional dorms, you can't cook because there's no kitchens, so I had to be on the meal plan, and I didn't really like that idea because I think it's no secret among students that Cafe Mac [Macalester's Cafeteria] is a bit difficult to swallow [laughs].

P.C.

And during those times, I guess I just could not. I just did not want to eat cafe Mac food. It was a struggle for me to already eat cafe Mac food for a year before, and now during these times, I have to eat it. Food is such an important thing to someone's way of life and way of being. I'm not picky, it's just that there's some aspects of Cafe Mac that is like *Oh my God, why do I have to tackle with this*, so I didn't like it.

P.C.

What happened is that I stayed in a friend's house outside of campus. We got to cook a lot of food together there, and food that we really wanted to cook, but the routine was mostly the same. You wake up, you cook food, then you do some work, or you play Animal Crossing and then you just go back to sleep again. You make dinner and then you go back to sleep.

P.C.

That was really the rotation of what's happening every day. There's no variation, and you really cannot go outside during those times because the entire state was in lockdown. And even if after the state was in lockdown, people still chose to stay inside. It was still a battlefield when you went outside. You felt like the air has something in it.

P.C.

You don't want to go outside, you just don't because you don't know what's happening. There's a lot of uncertainty, so you just stay inside.

C.A.

And you mention Animal Crossing, I was wondering if you could just talk a bit about what you did during that time. How you stayed entertained or occupied? Or maybe the different ways you stay entertained as compared to life before the pandemic?

[11:57] P.C.

I think Animal Crossing is a way for people to just stay entertained. But it's not just entertainment... before New Horizons [the most recent Animal Crossing game] there was Animal Crossing on different versions like the GameCube, and also on the DS and those games had a general pattern, you make your own village etc.

P.C.

I think the idea of having this small pocket world where you can really do your own chores, you can explore many things by yourself, you can build stuff... It's quite entertaining and you also play this game with your other friends that you haven't seen in many years, weeks, months because of the pandemic. It's such a perfect game now. It's not stressful like Dark Souls. It's not like Grand Theft Auto. It's not those difficult games that you have to do again and again and again. Animal Crossing is just anything you want it to be. And I think that's what made it so popular, especially during the days of the pandemic where you really cannot do anything. You put all the energy of doing your chores and everything inside Animal Crossing because it's so much easier.

P.C.

There are pros and cons to that. Many people use it as their therapy. There are memes, there are Facebook groups, Discord servers all dedicated to Animal Crossing and they always say that therapy is too expensive, but here is Animal Crossing: my own therapy.

P.C.

While I did not view Animal Crossing as a therapy for me, it was just more of a fun game. I used to play a lot of games before I went to Germany at age 15 to 16, and I never really played a lot after that. I got the switch during the pandemic and that was the time that I returned back to gaming, so for me it was a mixture of *yeah, it's the pandemic* so I got back into gaming. It became a cerebral experience for me and the community was also helpful. Everyone was playing it, even AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] was playing it. Everyone was playing it.

P.C.

It also made people have a common sense of experience that disappeared when the pandemic happened. It's less about an entertainment thing. I think it's more about fulfilling certain needs, emotional needs, collective needs in society. It has become a microcosm of care among different people spanning areas miles and miles apart and I think there are issues about access. There are issues about who can ever play this game, but for the people who have the game, it's such an entertaining game. It's entertaining, it's fulfilling it feels nice, it's a feel-good game.

P.C.

It's not a game that you break your ass off trying to smash the buttons like Smash Brothers for you to win. You can't win in this game. You can't lose in this game. It is what it is.

[15:41] C.A.

It seems like these ways of connecting and collective community are just so essential during this pandemic and I also know a lot of ways people connect on campuses are through cultural orgs. As a leader of the Filipinos at Macalester organization, could you talk about how your Cultural org operated as the pandemic started and during this school year?

P.C.

Point blank all cultural orgs are not operating. If it is operating, it's because people in the org are friends. For me there is a distinction between friends in a cultural org doing things and a cultural org itself. At least for Filipinos at Mac, nothing has been happening. Completely nothing. We haven't planned really anything... we gave up planning things this year because it didn't make any sense.

P.C.

What we try doing is to plan for next academic year, that's really what's up. There's really nothing with FAM [Filipinos at Macalester] at all.

P.C.

Maybe I'm talking to the first years, but that's really not about FAM [Filipinos at Macalester] at all. It's about the individual upperclassmen wanting to connect to the freshmen, to the sophomores, to basically anyone. It's not about the org. It's more about the individuals wanting to do it, because so many of the orgs are paused.

C.A.

And how do you feel about the pausing of all these cultural orgs? Do you think a pause of cultural org activity is going to have some type of impact?

P.C.

Regardless of whether a culture org is paused or not, the impact will be the same. They are paused simply because they don't want to have the responsibility of trying to do stuff or trying to be responsible for certain freshmen. For example, I think 13th Street is... some of the dancing orgs are on pause because how can they dance? They can't really connect effectively with the first years, so they decided to just pause.

P.C.

Whether you're paused or not, it's still a huge change because you really cannot do anything... for example, with FAM [Filipinos at Macalester] we chose not to pause ourselves because even if we do or even if we don't, we don't really see any change that that might happen. There's really nothing for us that we can lose in opposition to, let's say, the dancing groups that really have to dance when they do. For us, we really didn't see any point to just pause our group indefinitely for the year because things might change, everything is uncertain, and we don't get penalized for not doing anything. Why pause, right?

[18:49] P.C.

The implications of having the cultural orgs go through this phase in the pandemic is a bit damaging because the informal structures of mentoring, of care, and of traditions among the BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] community on campus simply doesn't work. For many of the first-year people of color who are BIPOC, it's harder for them to get the support that they need and to share their experiences with other upper classman because we're not here. I'm not saying that other people don't have it hard in terms of having other upperclassmen on campus, but the question is... the institution Macalester, it's a predominantly white institution, and there's a lot of programming, not just the singular events, but programs that mostly cater to the needs of the white students.

P.C.

I'm not saying that Macalester is not fully paying attention to the needs of their BIPOC students, but there needs to be more attention put to BIPOC students and unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, BIPOC students are the ones that are bridging the gaps and making the ends meet here and because it's mostly students, the structure is very informal. Without that structure being passed on, without that structure being supported by Macalester in an institutional manner, I'm afraid that it might just evaporate, or may slowly deteriorate, or people might have to start over again, which I think is such an unnecessary move.

P.C.

I'm being pessimistic so that I know what's the worst to come, but I'm also optimistic that Cultural org leaders, especially in my year, will do our best to collaborate with the Department of Multicultural Life so that we can have the first years, the sophomores, essentially all the years lower than us be engaged because let's be honest, next year it's only our year or who have experienced an entire full year of college at Macalester. I'm not saying it's our responsibility, but I'm saying that we should play our part if we want to continue this certain thing.

C.A.

That's interesting to hear about. You being a junior, you've had more years than a lot of other people on campus currently and I was also wondering what you have noticed and observed regarding the current social scene on campus in a general sense?

P.C.

It's much more strict. It's much more restricted and I think that... I mean there are less people on campus and Macalester said that you should be in your pods so that already restricted who you can talk to and cultural orgs are not doing anything. All orgs are mostly not doing anything. The athletes are housed in a single dorm, so this structure in itself for this year really paves the way for restricted forms of socialization. It's no one's fault, it's just the reality that we live in to make people safe.

[22:41] P.C.

I think the biggest blow is going into Zoom because that 10-minute period that you have in-between classes, even though it's just 10 minutes, is quite crucial because that's the time that you actually see certain people. It becomes a habit; it becomes like a small daily quotidian habit that when you see someone you say *oh hi*. When you go outside of your room you kind of expect to see them, and that small interaction makes you feel that you're still connected in opposition to not seeing them at all.

P.C.

And the interaction with professors is so much different as well. You have to go to their office hours through Zoom which is very different from entering their office and seeing their, let's say, big portrait of Karl Marx, or of Antonio Gramsci which tells you a lot about their personality... or looking at the books that they read. It's a very different experience and you can really see the exhaustion in people's eyes. People are tired of this, and because of that, people are just tired of socializing.

P.C.

People are tired of everything.

P.C.

I'm looking forward for a better tomorrow and during that time in the fall it was uncertain when that would happen. Now it's becoming more clear so I'm very happy because of that, but certainly to be completely honest about this, socialization has become utterly shit. It really did.

P.C.

Things have to be more intentional. Macalester students... or many people have taken granted, the notion of friendships. I think the pandemic made it more clear what you have to do as a friend or as a person. If you want to do something, it has to be intentional. It has to be scheduled. It doesn't have to be micro-managed, but you need to have the initiative of putting the idea out in the universe so that it can happen.

P.C.

If you're just waiting for it to happen, it will never happen and I think people have opened their eyes to that. I think that's one positive side of the pandemic, if you would ask me, because people pay more attention to their relationships, trimming off the fluff that doesn't need to be there, and I think that's a completely necessary thing.

C.A.

Yeah, that's a really interesting take away from this pandemic. I'm also wondering if are there any either shocking or eye-opening moments, instances, or messages that you've encountered during this time period? This can be on a small scale or large scale. Really anything that comes to mind.

[25:58] P.C.

Life is fragile. It's completely fragile regardless of what field you're working in. People say that if you work as an economist, you'd be in a very stable position. You work as a banker, you work as a person in computer science that life would be quite stable. There's so much more to life than materiality and the pandemic showed us life is precarious in whatever sense it is. It's very fragile, and it opened us to so many more dimensions of life than we could have ever imagined. People pay more pay less attention to the material things of the world and I think that is an amazing thing. I wish it did not take a pandemic to make this thing, this realization happen.

C.A.

I know you have to get going in a little, but if I might ask, has the pandemic personally affected you in any way. Has it made you realize anything that might relate to you or your relationships with your friends and family?

P.C.

My relationship with my family has never changed. It's still the same... I called them once in a while and I think what has changed is the topics that we talk about. In the beginning *oh how's the pandemic? What's the regulations?* Then after we caught up on each other we just talk about the regular things again. Nothing really has changed in terms of my parents and my family back home.

P.C.

With my personal life, things have changed in the sense that many things have changed in my head rather than in my trajectory in life. My trajectory is still the same. What I think changed in my head is the tension that I deal with... I told in the beginning that being an international student never really changed anything before the pandemic. I was a student. They were a student.

P.C.

What really is just different is the culture. I just learned to see what's very different in terms of classroom habits, but outside of academics that's where the change happens and it just happened that during the pandemic, that sphere of your head and the sphere of what happens inside the classroom just becomes more merged and merged together and you can't really avoid those certain things. And not being home, not knowing when to be back home is certainly the thing that made me think that, *Oh yeah* I need to think more about my relationship with this country.

P.C.

Me being a Filipino, having a really clear relationship with the United States and being a former colony of the United States and all the cultures and all the capitalistic things that made me who I am and the historical things that made me who I am is also rooted in the United States.

[29:29] P.C.

I had to think about that more and more and I had to grapple with the differences between Filipinos within the diaspora. I think that's the important... I think the main takeaway that I really have for this pandemic, for myself. I became even more introspective and reflective about what is happening with me and my relationship with the United States and the diaspora because I cannot escape it. I'm stuck here, so I was faced with it.

P.C.

Before, I could just say *I'm going to go back in the Philippines during the summer*, I recharge my energies and then tolerate the shit later when I come back. Now you really can't. You just cannot tolerate it.

P.C.

And I'm not even talking about police brutality, that is something you cannot tolerate at all. I'm talking about the subtle stuff. How you eat on the table, or how you how you cook your rice, or how you clean the house. The values of house making or how you drink tea, how you spend your time when you're outside in the sun, or how you view the rain, or how you hear the night, or how you wake up. What do you hear when you wake up?

P.C.

You know these are all the things that are very different and sometimes not being understood by people who really cannot understand you is something that's hard to tolerate in the long run, especially if you don't know when you're going to be back home. That's really the biggest thing for me.

C.A.

It's really interesting to hear about your experience interacting with the diaspora and about your relationship with the Unites States.

P.C.

Just one last thing. I think that my biggest takeaway actually is learning what it really means to be grateful. Being grateful is to accept that the things that you have is temporary. I realized that when I compared my life now and my life when I was in Germany. I did not have a MIDI keyboard, I didn't have a switch, although that's my personal choice. I didn't have a room by myself, I didn't have a queen-sized bed. All those things. I didn't have lights that I really wanted, I didn't have plants and I asked myself how did I come to a place in my life where I started to become too comfortable with the things that I have now, because I was happy then too? I just changed my perspective and I think people should have this perspective, especially in such a consumerist country.

P.C.

I think to be grateful is to be at peace and to learn to let go of the stuff that you have.

[32:12] P.C.

Of course, I'm not advocating for poverty. People need a certain threshold to survive. They have needs. But to make that as small as possible and to be grateful that you need to let go of the stuff is to... it's like the same saying, it's cheesy, but if you really love someone or something you should learn to let them go and I think that also applies to the stuff that you have... to be grateful about it.

P.C.

It just made me happier realizing that a few months ago. It definitely put off a lot of stress because the pandemic made us question how do we keep things together? My material... everything is falling apart. I'm losing certain stuff, but as long as you have a roof on the top of your head, you have food to eat and you can pay for all your necessities, your bills and not for luxury, I think letting go of certain stuff is necessary and useful and will help you be a better person and able to accept the reality of the pandemic even more.

C.A.

Yeah, I think that's such a such an important way of thinking, and I totally have seen how it applies to relationships. I know a lot of people only started to realize how fragile life is once they realized they could lose relatives, parents, grandparents to Covid, and it made people really appreciate their relationships and reevaluate why they appreciate certain people. Well, if you don't have anything else to add, I think we can wrap up. Thank you so much Paul for talking the time to talk for my Covid Oral History Project. I really appreciate it and I know people will find your messages, stories, and experience valuable and interesting.

[33:42] P.C.

Definitely Corgan.

[End of Transcription]