

Transcript of Interview with Hilma Rodriguez by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Hilma Rodriguez

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 01/18/2022

Location (Interviewee): Florida

Location (Interviewer):

Transcribed By: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we discussed included:

The particular dangers of dental work during the pandemic, working at different hospitals and clinics. No access to PPE in the beginning and reusing masks. Being pregnant at the beginning of the pandemic, losing that pregnancy, and getting pregnant again and carrying to term. Fear of COVID infections in hospitals; having to go to doctors' appointments alone. Giving birth at the peak of the Delta variant in Florida; giving birth while masked. The impact of the emergency order mandate on work, loss of income, and choosing to go back to work. Having a toddler at home, child care. Mother visiting from Canada to help with childcare, border crossing. Getting vaccinated while pregnant; having family members who are not vaccinated. Toddler's fear of contact with other people; toddler having one friend. Risk assessment. Pandemic hygiene after returning from work in medical setting: coming in the back door, straight to the shower, thorough scrubbing. Touching, hugging, and kissing in Hispanic culture. How tending to young children and working during the pandemic limited connection to the rest of the world. Receiving support from family and other healthcare practitioners. The personal sacrifices of healthcare workers. Patient entitlement around access to routine care during a pandemic. The physical sensations of wearing PPE for 10 hours straight while pregnant/breastfeeding. Nothing feeling super safe anymore. Human resilience.

Kit Heintzman 00:00

Hello

Hilma Rodriguez 00:01

Hello.

Kit Heintzman 00:04

Would you please start by telling me your full name, the date, the time and your location?

Hilma Rodriguez 00:10

My name is Hilma Rodriguez. The date is January 18 2022. The time is 1:14pm. And I'm in Florida, USA.

Kit Heintzman 00:22

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under Creative Commons License attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Hilma Rodriguez 00:33

Yes, I consent.

Kit Heintzman 00:35

Great, I would really love to start by hearing a bit about you and this place that you're speaking from thinking about whoever might be listening to this, how would you want them to understand your experiences?

Hilma Rodriguez 00:47

So I think I work as a healthcare dentist. So I'm coming from that perspective, I'm coming in the perspective of the mother, and then of also as somebody who needed health care during the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 01:05

Can you tell me what the word pandemic has come to mean to you?

Hilma Rodriguez 01:10

Pandemic has just reframed what I value as important in my life. And it's taught me not to take things for granted that I've always taken for granted until now. And it's something that I'm really looking forward to being over.

Kit Heintzman 01:31

I'd like to follow up on some of what you said in the introduction, which is asking, tell me a bit about the experience of being a healthcare worker at this time.

Hilma Rodriguez 01:40

So at the beginning, at the pandemic, I work as a pediatric dentist, and I have to be directly involved in working inside people's mouths, which is how Coronavirus is that to be transmitted. And so there's no way for me to do my work without putting myself at increased risk. And I work at different hospitals. I also work in an outpatient clinic at the beginning of the pandemic, one of the biggest challenges was that the long term effects weren't known. I happen to be pregnant at that time, so I was able to have other dentists cover me. But then I was completely obviously cut off from income, or I had no idea like a lot of uncertainty. When I was able to return to work, there was no access to PPE, like the personal protective equipment. So we had masks that I got from a friend of a friend that had somehow gotten it from some basement who knows what kind of black market mask that was. But I had to use that same mask, taking care of it so much. And there's only so much you can take care of a mask. So that was one of the challenges I think still to this day. Because still to this day, in order to work, I have to wear my full and 95 Mask my goggles. My other mask to protect the original and 95 masks the face shield, I wear a gown I wear a cap to protect my hair. And it's just something that I was never exposed to before. And something that I used to take for granted just using one single surgical mask to work. Now the PPE situation has gotten a lot better, we're able to have new and 95 until the old one is soiled. But previous to that even the hospitals had to have these treated and sterilized they weren't sure how the sterilizing procedures could affect the way that the masks were working. I was pregnant again, I didn't know if all the chemicals and fumes that they were using could potentially have long lasting effects on the baby that I was carrying. And so now I'm grateful that I'm able to work and I'm grateful that I still don't feel like I've caught Coronavirus somehow with everything that's been going on in the world. And it's just an adjustment

Kit Heintzman 04:26

Could me to talk about how you negotiate with the places you work and decided to take leave while pregnant.

Hilma Rodriguez 04:42

So I was on leave while pregnant only for the first few months. And that was only because there was an emergency order where they had to close down elective surgeries or paused and dental falls under elective surgeries. and dental clinics were closed, regardless of how the clinic wanted to proceed. So during that time I took leave, because there were other dentists that all shared equal response to emergency visits only. And that had to be a true emergency, not something that could be solved over the phone, like with antibiotics or, or delaying necessary treatment. And then once the emergency mandate order was lifted, I was back to work regardless. So regardless of my pregnancy status at the time, and that was not something that I was forced to do. But it was something that I chose to do, because I had no idea how long the pandemic could last. Still, it's still going on two years later. And I took whatever measures I could to try to protect myself. But there are a lot of kids that are there just further checkups, and things like that. But there are a lot of kids that are really having a lot of pain. I see a lot of recent immigrant populations and a lot of kids that have just pain, swelling, infections, things that you really don't want to delay that long, and had already been delayed. So I made the choice to go back to work, regardless of my pregnancy status at that point.

Kit Heintzman 06:31

Do you remember when you first heard about the pandemic?

Hilma Rodriguez 06:35

Yes. I was standing in the kitchen. My father was visiting. And he was reading the news and telling me about this new Coronavirus and how they were thinking of shutting things down. And just my response to him in that moment was, there's no way they can shut things down for two weeks, because what am I going to do with a toddler inside the house for two weeks, and he gets bored in a minute. I can't keep him entertained at home in two weeks. So what a reality check, but it was not two weeks to keep a toddler at home.

Kit Heintzman 07:14

And then how did your sort of progression of understanding change over time and sort of still the early days of the pandemic?

Hilma Rodriguez 07:25

My, I think I went through all the stages of grief, like and just denial. And then finally, I think I've just come to acceptance, I think there are some things that are never really going to go back to pre pandemic. Like every time I come home from work, I immediately shower in a way different than I used to shower before. Before. I could just have like a quick, normal shower. Now I scrubbed down like my neck, the inside of my ears, like I won't go in the front door, I come in the back door directly to the shower, I take off everything. And still, I think I'm going to continue that even after the pandemic is over.

Kit Heintzman 08:20

How did you adapt some of your day to day living inside the home when you were there at the beginning.

Hilma Rodriguez 08:28

So pre pandemic, our day to day living involves a lot of going outside of the home, a lot of visiting parks visiting family going out to eat, things like that, then, now it's still I can't take my little kid to the park. He started developing fear of seeing other people because he thought that if he got close to people that that was something

bad. Just from watching his parents reactions, my reaction of trying to get him not to get close to strangers. We still haven't gone out to eat, because I think adults would be able to mitigate the risks at this point. But a toddler will put everything in anything in their mouth. So we still haven't gone out to eat. We're still having trouble even going to outside parks. Because same thing. Childcare is really difficult. And so being able to have predictable somewhere to put your child when you're at work. And both my husband and I work in jobs that are very difficult to cancel last minute, and we don't have any family support here. So we're very dependent on childcare, then that has been a huge deal just now. And my toddlers class got shut down for 10 days because there was a kid Have Coronavirus so that's shut down for 10 days, you got to figure out what you're gonna do with this child because you can't take him to work and you can't leave him at home. So what are you gonna do?

Kit Heintzman 10:13

What have you been doing?

Hilma Rodriguez 10:14

And so I flew my mom in from Canada. But she's getting, she can only be here for six months. And at the five month mark, so we're trying to save those last two weeks for absolute emergency times. And her flying down is kind of a big deal because the borders have been closed. And there's very strict testing and quarantining guide in both directions, but we don't have anything else. So, what are we going to do?

Kit Heintzman 10:55

Would you be willing to share a bit about what it was like going through pregnancy during the pandemic?

Hilma Rodriguez 11:04

Yes. That was a big role that the pandemic played in my life because I went through a pregnancy loss and a pregnant answer full term pregnancy. So I went the first, the beginning of the pandemic, that's when I was pregnant with the pregnancy loss. And so I had to go to all the doctor's appointments in as much protection as I could, because not very much was known. But then all the ultrasounds, I went to an ultrasound, there was no more heartbeat. And so we knew that we either had to go through a procedure to terminate to get the remainder of that Atomy or I could try to pass it naturally at home. So because I was scared of being in the hospital, I tried to pass it at home, which was fine, except that I've never seen that much blood in my life. Like I work in health care. I see blood all the time. My husband's medical doctor, he has never seen that much blood in his life. I thought I was gonna die. But I was scared that if I went to the hospital, I would get Coronavirus and then also die. So it was pre vaccines, pre treatment, pre anything. And I was just in a chair trying to drink as much fluids as I could, trying to monitor and weigh like how much blood loss I'd had calling the on call people to see if they're sure that this sounds like a normal amount of blood loss. Luckily, I was okay. I didn't need any kind of like blood transfusions or things like that. Nobody got Coronavirus out of that, the experience, but it was difficult because I had to go to all of the appointments, all of the follow up appointments. And I wasn't allowed to have anybody come with me. So it was something that I had to undergo completely alone. And I had to sit in an OBGYN office with all of these super happy pregnant people. And by myself undergoing a pregnancy loss. So that was definitely different because of Coronavirus. And I think it would have been without it because it's a very difficult experience to go through just normally for anybody and everybody processes that differently. But the added complexity of having to do it completely alone. Because you're not allowed to have anybody in there with you or feeling like you don't have the opportunity to fall back on the health care system because you don't know if that's going to be a good or bad thing for you to do. Definitely made it more difficult. And so after we recovered from that a few months after

that I got pregnant again. And this time around went a lot better. But I was giving birth at the peak Coronavirus Delta variant here in Miami Dade. So on my floor, half I would say half of the rooms were mothers that were Coronavirus positive. And so you would go out to the middle circulating desk and you would just see sheets of plastic trying to separate the other rooms from the rooms that I was in. I labored and gave birth completely wearing a mask because I didn't know how it could be transfer from their rooms to my room, you would see all the health care personnel putting on and taking off their, their active equipment depending on which room they were visiting. So it was a little scarier because you didn't know like if I had any kind of complication, if there were even going to be enough healthcare personnel to take care of me if there was even going to be rooms to be admitted in the ICU, because at that time was like the peak. So the the rooms were full, the health care people were at capacity. And that's the time that I decided to give birth to my second child.

Hilma Rodriguez 15:45

So everything went well. I'm very grateful to all the staff and all the people that were able to help you there. But that also was different because of Coronavirus. I was worried I was gonna have to give birth by myself. But luckily, that was not a problem. I was able to have my husband there, only my husband, he wasn't allowed to go in and out of the hospital for any reason. I wasn't allowed to have my mother, his mother or anybody else, the way that I had been with my first child, but that's okay.

Kit Heintzman 16:21

Thank you so much for sharing all of that. Um, I'd like to ask what you found, what was supporting you, in that moment or that difficult experience?

Hilma Rodriguez 16:35

I'm supporting me. I feel like family again, like I tend to be very, like detail oriented, very, like Taipei, like I want everything. I really want to not just wear the mask, I want to have the shield like I want. And just seeing my husband do all that even though I know how uncomfortable he is and seeing his family do all that. And even if they're far away, just having the ability to FaceTime people to actually see them. I felt supported by the medical staff, I felt supported the whole time.

Kit Heintzman 17:26

Thinking to the importance of seeing people and maintaining those connections, how is your relationship to touch changed over the course of the pandemic?

Hilma Rodriguez 17:38

It's definitely changed. That giving people hugs and things like that. So here in South Florida, I think there's a lot of Hispanic culture. And I come from Hispanic culture and touching and hugging and kissing on the cheek is a big part of that culture. And I think it was a lot more resistant to leaving, as in the pandemic than what I imagine it has been like in Canada or in other parts of the world. But I think it's it's making a comeback here. Even though everybody's still I mean Coronavirus is still here, I think that physical touch has been so important that it's making a comeback. I've been receiving hugs, which I'm a lot more tentative to give probably like three times this week, which is a shock.

Kit Heintzman 18:39

2020 through present has had a lot going on beyond a pandemic. I was wondering if you would be able to share a little bit about what some of the bigger issues have been on your mind over this period of time.

Hilma Rodriguez 18:55

Um, I don't even know my world is so small. Right now my world is just almost like getting through the days to the other side. And what I imagine the experience of other people during the pandemic I think has been a little bit different from mine perspective, just because my child was so just trying to keep him entertained on a day to day basis has me more disconnected or at work to make sure that I'm very diligent and don't drop the ball and not only to keep myself safe or staff safe, but patients safe from each other that I've been a lot more disconnected from the rest of the world than before and like actual bigger issues I'm in my own little bubble.

Kit Heintzman 19:57

What is partnership meant to you throughout the pandemic?

Hilma Rodriguez 20:02

Um, well, my husband has been my main partner, because we're both here in Florida. And there's absolutely no way that I think either one of us could have done it without the other. Or just to making sure that the kids are okay. Like there's no break. There's no grandma, there's no Park, there's no place that you can send them to. So there's no way that one I mean, people are doing it by themselves all the time, but I have no idea how it's been important. emotionally, mentally, physically. It's super important.

Kit Heintzman 20:51

How much do you think your toddler understands about what's going on?

Hilma Rodriguez 20:57

I think he understands quite a bit. So he's two and a half, about a turn three. So most of his life has been with Coronavirus, and before Coronavirus, he was too young to understand. So I think I worry about the long term effects that it could have on him. I'm always trying to balance the pros vs cons of doing certain activities. And I don't want him to be scared of other people. Like I don't want him to go up to strangers and get abducted like before, but I don't want him to be scared that he goes up to anybody now he's going to be sick or that he can't share things or um, the of the long term effects it's going to have on him whenever he sees my work clothes. He points at me and yells I have Coronavirus on me. So I have to even if it's in the morning where I'm going to leave like No, not yet. I'm going to leave to work. He's like mommy I've Coronavirus on you, you have to go shower. So I've got we're yet to see, I'm trying my best he has one friend. So at least he has one friend and I'm trying my best to see how we can socialize him after that.

Kit Heintzman 22:15

Would you give an example of one of the activities where you are weighing those pros and cons?

Hilma Rodriguez 22:21

Well, I'm seeing his one friend, his only neighbor friend. His friend has parents and his parents, one of them works. And that friend has grandparents. And they get together and have dinner sometime. So it's not just seeing one friend. It's seeing all of the contacts that that friend could have. Or right now they haven't been going to school because I've had grandma taking care of them. Because it's just too risky. But that was a big thing. Do I

take them to school so that we can both work? Or do I keep them home? And put that added burden on a grandparent that's getting older and now has to take care of two babies? And for how long? How long? Is it reasonable to wait without having him socialize or go to school? Is it a month? Is it a year? You because there's no end date that you have no idea how long this is going to take. So now he's been going on a month that he hasn't gone to school because of this new variant. But we're running out of grammar time. So he's going to go back to school, or we're going to have to quit working. So that's a pro and con type. What are you going to do?

Kit Heintzman 23:49

What was the conversation with your mom like when you first asked her to come or she offered?

Hilma Rodriguez 23:57

It was really she also is a dentist and she works by herself. She's the only dentist at her office. So for her to come was pretty big deal. She had to sell her office and retire completely to make sure that her workers the people that relied on her for income would now have somebody else that could pay their salaries and and all the patients that had been seeing her that that office would be passed on to something else. So it was probably like a good six months of work on her part to put her office up for sale, sell everything. decided what to do with her house. She's decided to rent out her house. So now in order to quarantine she's like in the basement in the unfinished cold Canadian basement. So it was a big deal for her to come but it was her As much as me just meeting me in the middle just both deciding that this was the best thing for the new baby for the old baby for our family, but I haven't seen my brother since before Coronavirus. So I've seen him through FaceTime a few times, but it's been probably two and a half years because we didn't know it was coming. So we didn't know we needed that a trip to see each other.

Kit Heintzman 25:29

What does health mean to you?

Hilma Rodriguez 25:34

Everything. And so I think my husband was saying a quote, like a healthy person wants a lot of things, but a sick person just wants one thing and that's health. And it means a lot. Just actually, on Monday, I had a nurse and he was just out with Coronavirus. Right now at my clinic we have five assistants that are out with Coronavirus. And he was telling me that he knows the patient that gave it to him that his job description required him to hold this patient still while she got spinal surgery and it had to happen because even though she had active Coronavirus, they couldn't postpone it. And he knows that holding that patient gave him Coronavirus. And he was sure his wife, like his wife had passed out and she didn't know if she was gonna make it. So just like the personal sacrifices that people do in order to provide that for us. Like when you see it firsthand. It's easy to, to hear stories, but when you hear it firsthand, and the sacrifices people really are, like sacrificing your wife, almost to see this, to be able to hold this patient while she gets her spinal surgery. That's a big deal. Like that's not something to take for granted. And I think a lot of people do take it for granted. We have a lot of patients that will come in. Like last week, I had a patient that came in that was so congested, she couldn't even breathe from her mouth, coughing wildly, and we're just like, Mom, we're gonna have to reschedule this, like you're your daughter's not in pain. You're okay, come back in two weeks. And the mom got so angry because it was inconvenient for her, because she'd already taken time off work. And she was already there. And we owed her to do routine care. And that's crazy. To me, that's crazy that it's just, I understand that it's inconvenient for her, but she could infect so many

people like we have five people out right now because of the exact same situation. So it's just it's interesting to see from both perspectives, and not something to take for granted.

Kit Heintzman 28:12

What are some of the things that you want for your own health and the health of people around you?

Hilma Rodriguez 28:21

I just good health. I don't, I don't know exactly how to answer that just taking care of ourselves a lot. As much as we can. Just seeing that good. Health isn't a granted thing that you can't take that for granted. It just means so much more than it did before.

Kit Heintzman 28:59

What does safety mean to you?

Hilma Rodriguez 29:05

Safety two has been a really big topic, especially because of things like personal protective equipment. And what makes you feel safe when you're trying to provide treatment or anything like that. But it's painful, like my nose has actually remodeled. I feel like to hold the mute and 95 in a way that it didn't used to. My nose didn't look like that before. So it's I wouldn't take my mask off in order to feel safe for 10 hours straight. I wouldn't drink water. I wouldn't eat food. I anywhere that I would feel comfortable other than going to the car to them take my mask off to them eat, but there wasn't enough time because it's not just taking off your mask. It's taking off your gown is taking off your shield, it's taking off everything you have up and not infecting yourself while you take it off and then re putting it on. And there's no more new ones to put on. So I spent probably a year and a half just going 10 hours straight, even though I was pregnant, even though I was breastfeeding, not eating, and not drinking during the day, to try to keep my personal protective equipment good, so that I could feel safe so that I could provide health care, and try to keep my baby safe while I was pregnant or myself safe so I could care for my babies, things like that.

Kit Heintzman 30:47

What are some of your hopes for the immediate future?

Hilma Rodriguez 30:53

Oh, sorry, you were cutting out? I didn't?

Kit Heintzman 30:58

What are some of your? What do you think's coming in the near future?

Hilma Rodriguez 31:04

Hope. I'm really hopeful. I'm good. I feel like things are just gonna keep getting better and better, the more we learn. Just good. Hope that's the only way I can summarize it.

Kit Heintzman 31:26

Can I ask more concretely hope about what? Like what you'd like to see.

Hilma Rodriguez 31:36

So, um, well, right now, we're in Florida, but we're my personal, my family is going to move closer to my husband's family. So that we can, my baby can have cousins at least. So I'm just, I'm hopeful about the idea of having friends, or family gatherings, or going out to the park and playing or having a birthday party, or it's traveling in an airplane. All of these things that we used to do all the time, that just seemed like this amazing thing that might one day happen again.

Kit Heintzman 32:26

I would love to hear anything about how you've adapted celebrating or not celebrating events like birthdays.

Hilma Rodriguez 32:35

Um, well, our birthday, my husband's birthday. We had my babies one friend, because it was a good experience for him to at least be friends with his one friend. It was a good excuse. But none of my husband's friends or none of his families or his anybody just just my baby. You got to bring a friend and then lots of food. Still presence. Singing, dancing, but I'll in the backyard, just ourselves. Still enjoying as much as we could FaceTiming telephone talking. But that's it.

Kit Heintzman 33:28

How have you been determining what feels safe to you?

Hilma Rodriguez 33:37

Well, there's, there's a lot of things that feel unsafe. So pretty much I don't think there's anything that really feels super safe. Anything? Yeah. Everything just seems like there's risk involved.

Kit Heintzman 34:03

Self Care has been a really big part of the pandemic narrative and I'm wondering if you've, if self care has been available to you what that's looked like.

Hilma Rodriguez 34:15

Um, I feel like a shower, if counts a warm shower, and even if it's to scrub all the parts off where my PPE wasn't covering me, right? And because that's like a moment where it's just me and the warm water and things like that. But other than that, I I've been cutting my own hair. I've been cutting everybody the little baby's hair. I there's nothing else that I could really say that I've gotten and done out for self care.

Kit Heintzman 35:00

This is my second last question. So we know that we're in this moment where there's all of this like biomedical research happening in better understand COVID. I'm wondering what you think people in the humanities and the social sciences can be doing to help us understand the social reality at this moment?

Hilma Rodriguez 35:21

Um, I'm not sure I just, I really do think that humans in general are very social creatures. And this has just been a very interesting experiment to test, like resilience, or I don't, I don't know. It's so difficult. All the the misinformation and information that gets out there. I mean, personally, both my father and my brother are not vaccinated up until this point. And I was vaccinated, even while pregnant to the point where the person giving me

the shot was like, You're sure your doctor is okay with this. And I almost had to pressure her into giving me the shot. So I've tried everything I can do. But the two people mean, my family's only four people and two people are not vaccinated. So I feel like that plays into the social and I don't know, I don't know how to fix it. There's nothing I can say there's nothing I can do. There's, I can't get through them. Like, it's just too strong of a barrier to go through. So I think that that's interesting, the way that that movement has played into everything. And that's all.

Kit Heintzman 36:59

Would you share a little bit about what those what those conversations have been like? Or felt like? Understood understanding that you have made different decisions in your family?

Hilma Rodriguez 37:13

Yes, well, first you try science or logic menu, try like guilt. Then you try, just like philosophy reasoning, like if A then B, like, how can you not see this? And then after an hour of trying, you put it for rest and try again the next time. But you have to try even if that's negative for your relationship? Because what if something happens? And you didn't even try? So? Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 37:54

And this is my last question. So history is filled with all kinds of things, and also missing all kinds of things when it gets written. And I'd like you to imagine a historian of the future, someone who's has zero lived experience at this moment. So they were not alive during the pandemic. What would you tell them what kinds of stories which you tell them need to be told what shouldn't be forgotten about this moment?

Hilma Rodriguez 38:26

I really think it's the way that everybody's been working together. Like, probably because I'm exposed to healthcare workers so vividly. But just the sacrifices that healthcare workers really have been putting in, in order to make sure that society and the well being of everybody else is taken care of. And that it was really scary, because you would see people dying, and still know that you could get that and that could happen to you and your family. Like, my concern wasn't even so much of me dying. And then it was a we live in Lee living and giving it to my mom, and then my mom dying, or giving it to my kid, and then him dying or leaving him without a mom. So I, I just want to make sure that the role that healthcare workers have played is a very personal one. Because there was a lot of sacrifice, to continue to provide that health care for other people.

Kit Heintzman 39:45

I want to thank you so much for the generosity of your time, and your answers. And at this point, I just want to open some space. If there's anything you'd like to share that my questions haven't brought you to to please do so now.

Hilma Rodriguez 40:00

No I think I've hit on a little bit of areas that it's really been affecting my life

Kit Heintzman 40:10

thank you so much