

Interview with
REBECCA URIAS

November 30, 2020

**THE PANDEMIC YEARS: COVID-19
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

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REBECCA URIAS

Rebecca Urias was interviewed by Matthew Heintz on November 30, 2020 via recorded phone call. She related her COVID-19 pandemic experiences.

RU: Hello?

MH: Hello! Are you there?

RU: Yeah—

MH: Okay. Alright, for the record, this interview is for November 30th, 2020. This is Matt Heintz, and this interview is for the Oral History Project [REDACTED]. And this will be one person's perspective of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Can you state your name and date of birth please?

RU: Rebecca Urias. U-R-I-A-S. Birthdate: February 9th, 1978.

MH: Thank you. And thank you for spelling out your last name! [Laughter] And what do you do for a living?

RU: I am a seventh-grade social studies teacher.

MH: Okay. So, what was teaching like before COVID-19?

RU: In what respect?

MH: As far as the classroom, social distancing, and everything. And how you interacted with the students, I guess.

RU: Okay. So, the school I teach in typically has classroom sizes of 25 to 35 [students]. [Throat clearing] So far this year— Oh, you want just the before, sorry. We would put students right next to each other and desks, you know, like completely butted up against each other. The desk would be touching and they would interact a lot with each other in close proximity, doing shoulder partners or group work. I would interact with them in a closer proximity by, you know, walking around each group or row depending on my classroom arrangement at the time. Kind of like kneeling down next to their— not really kneeling down, but, like, crouching down next to the desk to talk with them— [throat clearing] or having them come over to my desk in my personal space and sit at my desk with me to help them with something. Lots of kids, before the pandemic, would want to give high fives, or like a side hug, or something where they wanted some kind of, like, a physical greeting or contact, and so that happened a lot. Even in junior high, they still needed that and there was— So, this year there's been a stipulation that we need to have

all the desks facing forward, whereas before we would be encouraged to have kids facing one another in smaller groups where they could work in a collaborative kind of situation—

MH: Yeah.

RU: — and this year it's recommended that we keep them all facing the same direction so that any, you know, germs or breathing or sneezing is all like more at the back of someone's head rather than in their face, so—

MH: That [crosstalk] that makes sense. So—

RU: I don't know. [Crosstalk.]

MH: No, that's great! As far as the changes that have occurred now during COVID, what kind of changes have been implemented [that] you are using in the classroom that's different from before?

RU: Just about everything really. [Laughter] So, this quarter we started out in a fully remote model where we were teaching completely online, or not this quarter, this semester. And then at the end of first quarter, we started doing a hybrid model where some kids were coming to campus on Mondays and Thursdays, and some kids were coming on Tuesdays and Fridays, and then Wednesdays were office hours. And even the kids that were coming, that was only about a third of our campus, what we normally have. Our campus usually has about 1100 students, and we had about 350, I think, coming to campus on those days. And then we were instructed to keep them as far away as we could. And with that method, we had at least six feet between most kids in most classes and that wasn't a problem. Now we have all of the kids who have chosen to come in person are there Monday through Friday now, and it has been a little bit harder to keep kids' distance. I think my biggest class of in-person students right now is nineteen, and so, there are—

MH: Hmm [understanding].

RU: — settings where there are kids that are only one desk apart, so that's about two feet. And obviously, we're wearing masks the whole time; there does have to be a reminder to keep their noses covered because they like to have it down, their mask down below their nose and that's not the policy—

MH: Yeah [affirmation].

RU: Let's see, I don't move around my classroom nearly the same way that I would have. It's really hard, as a teacher, to get out of that habit of wanting to go and sit next to a student and help them with something, but for their comfort and for mine, I try not to do that too much. And so I stay at my desk more often. Another reason that I stay at my desk more often, is because now that kids are there five days a week, I also am teaching online at the

same time So, in every class period I have kids that are there in person and kids that are at home doing remote learning—

MH: Oh wow!

RU: — and so, we're doing the same lesson with completely different situations for the kids, so it can be a little tricky. And so, I stay closer to my computer so that I can monitor the chat because I feel like the kids at home need more support since they aren't there to exactly see everything that's going on and it's harder for them to focus. And kids have said that to me in the chat, like, "I'm really sorry that I'm behind, but it's just so hard to focus," you know, "My bed is right there, I could lay down, take a nap; the refrigerator's right there; my computer's right here, I can totally get on and play games. It's just really hard to make myself focus." And I think, you know, a twelve-year-old is being expected to have a lot more self-control than I even have. You know I get distracted if I'm on my computer or whatever. So I stay at my computer a lot more, for distancing and in order to monitor the chat and help the kids that are there remotely.

And so, most of the time we use a format similar to Zoom; it's called WebEx. And so, most of the time I have all of my students sign into WebEx, whether they're there in person or not, or whether they're remote or not. I'm sorry. And then that way they can at least interact with each other through the chat and it's actually been kind of helpful, because I have a lot of students that are very shy. In seventh grade, I feel like typically they're pretty shy. In eighth grade they come out of their shells. But in seventh grade, they're still nervous to ask questions in front of people. So, the chat feature has helped with that and I think that more kids are willing to speak up and say, "I don't understand this," because I can explain it to them in the chat without having to draw attention to the fact that they need help. I feel like I kind of diverged from the question. [Laughter] So—

MH: No, that's okay! No, that's fine! So the students at your school, are they primarily— you live in Arizona, where?

RU: I live in Mesa. And I teach in Mesa in west, the west part of Mesa, in the older part of Mesa. The demographics of my school are, like, eighty percent Hispanic, followed by Caucasian, and then African American— well, then African American and Native American. We do have a higher, higher percentage [AUDIO DISTORTION ON CALL BEGINS.] schools because we get Rivers, so I would say the exact first, but I believe that qualified, it might not actually.

And so a lot of them have had a lot of trouble with being remote, because the Internet, not having Internet, having a computer at home. And so the student has had to [inaudible] and hot spots. A lot of students, in fact, students got a computer this year. The city got a group, or the district gave them a grant or something. [AUDIO DISTORTION ENDS.] And so, we were gonna be one-to-one this year anyway, as far as technology goes, but the kids were gonna have to leave them at school and the pandemic forced that to change, so now they have them at home, too. They just bring them, you know, they take them home all the time. But I know a lot of them still have connection issues, connectivity, I

guess, issues with their Internet. And so, sometimes that's an issue where they can't get into our meetings or they'll do their work, but they don't realize that they're not connected to the Internet. And we're using Google, and so it's not saving, but they think it is—

MH: Hmm. [Understanding]

RU: — and so that is a frustration for them.

And then we've got a lot of kids whose parents both work or they're in a single parent situation, and they're home by themselves, being, having to be responsible for getting their work done, and a lot of times having to be responsible for younger brothers and sisters while their parents are at work. So that is a difficult, very difficult situation for them as well.

MH: Yeah, they're basically doing like— their job as a student, but then they're also kind of parenting sort of—

RU: Providing childcare. Yes! Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, it's very difficult. But I think, I'm— I have a lot of students that are failing, most of them are my remote students. But I'm still kind of surprised with the number that are doing better than I thought they would. — Because I don't know that I could have done that at the age of twelve. I don't know, maybe I would have, but I don't know whether I could have focused like that [laughter] at home, having to—

MH: Yeah.

RU: — take care of other kids or cook dinner. Or a lot of times, I'll get kids that will come into class late, and I'll say, "Oh hey, kiddo where were you?" you know. "We went over the assignment already." And, "I'm sorry I had to help my mom with something," or "I had to clean the house," or "I needed to—" "carry the groceries in," or whatever. And so, there's a little bit of a disconnect on the parents' part too, as to what is being expected of them in school, because we do expect them to be there from beginning of class to end most of the time. But it's really easy, I think, as a parent to say, like, "Well, you're right here and you can help me now that you're home—" and not really realize that the school is still expecting them to be present in class and participate, you know. It's not just, like, they're watching class—

MH: Yeah.

RU: — they're supposed to be participating too. So— [clears throat]

MH: Yeah. So, for you personally, how has life been during the pandemic? As far as, uh— you have a son who's in school. Are there challenges with that?

RU: There were more challenges with that when we were all remote, when we were teaching from home and he was doing classes from home. He is in a self-contained autism classroom. And the idea of— [crosstalk].

MH: Sorry, I was gonna say your husband is also a teacher and was working from home at the same time?

RU: Yes. Yes.

MH: So you guys were having to, like, somehow teach and do your job, and make sure he's doing his schoolwork?

RU: Yes. Yes.

MH: Wow.

RU: And it was, it was difficult. Luckily, my mother was close. And so, when we had live classes— So, let me backtrack. When we were remote, we had classes every other morning and then every other afternoon. So opposites, like one day we would teach in the morning and one day we teach in the afternoon. And so, but Ethan, or my son's classes went all day, and so, when we didn't have live classes, we would help him. And then when we did have live classes, we were lucky enough that she was here, so she could come over and try to help him with those live classes. But it was definitely a struggle for him to focus and do that. And it was very stressful for us. But as stressful as it was for us, I can't imagine someone who had to go to work—

MH: Yeah.

RU: It's been difficult as a teacher; I'm not gonna lie and say, like, this year has been wonderful. It's been, it's been a shift for sure. But I do feel a little like we're lucky to be teachers, because our jobs have been secured for the most part, because we are able to do our jobs remotely or in person. And there's a demand for our jobs, and there's a need for them that doesn't go away versus someone in, uh—

MH: And you're relatively safe—

RU: Yeah. Yeah, our jobs are relatively safe versus someone who's in a customer service kind of position, you know, for food service and things like that. I know— You know, obviously, those places have taken a hit.

MH: Mhmm.

RU: So, we've been lucky in that way, to be able to at least work and help him at the same time, instead of having to choose, like, do I go to work or do I help my child at home. Also, the school district did open up full-time classes for kids in self-contained rooms earlier than everybody else. And so, we had the option of sending him back sooner,

which we chose not to, just out of health concerns and things. But when we went back, we didn't have a choice, really, then. We needed him to go full-time back to school. And luckily there— His classroom is very small and there are only three other kids who have chosen to come back. So, there's four kids total with three teachers. So, that's like, ideal class ratio, I guess, for a child with autism. So—

MH: Yeah.

RU: — so that part has been okay. It's been a little bit hard socially for him because he needs a lot of practice with socialization, and not being able to go and play with friends, or go to the park when there's a bunch of kids there, or you know, go to one of the trampoline parks, or something like that. That has been hard on him a little bit, as far as socializing. And I'm interested to see what will happen when things, you know, fully open back up. And— And that can happen, whether he has regressed in those areas or not, you know?

MH: Yeah.

RU: So—

MH: Well that sounds not easy to be [a] full-time teacher and then also having to kind of figure out how to parent at the same time. I think that's probably something lots of parents throughout the world, in the country, everybody's having to adapt to this odd situation. [Crosstalk]

RU: Yeah. I'm— I understand the lens of the parents who want their kids back in school full-time, because I know how difficult it is for them. But I also understand the teachers and parents and administrators that are concerned about pushing full classrooms back into full swing, which is what is in work for our district next semester in January. Right after Christmas, we'll have two weeks of remote learning again, fully remote everybody and then we'll go back, and it's supposed to be, basically, we'll have full class sizes again. So anywhere— and they want to keep them as low as possible, but I know right now, I looked at my numbers for next semester and I have a class of thirty-one. There's no social distancing in a class of that size. It's impossible.

MH: No.

RU: And so, it'll be— I'll be teaching the same way even though I won't have remote students anymore. All my remote students will go to a different teacher, and I will take some of her in-person students. But my teaching probably won't change that much, because I will want to stay as distanced as possible so that I don't bring it home to my family, to my mom. And so, there will still be a lot of, a lot of the online work. Which, we're using Canvas as our learning platform, and it's great. And so, obviously being there in person I can explain it to them a lot more easily than if they're online. And, you know, give them more examples and use the white board and things like that that are much harder with a remote situation. But I don't honestly know how comfortable I would be having them, like, come up to my desk or be too close to me, or whatever you know?

MH: Yeah.

RU: So that's— it'll be interesting to see what happens next semester and after Christmas. And when this second wave kinda dies down, what will happen? I don't know— what will happen.

MH: Yeah. I think what's going to be kind of interesting is to see next year if they're talking about a vaccine, if that works out. And then— so probably like 2022, by then, will people have gotten so used to things like social-distancing that we'll be afraid to be around other people? I've wondered about that.

RU: I think— I think that, you know, I think it depends on obviously the person's individual mental health. But I do think that— our society just keeps going more and more toward a distanced society anyway, with social media and everything. And my students already have chat set up on their WebEx teams where they are chatting with each other throughout the day, feeling like they're socializing because they're craving that socialization. But are they gonna know how to actually socialize when it comes to it— I don't know that they'll be afraid. Some of them. Some of them will have anxiety about it, especially kids who have lost somebody during the pandemic.

MH: Yeah.

RU: Like, one of my students lost his dad and he, I mean, barely knew me. And he was— He called in during office hours and was telling me the story and was crying and I was crying because he was so emotional. And you know, kids like that, I think, will be more— anxious about getting close to people, because they've seen what can happen. And even though it might be safe, they might not feel like it's safe.

MH: Right.

RU: Because of their experience. So—

MH: Yeah b— I think about this since this is a history class that we're doing this report about— and it's kind of terrible to say, I guess, but this will be a point in history. There'll be before COVID- 19 and an after and it will be—

RU: Mhmm.

MH: — interesting, someday, to see the changes that the world itself made in that— and everything. So—

RU: Yeah, I—

MH: How do you—?

RU: — definitely think there will be some lasting changes for sure—

MH: Yeah.

RU: I've already thought about, you know— [laughter] going places and, like going through a drive-through, for instance, and looking in and seeing all the workers wearing their masks and then realizing that they didn't used to wear masks when they were preparing my food. [Mutual laughter.] And I feel like, okay, I'm okay with them wearing masks all the time. I think, I don't— you know it seems a lot more sanitary as far as food preparation goes. Or during cold and flu season, will more people consider wearing, you know, a mask, or something? Are we gonna blow candles out on a birthday cake? [Laughter.] I don't know!

MH: Yeah.

RU: You know, I looked, I looked into, just because I'm a social studies teacher and I was curious, I looked into the changes made after the Spanish Flu and specifically looked into changes in the way that my church operated, and I found some interesting things there. And I wonder if some of the changes that have been implemented in my church services will continue after this as well. I don't know.

MH: Yeah.

RU: It'll be very interesting to see.

MH: So, how do you think— this is a big question, I guess. [Laughter.] But how do you think this will affect our, *our* country, both now and then in the future?

RU: Hmm. Hmm. Well now, I think that unfortunately it is causing a big divide in our country—

MH: Mhmm.

RU: — and I think it will take a while for those feelings of judgment and misunderstanding to subside.

MH: Yeah.

RU: I think that right now, short term, it is obviously damaging our country financially and emotionally. And worst of all, we're losing tons of lives of people that are moms and dads and brothers and sisters and grandmas and grandpas, that are gone sooner than what they needed to be. Long term, I— I don't know. — I'd like to say that people will learn from this, to be more prepared and to be more compassionate and more understanding, but— maybe it's pessimistic, but I don't see that happening, just from studying history myself, I feel like it just repeats itself over and over [laughter] and— I don't know. I mean, how much did we learn after the Spanish Flu? There obviously weren't too many

precautions in place, or plans in place, or I don't personally feel like things would have gotten this out of hand with this virus. So—

MH: Yeah.

RU: That's just my personal opinion. I don't, I also personally don't think that this is the last— situation like this that we will be in, or that we will see. So—

MH: Yeah.

RU: I hope that people are learning something from it. I hope that I'm learning something from it, and that we don't— we don't just suffer through it but use it as a time to— get stronger, as a country—

MH: Yeah.

RU: It doesn't, doesn't seem to have brought us together the same way, you know, an incident like September 11th did. Instead of looking at, like, one common enemy of, you know, getting rid of the virus or defeating this virus, people have kind of turned on each other rather than being compassionate and collaborative and supportive. So, and that's, I think, on both sides of the issue. People are— struggling to have that compassion that they need, or that we need to get through this better than we were before.

MH: Yeah. I have one more question. As it was— I kind of put this in last minute, actually. You just had someone close to you that tested positive. Correct?

RU: Mhmm. Yes, mhmm, my stepdaughter.

MH: And how is she doing?

RU: She's recovering very well. She had very, very mild symptoms. She had a low-grade fever one day, one evening actually. And that's it. And then she lost her sense of taste and smell. She noticed it about three days after Thanksgiving. And [AUDIO DISTORTION BEGINS.][inaudible] got it, and achy, you know fever, a lot of fatigue, nausea, not really having an appetite, that kind of a thing. So it did cause us to be alarmed for a while. My mom— [AUDIO DISTORTION ENDS.] being in close proximity to someone who had tested positive, but we— have been tested. I came back negative. My husband is still waiting for his results, but none of us have developed any symptoms or anything. So we feel fairly certain that, you know, we got by without any major problems, so—

MH: Well, that's good. That— [audible intake of breath] Well, that's all the questions I have for you right now, Rebecca. I thank you for your time. And this interview is now concluded.

RU: Alright. Thank you.

MH: Thank you! Bye.

RU: Bye.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]