

Interviewee: Maria Chópite

Interviewer: Madeline Crandell

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Abstract:

Maria Chópite was born in Caracas, Venezuela, but now resides in Minnetonka, Minnesota after travelling and living in many different cities. In this interview, Maria discusses how the COVID-19 has affected her family, relationships with friends and co-workers, as well as the work place. Additionally, she describes how the pandemic has affected both children and teachers at her job in a local elementary school, and how it has affected the social and emotional well-being of students. Maria also discusses her concerns over the COVID-19 vaccine, and how she had many questions before getting her own vaccine.

Madeline Crandell 0:04

Okay, my name is Madeline Crandell and I'm conducting an oral history interview as part of an effort to archive the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, on individuals and communities in the Midwest for both the western Wisconsin COVID-19 Archive and the Journal of the Plague Year COVID-19 archive. So today's date is May 4 2021. And it is 3:30pm. And as of now there are 154 million cases and the 3.22 million deaths worldwide. Of those 32.5 million cases and 577,000 deaths are in the United States. And today we'll be speaking with Maria Chopite, and Minnetonka, Minnesota, and Minnesota, there are 580,000 cases and 7256 deaths from COVID-19. So Maria, thank you for taking the time to speak with me today and for sharing your experiences of the pandemic. And we really appreciate your help and perspectives for the project. So firstly, what is your name? And do you mind sharing some demographic information such as like race, ethnicity, age, gender and location?

Maria Chopite 1:08

Okay, my name is Maria Beatriz Chopite Gonzales. Um, I was born in Venezuela, Caracas, Venezuela. And then I have been moving and living around the world, in Spain, in Colombia and Atlanta, Georgia. And now in Minnesota. I have been living here for 11 years now. And I'm a

third grade teacher in Spanish Immersion in Minnetonka. My race, I'm Hispanic. And well, my parents are both from Europe, from Spain. My dad and my mom were from Venezuela, both of them now. And I'm 55 years old.

MLC 1:58

Okay. And then other than like your job, like, what are their primary things that you do like on a day to day basis, like extraction activities or anything like that, or?

MC 2:08

Um, that is not job related? I, I mean, I in, well, I'm in the Spanish Immersion program, but I also tutor some neighbors in my neighborhood that where I live now in Chaska, that are Hispanics, and then I help them with the homework in English. [Okay], And I like to walk and read in all those outdoor activities now in the spring.

MLC 2:42

Okay, so then, when you first learned about COVID-19, what were your initial thoughts about it? and have your thoughts changed since then? Or do you still have the same ideas about it?

MC 2:54

Well, at the beginning, I was really scary [scared], and I learned about COVID before even it was a, you know, an issue here in Minnesota, because we have family living in-- part of our family--is in Europe, in Spain specifically. And I also have a nephew living in Australia. And he was traveling at that time, he went to China in November 2019. So I was, you know, hearing a lot of news about that scary news. But I was a little bit a skeptical, you know, skeptical about it was coming to the States. I knew it was coming, but not so fast, as quick as it was. And we were really, really--it was unexpected-- really, all the things we how our life changes in so, in a very small timeframe at that time. It has been a long, a long year. And now after I got my vaccine, and my husband, too, I don't have children, I live with my husband and we are both vaccinated. And now my perspective I am less worry because at least I am I you know, I'm sure. Not really sure, sure. But at least I know for sure I have some protection against the virus. But still I keep my precautions I keep following protocols I keep using, you know, all these safety measures possible, especially because we are exposure here in the school. I'm hopeful about the future, even though I know it's a lot of people that don't believe in the, in the, in the vaccine and are

against the vaccine, but for me, I'm a strong believer. And I think we all got, you know, that vaccinations, that vaccine, we can move forward. Especially taking back our normal routines that have been really effective in all aspects of our life. I couldn't wait, I have not seen my family or friends since, well, my close family that are living, even here in the state since last, two years ago. So still, and we are thinking about still not to travel this summer. Just wait a little bit, till December during winter time.

MLC 5:59

And then how specifically has it affected your family, are you not, know, you're not traveling right now. But other than that, you're not able to, you know, see anyone or?

MC 6:08

No, we are just, you know, Zoom meetings, family meetings, friends with my friends that live in Spain and in, in Venezuela. But it has been I have to, two have our family, well, they were all from husband, they got COVID, and they passed away in Spain. So and I know now in Venezuela, in my home country is a huge spike now. And most of my friends have got COVID, there, one of my siblings got COVID, and he says play recovering. So, it has affected, my husband, lost his job due to COVID and is still unemployed. So, yes, it has affected a lot, our life.

MLC 7:13

And then you said before that it affected your husband's job. In what way has COVID affected your job and like your day to day life and employment and things like that?

MC 7:22

Well, it has been this year, we have been through three models, learning models. So, it has been really challenging, especially at the beginning, being, you know, I had to be, I had to be in two classes, different rooms. So, I have to split my time in 50/50, with the students, keeping the students out of you know, not so close to me, and taking a lot of up not only the academic part teaching, is also taking care of their socio emotional, you know, wellbeing. Even for me, taking care of my time, and setting boundaries in my life, has change in some points of change for a positive way because now I realize, you know, I take more, I don't take anything for granted now. So, I live every day the best as possible and we do the best we can with the situation we have.

But as I have been modifying all my teaching strategies, the students, they cannot work in groups. So, no touching, keeping the distance, it has been affecting even with my colleagues, I don't even, in the school sometimes I don't see my colleagues from, from the other the other side of the school. So being together in a meeting is just online so it has affected, especially the emotional, you know, the way and our connection as a teacher that we can see and talk. Always having a computer is not the same as being in person in a meeting or informal conversations with, with our colleagues. And even with parents their dynamic with parents has been totally different this year. I don't even know, well, my parents as I used to be years before because all our connections have been online. So, I maybe find them in this street, you know outside that school, you know, I don't know them. So, it has changed so much, we are missing so much, parents coming to the school, to the school helping us. So, it has been like, only us here with the students.

MLC 10:16

Have you noticed the changes with the students specifically? Are they acting differently? Are they behaving differently than before, because of these changes, changes due to COVID?

MC 10:25

Yes, it has been, at the beginning, many of them in, during the fall, most of them were really *quiet*, really, in some point, scared and cautious, because I think the parents are calm, and we were always, you know, following strict protocols, six feet distance. This has been changing along the school year, because the guidelines have been changing. So, in the positive way, for me, e-learning, I'm not a fan of e-learning, but during when we went in e-learning, it gave me the time to connect one by one with my students. It is not the same time I have now that we are in person, 23 students in, in, in one classroom, so I don't have that one-on-one time connection with them. But, in the positive, if we go to the positive, you know, side of this, I noticed that the students they, they value more the time they are in a school. We had a situation, some of them had to go into quarantine, and they were crying, I had to go to the, to the, nurse to calm down them because they were crying, saying that "I don't want to go home, I want to be in my school." So, the perspective for them is different. I noticed they play more together as a group, boys and girls, that years before it was not, it was the different was more evident, you know, it was more marked with them. Third graders, they are now playing together they enjoy so much the time, the free time, we have. So, I think it has been good in that point that, they value more the time that they are in school, and their friends and their teachers. I've noticed some changes, and they are more independent, that years before if we compare the group from, from the year before, and they are more in some point selfish, is you know, because they have their own materials, they is sharing thing has been because he's not allowed. So, with them, this is kind of a balance. But I like to see the positive things in this experience, and watching them how they value more the

time in school. It has been exciting in that, in that point. more independence, they learn more in the, and they like independent projects. So, they take advantage of what they have with the iPads, one-on-one iPads, and all the resources we have, and use more than that for own learning. But group, you know, I'm worried about the group or working in small groups, working and sharing in the social aspect, because they have less time and they are not allowed to touch each other even though, they now it has been better in the last weeks. But yes, they have been changing. It's a change compared with years before they are more mature now than years before.

MLC 14:40

And then also along with children, how are other people like, around you responding to the pandemic, like teachers or other members of the community also?

MC 14:47

Well, most of them, most we are in the same path. I know, I know some colleagues that are, you know, they have to be, they prefer to be in e-learning setting, instead of coming back here in person. So, there is a different in a little bit-- I don't know how to say that-- but like competence [competition] between, and some jealous of those who are at home and those who are here in person. So, the fairness thing, or is not fair, that we are here exposure to all this, you know, if on a regular basis, and e-learning teachers are, you know, just at home that you have only six students. So, yes, with the adult it is, is different. But in the other in the other side, we have been, we have been more connected to our teams. So, in the grade level team, we were more closer than we used to do before. We cannot work independently now, because we have to share resources, materials, activities together and do everything together. So, it's different and but in general, this year have been much better than last year. Last year, we had a lot of anxiety, we had, we cried together, we were really frustrated with the situation, the first, the first three months. So later on, it was better, now it's much better since we came back in person because we are working together. In, in a school is really we need that connection, in, in work as a group, as a team, to get you know, all the all the goals that we have to cover here in elementary.

MLC 17:05

And I know there have been a lot of changes as a result of COVID like these ideas of like, self-isolation and like flattening the curve and things like that. So how you personally are like friends and family kind of responded to these new ideas

MC 17:18

About the self-isolation? Well, this is the different and in my family, well my family live abroad, most of my, my sibling, but I have some nieces, my nieces, they live in Florida, in New York and Colorado. So it depends, on, on, on the age is especially. In the middle age, that, that I am most of my friends and my family, we are in the same, you know, we take a lot of precautions, we don't travel and we don't exposure each other to, to, we're really cautious with that. They younger, you know, they don't take care, they don't think the same as us. So they will go anywhere and they take pictures and I'm always like, "where is your mask?" They "Oh no, I'm not taking picture with my mask!" and then you know, those kind of things, we solve it and sometimes, I don't even tell them anything, you know, you're an adult, you know, but you are exposure. Even if you are vaccinated you still have risk. So, yes, it has affected that perception of the, the relationship that we have you know, with your family or your friends, and it depends a lot in the age that you are talking. So, it has to been point for reflection, self-reflection, you know, what are they being really conscious about what things you ask others. That if you are coming to my home, so I want you to know that I follow my protocol that we clean, you know, shoes are outside, we use mask if there we are really more than four or six people, you know, inside in the home. So it depends, on the, on the, on the situation. But yes, it has been a point of change in our relationships.

MLC 19:42

And then has like these changes you know, with these new, like rules being enforced kind of changes your perception how you view other people depending on how they respond? Like I know you mentioned like people don't wear masks, you kind of view them a little bit differently. Like do you see them as you're irresponsible? Do you kind of like not talk to them as much anymore? Or do you just? How do you react?

MC 20:01

Well, before I got my vaccine, I was I, I, you know, I feel really frustrated with people who didn't wear masks. I didn't have any situation, you know, hard situation, but I saw, like, in sometimes I knew people forgot, at the beginning, you know, we use, because I have masks in my, in my, in my purse, you know, everywhere, in my car everywhere, but sometimes you just forget. You know, when the people you know, when someone is not using because forgot, and then they tried to cover. But others were like, I don't care, you know, in the supermarket. So I just try to avoid them. And if it's someone, it won't happen here or in the school because we have strict protocols. But yes, sometimes, you know, you have to remind, especially the students, like keep reminding them to wear they mask, even though I know it's hard for them, ten years old, or six years or or, you know, the, the students. But with an adult with, yes, I have one neighbor that she didn't want

to use any masking, we stopped talking to her. So, try to avoid, not nothing, you know, big, but just try to avoid her. Especially before we got vaccinated. Now that we are vaccinated is kind of is different. But we keep, I personally, I keep using my mask in everything, because we are not 100% sure that you are not getting the virus, probably can get it. But it's less, you know, less harmful that if you are not, you are not vaccinated, but I totally respect people. I have some friends that they don't, they chose not to get vaccinated, I just, you know, keep the distance and then try to avoid close contact with them.

MLC 22:29

And I know also you mentioned before, like how the children [mumbled], and sometimes you have to remind them to wear the mask. Do you have any sort of like, like, I don't want to say like punishment? Or like, do you enforce it more if they just keep refusing to? Or do you just do they rather just stay at home? Or how does that necessarily work with the kids?

MC 22:45

Well, we have to, they know it's mandatory and we made that clear since day one. So parents know, keep reminding parents and keep, I keep you know, I have mask everywhere for child, you know, that if they don't, they get broken or so I will give a replacement to them. We, I had some situation especially in the during the fall, with some that get the mass and I had to send to the to the nurse for them to remind because we have a policy in the district that is mandatory to use the mask. So the students, there is no way, they need to use their mask but being respectful and careful. Especially those with special needs. That is hard for them. I have one is student with sensory issues. So he needs to wear a special mask that doesn't, you know, it's not paper, not the same. It's special mask. So being really respectful of the way, but yes, enforcing the use of the mass inside the school.

Unknown Speaker 24:07

And I know with the vaccine rollout. How do you think the school district is going to adapt? Are they going to enforce some sort of rule with vaccines? Or is it some sort of thing that's optional for parents, because I know a lot of parents don't really necessarily want their kids to get vaccinated. Is that something that's in place yet or is still up in the air?

MC 24:24

Is still, I don't know, with, the with the students? They, well, they they never told us it was mandatory to get vaccinated, they offer and they, they advised, beginning with the superintendent and the principal always remind, they gave us a lot of opportunities to get our appointments to get vaccinated, and everyone all the protocols and everything. With the students, we don't know. We don't know yet, and, but we expect at least, they have been parents been following protocols. And I know, the students tell me that their parents have been getting their vaccine. So we expect, I don't think they are going to do it mandatory. But maybe in the future, it could be. Maybe in the future, especially to travel, to go, because when you travel abroad you need, and my students, I, they have been in Mexico, and then coming back to this states, they need to tested for COVID. So I don't know, I don't know what the what the policy will be for, for the students. But for adults, they made clear is not mandatory, but really recommend to go and get you back, in gave us all the opportunities available to, to make an appointment and get your vaccine even during work time.

MLC 26:09

Before you got your vaccine. Did you have any questions or concerns about it? Or did you just did you trust the government? You know, with the vaccine?

MC 26:18

I had a lot of questions. I had to call my doctor and even my doctor in Venezuela, because I'm allergic. And then, like, I'm allergic to thimerosal, one of the components of the vaccine, the old vaccines is thimerosal. And then like the flu shot, I can't have the, the the flu shot because it gets worse on me. So I was really nervous to the doctor. And here the doctor explained it to me all that is not the typical, you know, vaccine that we use, is not the virus that they are getting, I got the Pfizer, and then they explain it to me all the things and I went really. I was nervous because of the reaction, but after the first shot, everything, was that I didn't have any, just a sore arm. And really exhausted. But nothing else I have. I was, it was, you know, I'm feeling well, I don't, I don't have any, any, any symptoms and anything, and I keep getting my COVID test that the school offers every two weeks.

MLC 27:40

And have you gotten your second dose of the vaccine?

MC 27:43

Yeah. Yes. One in March. So yes, one month, almost two months ago. And my husband got the Johnson and Johnson, the Jensen, before it was suspended. [laughs] So we were a little bit worried about that, but it was just one dose, and he's doing perfectly okay. He really didn't have anything. So we are doing pretty well. And my colleagues that got the vaccine it was the same. No really, hard side effects, you know, that we can be concerned. I'm a little bit concerned, is about the fact that if they are going, if the only thing worries me if it's this, you have to be next year, you know how long it will take? But we don't know. So let's wait for that.

MLC 28:41

And then in general, how was like, your experience getting access to vaccine? How did the school kind of provide that information to you like making an appointment and things like that? How did that end up working out?

MC 28:52

Well, the first, the first steps was a really big, you know, it was I think in January or February when they open it. I even, they open like just for really people in you know, like last concern. And they send the first email, I think it was in December. I'm not really sure. But I think it was at the beginning of January. So, I led out there like my turn instead of writing that I would like in the vaccine. I let other people that could be more risk than me. So I let them, I didn't email Dr. Peterson [Minnetonka Superintendent] or anything but in the second round, yes I got, you know, I sign up for the state of Minnesota Department of Health. And they sent me, were were like in the second, second group. I got my first dose on February 28th, on February 27th. So yes, it was, it was an easy process. But we were a little bit concerned about the timing. So because we weren't worried about if we have effects, what will be for our job, you know, that if we have to be doing streaming or live from home, and more than that. But the vaccine, the process was really fast and really easy, pretty easy. I went to the Mall of America, and I even, I didn't even know it was like 10-15 minutes. And the two doses went really fast. And my husband too. My husband got his in Walgreens. And he was 30 minutes, and we were done. So pretty easy compared to other experience that I know, they had to make long lines. I didn't have to make any line, the access was, was, was pretty easy for me.

MLC 31:19

And then today, also Biden has said that he is planning on having like 70% of Americans vaccinated by July 4th. So how do you think that the government right now is kind of responding to this, like, vaccine rollout and the crisis in general?

MC 31:33

Well, if I think the United States have been, you know, on top of that, in in, I feel thankful for being here. Because our family in Spain, the process is really hard for them, they need to wait till like, the hospital will get them, you know, they will call them. It's not like here, like, you made an appointment. No, there, they have to wait till they are called to come, go to the doctor. So, I think, I think, it's a pretty good, you know, I think it will be attainable, you know, that I hope people step ahead to get vaccinated and in getting conscious about, you know, what, why it's important for everyone to, to be vaccinated. But I think they are taking steps pretty fast compared it with other countries. So I was worried at the beginning because it was slow. But since January, it has been January, February, I noticed it has been more, more easier for people to get vaccinated. And I even know people who is coming from other countries getting the vaccine here even paying. They don't care, but they can pay for that because they cannot find it in their countries. So I think, I hope everyone, because we need our normal life to be back, the economy, the economy, you know, we are worried about that. They, you know, people are finding jobs and on all the world economy, we need to move forward from this.

MLC 33:40

And then speaking of like, moving forward, how do you, are you planning towards the future considering like, the COVID-19 pandemic? And do you think there's an end like a light at the end of the tunnel? Or do you think it's gonna last a couple more years?

mc 33:54

I think it will last a couple more years. I think we will be, you know, especially in the schools, it will, it's getting like at the end of the tunnel. But, still we will have to be very cautious and following proper calls, but it will be at least a couple of years to get aware. You know, as it was before. It's going faster than last year, I thought this is not going to end. I was like, frustrated. Especially thinking in, in my profession in teaching. How this affects students in our normal life. Because e-learning is really good, it's easy, you know, you don't have to travel to go anything, but the other side is a lot of time. I started to feel my eyes, you know, and in that Zoom, I was exhausted, exhaustion so soon all the time. Not only with a student, but planning and when I have, you know, a lot of work it using the electronic devices. So once we are back into the

normal is, is, is easier, and I'm hopeful it, will we can overcome this. And I believe in science and all the, all the you know, all the people around the science districts that are, you know, trying doing research and everything. I even, in Spain, there is a, you know, a team of researchers that they are trying to do the vaccine for, especially for the little ones, like where they spray. So it will go into the nose. So I think is, we are, you know, in a good path, and I think science, we have all the resources available to get override this. My worry is the counties, you know, the poor countries that, they don't have the resources and what is happening in India, for example, and Brazil. So, I let's see how this will end, but hopefully it will. I think it will take a couple of years.

MLC 36:44

Okay, yeah, I'm looking forward to the end as well. But you never know.

MC 36:47

Yes, yes me too. For sure.

MLC 36:52

Thank you so much for answering all of my questions!

MC 36:55

Yes! It's so nice interviewing! Thank you.

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