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## Oral history interview with José Rafael Cruz Ortiz, March 9, 2022

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## ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

### Oral History Interview with José Rafael Cruz Ortiz

#### PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of José Rafael Cruz Ortiz conducted by Juan Gabriel Cruz Ortiz on March 9, 2022. This interview is part of course work done by students at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Juan G Cruz Ortiz

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Prof. Marci E. Denesiuk

#### Key for transcription

> **Juan Cruz (Interviewer)**

< **José Cruz (Interviewee)**

> **Interviewer** Well then good morning, good afternoon, good evening to anyone that is going to hear this interview. I hope you are all well. I find myself here with my narrator for today, José Cruz. Grateful José that you are here with me. With no further chat let's start this interview. We agreed on conducting this interview in Spanish because we felt it was the language that we found easier to express ourselves, and with no further ado we shall start. José, what is your full name and how old are you?

< **Interviewee** Well, I'm José Cruz Ortiz and I'm 22 years old.

> **Interviewer** Where are you naturally from, where were you born?

< **Interviewee** Well, I'm from Bayamon, naturally from over there but I'm currently living in Mayaguez because I'm a student at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

> **Interviewer** Ok ok, and from Bayamon and Mayaguez, what are the biggest differences you

take away?

< **Interviewee** First of all, of the environment umm, the environment in Bayamon well it's part of the Metro.

> **Interviewer** Yeah yeah.

< **Interviewee** It's all buildings umm, a lot of streets and traffic, but over here in Mayaguez, clearly there is some traffic but it's only in moments that we know them by peak hours. But there are much more rural friendly people, much calmer over here.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, I understand completely. In the time I have been over here I have also felt the difference between the metro and with a much more rural area as it is Mayaguez. Who were in your family nucleus, and who were those people when you grew up?

< **Interviewee** Well at least my family nucleus... there is, well I lived with my brother, with both parents of mine and additionally I grew up with my grandparents. I used to go a lot to Naranjito and my father's mother is practically my neighbor and well a lot of friends that are from Bayamon and Levittown, Toa Alta.

> **Interviewer** Just to mention the person that I am interviewing is my blood brother, so if we agree on a lot of experiences, it's because we lived them together.

< **Interviewee** Exactly.

> **Interviewer** How was your childhood?

< **Interviewee** Understand that I had a good childhood. I had a lot of, I studied at Colegio de La Salle. A lot of people I know are from over there, well yeah, I had a good childhood umm, I was an athlete. Athlete for my whole life, I played volleyball, basketball in the end any sport you could think of I played it. And I love video games too since I've been a kid, I played a lot and yeah, I overall I had a great childhood and yeah always playing and studying always.

> **Interviewer** What was your favorite game? I know there's a lot, but you know.

< **Interviewee** From Sports?

> **Interviewer** From Sports and video games.

< **Interviewee** Well growing up my favorite game was Pokémon, There's no doubt about it, Pokémon and Kirby. And in sports I loved basketball and volleyball I played basketball for my whole life and when I got to the university, I started playing volleyball. Recently I've been picking up on surfing.

> **Interviewer** That's amazing man. Do you have any pets?

< **Interviewee** Well yeah, I have a pet it's a kitten called Chimi.

> **Interviewer** Chimi umm, Chimi lives with us here at Mayaguez in barrio El Seco. Chimi is the best.

< **Interviewee** Chimi is the best I agree.

> **Interviewer** Then, how old is Chimi?

< **Interviewee** Chimi, I think is 3 months old.

> **Interviewer** So yeah, we're talking about a baby in a small house so you already can imagine how chaotic it is. But yeah, he is our love here in Mayaguez.

> **Interviewer** Well, I think this question was already answered but, where do you live right now who are the members of your household?

< **Interviewee** Exactly, well currently I'm living in Mayaguez, even though my house is clearly in Bayamon and well I live with, over there in Bayamon I live with my parents and my brother every time he is with my parents, and well when I'm over here in Mayaguez, I live with my brother.

> **Interviewer** Then what are you doing in general right now?

< **Interviewee** Well in general I'm studying, If God permits I only I need one more year of college to graduate. Well, I'm studying, playing volleyball and yeah basically it's studying and playing volleyball.

> **Interviewer** You're letting the flow go steadily.

< **Interviewee** Exactly.

> **Interviewer** Doing your duty but without sense of urgency.

< **Interviewee** Yes correct.

> **Interviewer** I understand completely. Well José, now we're going to pass to some questions that are more topic-based that are from the class and if you feel uncomfortable in answering any of them you can tell me, and we can skip it. But umm, well, if you're not available to answer any of these questions just let me know. The first one, the themes are from the hurricane and the pandemic. Okay the first one I'm going to ask you; how did Hurricane Maria affect you and your family?

< **Interviewee** Well then at least to my family we were like basically the 99% of all Puerto Rico losing us without power water or Communications we didn't know anything about our grandparents at the time my grandfather was very sick, and we didn't know anything about him, and we didn't know if he was alive or dead because there wasn't any power to help him. In our home, it got flooded in certain areas. Water started getting in the house through the breakers and we had to do crazy things so that our house didn't get flooded. And well yeah, the hurricane hit

us hard, but we persevered.

> **Interviewer** And in general, we were blessed.

< **Interviewee** Oh yes.

> **Interviewer** That nothing happened to us.

< **Interviewee** Exactly. At least where we lived nothing happened to us because also, we lived in a mountain, and we lived at the other side, like at the side where the wind did not hit as strong. The wind hit the mountain and we were at the other side umm, and that protected us a lot.

> **Interviewer** Yeah man. Was it difficult to know that that year, that if I'm not mistaken it was your senior year?

< **Interviewee** Yeah. It was going to be totally, well you were at the potential of the administration saying well the year is over and you weren't going to live your senior year. Yeah, I got to the point that I said well I think I'm going to have to repeat my year 12 because I don't see the light at the end of the tunnel. I didn't know anything about my friends, I later got told that they had to evacuate their houses they had to leave to other places, they lost some possessions, but at the end of the day there wasn't any major losses close to my friends.

> **Interviewer** And did you get accustomed to this Sudden Change?

< **Interviewee** Well, it has been difficult because since I, since 12th grade, I haven't had even one normal year. It has always been, we started with the hurricane in 12th grade and then came the earthquakes the hurricanes the protest in the University and finally the pandemic.

> **Interviewer** The protest at the capital.

< **Interviewee** Yeah, the protest at the University umm, I haven't had a normal year, in reality it gets to you, I don't know but I'm still here.

> **Interviewer** Exactly we're still here. What did you do in your free time during so many months that we were without power?

< **Interviewee** Well, I was working around my house, Helping the neighbors, I was with my dad and his big car, and we went around, and we could pass through debris, if there was a hazardous area it was easier for us to pass through. And we helped a lot of people, from the community. Even our neighbors, Trees that fell down we were there cutting down trees moving them out of the way, and cleaning around the house because a tree fell down in our backyard, it did affect our house, but yeah that tree fell in the roof of our house umm, a palm tree fell in the front yard, and we couldn't take the cars out of the driveway.

> **Interviewer** In reality it was a humbling experience.

< **Interviewee** Exactly.

> **Interviewer** Like we had to go down, not go down that's not the word, be humble and work for the community. And at the end of the day meet new people.

< **Interviewee** We met a lot of new people, I met, I thought I lived in an old people community but in reality, there were a lot a lot of kids of our age.

> **Interviewer** Yeah yeah. Then, well that's another question that I wanted to ask you, how was it meeting other people that were also playing basketball or volleyball inviting you like hey come over here.

< **Interviewee** Yeah, really it was like it was like an experience like eye opening. You stay like, dang there is a lot of people that live close to me that I can socialize with, but we don't notice because we're always in our house in our computers and your phone. And the fact that everybody lost power and water and all those things it makes you go out of your house and see the outside. At the end of the day, we were obligated to meet various people basically and I don't regret it.

> **Interviewer** Things happen for a reason and that's why we're here. Alright now this question for me is a little bit touchier for both of us and for everybody and well you know hurricane Maria destroyed a lot of lives but the covid umm, the pandemic, how has it affected your mental health to this date?

< **Interviewee** At the moment I feel much better, but at a certain moment I had to look for professional help, because I wanted to quit everything I did not really want to be studying at the University, I was tired of me, I mean I don't know I didn't see, I didn't see hope in continuing and like.

> **Interviewer** The grass of the other side didn't seem too green.

< **Interviewee** Literally I didn't see the end to it, all this, I even thought of enlisting at the Army. Oh, thank God, I didn't do it with what it's happening right now.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, with the problems nowadays.

< **Interviewee** With the problems over there at Ukraine, thank God, I didn't do it but in reality, I was I was very exhausted I didn't want to know anything about the University I didn't want.

> **Interviewer** In reality this mental health topic is super super important and to everybody it should be and when you feel like that a lot of people also feel like that because those feelings get stuck to each other. When you see someone's face and the only thing you see is a mask another masking at top of that one you can feel like people are distanced from you, in reality it doesn't motivate anybody to feel happy.

< **Interviewee** Being locked down for so so much time because I didn't go out for any reason, I heard of people that went to the beach River, and in my house, I wasn't allowed to go anywhere. I requested to my mom to please let me go to the supermarket with you so I can see

the light of the day and she always told me no you're staying here behind bars. I didn't go out at all in reality I lost my head for some time.

> **Interviewer** Absolutely, seeing four walls all day is hard.

< **Interviewee** People said why do you sleep so much what do you want me to do if I do go out at all I can't I have people are not letting me go out and for real it was a very hard time for me and even more that my escape of life has been sports, I'm always moving up and down I can't be so much time locked down I have to do some activity. Athletic activities, and I went so much time without playing volleyball that I also thought about quitting because I thought how hard it was going to be to comeback.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, now starting from scratch.

< **Interviewee** Exactly it was like starting from the beginning again since it was months since I last touched a ball. And suddenly it was like let's go play, I was obviously going to be a disaster. And since I'm so competitive it was worse.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, we know about that competitive side. How did you react once the University close down the doors since that was your center of socializing socializing?

< **Interviewee** Well for me it was a hard hit, Initially it wasn't that bad I was like dang I have a free week and that it was too then it passed to a month 2 months and then they said well the university is not going to open up I was feeling like in first instance, some people were like oh perfect I don't have to go to university, but not for me I like seeing people's faces I'm super social how to be talking with people I can't stay locked down and that was literally what happened. And that was exactly what happened to me they locked me down don't talk to anybody stay studying, but I can't do that.

> **Interviewer** Yeah yeah, that takes away from your motivation, because at the end of the day we live to be around other people being alone always reading a book it's kind of hard for some people.

< **Interviewee** Exactly living organisms are social for a reason, every animal all of them are social the fact that I got locked down in four walls and people saying no you can do anything because of this this and that and I was like, for me it was hard-hitting and the fact that I couldn't go between classes to the cafeteria get in touch with my friends talk at least 30 minutes so that then I could go to class and say see you later man.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, those small interactions exchanges.

< **Interviewee** Yeah, those exchanges weren't happening and in reality, it was difficult for me.

> **Interviewer** Okay then talking about distance, how do you feel about distant learning and how has it affected you in in your learning process.

< **Interviewee** Well in learning it has been worse, at least my grades are the same but it's kind of

hard to learn distance oh, all you can hear is a voice behind the screen telling you this is this because of this and that and not.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, it's always necessary to have that social contact.

< **Interviewee** Exactly it's necessary that social that human presence for people to genuinely learn because in reality I felt so cold learning, I mean somebody is talking to me through a screen, might as well learn through YouTube and I forgot about the class.

> **Interviewer** Exactly. Sorry for the appendix I'm about to do but sometimes I feel like that that I see that class online and we're paying some credits to receive literally a video that I can see it any place and professors categorize you with a letter. Either you failed or you won, and you don't even learn, and it's not the fact that I don't want to learn you just get to a point that you get stuck because of a social frustration.

< **Interviewee** Yeah, it's like the brain gets frozen, I mean it's better to have the professor in front of you because he sees you, He asks you "do you understand?" yes? no? what did you understand? what you not understand? But that cold screen doesn't invite you to ask questions. The professor sent the video explaining and you had a question on a topic, and you couldn't ask live questions since it was only a recording. You know it's just a recording the professor is not actually there.

> **Interviewer** Office hours are so inefficient.

< **Interviewee** And we wrote them emails and most of the time they are not available. No, I have this thing to do, or the other thing to do and it was so hard and on top of that we were off lockdown.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, I understand that System is very Inefficient.

< **Interviewee** Horribly inefficient.

> **Interviewer** Well then going back to covid per se, did you ever feel fear of being infected or that did you get infected previously?

< **Interviewee** Well, you see, I got really scared and it was that I went to see a friend and I greeted him I hugged him and yeah it was a normal day and the next day he wrote me hey José my brother is covid positive and I was with him on a vacation trip 2 days ago. And I was like don't tell me this, And I started feeling funny and things and I went to test for covid, but I came out negative. But the thing I was feeling funny about was that our apartment was fumigated and that smoke, im asthmatic, it affected me my lungs and everything.

> **Interviewer** Not only you because at that moment I was with you, and we felt horrible you know. At that moment we both thought we had covid.

< **Interviewee** Yeah, I thought I had covid and it was the fumigation smoke. Yeah, it was that. The test came out negative and everything.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, but we felt horrible, horrible. If covid is like that then it's really bad. Well then during this. How did you manage your emotions for you know things like dang I can't go see Grandpa since he is so compromised grandma grandma is also very compromised, how did you manage those emotions on not seeing your loved ones?

< **Interviewee** Well in a certain way I manage them poorly because all I did was erase from my mind those people so that I didn't feel bad for not seeing them. I would say like, Well I can't see them I'll just erase them from my mind till I can see them again and yeah in a way it's very bad because you get cold as a person.

> **Interviewer** Exactly.

< **Interviewee** Basically, you just lose your love for your family and close ones. For literally erasing them from your mind and well I did that and it's not that good. The bad thing is the narrative people don't even get close to your loved ones nothing nothing at all, And when the opportunity rises that you could go see them you don't do it that also happens to me it's hard to go see them take some time because he literally took them out of your priority list. Because, you say I can't put it as a priority because I can't show up at Grandma's house because I want to, then I'll invent them a lot of excuses.

> **Interviewer** Exactly.

< **Interviewee** I always take out an excuse like yeah, I don't go see them like old times, it was like let's go to Grandpa's house and bang we got there, let's go see our uncle bang and we were there. And honestly, it's very sad because we have a lot of beautiful experiences with them and while they're on their moments, you know.

> **Interviewer** Exactly in their last moments, talking about grandparents.

< **Interviewee** Our Grandparents are already in their last moments, and I will want to see them a lot before they go. Sure. How all this, Also the University so much to study I'm already finishing which are the harder classes and yeah, it's hard sometimes but I have to take some time to go see them.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, trying is always what counts and having those intentions in her heart always. Okay José so already finished this question section of reflection, I mean, this next section is of reflection the one that I will enter now, already finished with the topic questions. Well then, past these four years, do you think you could handle another catastrophe like the one that hurricane Maria was?

< **Interviewee** I mean it will be hard, I understand I can it will be hard but at least already know what to expect and since I already went to my appointments yeah umm, I had psychological help at least I already know yes, I already know how to work with it. But if it wasn't for those appointments and all that, I think I wouldn't know how to handle the situation I couldn't handle another one.

> **Interviewer** In reality I understand how you feel but adding to that if you would experience the hurricane instead of in Bayamon, over here at Mayaguez, how would it be that difference?

< **Interviewee** Well then it will be very hard because here in Mayaguez our resources are limited to what our parents can give to us at Bayamon, and you know the good thing of being over there was that we were with our parents, and we were altogether and if something happened, we were all there to respond. but put it like something happened to us over here and they're two hours away or if something happens to them and we're two hours from them and still if we're two hours away we're not going to take two hours to get there hence a lot more then since once a hurricane passes roads will be blocked and congested there is going to be floods, there will be no power, accidents will happen.

> **Interviewer** That #2 is going to be horrible.

< **Interviewee** The streets will be horrible imagine we will get there in about 3 1/2 to four hours to Bayamon and it's not going to be nice.

> **Interviewer** Exactly. And even if there is any access.

< **Interviewee** And if we get there, food and water will be a problem.

> **Interviewer** And we are so close the sea over here, also the storm surge can prove very troublesome for us.

< **Interviewee** Exactly. And we at least live at a waterfront and that is going to be horrible, the waves will almost reach or reach our house. It's going to be bad; I would rather not experience it at all. Over here at Mayaguez, and my family over at Bayamon, I could not handle it.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, I agree with you, it would be a bad experience. Then, being, well this is more directed to the pandemic because the hurricane at least we could see our faces every now and then, when the time arrived, we could see each other. But being a student in a university that is social, and its culture is very party party. How did you readjust your daily life once the Pandemic started?

< **Interviewee** Well, it was a total..., in terms of the pandemic it was..., you see in that aspect I did not have a hard time, because I am a very party loving guy, I love going to parties you know pass time with my friends and everything, but I'm also a person that If I have videogames and things I can stay locked up, I call my friends and we all connect to play video games. You know in that sense there wasn't such a hard hit on me. Obviously, I wanted to go out and things, like dang it's been a long time since I go out, I'd like to do it now. But I did not really need it.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, you are a very adaptable person in that sense.

< **Interviewee** Exactly, with the fact that I could call my friends and talk with them and hear them out, I'm satisfied.

> **Interviewer** Yeah. And more when you love videogames.

< **Interviewee** Exactly. Since we all share the same liking in videogames, or some were playing certain games and I was playing other games, but we were all sharing the same good time then I did not have any problems with that. Trading parties with videogames, I did not have any problems.

> **Interviewer** In reality I'm not much of a gamer but when I had to play with my friends it was always a wonderful experience umm it was like feeling as if you were in your friend's house socializing and having a good time. So yeah, that part is very enjoyable. Umm. This part is about more about social critic. Why do so many professionals end up leaving to the states, and what should Puerto Rico do to avoid that so many professionals, at the moment they graduate, "I'm leaving"?

< **Interviewee** Well, in reality a lot of them are leaving because of quality of life. Quality of life in Puerto Rico is not as good, over here the government, like, starting off with the government's corruption that is the biggest problem in Puerto Rico, and then a lot of people want to leave because even though you graduate with a bachelor or a master's degree, you will be poorly paid considering the amount of time you had to employ to graduate. And that's why a lot of people prefer to leave to the United States where they offer them a higher pay and better quality of life. If the government wants professionals to stay in the island, then they should assure them a better quality of life.

> **Interviewer** So, you think that an increase in salary for workers with either a bachelor, masters, or doctors' degree will help them stay in Puerto Rico? ‘

< **Interviewee** Sure, starting with that well sure yeah. But also, it an overall thing, environment. Working environment too. Working environment, opportunities in the states are much better for personal progress, because over here you can get your salary bumped up, but if your progression opportunity is not as good then you would rather go to another place and work. You could start here and then go to the States, that's why it would be better to increase quality of work and life. If you want to live here, a lot of people would love to live here and work here, but they can't because the pay for living is not enough. Prices keep getting higher, of everything, and people get paid minimum. Minimum wage was raised by like a dollar, but prices keep getting worse.

> **Interviewer** In my eyes well, people are getting paid a dollar more but it's just a trick, but yeah that's a topic for another day. But yeah the situation of..., it's in general because... well once you increase the salaries of doctors, people with masters or bachelor's degrees umm umm also the price of contributions of people that not have much to give, people that don't have much money cannot pay for their health for their services, you will also be giving people exclusive services to exclusive people while the island is falling apart. So yeah, its hard here in Puerto Rico for professionals, we should do better. This question is a little harsh, if you don't want to answer you are in all your right. But it will make you think for a while, if you could change one thing that happened throughout these five years from 2017 through 2022.

< **Interviewee** I think, I would leave as it is.

> **Interviewer** You would leave it as it is? Why?

< Things happen for a reason, that being for personal growth. You know, it could have gone well at something, that's a win for you, it went bad for you, that's another experience you gain. At least I wouldn't change anything.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, if this wouldn't have happened you would not be prepared for a future experience.

< **Interviewee** Exactly, if the pandemic wouldn't have happened, I would not be prepared you know for another one, or other situations in general. Also, the pandemic per se helped me in the university, it helped me to acquire study habits, before I didn't even bother studying, you know I didn't want to be in the university anymore. But the pandemic helped me acquire study habits and that's why I would not change a thing. The hurricane, the hurricane opened my eyes in terms of the amount of people that were affected umm we in the family affected us heavily and we still, in comparison, were blessed.

> **Interviewer** Exactly.

< **Interviewee** Situations of friends that lost possessions, their homes, family members in the hurricane.

> **Interviewer** Yes, yes that's very tough.

< **Interviewee** Losing someone during the hurricane, or after the hurricane losing your house. That your house's roof literally rips off completely, and that's not a very good sight to see.

> **Interviewer** No, it's not a very cute experience.

< **Interviewee** It's not a good experience at all and well it opened my eyes to that and to the amount of work that is needed to fix this country. The ridiculous amount of time we were without power or running water, without service or knowing if our families and friends were alive and well. After the hurricane that, I..., the hurricane was on top of us I was thinking "there has to be house and cars flying around". And were here waiting if something bad happens, if by chance a zinc panel is going to pierce the windows, or if nothing was going to happen. In reality it was a moment...

> **Interviewer** A moment of uncertainty.

< **Interviewee** Yeah, a very big uncertainty. That was the worst part of it all, but I wouldn't change a thing. Despite all of it, all the ugly things that I said, I wouldn't change a thing.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, putting some names around, I was thinking over here the hurricane taught us humility and giving to others and the pandemic showed us meditation, it changed the constant social routine you had of distractions, and it gave us that time to reflect on who we really are,

what are our flaws, how can I work with those flaws and well yeah develop ourselves and grow. It was all a positive lesson at the end of the day and yeah umm with this I will be ending. And yeah, it is a little bit easier because I know you, what has been harder for you, being a full time student at the university or being constantly away from your family and home.

< **Interviewee** Yeah umm, for me being a student has been harder, I at least am a person that you can... if I had to go to Europe for something umm that is a job opportunity and you cannot see your family for a year, I'm leaving I have zero problems with that. Easily. I'm leaving. It's not that I don't love my family, I love them with all my heart, but I don't tend to feel homesick, clearly I miss them, but I don't feel homesick. I started over here at Mayaguez living alone, having to live, cook, I didn't know how to cook anything and to this point being a student has been harder for me than not being at home.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, that adaptation was very abrupt.

< **Interviewee** For me it was a very abrupt adaptation, when I was at high school, mom was always with me and my father as well, we told them that we had games at Santurce and they were the ones that always brought us. Mom brought us to the games at Carolina and all that, and suddenly I'm here at Mayaguez and there was nobody here, it was my responsibility. Now I must do the things that mom and dad used to do for me because there are not any mother or father that would cook for me.

> **Interviewer** Yeah, you would starve.

< **Interviewee** Here I will starve and yeah at this point it doesn't bother me.

> **Interviewer** Ok, enough time has passed.

< **Interviewee** Yeah. To mature in that sense.

> **Interviewer** With this I will leave you all, it was a pleasure José, I know you are my brother, and we talk all the time but it's not always that we talk about these topics, and we ask these hard questions that make us reflect.

< **Interviewee** Certainly.

> **Interviewer** And... well yeah grateful for anybody that hears this interview and Chimi also wants to give you guys regards, he's around there somewhere. And yeah, thank you.