

Transcript of Interview with Clare Acosta by Wilzave Quiles Guzman

Interviewee: Clare Acosta

Interviewer: Wilzave Quiles Guzman

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Location (Interviewee):

Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: This transcript has been provided by Otter.AI with a 2nd pass for accuracy provided by Bryan Paintiff, HST580 intern, at ASU.

Abstract: Clare Acosta is the director of the community engagement office at a Marianist University in San Antonio. Clare starts the interview out by describing community engagement prior to the pandemic and how they stayed connected to the community and they Clare goes into what adjustments had to be made during COVID in order to keep the engagement going. Clare talks about how the department developed a justice education online platform in order to gainfully occupy students in the program, so instead of going and volunteering at a soup kitchen or shelter they were learning why doing these things are important for society and why it is valuable beyond just volunteer hours. Towards the end, Clare speaks about the Empower Ecuador program where the community engagement office is outreaching to Ecuadorian communities to build relationships through the lens of faith.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 00:03

Perfect. The recording started. Hello, Claire [inaudible] thank you for saying yes to meeting with me to do this oral history. In general, I have been doing a collection an exhibition, my exhibition is based on Empower Ecuador and community engagement and the transition that we had. So it's kind of like [inaudible] for Empower Ecuador and also community engagement in general, prior COVID and after COVID 19. So the questions are going to going to be based on community engagement and Empower Ecuador.

Clare Acosta 00:45

Okay.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 00:46

well, so the first one is kind of like to get to know you a little bit better. How long have you been the Director of the Community Engagement Office? And for and how does your job align with who you are as a person?

Clare Acosta 01:00

Sure. So I've been in this role, almost six years, and I've been at St. Mary's just over 10. And, you know, I think for me, working in community engagement is kind of a perfect combination. For me, I'm very passionate about social justice and advocacy and direct volunteer service and faith formation and that's a combination you don't always find perfectly aligned together. And so I think, being able to not only find a position that brings together those components and working with university students, but then to do that, in a Marianist University, is just such a gift. I graduated from Marianist University. And so I've been around the family and the charism for quite some time now. And, yeah, it's just kind of a perfect space for me to both continue growing as a professional, but also is in my personal life, and to have the chance to work with fantastic students day in and day out who just bring such passion in life to our days. So yeah, so it's been a really great fit for me.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 02:17

Yeah, that's nice. How like everything that that you're passionate about, most of it is all integrated into this position and what you do here at St. Mary's plus values of the Marianist University. So that's amazing and having this in mind, what does community engagement means to you? And how do you think that Marianist university demonstrates community engagement through the semesters?

Clare Acosta 02:45

Those are loaded questions.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 02:48

We can do the first part first. So what does community engagement means to you?

Clare Acosta 02:52

Yeah, I think for me, the root of community engagement is relationships and mutuality and that sense of, you know, we're, we're on this journey together. And so thinking about that, specifically in our office, and what that means for our kind of daily work, it's this idea of, we grow with and learn from and walk alongside people in our community, and specifically on the west side of San Antonio, that I think has just such an incredible, powerful gift to offer, in terms of the culture and the spirit. And so I think community engagement, you know the theory is that kind of connection between recognizing and discovering some very acute tangible concerns in the community, and tying that to a larger narrative of justice. And so, you know, I think one of the things that's really important in community engagement is to spend time getting to know a community and getting to first recognize and explore the the gifts and the assets of that community and then trying to turn some attention to where's there room for improvement? Or where are their needs that can be met? And so again, is that you know, recognizing there's tangible needs, but then how does our community narrative and powers of structures of power and justice, impact the needs that are present in our community. And the only way to I think to do that is to to build relationships and to get to know people and to let them get to know you and try to create that space of reciprocity.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 04:43

Yeah, I really like actually your kind of like were the one that taught me you know, kind of like, this perspective on like, serving, like, I feel when people think on community engagement, they think serving and even though it's kind of like connected somehow but it's not about like just serving, it's more about just being present for the community and then through relationship finding out which ways can we actually be of use. But before coming and just saying, hey, we're serving kind of like recognizing this strange and values and everything that that community has to offer, which yeah, I think it was something you told me through the class empower Ecuador and really carry that with me, like, even today. So yeah. And so now coming to talk, started thinking about COVID-19. How was community engagement in our university prior COVID-19? Like, what were the activities events, and without thinking of like, this global pandemic?

Clare Acosta 05:54

So I would say, in general, there's always just a lot going on. And when I say that, I mean, a lot of like, doing right, like we were out volunteering, and we were out, you know, trying to, identify where our place was in respect to the needs in the community and so a lot of service learning classes were happening. You know, I think about our continuing the heritage event that would have like seven or 800, people showing up to volunteer. And I think a lot of our work was very much about being physically present to the needs in the community. In a way that obviously just got flipped, turned upside down with COVID-19. But I think, you know, the core of community engagement, never changed that emphasis on how we are striving to build in a in as humble a way as possible, striving to build community and to better understand the journey of another person of our neighbors. And to celebrate the gifts of the community and help to alleviate needs, it's like, I think that stayed the same, I think, again, it was very, like, tangible, kind of on the ground structured, I would say in a lot of ways that the volunteering and the service. And so there was always, always an event to go to always a place to go volunteer, you know, you could show up in the office, and they'll say, like, I want to participate. And I was like, okay, well, you've got these, like, seven different things you can choose from, you know, and like they're happening over the next few days. And so I think there was a lot going on. And I will say, I think there were a lot of students who wanted to do that, who wanted to be serving, wanting to volunteering wanted to be of use wanted to, you know, physically be engaged in, in the community. And were able to, and so I think we've always had that sense of relationship and faith. And that stayed consistently and constantly throughout opportunities for community engagement. But it definitely looked different before COVID-19.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 08:31

Yeah. But I'm glad that you mentioned like, even though with this difference, like the foundation, or like what Community Engagement Office, like what this is for always has stayed the same and it was constant throughout the changes, obviously. And now looking at the differences a little bit more like what adjustments did the community engagement, did to keep this the students, I guess, engaged also, or

maybe participating within the community? So yeah, what adjustments were taken after COVID or during COVID I should say?

Clare Acosta 09:10

Yeah, I would say during COVID, one, we did a lot more personal outreach to our community partners. You know, we're always in pretty good communication with them. But we did some additional surveys and assessment work to try to say like, okay, what do you need in light of COVID? Right, like, what how have your needs changed for the population that you serve? And how can we be of help? Like, are you accepting volunteers if you are, what kind of precautions are being taken and you know, those those sorts of things. So definitely some increased conversation with our community partners, which I think was hard because a lot of them didn't know either, you know, like,

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 09:10

it's kind of like discovering

Clare Acosta 09:10

Yeah, like I think about one of our main community partners who we work with regularly, which is heavily focused on mentorship of middle and high school students. You know, and for months, it was like [inaudible] from them, like, we don't really know, we're going to try to do this virtually it might work, it might not work, we think we might have people back in classrooms in x month, but we're not really sure. And just trying to, I think, accompany and support and journey together with our partners was was certainly not something, again, that we weren't doing before, but it was just a different emphasis on that. I would say one of the biggest changes or shifts that we made was really trying to implement greater opportunities for justice education. So if we think about community engagement as kind of this continuum of service and justice, a lot of our work, I think previously, was really focused more heavily in service. And because and, again, that being like meeting immediate needs, like serving at, you know, haven for hope, or the food bank. And then, during COVID, when we couldn't be doing those things, it was like, okay, well, let's kind of swing the pendulum a little bit, because we know that we haven't necessarily done as much work on justice education as we maybe could have been, or should have been. And so really creating opportunities for students to explore, for example, you know, food insecurity, like, okay, you work at the or volunteer at the soup kitchen or food bank. And you're like really passionate about that, and you like going, and that's great. Let's really talk about what food insecurity looks like in San Antonio and read some articles on that and enter into some discussion on that, and what does our faith say about that? And, you know, how are we called to be agents of change in this structure of injustice and insecurity. And so, you know, one of the clearest examples, I think, we worked with staff and faculty, to build out these community engagement modules and focus on five different topics of justice, and each one of those so we focused on immigration, hunger, and homelessness, criminal justice, racism, and environmental justice. And so each one of those modules had a number of different articles and videos and readings and things that people could either watch or read pretty much, and then had a series of reflection questions, to try to get people thinking about that

particular area of justice. And then it had action items. So once you've kind of gone through this module of education and learned more about the specifics of that topic of injustice, and then you've incorporated that into your own thoughts and reflection and thought about like, okay, what is my role in, you know, contributing to environmental justice. And then the last part of the module was, you know, okay, here's some next steps. And so here's some organizations that you can become a part of, here's some further documentaries, you can watch. Here's some places that when they're back accepting volunteers you can get involved with and so we built that out for each one of those areas of justice. And those were then incorporated into classes and groups and organizations to have students engaging in some conversation and dialogue around those different topics.

Clare Acosta 13:43

Yes, planting those seeds right.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 13:43

Yeah, that's great. I really like that. Like to take a look at those honestly. I guess it feels sometimes that dialogue like some people care some people don't some people are engaged, some people don't engage and it's kind of like, I guess my end sometimes I'm like, what's the point? But then I'm the one that I'm also super involved in there. Like I learn from it, I also see other people engage in it. And it's kind of like, putting those conversations kind of like those conversations allow to put those issues in the heart of people indirectly or directly. Honestly, despite in the way they engage or not engage and in the future will come to them at some point and doesn't matter the work they're doing, at least we hope and have faith that those issues and those dialogues are going to stay with them and are going to be reflected in the work that they do.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 13:59

Yeah.

Clare Acosta 14:01

Hoping that they

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 14:07

Yeah

Clare Acosta 14:07

Sprout and take life whenever down the road.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 14:52

But I didn't know about and that's honestly great. I really liked that if they're available I'd really like to

Clare Acosta 14:58

Yeah, they're all on canvas. So they're all accessible to anyone at university.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 15:02

That's great. So, obviously, I guess this well, were these adjustments easy was easy to make all these models. So it obviously took some work, I guess.

Clare Acosta 15:14

No, yeah, it was a lot of work.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 15:16

Yeah,

Clare Acosta 15:16

It was a lot of work. And I think it was a lot of work just in terms of, I feel like that for us in community engagement, at least in the pandemic, it was a lot of reactivity. Because we just couldn't proactively plan for what was coming next, you know, so I think that for me, anyone else be personally, it was very challenging, because I'm a pretty structured person that likes to strategic strategically think about what's coming next and how did you prepare for that in advance? And you just can't. Yeah, during COVID? Okay, let's pivot, you know, and try something new. And so, that definitely took a lot of work. I think the other piece of it that we're really intentional about is recognizing that, you know, we're talking about issues of justice, and wanna make sure that our conversations are one it's rooted in an acknowledgement of our privilege and power, like at a university, where we hope that everyone at some point that comes through our doors is going to leave, you know, with a more formal education. But that is such a luxury and such a privilege. And so thinking about how do we, you know, route ourselves humbly in the privilege that we have, and use that to serve the common good. And then also thinking about, you know, diversity, equity and inclusion, and what does that look like? If we're putting together a module on racism? You know, I, as a white woman should not be fully putting that together. Right and so thinking about, like, how are we engaging in, you know, really, as well grounded efforts as we can to, to not just talk about justice, but to live justice.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 17:07

Yes.

Clare Acosta 17:08

And to, you know, I think we use the word ally a lot when we think about efforts of justice. And we talk about being an ally a lot in terms of anti racism and LGBTQ services and I think one of the things that I reflected on a lot in the pandemic is, how do we move from being an ally to being an accomplice for good? And what does that mean right, and, and kind of the responsibility that it places on us.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 17:42

accomplice?

Clare Acosta 17:43

Yeah, so I mean, it's usually used in a negative way if you think about an accomplice. It's usually like, oh, you were an accomplice in that like, crime or that after something, but I think it's I don't even I don't know this specific translation.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 18:01

So you were witness, but then you

Clare Acosta 18:03

but like you were active in it. like,

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 18:05

You were inactive, when you were a witness of it,

Clare Acosta 18:08

No you were active,

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 18:08

You were active in it.

Clare Acosta 18:10

So that's like, so like, for example, if I'm like, I don't know, if somebody's robbing a bank. And like, you drive the getaway car, you'd be considered an accomplice, right? Because you didn't go in and rob the bank. But you drove the getaway car that like enabled that person to go in and rob the bank.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 18:26

I hate this because I know the word and just went away like I know, what we're talking about. So moving from being an outlier to an accomplice.

Clare Acosta 18:35

Yeah. Because I think that's a different level of responsibility, right like that saying, you know, if I am, if I as a white woman, and going to be an accomplice, to the black community, and to the fight for becoming an anti racist society, like, I can't just say like, yeah, that's really good. I believe in that I support that. I have to be involved, right. Like, I have to recognize that my skin color in my race is not that of my black community, but that I have a really deep responsibility and being a part of that, of that fight for justice. And it's not enough to just say, I support you, it's not enough to just say, you know, yes, we need to do this. It's how am I actively doing it? Right. So that

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 19:29

That makes sense. It's easy to say, yeah, I support you, yeah, I agree with what you're saying. But What steps are you taking either in your personal life or in your work life to really make, like, social justice for either the African American community or anything related to issues of justice that is going on.

Clare Acosta 19:50

Right. And I think it's so interesting because the pandemic was happening at the same time we were seeing all these really deep manifestations, our roots of racism in this country, you know, and like, we're we're very focused on the pandemic as we should be, because it's an immense global health crisis. And we have to be aware of these other just as important components that are happening in our society. And, you know, when we think about, like George Floyd Floyd or Amanabi, like, how are we, how are we making sure that that continues to be a prioritized not just conversation, but a course of action? And so, you know, I think a lot of the work that we were doing in terms of justice education needed to be and should continue to be and was rooted in that very necessary conversation specifically around racism. And so that, so that came to bear to right, like, yes, we were focused on this kind of different approach to community engagement because of the pandemic and kind of limited personal interactions. And recognizing that there was a really key point in our national history that was happening and is happening and needs to continue happening.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 21:16

Yeah, for sure. I'm like all these are some [inaudible] conversation. Really didn't know about like this transition and well, I don't know, I was thinking, like, it's gonna be just about how to do like, interactions online with students. And then all these is, is different and it's great, I really didn't know that all of this was going on within the Community Engagement Office, and it's really surprising and like, amazing, and in a good way. So okay, so now we're gonna transition to the Empower Ecuador program, kinda like to do probably two or three questions since probably gonna be without charge very soon. But I have been really enjoying this conversation about community engagement honesty is great. And I love the way in which you connect all the dots, like, you know, service and justice and how like, transition into where it's justice more just because of the situation we were in. So, okay, so when talking about the Empower Ecuador, what is the program of empower Ecuador, and how it is connected to community engagement?

Clare Acosta 22:28

[inaudible] That's okay. No, don't apologize. I love that you're asking these questions. So Empower Ecuador, so empowered stands for engaging mission, through purposeful outreach, holistic education and reflection. really long title. But really, the the, the point of Empower, whether it's domestic or international, right, is to, again, focus in on relationships. Within, in this case, you know, we were looking at building relationships with the Ecuadorian community. And through those relationships and exchanges, and reflection, thinking about, you know, not just what we're seeing, and witnessing and learning and hearing and experiencing, but also the reflection of what is that changing in me? And what

is that calling out of me to offer an opportunity for students to one further discern their own vocation, and how their skill sets and talents and passions meet the needs of the world. Right? And also to think about what does that mean to be a global citizen and an agent of change in our community? And so and to do that, in our case, through a lens of faith, is that what does that mean? And what kind of opportunities but also responsibilities are placed on us as a result of being people of faith and being having the gift of getting to know other communities and other people. So you know, I feel like I'm saying the word relationship a lot. But that's so much at the heart of everything that we do. And so, you know, whether we're thinking about like our Saturday service sites, or empower, or our summer of service, like all of it is about creating those relationships of reciprocity and mutuality and growing together, and so Empower Ecuador tries to do that. And to really give students an opportunity to experience a culture and a history very different from their own. And think about how has that changed me and influence who I become in the future?

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 24:54

Yeah, definitely. And so it was like, I'm like, Yeah, you accomplish everything that like that's how the class was for me. And the course was for me and it still impacts me today. So having like, I feel like the the answer to the question is kind of like already in the air. But do you feel- so, do you feel that- How do you feel after the trip was canceled? And as a consequence of that, how do you think that affected the purpose of Empower Ecuador?

Clare Acosta 25:31

So, I'm going to start with the second part of your question. Because I don't know what would have happened with a different group of people in a different group at different time, right, but what I think is so powerful is and our students are all amazing, across the board, but I'm a little biased and our group your group, for Empower Ecuador that year, just the grace with which you all handled, the news of not being able to travel and the adjustments, as a professional like blew me away, I just don't think I could have like, hoped for created or imagined a more humble and Grace filled response, then then how you all engaged with it. And within that still maintained this deep connection and commitment to the purpose of the program and to the, you know, opportunities that we did have, or we created. So like, you know, I'm thinking about meeting with the volunteers who returned and then writing letters to your prayer partners, like, those were obviously created kind of on a whim because we didn't know, like, I didn't know really how else to transition that. But you all just engaged with that so powerfully that I hope, I think I pray that the purpose of it was still there. But I think in large part that was because of, of who was around the table. And so yeah, so I think that was really it was special it's like, probably sounds too trite. But it was a really beautiful experience to witness. I will be really honest, that I was super disappointed that we couldn't travel. And even though I feel like in many ways, you all as a group, like it humbled me to think about, okay, what really is the purpose, and how are we you know, honoring the space that not just we're in, but most importantly, our neighbors are in since specifically in our case, like, it was our partner in Ecuador that had to cancel it. It wasn't canceled, like by the university, but it was our partner that said, you know, we can't receive you right now. I think it you know, it was sad and

hurt me because Ecuador is such an incredible and special place for me that like one of the best parts of my job and one of the things I most look forward to working with students is getting to be that bridge, and to invite students into this place in these relationships that are so so integral to who I've become, and to I think, a way that we live out our charism and you know, I personally do so is not a Marianas program, but I think it's so perfectly aligns with our charism and so it's a really selfish space that I just love getting to invite y'all in and then watching you invite in our neighbors in Ecuador, and then invite you in and just this really powerful exchange. So I was definitely disappointed that we didn't get to go and you know, we had put in so much work and time and that we had overcome already I think quite a few hurdles and like just like different challenges that were arising throughout the preparation time to then like the day before. Like it was, it was difficult but but I really I'm so grateful for for you for your group for you and the way that you all kind of engaged in that space. I think it was it was really beautiful.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 29:41

ya know, for sure. I, I feel that as you talk about what the purpose of Empower Ecuador and empower any, everything around us, I guess, is like, for sure, like the purpose was accomplished through the class, you know, and It was a real, I feel like really challenging for us. Because throughout the journey of like preparing to that moment, we were talking about how to empower other communities, not only Ecuador but also learning about Ecuador, and also learning about the importance of being present. And I guess it was a journey of learning how to be present to different means, you know, not only physically present, but after COVID it turned into, so how can you be present with someone, even when you cannot be physically there? Which I feel was very useful for the time of COVID in general, emotionally. And also just the reflection and how are we going to apply everything that we learned throughout that semester in that class in our daily lives and in our professional life in general. So I feel it was really like, powerful and useful in every way. Like, even though like, we didn't got to travel, I was gonna tell you that Monica to actually she looked, she looked me on Facebook-

Clare Acosta 31:02

No way!

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 31:02

Since my name is so difficult to find,

Clare Acosta 31:04

Yes. She found you?

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 31:07

She found me and she sent me a message telling me that she received a letter and just saying thank you and things like that. And it was. Yes, it was from them. Because you know how in Messenger. There is people that are not your friends. So it kind of like separates the message. I'm never on messenger, but

that day I decided to check. And it was one message and I was like Monica? what the heck is she talking about? And then I think and being like, Oh, my God, Monica from empowering Ecuador, and we just started chatting. And we're about to like, make a call. We haven't done it-

Clare Acosta 31:45

Oh my goodness I love that.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 31:46

But yeah we have been talking. Yeah. So I actually did in my exhibition, or the archive that I'm working with, I took a screenshot without her name on it, I will like our conversation, how she said, thank you and that part of my exhibition is called ways to be connected, despite social distance. And kind of reflecting on how yeah, COVID was bad not being present was bad, you know, it was sad. And it really took a lot from everybody of us despite our socioeconomic status and everything. And yeah, just how to be present despite social distance. And I think yeah, empower Ecuador did impact me in very amazing ways. So yeah,

Clare Acosta 32:34

I'm so glad to hear that. Thank you for sharing that. Yeah, that makes me so happy. And of course, I'm like, it is not at all surprised.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 32:41

Yeah,

Clare Acosta 32:42

She has such an amazing personality. She's so like, she's a go getter [inaudible]

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 32:47

just in case. But no, yeah, it was has been amazing. Thank you so much for sharing this time with me and answering some of these questions. Again, this is kind of like going to be saved in an archive in general to see the future in the future, probably, what was our experience through COVID. And what we learned, and in general, my emphasis on my exhibition in general is like, just there were like, bad moments. And obviously, it was sad for all of us, and many people that were affected by COVID and the are still getting affected. But you know, what happened in between all these messages that what was really helpful for us in different ways, I don't know. And I'm just taking the Empowering Ecuador experience as an example for that. And how we grew, you know, even through the divert-, like the the, the many challenges and so many things that happened. And honestly, I feel like empower Ecuador was during the right moment, because the class was so reflective, so connected with like, who God is and who we are as a person and what is a role that I really, like, empower me to be okay, during COVID. And, and even right now, I really look back to what happened. I still have the books I love, like [inaudible] I'm still dreaming I'm going to California, I'm gonna go to that place-

Clare Acosta 34:15

They put out a new book, you know?

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 34:17

Yesss

Clare Acosta 34:18

I don't I think it's supposed to be released soon.

Clare Acosta 34:20

They do have a new one. Yeah,

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 34:20

yeah

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 34:21

yeah. Well, in general, thank you so much.

Clare Acosta 34:25

Thank you. Thanks for asking these questions. This was really good. And I just appreciate so much you taking notes and say this is this is an important piece of the story.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 34:34

Yes.

Clare Acosta 34:34

So I really appreciate it.

Wilzave Quiles Guzman 34:36

Thank you so much.

Clare Acosta 34:44

Let's see