

COVID-19 Oral History Project

Transcript of Interview with Greg Schell, Attorney, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid/Southern Migrant Legal Services, West Palm Beach, Florida

Recorded Thursday, April 16, 2020

Interviewer: Emily Leiserson, Indianapolis, Indiana

Topics: COVID-19 impact on agricultural laborers, outbreaks among farm laborers, meat packing plants, COVID impact on immigrants, demographics of agricultural workers, Florida government during COVID, West Palm Beach, DeSantis, outreach to farm workers, relations between agricultural workers and farm owners, pandemic among laborer camp

Emily Leiserson 0:00

So we are recording. I am Emily Leiserson. I am doing this interview with Greg Schell. It is Thursday, April 16th, just after noon. The year is 2020. We're recording for the COVID oral history project database. Greg, would you be willing to introduce yourself really quickly?

Greg Schell 0:27

Sure, my name is Greg Schell [pronounced "Shell"]. I'm an attorney, age 66. I've worked for the past 41 years as a legal aid lawyer representing migrant farm workers.

Emily Leiserson 0:39

Wow. And I apologize for getting your name pronunciation wrong. Shell - is that correct?

Greg Schell 0:44

Shell like a like, unfortunately it's not spelled the same, doesn't equate with the gas station, but it's the same pronunciation.

Emily Leiserson 0:52

Got it. Great. And you received our written informed consent. Could you just confirm that?

Greg Schell 1:03

Yep. I received it and I reviewed it and I've signed it.

Emily Leiserson 1:06

Wonderful. Thank you so much. Well we'll jump right in then. Can you tell me about some of the primary things that you do on a day-to-day basis and how those have been affected during the COVID-19 shutdown?

Greg Schell 1:25

Well my work has probably been affected, my life has been affected probably less than many people because prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, I worked from home. So it's not a new hat for me. I'm well accustomed to working at home, so really it has not changed my work situation. Like most people, I have reduced the times I sort of go out to do small errands. But it has not been a major game changer in terms of how I live my life.

Emily Leiserson 1:59

Yeah. So what do you do on a day-to-day basis? What does your daily work life look like?

Greg Schell 2:08

I'm a lawyer and what lawyers do is read and write a lot. So I research things, I communicate with people on the telephone, I write things. And, um, a lot of it is sitting in front of a computer. And that's, that has not changed, fortunately. And what has happened is the courts, which the courts... over the past 15-20 years,

courts nationwide have been moving away from filing paper documents to a digital system. That has been completed in Florida where I'm based already. And so don't the difference now with the courts is that all, virtually all hearings, in-person hearings have been eliminated and so there are still hearings going on, but they're by telephone. Those existed in the past. Increasingly judges were using phone hearings, which made sense because frequently you had layers coming from great distances for a 15-minute hearing. That seemed rather silly, particularly if it was sort of a ministerial-type hearing that you're talking about setting dates or something. There was really no need for the attorneys to be physically in front of the judge. Well, that sort of a matter has now become the norm. And what I did, I did this morning, for example, the court sent a reminder, in fact they set a hearing for next week to remind people in this particular case that well, the fact that COVID-19 is here does not mean that the case stops. What it means is we want to keep doing all the things you're going to be doing to prepare for the trial and all the various pretrial things. And I want to make sure you're still doing those so you don't we get near the trial and maybe things loosened up by that point. And you come in and say, oh, gee, we didn't know, judge. We were just sitting on our hands for months. So the courts are trying to at least the system moving forward. There are certainly challenges involved with that. Some things need to be done in person or usually are done in person, particularly a lot of the pretrial work. There are depositions where the parties will sit down with opposing witness and ask them questions usually in front of a court reporter. Well, that can't be done in person anymore, so that they'll have to be done remotely. And you may request a party or a witness to produce documents, bring them to the office at such and such a time. Well, that can't be done either in person now. That'll have to be done digitally. But what do you do if the witness doesn't have a lot of technology or is unsophisticated has just a bunch of paper? What do you do with that? Well, I guess they could in theory, find someplace they could photocopy it and send it to us. But it would be a little different than going in person and looking at the actual document.

Emily Leiserson 4:56

Right. Yeah. And, and tell us a little bit about your clients, specifically.

Greg Schell 5:04

My clients are all farm workers, and they consist of several groups. The largest group historically has been people that are US citizens or legal residents who go and do farm work on a seasonal basis. Now, historically, going back decades, I'm in Florida, which is a base state. So as the harvest would finish in Florida, usually in May or so, there would be no more crops to harvest in Florida so workers would migrate north to northern states where their harvests were coming into season, and they would work there and then return back to Florida in the fall. That pattern has become less and less common. More and more farm workers are only working in their local areas; they are not migrating. And part of that is due to the availability of the second group of farm workers. This comprises much of our clientele. The Immigration and Nationality Act has a provision that allows agricultural employers who cannot find domestic workers to do their harvest work to bring in foreign workers legally from abroad. And that program has been used increasingly in recent years by growers. There are roughly now 250,000 workers brought in, principally from Mexico each year to help harvest the crops. In some areas, for example the area I serve now which is predominantly six southeastern states, the guest workers brought in from Mexico are the majority of the workforce. And this whole COVID-19 situation has affected that - there have been fears, with some basis, that at some point the government would close the border. They have closed the border to some extent between Mexico and the United States, except to essential travel. And there was a concern they might shut it entirely and the foreign workers could not enter the United States. And the farmers were very concerned about this. But this was announced - actually at one point they were going to restrict the workers, they weren't going to let workers in at all. That was the situation for about one day until the entire agricultural community of the United States called all their senators, the White House, whoever they could think of, and that policy was walked back. The policy - now what they've done, they've actually gone out of their way to facilitate foreign workers coming in. In prior years foreign workers needed to be interviewed at the United States consulate in Mexico before they could come in to make certain they didn't have a prior record of problems in the United States,

that sort of thing. Well, we can't really interview people nowadays. So what do we do? Well the answer the government ultimately came up with is we'll waive all the interviews. So if Jack the Ripper wants to apply as a guest worker, he can come in because nobody's going to check him. They're not going to interview him and ask him "well have you ever committed any heinous crimes?" So, what they've done is they've gone out of their way to facilitate the movement of the workers in from abroad, and they just announced yesterday, the Department of Homeland Security, that they're easing the rules, so that the workers after they finish one job can more easily transfer to another job, and that they can extend their stay in the United States longer than they have been allowed to in the past, again, to try to make this foreign workforce, more readily available to the growers.

Emily Leiserson 8:38

Now, is that loosening of restrictions, is that due to the fact that there are a lot of disruptions in the supply chain for food at the moment?

Greg Schell 8:50

Well, it's a concern that the workforce, that the policies will No it's really the COVID-19 fear that they're going to be some kind of restrictions putting on. That has been one of the principal responses of the administration to the whole COVID-19 crisis has been to say "oh well if we stop people coming from China or whatever area, it will eliminate the problem." And for example in Florida, we have a governor who is a disciple essentially of President Trump, and his initial response to try to reduce the number of cases in Florida was to say, "well, we're going to quarantine anybody coming to the state of Florida, from New Jersey or New York." As if somehow that would stop the spread. I think they're concerned, the growers are concerned that those sorts of policies will be enacted in a fairly blunt way, and will block the flow of labor. And with harvest crops, many of these crops, you have to pick the vegetable or the fruit within a matter of days or it's no longer commercially viable. So they can't deal with delays, they've got to get the vegetables picked then. And now this has been complicated. You mentioned the supply chain. This is a bit complicated by the supply chain. Florida is a good example. Although Florida is a large producer of particularly vegetables as well as fruit, most of the vegetables in Florida do not go to supermarkets. They go to the institutional market, food service market, which services colleges, universities, restaurants, and cruise ships. That's not a real good market to be selling to right now. The demand has totally evaporated. So a number of farmers in Florida are literally having to plow up their crops that they're ready to harvest right now because they simply can't sell the produce. A number of farmers have said, well, even though it's not getting them any real income. For sort of good public relations, what they've done is to say well we can't sell our tomatoes, for example. So we'll put a bunch of tomatoes or mixed vegetables into a box and consumers can drive up to our house, they don't have to get out of cars, and then they, you know, we charge them 10 bucks and we'll put a box of vegetables in our car. Now of course, they were saying well you know that sounds like we're making a lot of money, but we're not. Because we're used to selling a truckload of vegetables, of boxes of vegetables, not just one per car as they're doing now. But there have been articles, a number of articles in the Florida papers recently they just, they can't get rid of their produce. There have been efforts by the United States Department of Agriculture to ease the means by which some of these farms can donate their crops, their harvest to food banks, who also need them. But the food banks are also sort of full; they can't store this stuff for very long, because again it's a perishable crop. So, just like the problems with the market trying to adjust to the new demand in the way toilet paper is consumed, there's a new way that vegetables are consumed. And most of the supermarkets are not buying the extra vegetables that are now all of a sudden available, because they already have their suppliers signed up, so they can't use extra truckloads of squash or zucchini. That's not something they can deal with. So literally, you have these very sad pictures of just, you know, hundreds and hundreds of pounds of vegetables just being poured on the ground or being used as cattle feed, because they can't sell them. Or being plowed up by a farmer.

Emily Leiserson 12:37

Wow, yeah. I will say anecdotally here in Indiana, the produce is very irregular. You know the stocks in the supermarket seem one day to be fine and then the next day you don't know what you're going to get.

Greg Schell 12:55

Well and I think that's consumers. Consumers are buying certain things all of a sudden, and we can't really figure out why that is why certain commodities they buy today and they don't buy something else. So we're not really very clear on that. But there are some things like flour and things that have really been hard to get because people are baking more. And it'd be nice if they ate more vegetables. I think that, you know, it's sort of like, like when you were a small child, eating your vegetables was sort of a punishment. And I think some of that still carries on with adults.

Emily Leiserson 13:26

Definitely. Well, and I believe you said this, but just to clarify and confirm, so you represent the workers not the farmers, is that correct?

Greg Schell 13:37

That's correct. But of course obviously there's a symbiotic relationship there,

Emily Leiserson 13:40

Right, that was going to be my next question. Do you feel like their interests are in line, concerning COVID?

Greg Schell 13:48

Well, yes and no. Because of course, the way farm workers generally get their jobs and go to work and are you know, accommodated, most of the farm workers, particularly in these states that have relatively short harvests, the harvests that are starting now, like from probably May through the summer into the fall, are in northern states like Indiana. And then those northern states the harvest is very short and so the farm workers cannot really realistically find housing in the local community for a month or two. So most farms provide housing. Well of course they try to spend as little money as they can on housing, and the federal regulations only require in most instances only 50 square feet of floor space per occupant in bedrooms. Well that's not a whole lot. And if you have bunk beds, it's only 40 square feet. And that doesn't really do a lot for social distancing. Likewise the farm workers ride to and from work, usually in vans or buses that are packed with people. They've tried to put in as many people as they can, because they don't want to buy any more, and operate more buses than necessary. Well, we've urged employers "well gee, maybe you need to think about putting the bands farther apart, not putting so many people in a room, not putting so many people on the bus running an extra trip of the bus or something." And some farmers see the big picture. They say, "look, it is worth my taking that extra effort and incurring some cost, because if there was an outbreak in my facility, just like you seeing at the Smithfield plant outside Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with the pork processing plant, same thing. If that happens, the whole thing shuts down at some point. And that's the worst thing that could happen, because then I have nobody to pick my stuff. So it is better for me to take these steps, and if somebody does test positive to immediately have some arrangement to quarantine them in a motel or something, so they're not in with the other workers." Smart farmers are going to do that because they see that it's a relatively cheap form of insurance against a potential disaster. However, many farmers are small, they operate near the margin, and they're going to take a chance. They will view the workers - many of them view workers as fungible, even though they really aren't, because if again, if there's an outbreak and the workers can no longer continue because they're sick and they're so sick they cannot work, they're showing symptoms. What do they do then if they're short harvest labor? It's not like they can just go down to the street corner and get a bunch of guys to come pick up cucumbers. So, we don't know exactly at this point what the reaction of farms is going to be. I would say some of the bigger farms behave fairly responsibly. A lot of the smaller farms are just starting to operate with their workforces. And if I was betting, a lot of them will do nothing, and just will not change anything, and sort of whistle by the graveyard. Yeah.

Emily Leiserson 17:03

So you're in Florida. What part of Florida are you in?

Greg Schell 17:07

Well, okay, I am technically employed in the same office as your sister in Nashville, but I live in South Florida, and I'm allowed to work remotely. So I'm near West Palm Beach. But most of my work has been in Florida. I probably in my 41 years, let's see, I'd say, 35 have been working in Florida with farmers.

Emily Leiserson 17:32

And for you personally - it helps us just to locate you. What is, if you don't mind sharing, your zip code?

Greg Schell 17:39

33410.

Emily Leiserson 17:40

Okay, got it. And your clients, mostly in Florida, but are there some all over?

Greg Schell 17:49

Well our clients home base, in my current job working out of the Nashville office most of the clients' home base is someplace in Mexico. And they come in for the harvest season then go back to Mexico. And there are, just like in the United States, there are certain areas in Mexico that send more farmworkers to the United States than others. And they tend to be, as you might imagine, the poorer areas, where people are desperate enough that they will come to the US to do very hard work and be absent from their families for months on end.

Emily Leiserson 18:25

Yeah. Yeah. Would you be willing to explain a little bit about the structure of your office, your organization? So you have the office in Nashville, there's the greater organization in Texas.

Greg Schell 18:39

There's a large Okay. There is a nationwide system of legal services, and within that there's a system that covers all the states, which provides services to agricultural workers. And the Texas, the overall Texas program has also, as part of its funding, it is responsible to provide services to agricultural workers, both in Texas and in the six-state southeastern region served by the National Office, which includes Louisiana Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Alabama. Now, the challenge with that is, of course, most of those farms are quite small and they're very scattered. They're not next to Nashville most of them either, of course. So that that's another challenge you have. Kentucky, for example, you probably have 1,000 or more farms that use migrant labor. But most of them use, maybe a dozen or less. But they're scattered. There's a trailer here, a trailer there with a handful of workers. So it's very hard. How do you make those workers, scattered all over the place, aware of your services, knowing that most of the workers don't even come from the United States, so they are fairly unfamiliar with our legal system or their rights under the law? And so that's a double challenge. And historically the response of our office to that has been - and the response of similar offices across the country - has been to do outreach, physical outreach, to the workers. To go out and see them during their non-work hours, usually in the evenings or on the weekends, and introduce yourself and tell them about your services. Provide them maybe with a brochure. That's what our office has always done. We have several people in the office that that's one of their primary - non lawyers who that's one of their primary responsibilities. Well that's sort of not going to work now for two reasons. One, the danger to the person who would be doing the outreach on behalf of the office. But also if I'm a farm operator, I sure don't want a bunch of outsiders coming in, any more than people that, you know ... For example, I was telling

my wife, she said, "Oh, well, we'll have somebody come in and help clean the house." Well, no we won't. Not now, we can't have an outsider come in. The idea is we're supposed to be, you know, social distancing, and bringing in an outsider is a really bad idea. And so for the same reason if I'm a farm operator, most of them don't like us coming on their property anyway to see their workers. This is another reason to keep us off the property, saying there's a health concern related to COVID-19.

Emily Leiserson 21:21

It's an excuse, in a way, potentially,

Greg Schell 21:24

Yeah. So yes, but it's also, I will say our staff and the staff in similar staff persons around the country, for good reasons, say, "Well, I'm not sure. I like my job and everything, but I'm not sure I want to go in the camp of, you know, dozens or hundreds of people, you know, that I don't know, that are kept in close quarters. It's just like other conGreg Schellate living situations, like nursing homes. A migrant labor camp is a potential ideal breeding ground, a petri dish if you would, for development of COVID-19. So why do I want to go out and meet with those people, probably be in fairly close proximity to them? That seems like a really bad idea."

Emily Leiserson 22:08

So how are those paralegals and others who are doing the outreach, how are they trying to adapt now?

Greg Schell 22:16

Well, they've been scratching their heads. They're trying to use technology. And I guess the good thing is that most of the workers who have come from abroad are young. And even in a developing country like Mexico, everybody in Mexico is on Facebook. Everybody has WhatsApp. And so the idea now is to let's make, let's get better digital tools. Now again that only works so well, because you have to have somebody look for you, look for your Facebook page. So how do you tell them "here we are, we have Facebook page." And so, we may actually be buying Facebook ads to try to promote it to, if I'm a farm worker coming I will, by doing certain searches, our page will come up. But no, it's a challenge. Other means can be used, like radio and other things. They're terribly expensive. When you're looking for a very narrow population. I mean you don't want to be paying for an ad that 99.9% of the people hearing the ad are not going to be the people that will be using the service. So that doesn't make much sense. So trying to also work with other groups that go out to these, that do, or maybe don't go out but deal with this population. Migrant health clinics is one. To some extent, religious groups. There are some just sort of, you know, social help or advocacy organizations that also go out there. Or if they don't go out they have their places that the workers will contact. The Mexican consulate is another. Workers in trouble if they're abroad, just like you or I would, if we were in trouble in a foreign country, we might contact the US Embassy. Many of these workers contact their embassy when things go south.

Emily Leiserson 24:05

So, what are your biggest concerns with your clients, during the epidemic?

Greg Schell 24:13

Boy, you know I probably am remiss in this. I mean I think Liz and some of the other people also in the office are really well looking at the immediate, how do we change the housing configuration. I am concerned about that, but I'm much more concerned about the mischief that is going to be created. Because I understand, I spent a lot of time following what employers are doing. And they have a lot, a lot of their wish list, over the last 15-20 years, things that they've never been able to get passed. They're pushing hard now, in hopes that they will slip it into one of these various bills that's going through. Because for the first time in a long time, there is some legislation, major legislation passing. Now admittedly it's COVID related. But as you've seen if you've looked at any of the bills, if you look at the CARES bill or the other, the prior bill, it's loaded with all

these little things that somebody stuck in there at the last minute. And that's what farmers hope to do. In claiming "Gee, we were in tough shape. We're having trouble getting our labor, nobody's buying our product, you know the cruise ships aren't buying our cucumbers, whatever. So you need to give us this goodie to help us through." Now, the farmers have done pretty well if you think about it. Because during the trade prior to, leading up to this, during this so-called trade war we've had with China and other countries, I mean the farmers have taken a huge hit. But the government has gone out of its way to give them major welfare payments. Essentially they've given them, it's been over \$15 billion a year they've been giving to farmers to compensate them for crop losses because of the trade policies. Because of this tariff war, they can't sell much of their product to a lot of the world, particularly China. So the farmers are you know saying, "gee, we're doing pretty well this administration. They like us a lot, maybe they'll do us this one too, they'll do us this favor." And the democrats are desperate enough to You know the farm industry, it's interesting. There are a lot of giant farming companies, but particularly in the fruit and vegetable industry, not so much. And many of them, I'm not going to say they look like the painting from Grant Wood, you know of American Gothic. But they are sort of, a lot of them, small family farms. They're pretty sympathetic. You know, blood of the scarecrow, or no - what is it - blood of the scarecrow, rain on the flower - or vice versa, whichever one it is. It's the sort of Farm Aid, like these are really sympathetic people, and that may be enough. In the past, some of the people that have pushed some of these bills that have not gotten through, some of the sponsors have been included Bernie Sanders, Chuck Schumer, you know, Pat Leahy. Real democrats that are progressive, but they have a lot of farmers in their state. Bernie Sanders totally does whatever the dairy industry wants, because you know there are more cows than people in Vermont. So he's a total sellout to the dairy industry. He always has been. So I always say to our allies I say "well you know, we start puffing our chest out and say well, gee, we're gonna get all these good bills passed. Look, if we can't get Bernie Sanders on our side, we got a tough, tough road ahead of us. It's not gonna be easy." And so in these times this is an opportunity for these farmers and their interests to really press things they have literally been trying for decades to get through. And I see there a real possibility of that. And once they're enacted it's a lot harder to take them away, in my life experience. I came out of law school in 1979, in 1980 Ronald Reagan was elected and Ronald Reagan hated legal services for, and particularly migrant legal services for a number of reasons. But one of the things he did was he imposed some restrictions on legal services. Now, 40 years later those restrictions are still on the books, even though we've had progressive presidents in between. Nobody's bothered to get rid of what Reagan did, and we still struggle with those things. And I see the same happening here that anything that's put on will be like the devil to get removed. And let's say there's a democratic administration that replaces Trump at the end of the year. They've got plenty of things to do to undo what's been done. And this will not be a priority, fixing what affects particularly primarily farm workers from abroad who, truth be told, even if they're cheated here badly, they make more in an hour here, they make in a day in Mexico. So, there will never be a shortage of foreign workers, regardless of the conditions, that are willing to come and work here.

Emily Leiserson 29:04

So, if they pass some of this legislation that the farmers want, what would be the impact on the workers?

Greg Schell 29:11

Lower wages. Expansion of the guest worker program to eliminate the last remaining US farm workers. There are still, not a large number, but there still are some US citizens and permanent residents that depend on farm work. Fortunately, when I started in 1979, there were a lot of US farmworkers, they were the majority. But fortunately, in the intervening years, opportunities for people in the United States, particularly minorities, have really improved, thank heavens. And so their kids haven't had to be farmworkers by and large. But that dwindling group that's left there because they don't have, they don't have a lot of job skills, they don't have much education, farm work is really what they can do, they're going to be pushed aside. And because there are a number of obvious and some not so obvious reasons they prefer the foreign workers. The principal reason they prefer them is the foreign worker under the terms of our laws comes in and can

only work for the farmer or the employer who petitions for him. So if I come in to work for farmer Smith and his job stinks, my only choice is to stick with farmer Smith or go back to Mexico and starve. And so, if you think about it, General Motors could do something similar to that, I mean this is an employer's dream. You work for me or you go back to third world poverty, that's pretty good deal for an employer. So of course there is massive underpayment and cheating of the workers, abuse of the workers. So, and plus as the result of some wrongheaded court decisions, the courts have ruled that in hiring these foreign workers, the US employers are not subject to US employment discrimination laws. So they can say I only want men, I only want young men. For example, they bring in a bunch of workers from South Africa, they will not bring in black South Africans. And I've heard rumors there are some black people in South Africa. But they bring in 6000, about 6000 South Africans a year to do farm work, and not one of them is black. You cannot get away with that otherwise. I mean if you went out in the United States, put out an ad and said only white people apply, that would be illegal. You'd be in all kinds of trouble. But you can do it in hiring the foreign workers. I don't want any women, I don't want anybody over 35, you know, whatever. So, that is an employer's dream. If you think about it. You can go to a foreign country and sort of just cherry pick the people you want to come in. And of course, the nice thing is you let them know at the beginning, "well, you know I get to decide who comes back next year, and any problem people don't come back." Well that reduces the complaints too, because I want to come back next year, because this is the only way I can get legally into the United States. And the nice thing about this program, I don't have to risk dying in the desert coming from abroad, which is the only other way to come in, and you know and of course if I come in through the desert and I make it, I won't be able to go back and see my family for a long time if ever. But under this program, if I get a visa to come in, I work in the United States for 6 to 10 months, and I get to go back home and at least spend a little time with my family. So I want to be part of that. You know, just like the saints come marching in, I want to be in that number. I want to be those guys. And the situation is so desperate abroad, that the majority of workers coming from Mexico nowadays pay, illegally, a fee to the employer or the employers' recruiter to get the job. They pay up to several thousand dollars and they have to borrow the money from loan sharks to say "put me on the list to be hired," just to get hired. So they arrived thousands of dollars in debt, many of them, because they spent this money to get chosen. So, if you think about it, what employer wouldn't love this program? This is the greatest thing ever for employers. I mean, really, this is in ways some ways, better than slavery. Because slavery like you know, let's say, if you're a grower up somewhere up further north than Florida. You know there's an offseason that maybe the slaves aren't working so much, I still have to feed them and house them. This way when I'm done I just send them home. And I don't have to deal with their stinking families, their stinking families stay abroad. So I only have to deal with the guy. I just get him in here to work, I work him like to death, and then I send him home. And if he's a problem, I send him home. He's gone. That's better than slavery. Before I, you know, I had to like string Toby up and you know cut his heels and stuff. I don't have to do that anymore. I mean this is really fairly, fairly amazing stuff. So, this is a, this is a system that, again, employers did pretty well. And how did they get this system created? This system came out of World War Two, and it's been preserved. Because during World War Two, we did not have a lot of people because we had sold- a lot of people, particularly the men, had gone off to fight the war. So there was a shortage. So they got these rules, and of course at the end of the war they said, well, everybody came home, but the farmer said "well we really like this program, this is really good. Let's keep this, and they've kept it ever since."

Greg Schell 34:13

So it's a vestige of World War Two that survived. And that's what I fear will happen here, that they'll make the program this much worse, they'll make the conditions worse. There are some modest protections in the program, but they will be watered down, reduced. whatever. There's supposed to be a statutory legal preference that they have to hire Americans first; that'll be gone. Why do you think Donald Trump hires 120 foreign workers to work at Mar-a-Lago? Do you think there are no people in West Palm Beach, Florida that would work at Mar-a-Lago? I'm gonna let you in on a secret: there are hotels in Florida, you may have heard of them. And, you know, they have like people from here, from the United States, working at hotels. Maybe

you've been to hotels, you've seen people there that are from the United States. And why you can't get any of them to work at Mar-a-Lago? You ever wonder why that is? But no, he needs 120 people from abroad every year to work at Mar-a-Lago: as servers, and work the front desk and things, they can't get anybody from here? And so the reason they do it is because, you know, why does Trump do anything, is to save money. And you've read the stories probably. He has these foreign workers working at his, he has a vineyard in Virginia, he brings in workers from Mexico to work there. So, so, I mean, he's not unique in this respect. But I mean, the point is, these guest worker programs are an employer's absolute dream. And so, who wouldn't do it? And so, again, if I'm employers, and I will tell you all their lobbyists and are like working hard to make sure they get what they want out of this. And that's what I fear most is going to occur from this is that there's going to be this - there are going to be changes that are supposedly temporary that will become permanent, that will further depress the wages and working conditions of farm workers and eliminate the last domestic farm workers.

Emily Leiserson 36:11

Yeah. Yeah. Well, and you earlier mentioned that you have health concerns as well. That the camps can be kind of like a perfect-

Greg Schell 36:21

Oh, I think short term there's gonna be big time concerns. But, again, it's beautiful. My concern is that an employer, again, "I want em to be healthy enough to get the crop in. But as long as they get the crop in, you know, if they get sick in the end, I just ship them back to Mexico, not my problem." That's a pretty good deal. And even, you know, even in midseason you know if I've got this guy who's positive, you know, he's probably gonna be okay in a couple weeks, but rather than quarantine, I'll just ship him back. And so, these are great things. And because you know probably the worker won't be able to get- the workers technically are eligible for sick pay, but that worker sitting in a trailer in rural Kentucky, you think he's gonna figure out how to get that? Of course not. He's gonna, he's gonna be back in central Mexico, and he hasn't heard about any of these things, any of these various laws. His sick pay, his emergency sick pay provisions, he doesn't know anything about it.

Emily Leiserson 37:22

Do you know of any instances of COVID-19 among your clients?

Greg Schell 37:28

No, because first of all, most of our clients aren't in. But even nationally, I read these articles that say we haven't had a farm worker outbreak, and I say, "That's impossible." And it's because we aren't testing it. It's just like that plant in South Dakota. That if you look at Smithfield plant in South Dakota, which now has over, nearly 600 cases - it was 600 last night, it's probably higher. It's over half the cases in South Dakota, and you know, nobody knew about a week and a half ago.

Emily Leiserson 37:57

Are those migrant workers, at that plant?

Greg Schell 37:59

Well, no. Yes but no, no they're not. But many of them, initially came What happens is those processing plants, I'm gonna let you in on a secret, working in a meat plant, meatpacking plant is not a fun job. It's a really crappy job, but it's- many of those plants are filled with workers who came originally to the area as foreign workers. And why did they stay and go to the meatpacking plant? Because my Haitian clients would tell me in Creole, a meatpacking job is what they call a job ponché. In other words, a job you punch in for. You get 40 hours a week every week, unlike picking vegetables, which the work is very irregular. So it was a job ponché. So if you look at the meatpacking plants, they're filled with immigrants, many of whom came

initially as farmers and just stayed in the area. I used to work, I spent five years working in the Delmarva area, the eastern shore of Maryland and Delaware and Virginia. And [it's a] big chicken area, Purdue is based there. And the chicken plants were full of people who'd come as migrant workers and just stayed. After they picked the vegetables they said, "Well, maybe I'll go get the job at the chicken plant."

Emily Leiserson 39:10

Wow. So- oh, are you still there?

Greg Schell 39:14

Oh, sure.

Emily Leiserson 39:16

Got it, okay sorry I thought it cut out for a second. So but yes you were saying, I mean certainly there have been cases of COVID, but nobody's getting tested so they're able to say-

Greg Schell 39:30

Right, right, except in Florida and maybe Arizona, right now, this is a low point in the harvest cycle for the country. The big amount of work is going to begin, probably in May, into the summer. That's when there will be more farm workers working in the United States than at any time in the year. Because right now, you know, it's not, you know, they may be planting and doing pre-harvest work in many states, but it's not, if you've looked out the door in Indiana, you've noticed it's not like sunny and warm and 75 degrees and growing watermelons right now. Now, in a couple months it will be, but not right now. And that's true lots of places, even the places like so for example, the South Carolina harvest and Georgia will start in, you know, like in late May or early June, but right now the only places harvesting really large amounts are some parts of California, Arizona, Florida. And right now it's big, big time in Florida, and I would be willing to bet dollars to doughnuts, there are people positive in Florida, but nobody's going out to find them.

Greg Schell 40:38

Again, how would you find out about it unless- the worker, again, because this is even better with the guest workers. If I hire local workers, well they live in town and they know how to go to the health clinic and they feel sick. If I hire guest workers, they're almost always housed in employer-provided housing, frequently on employers' land. As you may have noticed in Indiana, most farms are not in the middle of town, they're out in the sticks. They're not close to anything and these guest workers of course don't have vehicles. So if I feel sick, what am I going to do, if I'm living out on Farmer Jones's farm in the middle of nowhere? I'm not going to really have- it's not going to be easy for me to call the doctor, I don't have any health care. What am I going to do? And I came here to work, remember I don't want to be on that list of troublemakers or undependable workers. I'm going to keep working as long as I can. I'm not going to take a day off if I sort of feel bad because I, again, my family needs the money and I want to be on the list of workers requested back. An employers' dream.

Emily Leiserson 41:44

Yeah. So I'm curious what are the demographics of your typical workers? You said most of them are from out of the country.

Greg Schell 41:56

Yeah, it's changed. When I started, it was a cross section. There were a lot of African American farmer workers at least on the east coast, in Florida. A lot of Mexican Americans, some undocumented Mexicans but not very many. And, but that's changed over time. And still some white workers when I started. There were still a dwindling number of white farm workers. That's totally changed over the years. Increasingly, thank heavens, African Americans, their children didn't have to be farm workers, so they got out of there. There are

very few African American farmworkers left; they're some but not large numbers. There have been waves of immigrants, from Mexico initially, then from the Caribbean, from Haiti and Jamaica and Guatemala, in Central America. But increasingly in recent years, there's been this steady growth – I saw the statistics just yesterday – that it's continuing at a growth rate of about 13% a year, at least for this year, in guest workers. And almost all of them, probably 90 plus percent, come from Mexico. They are overwhelmingly male, because again the employers can pick, and they're overwhelmingly young. And of course that's probably good for employers because the young people appear to, despite what our brilliant Governor of Florida announced that there's never been a young person [who] died from COVID, which is not true, but he's a disciple of Trump so we don't bother with facts. But anyway, but young people do seem to be less impacted by this than more vulnerable, older people. So they're young, they're generally under 30. They're, I'd say the majority of them are not married.

Greg Schell 43:49

So, again, it's hard to generalize, but if I'm an employer, that's the person I'm going to hire, right? I'm going to hire that guy. Some employers do value the worker who's been coming for a number of years, particularly if he's going to do some kind of a more sophisticated thing than just picking vegetables. If I'm going to require him to operate heavy machinery, for example, I have somebody who knows how to operate the machinery, and he's a little older but he knows how to run the tractor properly. I'm gonna bring him back regardless of the fact that he's aging. But for most of the people that go out and pick and plant and do all that sort of thing, it's young and male and Mexican; those are sort of the three predominant statistics, demographics.

Emily Leiserson 44:33

Well, so when you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts? If you go back to January, February, whenever.

Greg Schell 44:49

Going- apart from- my personal response is, aside from how I professionally worry about my clients. I said this is the moment of reckoning. The audio we have in the White House is now actually going to have to deal with a problem, a serious crisis. And all we feared is likely to come true, which it has. That he's totally incompetent. He won't listen, you know, he's opposed to science and medicine and all that sort of thing. Which I'm a big fan of science. And so, right it'll be mishandled, it'll all be done- he's trying to first of all deny it exists. The total thing he does with everything, is deny its existence initially and when it becomes clear that he can't deny it's here, then blame everybody, which has been the modus operandi. And everything, you know, everything Just to let you know, my life since 2016 has been, my wife limits me, because I have blood pressure issues, she limits me to two hours a night, I can watch MSNBC and yell at Donald Trump. But I only get two hours. So but I really, literally every night, I spend two hours yelling at the TV and how stupid he is. And so this was not a shock to me.

Emily Leiserson 46:09

[Laughs] And you've talked a little bit about the Florida governor and his response, but could you lay that out for me? What you've seen in Florida.

Greg Schell 46:17

Well, he's been also slow to put in – and he's been slow to – one of the great things – he's been slow to put in a restrictions – a stay at home order. And when he finally did, yesterday, this great thing on again, my Donald Trump hour, he had classified as one of the essential businesses in the country – or in the state – was professional wrestling. Why do you think that is? Because Vince McMahon and his wife, who was the small business administrator originally, for the Trump administration of course promised all this money would come into Florida. So of course, what they did is they held their event so they could get the money. But just yesterday announced they fired all the wrestlers. Because they've all been exposed. Of course, there was somebody that tested positive within the wrestlers. But this is what he does. Now this is sad because Ron DeSantis, who's the governor, is not stupid. He went to Harvard. He's not stupid, like Trump, who's just an ignoramus. But he is clearly the way he got elected was, he was a sort of unknown congressman, only a congressman for maybe two terms or three terms. And there was a very much a favored person who sort of

was the obvious heir apparent to be Governor. And DeSantis won in the primary, to everybody's surprise, because Trump embraced him. DeSantis as a congressman in 2016 and 2017 had made it his business to be one of the regulars on Fox News. And he would go on Fox News all the time and say how great Trump was. So Trump, of course, loved him. And Trump came down and said, he's my guy. And people in Florida, we specialize in stupid people down here. Especially stupid white people. So we have a lot of stupid white people that said "Oh, well Trump likes him." So he won the primary, pretty handily. And he won the general election by a close margin. And but he has really followed Trump's lead, and he didn't put a stay-at-home order in until after somebody, the Surgeon General finally said that, well, we think it would be good if people stayed home. It was only that he figured that was a sufficient signal from the White House that he could do that. But since then, he, you know, he took a lot of heat, and he should have, for not shutting down spring break, and for you know sort of like the professional wrestling thing on a bigger scale. So Florida did very slow, they're, you know, slow to do things in Florida. Again my Trump TV has been emphasizing the hotbed, the potential petri dishes of this, besides places like meatpacking plants, it's gonna be conGreg Schellate living facilities. And I'm gonna let you in on a secret. There are a lot of older people in Florida, I know that's a shock to you. And they live in, like, a lot of them live in rest homes, and you have to imagine that, just like they found - this morning they were announcing they found 17 bodies at this rest home, or this nursing home in New Jersey, I'm confident there are places like that all over Florida. Because we have just endless nursing homes where they house these old people, and many of them don't have a lot of money, so their fee is paid by medicare or something. So they don't, it doesn't pay very much, and you don't get very much for your money. So they're not very well cared for in the best of circumstances. And now this is not the best of circumstances, so my guess is that the nursing home numbers are off the chart. But of course, just like the Trump administration, our governor is not willing to go and check it out. Now he did announce he's gonna send the National Guard in and try and start checking the nursing homes, so we'll see if that makes any difference. But of course he's just like Trump. He's announced that he's already got- is putting together his panel to figure out how to get back to work. So he exempted, I mean when he did put in the stay at home order, he made a point of exempting religious services. This came a week or two after a Tampa minister had been arrested because he, in violation of a county order, he had held this, you know, he had urged all the people to come to church because, as he told him, the blood of Jesus would save them all. I'm not sure how many of you are testing positive now, but anyway. So, but when DeSantis, the governor, finally put in the order to do a statewide stay at home order, he made a point of specifically saying that he preempted any local communities from enacting more strict requirements. So we'll make sure the pastors ... so statewide there is an exemption for religious organizations and religious services. So you know if you want to go all Praise the Lord and handle snakes or whatever you want to do, that's okay. So, I mean, this is nuts. This is crazy. But, you know, again, somebody who is not stupid would - it's hard to believe, but again, there are two things: one, the governor is a fan of Trump, and number two he's depending on the fact that people in Florida are pretty stupid, which is not a bad bet to make. He's not called Flori-duh for nothing.

Emily Leiserson 51:30

So you have a current, a stay at home order currently, do you know how long you're under it?

Greg Schell 51:37

I think it runs to the end of the month. Because we. And we'll see what happens. I mean, we have not had something like they had in Michigan and some other states, where people were protesting in front of the Capitol. But there'll be pressure to open it up. Florida probably was hit- our immediate problem the governor has been facing is that total Florida had one of the worst unemployment compensation systems. Prior to COVID, Florida actually I think had one point the lowest percentage of unemployed people in the country receiving benefits. Florida only gave benefits for 12 weeks and the maximum benefit in Florida, prior to COVID, the maximum benefit if you were earning \$2 million a year, the maximum you could get in unemployment compensation was \$275 a week. So it's just a ridiculous system. Now of course, and the system was run - in fact, the former governor who is now our senator admitted he did it this way - he made it as difficult as possible for people to apply. Because you not only have to fill out an application, give the basic information, you know for example your name, address, that sort of thing, you were required to do a 45 question survey, as part of the application. Gee, I can't imagine anybody being deterred by that. Not to mention the number the fact that you have to apply online, and you may have heard there are some people in Florida who immigrated here from other countries that don't speak English. I know you've probably never heard about that, but that does happen down here. And so, as a result there was very low participation in unemployment. Well now that we have all these employed people applying, Disney laid off 77,000 people. Disney World. One place, 77,000 people! What do you think is happening to the computer right now, they

immediately bought like, what was it, nearly 100 servers to try to handle the volume, but that just isn't going to do it. So the system is totally crashed all the time. This happened in other states, but it's probably worse in Florida because our economy in Florida is so heavily service oriented. What does Florida have going for it? Nothing except the weather. And so most people work for things like hotels, restaurants, things that are based on tourism, because there's nothing else here that matters. And so, I mean why else would you come Florida? So there's this enormous- the unemployment rate here, I'm sure, is just off the chart. And so the system, so, yes, we have this huge problem. The governor spent a lot of his time dealing with that. Now he wants to open that up. It's hard to imagine if you open up every hotel down here, it doesn't matter. People aren't traveling.

Greg Schell 54:17

[Barking in background.] Got a knock at our door. My wife's going to see who would knock on our door now. That's very odd, our dogs are saying there's somebody at the door. Anyway. So I guess it's delivering a package probably, I hope. Anyway, so those two things are occupying the governor's time right now. We have not had the breakdown in the hospitals yet. You have to figure it will happen, but we're much- It's sort of like the general populations nationwide. Just like Trump, I have this hunch, probably, is less worried, President Trump is less worried about the death and the hospital problems because they're largely occurring in what he would call blue states: New York, New Jersey, California, Washington state. Who cares about those places, because they don't like Trump. In fact he's bragged that the stupid states in the middle of a country like you know, South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, stupid states, those states, you know, they're not having problems yet, but they So similar here. Similarly in Florida, the vast majority of the positive cases are in the southeast part of the state, where they are not, they're the blue part of the state. And I think frankly, they're not occurring up in the part of Florida which considers itself part of Alabama. So, the governor is probably less worried about them than he might be if they were occurring in areas where they had a much larger percentage of red voters. So, in many ways, it's a microcosm of what what's occurring nationally.

Emily Leiserson 55:52

Yeah, yeah so the national discussion has been a lot around flattening the curve, and how that may appear different in different parts of the country. Do you have a sense of where you are in the curve in Florida?

Greg Schell 56:09

They say it's flattening or close to flattening. I live in a county, even though Palm Beach County, it does not have the highest number of cases, it's had consistently the highest number of deaths. And that's probably because we have a large number of elderly people here. And most of the deaths have been elderly people in their 70s or older. But it does appear that the deaths are at the point of slowing down. Just like in New York, hospitalizations are slowing down. Now, I also fear that of course everybody's gonna start, as in probably every place in the country, people are going stir crazy, and they want to go out and do things. And they want to go out and party and whatever. My guess is there's going to be strong pressures to that. And I'm guessing the governor will indulge that probably in the next couple weeks. There is, just like there is in the state of New York, there is a battle here. The governor has said, "Well, we should open the schools up again," and the superintendents down here are saying "that's nuts. We can't do that. That's crazy." And so we have that same debate is going on, just like with Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo in New York where they're arguing over when their schools will reopen.

Emily Leiserson 57:25

Right.

Greg Schell 57:27

But at the end of the day I'm guessing the schools do not reopen. I'm guessing there will be stuff reopened here, because again, it's Flori-duh, and so they'll do something very stupid. Always count on Florida to do something stupid. So yes, and it'll be interesting to see what happens. Now I'm guessing that of course, one of the battles will be here - and probably more than any place - we'll have a big battle over the election, because Florida will be the biggest swing state in the national election and there will be a huge effort to prevent, you know, expansion of absentee voting and voting by mail. Even though the President acknowledges that he had voted in the last Florida election by mail, but he's different because he's the president, and there's no fraud because he's voting. So, anyway, I'm sure we will face a lot of battles over that. And I hear a lot of that down here because I'm in the blue area of Florida where they like, favor people voting and like they're sort of big fans of democracy and things like that.

Emily Leiserson 58:32

Right. Well, so, how have people around you been affected other than what we've talked about? Your family or people in your neighborhood.

Greg Schell 58:43

People seem to be staying pretty much home. Now you know I've cut way back on my trips to the store. I tried. But for example, I've seen changes. I go- the biggest supermarket chain in Florida by far is one called Publix. And they instituted early on, they cut back their hours, but they did institute two days a week that they will open an hour early to let senior citizens go in. So, being a senior citizen, I said okay let me try this. And I've gone the last three or four weeks for the senior citizen day. And I've noticed changes. What I've noticed is, from no masks to most people have masks, that's been even though masks aren't mandatory. That's really been noticeable. The second thing that's been noticeable, actually was sort of, maybe this reflects people either getting used to it or whatever, the line. They open the store at seven o'clock, so people started lining up. Some people stayed overnight initially just because they had to get their toilet paper or whatever. But I tried to go, plenty early to be top of the line, so I could get the toilet paper and so on. And the lines have been dwindling. I mean, when the store opens at seven o'clock, where it had been the line had been maybe 40 or 50 senior citizens, a week or two ago, it was like 20 this week. So that was, that says something. People in the store, I noticed that people were- Oh the store finally put in directional arrows so people would not keep running into each other in the aisles. Now, and being Flori-duh, a lot of people couldn't figure that out. It was you know they couldn't figure out which, they were going up the down staircase or whatever. But they've made efforts here. So people seem to be adjusting to that. I haven't been out enough to really know, but the only thing I- they've closed the parks, as with everywhere. The dogs of America, dogs of Florida are getting tired of being walked, I think, because that's what people are doing for exercise. I exercise extremely early in the morning. I go run and, like I leave, I'm out of here before four o'clock. And that way- I always ran early but I try to run even earlier now, so that I don't, you know, I have no contact with anybody and I'm not bothering anybody. I hear complaints, which are legitimate complaints, about people saying, "Well, what about the person walking down the sidewalk, and a runner, you know runners run up next to them and run around them. That's not good for anybody." And I want to make sure I'm not doing that. And at 4 in the morning it's pretty quiet here.

Emily Leiserson 1:01:34

Right, yeah. Yeah, definitely. Have you known anyone who's gotten sick?

Greg Schell 1:01:39

No

Emily Leiserson 1:01:40

How do you think it's affecting people's mental health?

Greg Schell 1:01:46

I think people are very anxious here. Again, I don't, I don't have a lot of friends apart from work, so that's- I'm not a very good person to respond to that. But given the unemployment, well here's some reflections. I look in the paper and see the number of people, this is happening around the country too, they're lining up for the free food distributions, lining up their cars. And, for example this week there was at one of the big shopping malls, they distributed food, and they were supposed to start handing out the baskets, the boxes of food at nine o'clock. But by five o'clock in the morning they already had dozens of cars there, and they couldn't serve everybody. There were, they served I think nearly 1000 families, and they didn't get everybody served when they finally started distributing the goods. And I think those people were very desperate. These are people who've never gone to ask for food before. I think there are a lot of hungry people, and just like everything else in Florida, which has like one of the worst social service safety nets in the country, the food stamp program here is pretty crappy too. So that's not going to help people, so they're gonna be a lot of really- I think there's a lot of hungry, desperate people right now. Florida has a lot of renters, because this is a low wage state, because we decided it's Flori-duh. And so, you compare the sort of development or lack thereof of Florida versus some of the states that are slightly more enlightened like North Carolina. 40 years ago North Carolina's governor said, you know, we don't want to be a stupid state forever. So we're going to develop this Research Triangle in the tri cities, and we're gonna actually try to bring in people that can read and write, and have our universities develop. But Florida never wanted to do that; they've been more and more

important that they have “we have real good football teams here.” That's the important thing to them, and they do have really good football teams. And they pay their coaches. The highest paid employees in the state of Florida, that I think it's the top five employees in the state, in terms of salary, employees in the state of Florida, are all football coaches. I mean they make literally they're paid \$4 or \$5 million a year as a football coach. But have you heard about the great academic achievements of the Florida universities? No, because there aren't any. And that's why high tech hasn't moved here, and we have a service economy that's a really crappy economy. Because it depends on- we don't have a state income tax, because we want to have crappy schools. Because again the attitude of Florida, it was built on the idea that I paid my taxes up north and I moved to Florida because I don't want to pay any more taxes, because my kids are already through school. And that's sort of the attitude the state was built on. You know, we don't give a crap about anybody else; that's the motto in Florida. And that's certainly generally carried down. I mean, there's no sense of community here because most people came from someplace else. It's a weird state. It is not a poor state in terms of there are a lot of millionaires here, there are a lot of billionaires here, but in terms of the services, they're terrible. And so people are very hungry here, and I think they're very anxious. Because these people that are What are those 77,000 people that work at Disney World going to do? What- are you going to go to Disney World if they open it next month? Heck no, nobody's going to go to Disney World. That's like the worst place to go in the world, and they of course depend on people going and overpaying for everything there. And there just aren't going to be people there. 77,000 people just at Disney World! That is an amazing number. I saw that and thought wow. It's interesting that Disney World, they say their employees are better off because they are unionized. Not a very good union state, but they were able to get their health care continued through the end of the year. But they got no severance. So we're gonna try to go get on unemployment. Good luck trying to get through on an unemployment computer. And thank heavens to the federal money because they won't be limited to \$235 a week; they'll be able to get now 875 a week, but that's going to run out at some point. So people were very, very scared, very anxious. I mean I think people, I'm expecting one thing, again, anecdotally, you read about in the paper, it's not surprising, there's been a great increase in the amount of domestic violence. Which you would expect. Because people are cramped. And cramped up at home and they're all crammed in the house. And add to that the financial concerns. Yeah. And this isn't limited just to the poor, because I read the, I get various blurbs regarding the legal profession, and a lot of big law firms are laying people off right and left. I mean Liz and I are sort of lucky that we work for an organization right now that has money. So we have a job. But I'm in better shape than, I was telling my wife, even like take a low paying legal services job, right now I might have a better situation than some people working in big law firms, because they're shedding lawyers right and left too. Because they can't- there's no business; nobody's suing anybody, because unless you're a bankruptcy lawyer, you're not doing very well.

Emily Leiserson 1:06:40

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Okay, so I only have a few more questions. I have a couple of questions about the media. You mentioned MSNBC earlier. Have you had, do you have any other primary media sources?

UGreg Schell 1:06:55

Well I read the papers, which is, that's been another noticeable change. The papers have gotten- the newspapers, of course, gotten thinner and thinner. It's now like the Fort Lauderdale paper, which is owned by the Los Angeles Times parent company, which is also going broke, by the way, but they've gone- Fort Lauderdale is like a city of a couple million people, it's a big deal. And the paper now is down to about 20 pages total. And I think that I told my wife, “we have crossed the Rubicon when they stopped making a separate section for the sports page.” I said now it's part of, stuck back by the comics somewhere. And I said well that's a good combination. Two things: one is you know the paper's getting smaller, but also of course there aren't any live sports. And so, but that's a change. So I do read newspapers. I read newspapers vociferously. I read at least two US. I read the two local papers. I usually read the New York Times, and I read a paper from Mexico every day.

Emily Leiserson 1:07:51

Do you think there are any important issues that the media is or is not covering right now?

Greg Schell 1:08:00

I think, again, this is my MSNBC side coming out. But I do think that, particularly in Florida, I think that the nursing homes. Two things. One, the nursing home is the COVID-19 infection issue. The other issue I think that's not being covered enough, it is this whole thing has revealed how weak our safety net is. After Ronald

Reagan came in, before you were born probably, and started, you know his idea was we're going to eliminate the safety net. And that's been gradually done over the years since then, over the last 40 years. To where the safety net has really got a lot of holes in it. And Florida is particularly- there's an acute problem with the unemployment compensation system, because it is really the worst one in the country, even before this. And now that we have a lot of people who need unemployment compensation for the first time, it's now painfully obvious how inadequate the system is. Not only in terms of benefits, but how it just can't really function. And it was okay when we just had poor minorities applying for unemployment, but now we have white people applying, so it matters. And I think it ... but there's been very little coverage of that. I think this is the problem that really goes directly to- I think people are hoping that they're gonna- Well the unemployment system will become more, probably, prominent once people have spent their initial, Donald Trump-signed check. After they spent that, then they'll, there won't be any more of those so they'll say, "Well, now we got to get on unemployment," and they'll find out how awful the system is. I mean, it's just a really bad system, and it's not just limited to unemployment. I use that as an example, but all the benefits, the food stamps, workers comp, all those things that are designed to help people when they are having tough times, those systems are horrible in Florida. And generally nationally. And this is a product of what was started back in 1980 when Ronald Reagan came in. Because you know one of his famous phrases was well, you know, "the government is the problem." You know, that it's not the problem with government, the problem of government is the, it's the problem of government is the problem. And you know, and so the whole idea of the Republican party has been to sort of eliminate as much of the government as possible, and Florida has been a champion of that because they are a low tax state. That's their big selling point. You know, come here, retire, you know you can sit out in the sun and get skin cancer and you don't have pay taxes, you don't pay for anybody's stinking kids go to school.

Emily Leiserson 1:10:41

But you think that attitude may change because more-

Greg Schell 1:10:45

Well, hard to see in Florida, because that's why people came here. Again, the old people are just going to go die because we haven't- you know the younger people are sort of, yeah I think they were sort of disengaged. It'll be interesting to see if they'll become more engaged now. Because they've sort of like, you know, been, in all fairness to the younger people, they've been trying to survive, because again you're trying to survive in an economy that pays people horribly. This state just is awful. The state does not have to behave like Alabama, we have lower social social service benefits. We have lower graduation rate than Mississippi and Alabama. This is amazing. I mean, if we can't beat Mississippi and Alabama, are you kidding me? Those are real poor states, they don't have any money. But Florida isn't poor! There's plenty of money here. But what did the legislature- did they adjourn- the legislature meets annually for two months. They adjourned right before the worst of the COVID became evident. And they pointed out, just in their final days, they were approving the budget, and they pointed out, they were giving like, I don't know 93 billion in tax cuts for the rich. And somebody said well maybe we shouldn't do that; maybe we need to put a little money in the rainy day fund for this COVID. And of course, the Republicans all said "oh no no." To put this in perspective for you, you may not know this. I'll give you a quiz: Florida has the highest percentage of Republicans in its State House of any state except one. What state has a higher percentage of Republicans in the legislature than Florida.

Emily Leiserson 1:12:18

Oh gosh, I mean Indiana has a high percentage.

Greg Schell 1:12:23

Oh no, we got you beat. Forget it, you aren't even in the running. It's Utah. The only state is Utah. But it's gerrymandering, because they're more registered Democrats than Republicans in the state. How does this happen? Well that's a longer story, but the state has been- the republicans have run the state for 20 years. And they've run it- it's sad that we now look back at the days of Jeb Bush as those were the great days. Those were- he was horrible, but he's like compared to this, the bunch since have been worse and worse. And their whole cause in life has been to destroy the social service net and to have charter schools and praise Jesus. That's been all they want-and [to do away with] abortions, they want to do that too. But there's all this right wing stuff. And we have school districts where they won't teach evolution. You know, this is really Flori-duh. I mean it's such a stupid state. And I guess the symbol is- you know I think it was Pence, right before the thing broke out, he was giving a speech at The Villages. Do you know about The Villages?

1:13:24

Yes.

1:13:25

Yeah, The Villages: that sums up Florida. It's all these stupid people from places like Indiana, that move down here and want to live in a seniors-only community that doesn't give a hoot about anybody else, and want to you know just drive around in their golf carts and you know, and make sure they don't have any money for taxes. The Villages symbolize Florida; everything wrong with Florida is the villages. So anyway, not going to have an opinion on any of this stuff.

1:13:55

[Laughs] No, clearly not. Well, let's see. I wanted to ask one other question about the future. I guess for you, in your opinion, knowing what you know now, what do you think that individuals, communities, or governments, or the people, your clients who serve at work, should keep in mind for the future? I'm guessing I know this but I'd like to ask.

1:14:23

Well I don't have much hope for Florida. I'm hoping nationally, I am encouraged, I was very encouraged by the vote in the Wisconsin. Despite everything they did to make it impossible to vote, that overwhelmingly they threw out Trump's candidate on the Supreme Court. Which was, I was astonished. But that made- that very much encouraged me that maybe people are understanding that we can't, it's not that Trump and his bunch are a bunch of idiots, but also that maybe government isn't the problem, and we need to maybe get back to recognizing government can do some good things. And maybe like things like a national health, the Affordable Care Act, those aren't bad things. And maybe it's a good idea that people go to the doctor and have medical care; maybe that's a good idea. Maybe it's a good idea that we have hospitals in rural areas and that young people can get medical care, and maybe it's a good idea when people are down on their luck, we don't just forget about them. I think nationally there's a chance there could be a turn. I'm hoping. Sometimes you got to go through, hit the bottom and you know what, the question is that we sort of did that in 2008-2009, but then the rebound was quick. It didn't last very long because we had the Tea Party, those crazy people. And, but I think also what's gonna, I think it's gonna be a little different this time, because the group that - this is going to be more so than in 2008 2009 - the people that are going to come and sort of lead the movement forward, are younger. And they are a lot more diverse and they were in 2008-2009, despite the fact that Obama was the President. I mean it was still dominated by sort of white progressives; this young group doesn't look like that. It looks very diverse. So I think, the old Republican Party comprised of white old men is gonna sort of change. I think suburban women have sort of figured out that the Republican Party's a bunch of old white men who want to tell women how to, what to do with their bodies and stuff. I mean, they're I think that's going to change nationally. Flori-duh is going to be stupid because they keep bringing people down to go move to The Villages, but Flori-duh is, you know, it is going to be canceled out by places like Texas; that is going to flip. Texas is going to flip in the next 10 years. Georgia's going to flip in the next 10 years, because they are younger, more diverse people coming in who can, some of them can read, write, and think and everything. So I think that will happen. I think people will maybe realize that we cannot, you know this America first is stupidity. The sort of, Trump is sort of the- he's a symptom, he's not the cause, of this sort of idea we can go it alone and be stupid, and ignore the rest of world. I think it is going to go. So I'm sort of, on a national level, sort of hopeful. Locally you know, I like my little community here, our little community here has got, I'm in a part of Florida that is comprised principally of people- Florida is If you look at how Florida was settled, the majority of people on the east coast of Florida, particularly the southeastern part, came here from New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. And then the other coast is filled with people who came from the Midwest, from Ohio and Indiana and those places. And the politics reflect that. My part of the state can, you know people like can read and they like the New York Times and stuff like that. Other parts of the state are just filled with idiots. And, unfortunately, the worst- the best part about the people from Ohio and Michigan and Indiana is most of them, they're not as socially conservative as the people from Alabama that also live there. But they're, they also are very much, small government people. So I'm not sure that's gonna change in Florida. I do think it'll change- My little community is, I think people have been pretty good here, we like, I don't have complaints before or after about our community; I think it's really run pretty well. I think our county government is run pretty well. Again, you know, compared to, you know, a lot of places and so I think progressivism will continue. We'll see if Florida can pull it together. Maybe if we have all these unemployed people, maybe they'll come together

and say, "We don't need all these idiot Republicans in the state legislature. And maybe we can have some people that can read, you know that are little, their full cause of life isn't to prevent people from voting and making sure that we don't have any abortions and we praise Jesus all the time. And charter schools.

Emily Leiserson 1:19:08
[Laughs] Yeah

Greg Schell 1:19:10
Not that I have an opinion on any of this.

Emily Leiserson 1:19:12
Of course. No. You reminded me of another question I had, that I forgot. So nationwide we've been seeing some statistics, scary statistics, around people of color, dying at a higher rate. And I've particularly seen that in the African American community, but I'm wondering if in Florida, you have any-

Greg Schell 1:19:36
We don't know it because we don't want to count it. Remember this guy works- this is Trump's disciple, so we don't check that. We don't check those, even though we have a huge African American population we have a huge Latino population, and maybe those would be nice things to know. But we wouldn't want to know that, you know, because again we want to be Flori-duh all the time. And so, and of course, they don't want to really reveal what's going on here. As I said, I'm really suspicious on the numbers from the nursing homes. Florida it should be, you know, again, my MSNBC thing, but these measures they're doing, like the one who measured the people who had high temperatures - they have one of these phone apps that measure this - and Florida was like off the map. And they said, it should be the next hot bed, and it hasn't been, and that makes no sense, that Florida is off the map, given all its demographics and everything else. And I just have to believe, I'm sounding like I'm now ready to join the Tea Party, because I sound like a conspiracy person, but I just don't think the numbers here are at all accurate. And I, I think it's purely, we don't know. I mean we don't know enough about the reported deaths to know if it's disproportionately in the minority community or not. I would sure think it is. I And I think actually, for some of the reasons, actually the Surgeon General took a lot of heat for this, but he was trying to say, making some accurate points, that you know the African American community generally has underlying health problems or has a higher percentage of underlying health problems because they, among other things, they have crappy nutrition they have crappy healthcare. Because they get crappy jobs and they're discriminated against. You know, that's, yeah, it's not very hard to connect the dots on this. And the Latino population here, although a lot of the attention is on the Cubans, but even most of the Cubans are not wealthy. Most of the Latino population here is very poor too. And they're not doing so hot. And I would think that in my client community, I think that they're, you know, it's hard to see, I'm guessing again. I'm sure there are going to be farm worker outbreaks that we'll never hear about.

Emily Leiserson 1:21:48
Well, we're nearly out of time. Is there anything else you wanted to mention or close with?

Greg Schell 1:21:53
No, no I'm good.

Emily Leiserson 1:21:55
Okay. Well, Greg Schell, this has been really fascinating to talk to you. There's a lot of amazing stuff you've shared about Florida and your clients.

Greg Schell 1:22:09
Well hopefully I've dissuaded you from ever moving here.

Emily Leiserson 1:22:14
[Laughs] I, you know, I will have to think twice now.

Greg Schell 1:22:21
Don't do it. I hate this place so much, but I've been here only because it's a great place to serve this client population. It's the best place to serve the client population, but I just absolutely detest Florida, as you've

probably noted. My wife when she wants to get me riled up she'll say, "Well, you've been here so long now you're a Floridian." I said you know those are fighting words.

Emily Leiserson 1:22:46

That's really funny. Well, yeah, no, thank you so much. I really appreciate your time. I'll throw it out a thanks-

Greg Schell 1:22:53

You know one thing I maybe should add, this might be of some interest to you. My wife was a farm worker, and all my in laws are farm workers, or were farm workers. And they operate a migrant labor camp and they were a crew leader. I mean, I'm related to all kinds of farm worker type people. They all live in, well my wife obviously lives here, but all of them live in the town of Immokalee, which is one of the most prominent farm worker towns in America. That's where I started, and that's where I met my wife. But all my in laws are there, and they went to, for example my brother in law runs a couple of migrant labor camps in Immokalee that, and I asked him- well of course I haven't talked to him in about a month about it. But you know, I'm wondering what he's doing, because these are not social distancing type places. These are very, you know like, for example, these cabins, some of them were built 40 or 50 years ago, they're little cabins, and most of them are now designed for an individual worker, but they all have a common shower, for example. Now how's that working. And I haven't asked him about that, but the camp, the cabins are barely a couple feet apart from each other and they share, you know there's like common sinks and stuff, you like to wash your clothes in and stuff. I think you like, well this is like a COVID-19 like breeding ground here.

Emily Leiserson 1:24:14

Right. How do you spell Immokalee?

Greg Schell 1:24:16

I-M-M-O-K-A-L-E-E. It's probably one of the biggest farm worker towns in America. It's the winter tomato capital of Florida, and it's, it's all, it's essentially a giant labor camp. And it's the largest unincorporated city in Florida; that's another story for another day. But um, and as a result, it's one of two major population centers in the county. The other is Naples, which is a very wealthy community and then has this incredibly poor community. And so they get served by the county, and as you can imagine they have always been the sore, the poor stepchild for the county. So they get crappy services in terms of everything, including health service. And the health department over the years has done a better job of regulating the housing in Immokalee. Since there's no city, they don't have a city housing code, so they try to regulate it. They've tried to classify most of the group buildings in Immokalee as labor camps under Florida law, even though they may not be owned by a farmer or a crew chief, they're classed as labor camps and have to meet certain minimal standards. Now, most of Immokalee is just a giant, giant labor. People living eight or ten in a trailer or something, I mean that's that's all over the place because that's where farmworkers live. So I would think Immokalee, in fact there was a thing that Immokalee, one of the Immokalee advocacy groups just sent a letter to the governor, saying they wanted like hand-washing facilities in the central pickup point, they wanted to have, there was a whole list of demands they sent that the governor, about, that were specific to Immokalee. And there was an article in the paper about well, they were describing something, and it seemed fanciful to me, that they said oh well people were, in the morning on the buses, they said only one person on a seat. And I said that oh that's not going to happen. And oh they said they were practicing, they were showing a picture of workers practicing social distancing, and they have little cones out, little traffic cones. And showing them, they had them six feet apart so workers would know how far six feet work, and it just said, I said this is just a joke. This is not happening. When they take them out to the field, they're not going to give two hoots about they're six feet apart. So anyway, there's a lot to be talked about there. So we can do that another time.

Emily Leiserson 1:26:35

Yeah, that'd be fascinating. Or if you think you know anyone in Immokalee who would be interested in talking for this Oral History Project, I'd love to talk to them too.

Greg Schell 1:26:44

Well I'm sure the Coalition of Immokalee Workers would be happy to talk to you. They have a very- I'm not their best friend, so the recommendation from me won't be much there. But if you call them they're advocates; they're the one who pushed this petition to the governor. So they're all about it. So if you go to the website, the website is ciw-online.org. If you call them, they are big into media, they love media. And

they would, I'm sure, be happy to talk to you.

Emily Leiserson 1:27:20

Wonderful. Well, thank you. Yeah, and I would love to talk to you again too, you know if you're still interested in talking in six months.

Greg Schell 1:27:28

Well, if you haven't noticed, I don't mind talking.

Emily Leiserson 1:27:30

Yeah, yeah, well we'll keep, we're keeping this oral history project going probably for as long as the COVID crisis is going.

Greg Schell 1:27:38

Oh so over two or three years, good.

Emily Leiserson 1:27:40

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So, well, again, thank you so much. This has been really a pleasure. I really appreciate it.

Greg Schell 1:27:50

Well if you need anything else, let me know, and if you if you strike out on trying to talk to them in Immokalee, I have some less, less crazy groups that would also talk to you probably over there. For example, there's one person I could think of that, he's not in Immokalee, but a totally different perspective than you're going to get. A person who's a paralegal, former farm worker for the legal services down here. He's a Haitian immigrant, and he works almost entirely with Haitians, and they live in incredibly cramped conditions, even though they're, most of them are now legal, because they live in a community in Florida, another farm worker community that's very famous, where they live in buildings that were constructed in the 1940s to accommodate guest workers. So they were designed for like single men sharing shower and toilet facilities, but now they're filled with families. And they're like, you can't imagine closer quarters than this. And, and they're all these, it has a, I was told once that the density in that area of the town where all these buildings are is higher than in Nairobi, which probably isn't very good right now. So he can tell you a lot about that. That's all he does is work with that community, has for 30 years, so he'd be a great source.

Emily Leiserson 1:29:07

Yeah, I would love to talk to him. That would be fantastic.

Greg Schell 1:29:09

Yeah, and I'm sure he'd be happy to talk with you himself. So, well the thing to do is, okay, I'm old, I forget things. So if you want to follow up on any of these, send me an email, say, "Hey stupid, tell me about that person and give me their contact information." Because I won't remember otherwise, so but if you send me something in writing, I will react to it.

Emily Leiserson 1:29:30

Okay, perfect. I will do that. That's wonderful. Alright, well and if you think of anything else you want to talk to me about, you know, feel free.

Greg Schell 1:29:40

I will let you know.

Emily Leiserson 1:29:42

Awesome. Thank you again, Greg Schell.

Greg Schell 1:29:46

Good luck to you, then.

Emily Leiserson 1:29:48
Thank you.

Greg Schell 1:29:49
Okay. Bye-bye.