

Interview Date: October 2, 2020

Narrator: Ariella Riapos from Comida Pal Pueblo

Interviewer: Cynthia Tobar

CT: Welcome, thank you so much for participating in our project. Today is Friday October 2nd 2020 at 6:16 PM.

CT: Please state your name and affiliation:

AR: My name is Ariella and I am with G Rebels and we collaborate with Mi Casa No es su casa and the NY Boricua Resistance, and Comida Pal Pueblo

CT: Thank you so much. Can you tell me a little about Comida Pal Pueblo and what are the things you do on a day to day effort.

AR: So its basically just a mutual aid effort. You know, with our different orgs. We try to bring fresh food to our neighbors as well as non perishables. Things like sanitary napkins, masks, gloves, things like that. And now it's expanded into clothes as well. And day to day I would say, ever since I kinda took the initiative to expand the clothing drive aspect of it. So I've been trying to get more donations, stores, where we can keep them, things like that.

And we have calls every so often just to determine the direction of it. You know, where it's going, what we feel like we should work on, and things like that.

CT: Wonderful, so tell me a little bit more about Comida Pal Pueblo and how that began.

AR: So honestly, it was like, we were approached by NYBR, that this was something that they were thinking about, something that they were planning and if we wanted to be involved. And we were like yea definitely, (we being G Rebels). This was something that we've been wanting to work on and something that's really important right now with everything that has been happening with our government and our country right now. So we kinda jumped at the chance.

And it was really... At first... It was very like the first couple times it was everyone, everyone was just like, we're just trying this we'll see what it turns into, where it will go, and if we can make it happen

So that's kind of how we got involved with it initially

CT: Wonderful, so tell me a little about G Rebels History.

AR: It's a very small grassroots organization, community. It basically started around 2016 it was really just a couple of us, we were friends who knew each from work, school, various spaces, similar politics, similarly minded in terms of wanting to service the community

And we were just like, similar politics, similarly, minded in terms of like wanting to like service, the community, kind of operate like outside of the nonprofit sphere and like, not make this like a career thing. And so we just started getting together. And first initially, what we did was like we did a lot of reading for the first like force four to six months was like political education, reading about, like, revolutionaries before us different, you know, organizations that have tried to do like community work, things like that definitely studied a lot about like the Panthers and Brown Berets. So, and then from there, we really just were like, kind of getting where we fit in type of thing. It's, you know, wherever we can really support whatever's happening in the Bushwick community and like service, our neighbors service our community. You know, we were involved in the housing struggle around the rezoning. A few years ago, we've done our own mutual aid stuff with like, giving back to school drive and stuff like that, you know, school supplies for the kids, um, cookouts where, like people can just kind of pass by and get hot food. So you know, this kind of falls in the mutual aid kind of falls in line with what we've been here doing for a few years now.

CT: And that's fantastic. And are they all? What are the demographics and the consistency of the group? I guess? Like, are they all from the neighborhood? Or do they come from other parts? And how large is the group?

AR: Um, there's, like core members, there's about five of us. And then you know how it goes like, we have people who come around and they can come around. So it's all people like in the area, like, you know, from like, Jersey, New York. And we're just like Bushwick is like our central locations like two of us like live here. One of our other comrades lives in East New York but like grew up coming to church in Bushwick and like felt very, like all his friends were in Bushwick. Like this is where like, you know, he spent most of his time so like, you know, community members, and then two of our other members live in East New York. So it's like, just kind of happened that like Bushwick was like the central location for it all.

CT: Absolutely. And how long have you lived in Bushwick and what is it like to live in Bushwick?

AR: I've lived here for five years. Yeah, for five years. Um, and it's been it's been great. I'm somebody like as a kid. I moved around a lot. Like I was like, I felt like I was like, never in one

place. So in my adult life, something I was very, like conscious about was like, I want to move somewhere and like put down roots there and like, be there. And it kind of was like, the way that we ended up like moving here, we were all very young, I had roommates, you know, in college, and we like needed to find a place like ASAP and this was like, ended up being the place that we could move into. And ever since then, like, it's just been an effort of like, putting in like to make community and to like, really put down roots here and like, get to know the neighborhood, like, We're not here to just live for a few years, get our little like New York experience, and then leave like we're really here to like, you know, build.

CT: And that's awesome. So thinking about that, and thinking about this desire to be an active, vibrant part of your community giving back when you first learned about COVID are your thoughts about it? And how have your thoughts changed since then?

AR: I feel like, I don't know, it's such a wild ride to really think about, like, COVID and how, like, our entire reality has changed in like, six, seven months. Um, I, at first, I really was like, I was just a little bit skeptical, not of the virus. I mean, I definitely believed like that this was like, you know, an illness. But I felt, I just felt like, you know, especially the fact that the government was like hyper focusing on like China, it's coming from China. So to me at first, it felt a little bit like, just kind of like scare motley, fear mongering, you know, like, they were just trying to paint China in a certain way. And this was like their means to an end. So at first I was kind of like, okay, it's something to look out for, but it's not really the end of the world. And there was like, as it was continuing, I was like, Okay, this is getting really, really serious, like, this is really going to affect our lives and change everything.

So as time went on, it did become more serious. And at the time, I was working in a shelter. And that was like, its own traumatizing experience. Um, so it really, you know, like, COVID, has really just changed a lot, it's changed the way that we interact with each other, it's changed. I think, the way that a lot of people see the government, I think before, like, a lot of people maybe had, like, a little bit more faith in the government, you know, like, I don't know, they were maybe felt like, Oh, you know, like, well, they'll take care of us or, like, the government's are going to fall apart, like, but little Do we know, it took a little pandemic, and everything just kind of fell apart.

CT: And tell me about some of the issues that have surfaced that have concerned you the most about this pandemic?

AR: I don't even know how to pick like, once, you know, issue, because, like, so many of them are so tied, but I just feel like, for me, the main thing is that it's highlighted the rotten foundation that's always been there. You know, like, we knew the economy was operating in a certain way, we knew of these inequalities that were, you know, that were happening, we knew of like, the, of

how horrible the health care system is, and everything like that, because we live it every day. Um, versus, you know, I guess people, people in power or people with means maybe didn't know that it was this bad. And so I feel like with COVID, it just kind of laid bare all the things that were wrong with this system, and everything that people have been saying, for, you know, honestly, maybe even decades like that about this system in terms of the growing inequality in the healthcare system not being what it needs to be and like the economy being built, you know, as before, this was essentially a gig economy, you had a lot of people who didn't, you know, have a stable nine to five job, they were just kind of working whatever hours, they could Postmates, it's Uber, this that, you know, um, so this really, really just, to me, just exposed everything that was really wrong with our society.

CT: Right. And so, going back to like, Okay, that was like the macro image of the things that are affecting the issues that surface that resonate with you. How about how it's directly affected Bushwick? What are your thoughts on that?

AR: It's been hard. It's been really, really hard. I mean, I can't even lie I've been I've been very fortunate and very privileged, honestly, to have a job this entire time. So I'm able to, like, at least make, you know, pay my bills, like I'm not gonna act like I'm rich here, but like, at the end of the day, I have an income coming in and like I can pay my bills I can buy food. Um, so I've been like very, very fortunate in that way. But at the same time, like it's, it's it's just been hard to watch like, you go outside and there's so much unemployment like so many people are like, I'm really really struggling like people in my building. We're like, we don't know if we're gonna be able to make rent. Like, especially at the height of everything and when they were waiting for, you know, the unemployment earlier, like from March, well, prior to March, but like March when the lockdown started to June, I was working in a shelter in Bushwick. And so just like seeing how the people in that shelter were treated, the clients, was like, I don't know, like something I don't think I'll ever forget. Because, you know, for all intents and purposes,, they're members of the Bushwick community, some of them had been living in the shelter for two years. You know, they know people, some of them were from Bushwick. And they were, you know, like, I'm in this shelter. Like, because I got evicted, or because my landlord wanted to raise the rent, or like, I'm on Social Security, like whatever the issue was that had them end up in shelter, like, these people were a part of the community too. And it was just really, really traumatizing, and like, devastating to see the way that like, even the local, like local elected and local officials really didn't care, they did not care about these people who were extremely vulnerable. I would say honestly, probably among the most vulnerable people in, you know, in this neighborhood, being literally dependent, you know, being like, in a shelter being taken care of by the state, essentially. it like that, to me was, I don't know, I'm gonna get very like emotional when I like think about it, because it was just really difficult to watch like to see the just the pure callousness of like, these nonprofit agencies that are entrusted with these people's lives. And the way that the local

government was absent, I can't I can't tell you one thing that like one of my council members, or the community board, or like anything that any of them did really honestly, like.

CT: And can you describe what an incident would look like that was like, sort of like this is what a homeless member of the community of Bushwick actually encountered? That would have been in line with what you're talking about, about this increase in their vulnerability during this time?

AR: There was I mean, to start off, there was no masks from very early on, they weren't they were, our agency made it very clear that they had no intention to provide masks that they were really honestly trying to downplay it for a very long time until people started dying. legitimately, people were dying. We had the ambulance coming every single day to take somebody else. It was, you know, as 100 man facility, and you had, at the height of it, you had over 20 people in the hospital, that's like, a quarter of your population is like, you know, that's the numbers were so much higher in shelters than in other places, like, you know, like, relative to, you know, what everybody else was experiencing. So like, for example, there was one client, who, you could just look at him and he was sick, you know, he couldn't breathe. I'll never forget the wheezing sound that he was making. He had a fever of like 100 degrees, or like over 100 degrees, and we call the ambulance. The ambulance came three times before they would take him three different times. We're in a pandemic, and this man is coughing, he has a fever. Like he can't stand up, you can hear him not being able to breathe. And the EMS literally said, "Everybody has a fever. Everybody's coughing." Like wouldn't take him and this man ended up dying. And honestly, me and my coworkers, all we could talk about was, what if they had taken him the first time we called? Like, what if they took him and kept him because they did take him actually at first and they brought him back. He got sicker, and then we had to call again. And then we literally called three times in one day for them to finally take him to the hospital. It was I like, again, I've just never, I don't know, it's just really, really extremely difficult to see that level of callousness towards these people. And this almost mindset of like, well, they deserve it. Well, they're dirty because they're homeless. You know, like, that's what happens when there's dirty people. It was very, very, like, heartbreaking. Just to witness.

CT: Yeah, that's astounding to me. I can't even imagine what that must have been like, what would you say? So how did how did you navigate during that period? And how did you come through to the other side to what you're doing now?

AR: Honestly, I feel like I'm still really processing it. Um, it was it was really like, you know, I ended up leaving that job and again, very, like, you know, the privilege of having a degree and being able to kind of, you know, jump jobs in that way. I found another case management position and I ended up leaving because I was just so I really didn't know how I was supposed to come to work and like pretend like everything was was normal. And me and a lot of my co

workers like, would talk about that like one of my coworkers was like, I'm angry, I'm angry, and I'm traumatized. Like, and what was really upsetting was that, you know, the leadership, all of management left, like it was, it was really wild the way that like, every one of our supervisors, except for one left, they all went on a medical leave, they all went on vacation, they left and it was just the employees, they're working. So we essentially felt abandoned, with our clients and our agencies not providing us masks, and all of this is happening. Um, so you know, when it kind of came time for like, after like, the peak had passed, and we hit to June, I really was like, I just need to get out of here, like, this is just, I don't know how I could continue to work in this environment after witnessing what I witness. Um, so I just kind of left and moved on, and I haven't really looked back, and I feel like, ever since then, and like lockdown, and you know, like, not seeing people for so long. I feel like Ever since then, I've just had this like, feeling inside me, like, I need to be doing something I need to be, like, I need to be involved, I need to be, I don't know, I guess like doing what I couldn't do when I was working in shelter.

CT: When you were working you, you have this experience in social service, can you tell me more about that background. What got you interested in doing social services in the beginning, and how that led you to working in a homeless shelter initially?

AR: Um, so it really like it was honestly really a matter of circumstance. So it was like prior to that I was working doing like tenant organizing. And, you know, I was like, just looking to I needed, honestly, from being honest, you know, to make more money to be able to pay my student loan bills. So I started looking around for, you know, jobs and things like that, um, and this was something that I came across and, and I interviewed for it. I've always been interested in like, I've never thought I could work for like a corporation or anything like that, like I've always been, if I'm going to do something, I would want it to be in service of people. I'm so working, you know, in a shelter as a case manager, you know, it's very fluid, I'm not going to sit here and pretend like, you know, we're heroes or do anything amazing. It's extremely flawed system. But, you know, you do what you can essentially to, like, give the clients the resources that they need and the support that they need, because some people really don't. Um, so it was something that really, again, was just like kind of circumstance, I applied for it, it seemed like it was something I was interested in, I ended up getting the job. And yeah, so like, since I started case management, now I have another case management job. So it seems like this is kind of the direction I'm going in. And again, you know, case management is it's, you know, flawed. But at the end of the day, it's still satisfying, in a way when you can help that client and you can give them the resources that they've been looking for, or they do get the job or whatever it is that like you've been working with them on. Like it is very, like, satisfying and like just feels good in your soul like, wow, you know, congrats, that client.

CT: That's such important work to take part in. I mean, so we're so fortunate to have people like you involved in that kind of work, because that takes a lot. And so your interest in this type of case work, you're still servicing homeless clients.

AR: No, so this this work now is I'm working with survivors of domestic violence. So it's a little bit different, we're not a residential facility. So we really are just in there in terms of support. So I'm still doing case management. But at the same time, we do have like a program that some clients may want to take or be mandated to take on domestic violence, which is kind of like counseling, you know, assisting them with a lot of clients come with, like immigration needs, needing to, you know, regularize their status. And so we work with them on that kind of advocating for them in that way, with lawyers. Also, you know, for clients who want to file police reports get an order of protection, you know, a lot of that can be very complicated. And they definitely need like an advocate somebody who can like really tell them no, this is what it is, like, you know, if people try to mislead them, or whatever.

CT: And what would you have wished that municipal leaders and those in local federal state levels could have done to address such need during this crisis with not only servicing your clients, but with residents and neighbors here in the neighborhood that you would have liked to see, especially given your experience as a social service worker.

AR: Um, you know, that's something I feel like I like I kick around all the time in my head of like, you know, where do we go wrong? Like, how did this happen? Like, how did we overnight lose? What is it like 20 something thousand New Yorkers, you know, how did how did we,

I definitely think that For starters, I mean, people should have just taken it a lot more seriously. Like, you know, and and it's, again, you know, I had mentioned earlier that like, at first I was kind of, you know, even skeptical on how serious to take it, but You know, I'm just a regular person, if you're working in government, you, you were being briefed on this, you know what I mean? Like, you definitely had more information than the average person. So I'm just, I would just continue to be confused as to why there seemed to be such a, I don't know, hesitant, like, you know, like, so being so hesitant to, like, do anything, I definitely feel like closing schools and doing like, the shelter in place earlier than they did probably would have helped a lot. Um, and, you know, I think that like, you know, de Blasio gets a lot of heat. And I'm not gonna say that's not deserved. Like, I definitely, you know, have my critiques, but at the same time was like, where was city council? You know, what were you guys doing? Like, were you calling special meetings? Were you trying to figure out how we could like, you know, get masks to all your constituency, like your all your constituents, like how we could get sanitizer, how we could, you know, get maybe expand benefits, how we could, you know, like, don't I get really frustrated when, like politicians and our representatives kind of act like, there's nothing that they could have done? When what did what did I elect you for? You know, like, what did I elect you for?

Like, I don't know, like, if you can't do anything, then who can? You know, so I kind of get frustrated in the way that like, people just threw their hands up. And they're like, Oh, well, we couldn't have prepared for this. And I'm like, I don't know how true that was, I think that had you been more plugged into your community would have known that the issues that your your constituents were facing, and you maybe would have been able to better prepare for it.

CT: Fantastic. So tell me a little bit about how you basically got going with the initial work, seeing this gap, seeing this need in the community, how you organized and structured the work to get this process in motion. Once New York boutique law resistance reached out to G rebels and how that got going,

AR: Um, honestly, I really have to give it up to them. Like they really had a lot of these connections in terms of like, you know, getting the food from farmers markets and stuff. So like, a lot of this, like, I have to say, like, organizationally, like we, I have to give it up to them, like they really have had a lot. So we're, you know, definitely like collaborating on expanding it and like, how we can support and like forming different teams and stuff. But, um, you know, I will say like, they they initiated, like, a lot of it, and it was like a, you know, bringing us into the fold type of thing. So once we like, got everything started, it was really, you know, we had that first distribution, it was really kind of determining, like, do we want to continue? Where do we want to continue, because the location was definitely like, um, something we wanted to figure out, because we were like, you know, if we do this regularly, like people will come to depend on this. So we need to make sure that we pick a location and like, that's our spot, and we're there regularly. So it's, it's really just been a lot of, you know, that and we're definitely like, every time we do it, I feel like it's better. Like every single one that we do, like, it's, it's, it's getting more organized, like people already kind of have been finding their roles and like, Okay, I'm doing this, I'm doing that, like, so it's been very organic, it's been very, like, really, like, wonderful to be a part of, because it's just like, you know, we really did kind of at first, like the first couple ones, we were just throwing them together, and we were like, let's see what we can do. And like, we're really doing it and like, you know, the community. At the most recent one, we had, like a community member Come and join us on the line and like packing, you know, like veggies and food for the community. It's like, it's really, really beautiful. Like, every time people are, you know, they know we're gonna be there

CT: And by these things that keep popping up every week, as you're talking about, you're talking about just the food distribution, correct?

AR: Yeah, yeah, the food distribution.

CT: And you said that it includes... What is each distribution as you all envisioned it? When did the first one start? How long has it been going on? How many have there been? And how many more will there be?

AR: I want to say, it's, I feel like oh my god, I can't think of the exact date that it started. But I want to say it started like, towards the end of July, um, we've been doing this because we've been doing this for a while, and it's like, every two weekends. Um, so you know, like, we we started around then and we had a certain amount planned. So this past weekend that we did it was like the last one that we had planned. So we're actually like, talking about do we? Are we going to continue it? I think a lot of us definitely do want to, um, but you know, like, Are we going to continue it? How are we going to continue it you know, what is it going to look like as it gets colder and we don't necessarily have access to the farmers markets and stuff. Um, you know, obviously when the growing seasons over a lot of these places won't have stuff to give us so it's been, you know, we're kind of again, just really working out and figuring it out. It's it's been only three months that we really been doing it and it's already expanded so much into clothes and and non perishables and all this other stuff. So I'm excited to see you know, where it goes from here.

CT: And tell me how would you describe the role of these[cuts out] works, especially these pop up ones that have been created in responding to this crisis? And how is it different from government based aid or charity work?

AR: Um, could you repeat the first part of the question, because the audio cut out for a second?

CT: No worries. How would you describe the role that mutual aid networks provide in responding to the crisis? And how is it different from government based aid or charity work?

AR: Oh, I actually love this question. Um, so mutual aid to me is like, it's the community taking care of each other. Um, you know, it's like mutual aid, like exactly what it sounds like, we're mutually taking care of each other. And I think what's so beautiful about mutual aid is that, um, you know, a lot of people we kind of, I guess I don't, I don't know, if it's a socialization, if it's what we're taught, if it's like, just years of society beating you down, but I feel like a lot of people almost feel like you have to ask for permission, or, you know, kind of like, I don't, I don't want to say like, wait on the government, because that implies like that people are lazy or whatever. And that's not the case. But it's just, you know, like, I guess we've, a better way to put it is that I feel like a lot of people have been stripped of their agency. So I feel like with mutual aid, and like, when we do them regularly, and people always ask, like every mutual aid effort I've ever been involved with, like people have asked like, so you guys just did this, like, so you just decided and you just like, came up here and just, um, and just did this? And we're like, yeah, and

they're like, Oh, my God, that's so cool. Like, that's so great. Like, wow, like, it really does a lot for people like to just see something like this happening. I feel like once and once they see that, like that spark is like, so hard to like, get rid of. And the way that it differs from you know, government is like, again, is like, isn't the whole purpose of government like to serve the people? Like, you know, I mean, in a very abstract and like, loose sense, you know, what I mean? Of course, like, there's, it's more intricate than that, but like, you know, you're a pub, we call them public servants, like your job is to make sure that your citizens are taking care of like, so I don't know, I had seen like some I forget who but it was like some elected officials tried to call like, the work that they were doing mutual aid. And people were like, how dare you? How dare you call your work mutual aid, like you are a public servant, you were elected to do this, you get paid a salary from the government, you have all types of health care and benefits and all this stuff, to make sure that your constituents are okay to advocate for your constituents. So how dare you call your job? mutual aid? That's not what that is, you know, you're a public servant, your job is to serve the public.

CT: Absolutely such important work. Um, what do you think you'd like the post COVID world to look like? And can you describe that to me?

AR: Um, I think, you know, there's definitely some scary parts of it, you know, in terms of like, this social distance, and like Not really being able to see people as much as we want to. One thing I really hope that continues is the masks. You know, they suck, and I hate them. But at the same time, it's like, you know, it really is a way of caring for each others, like, you know, like, during flu season and stuff, you don't want to walk around getting people sick and stuff like that, you know, like, that's just something I feel like when there's like, strong social fabric, like, that just feels something like something natural to do. But I think that, you know, something that me and my co workers have been talking about a lot is like this, you know, with the shelter in place, and everything like that. And, you know, granted, of course, we're not going to romanticize mass unemployment. However, it has given a lot of people the time to reconnect with themselves and reconnect with their families and reconnect with their communities in a way that I don't know that like, a lot of people have had in their, you know, adult lives. Um, it's, it's always like work work, and especially somewhere like New York, you know, they call it the city that doesn't sleep, like, everybody's always got somewhere to go somewhere to be something to do, you know. Um, so with this, it was really like, just slow down. So I'm really hoping that, like, for me, that's something that could continue into this post COVID world is like we, we don't get, don't just go immediately back into where we were before. But we kind of say, you know, what, like, why was I doing that? Why was I pushing myself to that point, like, when you know, I have everything I need right here. I have my family, I have my friends, I have my block, like,

CT: Thanks so much. I totally agree with you. I think we're done. Are there any final words you have to share? Before we wrap up?

AR: Um, final words? I would say, you know, um, I think I think it's, you know, we're living in very scary times, it's very troubling, it's very, you know, I'm not gonna sit here and lie, like, everything's fine. I definitely get very worried about, there's so much going on, you know, the climate COVID the elections, it's not just one thing. Um, but I think that one thing that has kept me going, I guess, is just to see the way that so many people have mobilized that, you know, especially for those of us who have been organizing for for years now. Um, sometimes it can, it can be hard to like, not feel like, Ah, you know, especially with like, the, the little things that happen in every organization, or like, you know, being like, at least before being like, I don't know, like, wondering if we could really pull it together in the end. And I feel like COVID really just made everybody jump into action. And then on top of that, with like, Black Lives Matter, and all those protests and like rebellions happening across the country, like, just to see everybody mobilizing, and getting in where we fit in, you know, some of us are not everybody is is a is a protest, or some people are lawyers, who are offering free legal services, some people are urban farmers who are giving food to the communities, some people are, like, you know, advocates, like we're all doing, what we can do to, like, contribute to changing this society and like, really, really making it more equitable and fair, and, and, you know, like, moving to take care of each other. And I think that that's something that really has been sustaining me and like, that's really, really beautiful. And like the work we do with this food distribution, like I leave every time tired, but like, just so like, I feel like I have my energy for the week. I feel like I Okay, that was it. I needed that for my soul. So I think that that's just something really beautiful that's been happening that, you know, I'm sure a lot of other people have been feeling as well.

CT: I think that's great. Thank you so very much, Ariella. Thank you.

AR: Thank you.