

ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Alejandro Yara Valle

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Alejandro Yara Valle conducted by Keyla on March 12, 2022 and March 19, 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.

Interview Transcript:

Interviewer: Keyla

Interviewee: Alejandro Yara Valle

Dates: March 12, 2022 and March 19, 2022

Location: Cayey, Puerto Rico

(Start of interview)

Keyla [00:00:00]:

Hello, my name is Keyla. Today, I will be leading our interview for the oral history/creative writing English course. Joining me today is Alejandro Yara. I'd like to start by thanking you for making time to speak with me. During this interview, I'll ask you a few questions about hurricane Maria and eventually, social justice issues. To start, I'd like to hear a little about you – what's your occupation?

Alejandro [00:00:26]:

I'm an electrical engineer since 1987, I graduated from Cuba in Polytechnic Institute and I'm working right now for a group of hospitals that are located in different areas of Puerto Rico.

Keyla [00:00:49]:

How long have you been an engineer?

Alejandro [00:00:53]:

I've been an engineer for at least 30 years, not only in the electrical field but also mechanical and environmental engineering as well.

Keyla [00:01:12]:

What position do you have in the hospital?

Alejandro [00:01:18]:

My position right now engineering is engineer vice president of the 5 hospitals. I'm in charge of power plants, physical plant, and environmental issues.

Keyla [00:01:33]:

Ok that's great. Knowing that you work as an engineer in the health field, I would like to know how was your experience with Hurricane Maria at the work environment?

Alejandro [00:01:45]:

During the hurricane Maria we had different situations. The first one was the diesel supply; it became very difficult. During this time, we had problem with diesel supply for 12 days. The situation was complicated because our inventory was compromised. We had to go to Barceloneta, the headquarter of trans fuel company (the company that supplied diesel to the hospitals). Everyone was here because everyone was trying to get diesel for their companies. We communicated that the supply for the hospital was primordial for everyone to be well. They understood the situation and we only waited 2 or 3 days to receive this. The problem was that there was a general electricity black out on the Island and it was very important that all generators were working properly. The second main situation was the communication. The communication was lost in almost all of Puerto Rico. This was a critical situation because almost all communication was done through transportation and all communication through air was compromised. The gas became another situation because we needed gas for transportation (cars, SUVs, etc.) in order establish communication with the other hospitals. In Puerto Rico, almost all companies are closed because they were affected by the hurricane. The third main situation was food supply. All food suppliers were closed, and we needed to feed the patients since the hospitals were full of people. The elevators were compromised, we had to transport food through the stairs. In conclusion, the main situations where: diesel supply, communication, food supply and the logistic that we had to create to keep everything in order at the hospital.

Keyla [00:07:10]:

Thank you for your context. It must've been a very critical situation. So, while you were working, how were things at your house after the hurricane?

Alejandro [00:07:22]:

During the hurricane, my family and I passed the night of September 19-20 at our house. In the morning, I went to the hospital to be in charge of the situations. But the night of the hurricane was difficult because it was 13 hours of strong winds and rain. We had many wet complicated situations because some drains were covered and damaged. We had flood in the house, and we had to pull the water out at 2-3 AM. It was very difficult. The moment that the hurricane changed of direction, we had 1 hour of break in order to recover and reorganize things at the house. I was able to clear the drains in order to let the water flow to the street. Later on, the hurricane continued, and we lost two of our tool houses. Our 4 dogs were locked in the bathroom of the first floor of the house. We maintained the calm despite everything.

Keyla [00:11:08]:

Did you have an emergency entity like FEMA helping you in this process or did you not have to approach them?

Alejandro [00:11:16]:

I tried to approach FEMA in order to get some help due to the situation at our house. For example, we lost the air conditioner that was in the roof, the water solar heater, the cistern, the satellite for watching TV, the two tool houses and some of the floor of the garage. The moment we called FEMA to get help, they said that since we had insurance, they had to pay first and later, FEMA would cover the rest of the money. The plan B was that people with insurance could contact Mortgage Business Administration and receive a loan for repairs and buy equipment. We took this action. The process was a very strict one because they requested pictures, they sent

inspectors and made a lot of questions from before and after the hurricane. They opened centers here in the island and in our case, it was located at the Baseball stadium in Cayey, Puerto Rico. There, they requested more information about the house. The problem was that if the loan was more than \$25,000, we had to take more actions. In conclusion, we worked with Morgue Business Administration instead of FEMA.

Keyla [00:16:09]:

I believe FEMA and other emergency entities needs to still work on the island. That's very a tough situation that you had to go through. Did anyone in your family suffered from an illness as a result of the hurricane?

Alejandro [00:16:36]:

Before Hurricane Maria, Hurricane Irma happened. It was two and a half weeks before Maria. We had three aunts in San Juan, Puerto Rico. At this time, there was an electricity blackout and one of my aunts, Teresa, suffered a fall in her apartment. My other aunt, Benita, was going to help her and she fell, too. We had to call an ambulance and took them to the hospital. Benita had a hip broken. Keep in mind that the three of them were more than 80 years old and this made the situation more difficult. They passed Hurricane Maria at the hospital where Teresa got an infection. Benita went through surgery for her hip and later on, they sent her to a rehabilitation hospital. Teresa and Milagros were sent to a nursing facility to recover. During this time, Teresa's infection got worse, and she was sent to intensive unit, it became a very complicated situation. One month after, Milagros and Benita were transported to Orlando, Florida by the humanitarian health care because they were working in Puerto Rico to take elderly people to

better care. Meanwhile, Teresa stayed in the intensive unit and on November 18, 2017, she died. It was a very tough situation for our family.

Keyla [00:20:54]:

How do you think this relates to the hurricane? Do you think it was due to the power outage that was in the island that caused this to Teresa?

Alejandro [00:21:11]:

Yes, I think so because the situation was very complicated, and the electricity black out was fundamental in this situation.

Keyla [00:21:24]:

So, in the report of Teresa it doesn't say that she died because of Hurricane Maria, but you believe it was due this?

Alejandro [00:21:36]:

Yes.

Keyla [00:21:38]:

Well, that's a very tough situation and I'm so sorry for your loss. To summarize everything, you have told me so far, in your work area you were exposed to different situations such as diesel and gas shortage, communication issues and problems with food supply. This was a general situation in all health field areas based on Hurricane reports. Later, in your house you had to work with

flooding and trying to fix the sewer system in the same night of the hurricane and you were called to work in the morning since you were in charge of the power plants. You lost your aunt due to the power outage which was a difficult situation and you received help from an emergency entity, but it was too, a complicated situation.

Alejandro [00:22:47]:

Yes, that's correct.

Keyla [00:22:49]:

After all of this, how have you recovered at your work area or at home?

Alejandro [00:22:56]:

At this moment, almost 4 years later, we continue dealing with the insurance company in order to receive all of the claims about the damage that came from the hurricane. At the hospital, it has been a very difficult journey and intense work. First of all, with generator sustentation, roofs, air conditioner conducts, water supply, everything. After the hurricane, we maintained the generator working for too long, 45 days. It was difficult because of the diesel and gas supply. There was no blackout at neither of our 5 hospitals because we made sure to give the proper care to the generator and maintain them up to date. Immediately after the power returned, we did a maintenance on the generators in order to have them prepared in case of another emergency. It is important to clarify that these generators are meant to be used for emergency only, but not for 45 days or long-term situations. The hospital took as a measure to store more diesel for each of the facilities: Bayamón, Fajardo, Humacao, and the two hospitals in Caguas. We want to be prepared in case of something like Hurricane Maria or worse. The roof was very damaged because it was

directly exposed to the winds and its repair was difficult. The air conditioner conducts were damaged too, and we had to change a lot of them. All the operating units; pediatric, intensive, and neonatal were located in the top floor. The parking area also suffered damages too. During the repairing time, we dedicated time to the cooling towers: clean them, change motors, transmission, fix mechanical accessories.

Keyla [00:29:22]:

Thank you for your context. Now, since you told me this do you believe that you are 100% recovered?

Alejandro [00:29:34]:

Not yet, we have pending situations with the insurance company like paint and some things on the roof. Right now, the facilities are working fully, but we are not at the same condition that we were before the hurricane. Some of the elevators are still damaged too and we have not received the funds for it.

Keyla [00:30:52]:

At your house, is everything fully recovered or not yet?

Alejandro [00:31:00]:

In my house, I believe we are fully recovered and there is no problem.

Keyla [00:31:07]:

So, Alejandro now that we talked about your experience, I would like to know if have you ever heard of social justice issues?

Alejandro [00:31:14]:

Yes.

Keyla [00:31:18]:

What do you think it's social justice?

Alejandro [00:31:21]:

When I hear about social justice, the first thought on my mind is knowing that everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities. Another thing I thought was that those who have less economic income, deserve some help because of the emergency situations in order to receive medical, construction and different assistance.

Keyla [00:32:29]:

You have a great idea of what is social justice. I would like to expand your thought by saying that social justice encompasses economic justice. Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organized human interactions. In turn, social justice, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for society, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development.

Now, holding this thought, do you believe that climate change falls into what is a social justice issue?

Alejandro [00:33:19]:

Yes.

Keyla [00:33:21]:

Ok, great answer. Do you think that what you went through after hurricane maria falls into a social justice issue? And the island's recovery?

Alejandro [00:33:32]:

Based on what you just explained to me, yes. As an engineer in the health field, I can tell you that Puerto Rico's recovery, if it can be called that, didn't come thanks to the government. It came from nonprofit associations, it came from the neighbors themselves. It came from foundations. It came from the hands of other people who supported the families that suffered the most. So, yes, this falls into what is social justice. My experience ranged from my work environment mostly because this is where I faced more issues. I witnessed how the government was slow to act and federal agencies were too. I think Climate change is a threat to everyone's physical health, mental health, air, water, food, and shelter, but some groups socially and economically disadvantaged ones, face the greatest risks. This is because of where they live, their health, income, and limited access to resources. Even though I was exposed to several difficult situations, I consider myself lucky because I was affected economically, but I know of people who were affected even worse. We are talking about a hurricane that is the first Category 4

hurricane to directly impact Puerto Rico in 85 years. Nearly the entire population of Puerto Rico were without electricity. Puerto Ricans are still experiencing blackouts almost daily and every single one of those blackouts takes me back to that unforgettable night of September 2017. Not only this, but it is important to say that many people died. My aunt Teresa, died because of the effects the hurricane had on the island. I'm sure that if it weren't for the poor healthcare the island had at the moment because of the electricity black out and lack of medical supplies, my aunt could have lived a little bit more. There were a lot of additional difficulties during the hurricane. The supply of everything, the people with diabetes, the people dialysis. People died because the patients arrived with illness at a critical state and so advanced. Without the proper treatment, it was very difficult. The people were very difficult to maintain them in a healthy state. It was incredible to see how in this century things like this happen. For me, it was very difficult to see this and not only because of my aunt, but also other people who live around me. When patients arrived to the hospital, people were seeing how the hospitals didn't have the proper care because of this situation. Another situation with the hospitals and other institutions, was dealing with insurance companies. They couldn't recognize the situation in Puerto Rico and when the hospital claimed for different resources in order to recover what was damaged, they put in doubt everything we said. We had to work with a consulting company in order to present all the documents since they denied everything we claimed. That was the reason that for us the cost to recover with an insurance company, was increased. At this time, we are still waiting for additional resources that we deserve. They already assigned it but haven't arrived yet. After hurricane María, the hospital established a program to collect help for the people with less income. We collected food, cloth, different articles in order to help people with no family and don't have enough resources to confront this situation. During this program, we collected almost

2 tons of food and many cloth and shoes for people with necessity. We cooperated with other agencies to help everyone we could. Also, we have a foundation for cancer patients. We are helping a lot of people that needs this. We also helped people with respiratory problems. We provided emergency generator in order to help people who had problems with respiratory equipment at their house. We also helped the community with water supply because we have 2 water tanks. In conclusion, the hospital cooperated with different agencies, inclusive the fire department and different municipalities. We believe that Puerto Rico needs another help, and we need to improve our infrastructures. At this time, Puerto Rico is not yet recovered from María. The island received another natural phenomenon, the earthquake. This phenomenon increased the necessity for Puerto Rico to receive help from other states of the union in order to recover schools, hospitals, houses, etc.

Keyla [00:43:43]:

Thank you, Alejandro, for sharing that. I really appreciate because Puerto Rico still needs a lot of recovering. I like how you think about how this relates to social justice and climate change. I remember when I went to your work area, I saw, and I was able to see how you had to work and fix things that hasn't been still fixed. When you told me about the roof, I saw how the roof was still damaged. You even showed me how the air conditioner, how some of them still require help. Even the power plants require the proper care. I really appreciate you sharing this with me. Also, knowing that you lost your aunt due to this, I would like to know more about this situation: how do you feel? How did you feel at that moment? These things aren't officially proven to be an effect of the hurricane, but I understand your point of view that this was an effect from this situation. I would like to know any information that you can add to this.

Alejandro [00:45:17]:

I realized that after the hurricane that this situation with my aunt Teresa wasn't a general situation with all people. The problem was that Teresa didn't receive any help from the family department and it was very difficult. Maybe the municipality gave help of "ama de llaves" and it was impossible for us to receive this kind of help. About the medicines, it was impossible to receive the help too. It was incredible to see at this time, nobody could give help to anybody (patient) to remain at their house. That was the reason we had to deal with a nursing facility in order to assist Teresa because in the house it was impossible to receive any help. Inclusive, in the nursing facility the situation was very difficult because you had to provide all the patient's cleaning stuff: soap, toothpaste etc. It was difficult because the tele communication, phone communication and transportation communication were compromised. I had to wait 4 days to arrive to the nursing facility in Cupey. I realized at this time that Teresa was dehydrated, and they took her to the intensive care unit. The situation was complicated there as well: they didn't have the supply necessary for the proper care. Also, my father who is Teresa's brother, it was impossible for him to visit her because transportation was compromised at this time. He was very sad and my mother too. Teresa was alone there, and she didn't have any company, only the nursing staff. Inclusive, the family department didn't accept to take her to my house in order to assist her there. It was very difficult because we had communication problems. We were able to assist my father and my mother at my house while my aunt, Teresa was at the nursing facility. My other aunt, Benita, was at the recovery hospital from the hip surgery and this was a very very difficult situation. With all this situation running, my wife was very stressed and that was the reason she suffered a heart attack. She was admitted to the hospital where they reported it was a

heart attack. I had to maintain attention to all of my family, and this was very complicated. At this moment, Teresa's situation became more complicated. She was moved to another hospital in Bayamón to take more care of her. My wife was in Caguas, Benita was in Hato Rey, my parents were in Cayey. As you can see, my family is spread through the island in different areas, and it was very difficult for me to assist everyone at the same time in order to maintain them in a good condition. Meanwhile, I had to continue working in the hospital because I had to maintain the generators and everything in good condition in order to prevent another blackout at the hospital and this was the situation that I had to suffer during and after hurricane Maria.

Keyla [00:52:17]:

Oh wow, what you just told me impacted me, really. I didn't know of all the situations that you had to go through. I'm sure you were under a lot of stress during this time, and I really appreciate you telling me this because this a very valuable information to know and it is important to know these types of stories. I remember when I was at your work, we talked about your situation with Teresa and Benita and that was what impacted me the most and what happened with your wife, must've been a hard thing to go through because you were under what happened to your aunts and now, your wife. I'm sure that you were from town to town to visit your family and that's a very hard thing to do and I really admire you. To close this session, I would like to thank you for making time to speak with me and sharing your story. It was impacting to know this, and it was a great experience to be able to hear this.

(End of interview)