

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Abner Bonilla

Interviewee: Abner Bonilla

Interviewer: Aunnisha Bhowmick

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Abstract: In this interview Abner Bonilla, a mail carrier in Boston, answers questions about how his life has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. He also talks about the frustration he has faced when encountering people ignoring public health recommendations like social distancing while he is delivering mail. Additionally, he talk about the main situations he has encountered while on his mail route and the responsibility he has to the people he delivers to.

Abner Bonilla 00:00

I'm okay to talk. I just finished my last house.

Aunnisha Bhowmick 00:02

All right, nice.

Abner Bonilla 00:03

It's pretty awesome. How are you? How's everything going?

Aunnisha Bhowmick 00:07

Good. I'm good. Yeah, thank you so much for allowing us to interview you.

Abner Bonilla 00:12

Not a problem. I'm out here for seven hours a day. I'm walking eight miles. I see, like I told you are over 1000 people, plus more cars driving by whatever. And it's just people aren't taking it seriously. And I'm trying to protect myself from them.

Aunnisha Bhowmick 00:33

Right.

Abner Bonilla 00:33

I'm trying to walk away because they don't realize like, I still they like- you- they walk up to you, and you start back stepping in, they still walk towards you. You know what I'm saying? Or they'll meet you at the door and say, how's everything going? Oh, you guys are still delivering mail. And while they're doing that, they're like standing a foot away, like, so I'm very friendly person. I'm very outgoing like, but now is not the time like through the window, say hi, you know, a lot of people will greet me through the window. They'll wave. Their kids away, which is awesome. Incredible. Some people aren't taking their

mail from their mailbox, because they're afraid that their mail might have stuff. And I don't blame them one bit.

Aunnasha Bhowmick 01:12

What is it like kind of make you feel to see these people who aren't taking it serious or are oblivious, like being someone who still has to work?

Abner Bonilla 01:19

It stresses me out. Because there's nothing I can do, I can't walk up to them tell them go back in the house. I'm not a police officer, nor can they tell people to get back in the house yet. But it- I'm more worried about not myself. Because I feel like if I get sick, maybe I'm one of the 98% that recovers, I'm more worried about me having it and then going home and then my mom getting it. And then my mom giving it to my aunt who's in the older you know, like our parents who are in the older crowd or your grandparents or, or whoever is in your house who's ever had cancer who's ever been sick from another disease, pulmonary issue. And that's what stresses me out more, because I'm not saying I'm 100% safe, but I'm in that age bracket where it doesn't hurt us as much. I'm not immune to this. But the the people walking around, they're they're really putting at risk of those people that they never physically come in contact with three people away four people away five people away. And that's the issue that I think we're running into right now.

Aunnasha Bhowmick 02:25

Yeah, there anything that's like, outright changed for you kind of in your day to day life in your job?

Abner Bonilla 02:32

Yes, I'm number one I am- I as a mailman, I get to see many people every day. And people don't realize this, but a lot of people come up to you with their problems. A lot of people have mental health issues and substance abuse issues. And they just want somebody to talk to maybe for a few seconds just to get it off their chest. And we are that. A lot of people walk up to you and be like, "oh, you know," You know? You don't even know them. And they'll tell you their life story. And we can't do that right now. And, and it's gonna get worse for those people that can't get it off their chest. Like they can't go see a neighbor, they can't tell them. Like, you know, this is what's going on. And a lot of people maybe that have that substance abuse or whatever they get out of the house. And it just, they can focus on something else for a while. And now they don't have that. So I think mental health of my customers are going to deteriorate. I'm not the only one they talked to. But like, I I can't stop and talk to them. I'm sorry, I like I can't I can't talk to you right now. And that's changed because because one of one of my things I do all day is talk to my customers like non stop. And that's changed. I had been delivering non stop with gloves on. And before it was because of paper cuts. And now it's just so I can't transfer anything to my body. So what happens is a lot of people wearing gloves, but what they'll do is they'll wear gloves and they'll touch their cell phone, they'll touch a pen. Well guess what, when you touch a glove, when you remove your glove, you're going to touch those same things. It's like cross contamination with salmonella. Like you have to be careful. And that's my job. When I'm in the office. Now I'm wearing a face mask. Just because my coworkers are so close to me, there is no like, like space. And I'm just trying to keep as far away as I can for older people because a lot of my customers are old. A lot of my customers, believe it or not, their kids don't come to see them. Like it happens in a

lot of I've noticed in the richer part of the neighborhoods. There'll be like a 80 year old person in their house. And their kids won't visit them until the day they die to take their house or whatever. So a lot of them used to talk to me, you know, "hey, how you doing?" Like I was the only like talk and you know. I can't get close to them because I don't even know my job, if I'm sick right now. I'm not showing any symptoms but I could you know I get spit when I talk. And definitely I'm three feet away, because I'm a spitter. So my job has changed because I have more businesses that are closed. And they're just walking away. There used to be a business had to call and be like, "we're going on vacation hold our mail." It's just they're walking away from their business,

Aunnisha Bhowmick 05:15

Right.

Abner Bonilla 05:16

So we're just taking care of that for them. These mom and pop shops are, I believe, like almost paycheck to paycheck. There's not a lot of capital. They're not McDonald's. They're not Amazon. They don't have a billion dollars to go. And I don't want to see them disappear when I go to deliver mail, like all a bunch of empty storefronts, you know. I really hope that they're there in a month or two, I go to a bar everyday, drop off the mail. They let me use the bathroom and they give me some water and they're not even there. And it's, and I'm so used to that.

Aunnisha Bhowmick 05:48

Right.

Abner Bonilla 05:49

That, that it's weird everyday not doing that. And you know, it's tough. It's tough. Being isolated from my customers. It's kind of weird.

Aunnisha Bhowmick 06:00

Yeah.

Abner Bonilla 06:01

Yeah. I mean, a lot of us are the first line of when something goes bad. We're the first ones to call 911. This person hasn't picked up their mail in days. They're 90 years old. Like they pick up their mail every day. Or I smell gas. Or, you know, I could see through the window, it looks like someone passed out. I mean, I've called 911. So many times. They got they like hey, Abner, how you doing? What's what is it today? You know,

Aunnisha Bhowmick 06:09

Right, yeah. Yeah.

Abner Bonilla 06:31

Like-

Aunnisha Bhowmick 06:31

that's such an important part, though. Like that. I think a lot of people don't really realize or understand like, that's the part of your job, but it's a crucial part of it. Yeah,

Abner Bonilla 06:41

It's crucial we we see things that that people don't realize that we see slight changes in people's behavior. And we know something's wrong. We know something's wrong. And I mean, there's been countless mailman that have saved lives of people. Because they've called and said, "my elderly person, like, has not come to the door in two days." They've been, you know, knocked out on the kitchen. I've called in gas leaks before where people are sleeping the house. And they come and break the door down. And, you know, one guy said his dog turn on the stove. And I was like, "Oh, yeah, your dog left the stove on, I believe that." You know, I can smell gas. And I am like, I feel bad. Because I call him the fire department. I'm like, you know, whatever. But then you find out like, this person would have died-

Aunnisha Bhowmick 07:29

Yeah

Abner Bonilla 07:29

-had you not been there. So so that, you know, we're out there, we're- I think we're about 200,000 letter carriers going to almost pretty much every address in the US. And I mean, what could happen is one letter carrier could get infected, it could affect the whole city for mailstream. You know, this guy gets sick, and the guy next to him gets sick. And so we have to protect ourselves. So that doesn't happen. We can go out every day.

Aunnisha Bhowmick 07:57

Is there any like surprising or positive moments that you've kind of had during this time? Like, especially because it's really stressful, things have changed, like anything that surprised you? Made you just-

Abner Bonilla 08:07

I have had so many people come to their window and say thank you for doing what you're doing. I think a lot of people say all they get is junk mail. And all they get is like, you know, they say oh, junk mail, garbage, bills, you know? But it's a change in the pace with they they've been watching TV for 20 hours straight. The kids are running around the house, they're not used to it. And the mailman comes by and like, "hey, how you doing?" And they're like, "ah thank you for everything you've done." You know, just keep going stay out there like people, just people I don't see all year just thanking for staying out there. I don't know if it brings a little change of pace what they used to in the house. I thought it'd be awesome to be staying at home all day. And then I realized on last Sunday, it's not. You know, somebody handed me a chocolate bar the other day and was like, I clean the outside. But they were like, "thank you for everything that you do." And I was like, "you're very welcome." But I appreciate being appreciated.

Aunnisha Bhowmick 09:08

Yeah. That's good.

Abner Bonilla 09:10

You know, people people are, you know- I've I've seen mailman that have gotten gifts of hand sanitizers and bags and said, "thank you very much." You know, they're signs on people's window. Thank you very much mailman for coming every day. Some people put out stuff for the UPS guy and the FedEx guy and the mail man. Like potato chips and drinks and say grab whatever you want. You know, and that's pretty cool change your place. I mean, in the summer, you get a lot of people offering us water, but like they're just leaving out drinks and stuff because we're going to the house and they get a little bit change and they're very happy to see this. That's, that's the most, you know, like, coolest thing I think going on right now is just people saying all it all they're doing is saying thank you but you know, that's awesome.