

María Del Carmen Unda

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SPEAKERS

Aysha Moneer, María Del Carmen Unda



Aysha Moneer 00:02

This is March 22, I am Aysha Moneer interviewing María for the Religion Texas digital archive. María, thanks so much for being here. To start off, just tell me about your background, your upbringing, and just any formative experiences during that time.



María Del Carmen Unda 00:26

Yeah. So thank you for having me today and interviewing me and doing this project. I think it's so important to document a lot of the movimientos, movements that are going on at this moment across Texas. I think that's so imperative through our time during COVID and the weather crisis that just happened and all the environmental issues that are currently happening. So thank you for having me and thank you for doing this project. A little bit about me, my background, name is María Del Carmen Unda, I grew up in Weedpatch, California, but my roots are in Puebla, Mexico. I'm the oldest of nine children. I grew up in Weedpatch, California. I grew up a lot with the farm workers' movement, because where I'm from, it's all agricultural. We pick a lot of like grapes, bell peppers, corn.



María Del Carmen Unda 01:34

It's been a hectic ride, getting here to Texas. I did my undergrad at UCLA. And then I decided to come here for my master's program to UT Austin, but I didn't know anything about Texas. I never even had been here. I had a friend, a colleague, his name is Juan and

he was like, "You need to come out here. There's so much work, great work happening."
And I don't know, I just had a feeling so I just jumped on the plane, and got here. And then the next day, it was orientation. It's been nonstop, and that was 2017, and now it's 2021. And it's been great.

A Aysha Moneer 02:18

Awesome. So you moved to Texas recently then.

M María Del Carmen Unda 02:24

Yes. After I wrapped up my undergrad, I took the year off because I had a pay for the GRE and my college applications. I ended up applying to like 10 graduate programs, and each program was like \$100. So it's \$1,000 plus GRE plus GRE prep. So it ended up being like two grand and I didn't have that money right off the bat off college when you graduate. So I took a year off just to study for the GRE. And then I don't know, I applied to UT Austin. I heard about Dr. Valenzuela's work, which is my academic advisor. I knew she was doing radical work in terms of Chicano studies for K through 12 students and I just wanted to be a part of it. I just had a gut feeling and so I just applied, I'd never even been to Texas and it's been great. Yeah.

A Aysha Moneer 03:25

And how has your experience in Texas been so far?

M María Del Carmen Unda 03:31

Texas will always have a special place in my heart. I learned how to do activism here in Texas. Because when I was in LA, I did a little bit of it here and there, but I wasn't as entrenched as I am now. I think it's because at UCLA, I think I was just trying to survive a new environment, trying to survive because I double majored, I was trying to survive academia. Also, it's because I think I was young, so I didn't realize how much I internalized academia and capitalism and that working 15 hours, 20 hours a day, hustle. I really did internalize that. I mean, it worked out and then I'm 26 years old. I'm second year PhD, I'm about to wrap up in two years. I'm incredibly young for a doctoral student.

M María Del Carmen Unda 04:23

So I don't know, it was just hard at UCLA, I was just trying to survive because rent was so

expensive, food and FAFSA was not enough. And I still had to make all my academic deadlines, I still had to learn how to write, read. We were reading books and hundreds of pages and it was all great. I don't regret that at all because I learned a lot about myself, Chicana feminism. It was all a lot of theoretical things, but I really didn't know how or didn't really meet anyone that did community activism in the way that folks at Academia Cuauhtli do it.

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María Del Carmen Unda 05:08

Then I got here. And then I started going to the Academia Cuauhtli meetings. And just so you know, just background, so Academia Cuauhtli is a cultural and language revitalization program here in Austin, Texas. And we're housed at the Emma Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center off Rainey Street. But it is also an extension of the Texas Center for Education Policy and the College of Education. And basically, we run a Saturday school program. Right now we're trying to implement a coding summer school program in the summer for first generation immigrant young students. I'm really excited about that, because a lot of the girls are going to learn how to code and they're like 10 years old, and Google's right here, so I'm really excited.

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María Del Carmen Unda 06:02

So that's what Academia Cuauhtli is. But the people that run it, it's called Nuestro Grupo, it's a community lobbyist group. I think being here and having the legislature there and having the Texas Center for - I mean, the Texas State Board of Education. I've learned how to really lobby, how to align research theory to community, and it's one circle. It's been great. It's been a lot of work. So many things, so many stories about activism here in Texas.

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Aysha Moneer 06:48

So how did you first get involved with more community work when you moved to Austin?

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María Del Carmen Unda 06:59

It just started off because I'm an education scholar, I learned about theory and practice and the research, but I really lacked experience of teaching. And so that's how I started off, I started off as a volunteer teaching assistant.

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María Del Carmen Unda 07:19

And then I learned a lot about curriculum and culturally relevant pedagogy. When I got here, right away, the teachers and everyone, we started advocating for ethnic studies at the Texas Board of Education. So that was my real first introduction of lobbying, putting the community together, putting the research out, hitting up news outlets, and then also learning how to just stop and reflect, and yes, we're trying to pass Mexican American studies, but we also need to start thinking about passing the African Diasporic studies and Native studies, gender studies, there's so much that also needs to be done. But I think the fact that we were able to pass Mexican American Studies in Texas, I was so amazed.

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María Del Carmen Unda 08:14

I know I came here at the tail end of the thing, because prior to me, there was decades of activism by other community members that really went above and beyond, and I just got to see the end, the last push. That was great. And ever since then, I've just tried to figure out what policies are passing. What does the research say? How do I hit up the community and try to make sure that law doesn't pass or this law passes? And so it's very interesting to see what the community wants for Austin and what I've realized is that we really are striving for a decolonial consensus. So the fact that we've passed Mexican American studies, and then they passed the African Diasporic studies, the community does want a decolonial curriculum, a decolonial society and so it's always been so amazing to see that and to be a part of that. It's been such an honor.

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Aysha Moneer 09:31

And I know you're talking about working on education policies, seeing what pieces of legislature are happening in the Texas legislature with Academia Cuauhtli, but tell me a bit more about what your activist work looks like.

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María Del Carmen Unda 09:52

My activist work, day to day, what it looks like is - first, if you're trying to be an activist I think you have to see how other people are doing it. Because activism I think it's super complex, because it's just doing the bare - you know what I mean? I feel like a lot of activists get put on this pedestal, when in reality, yo, you're just doing bare minimum, you know what I mean? In academia, you see a lot of, "I'm a scholar activist," okay, yeah, but you're still within that mold of, you're not really changing anything. What we need is scholar abolitionists. We need to be out there. You know what I mean?

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María Del Carmen Unda 10:41

I think for anyone that's starting activism, yes, go see how everyone else is doing it. On social media, in person, a grassroots organization, and individual, people are more than happy for you to tag along on whatever they're doing. And then just being careful, you know what I mean? Knowing the history of the research, really immerse yourself in what what happened in the past, because there's so much history. Stuff isn't the way it is now because it just magically happened. Now, there's decades, years, 1000s of years of colonization, that happened to our people here in Texas, and it's just, you've got to know that if you don't know that history, then you need to get on that.

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María Del Carmen Unda 11:27

What that looks like to me on a daily basis is, first of all, I think you need to have a network of people that support you, that are in solidarity with you, that are in community with you. Have an email list. I have an Excel sheet, and I have their name and their email. And whenever something happens, I'm like, "Yo, someone submitted this policy X, Y, and Z, or the next Texas School Board of Education meeting is coming up." I email those people like, "Who's going? What do we do?" We're in community in that sense. So you really do have to have an email list.

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María Del Carmen Unda 12:07

Social media I think is very important too, because that is where you get the information out. So when the Texas weather crisis happened, I right away just made a campaign to try to get funds for the families here, the Academia Cuauhtli families. And that was really hard, because when the whole weather crisis happened, yes, it happened, and people didn't have electricity and water. But that is especially hard for the families here that are first generation immigrant. If you lose a week worth of work, like you're basically not making rent, you're living paycheck to paycheck, and a lot of these families are only making like \$10 an hour. They're not making a lot.

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María Del Carmen Unda 12:57

So I made a social media campaign, and people were so generous. We were able to fundraise something like \$7,000. And so we were able to give about 19-20 families from \$200 to \$400, depending on how many kids they had. And a lot of the moms that I was able to help, because that's mostly who I talked to, the moms from the Academia Cuauhtli families, they were so appreciative. They were half crying, they were like, "Oh, my God, I was really stressing about rent. Thank you so much for helping me." And so we did that.

And then after that happened, then we started helping them out with rent relief applications from the federal - the city of Austin opened one last week on Tuesday.

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María Del Carmen Unda 13:52

And so right away, I called them and it's lot of misinformation too. They're like, "Well, Ma'am, I don't know if I can apply because I'm undocumented. What if they ask for my social? What if I give them the address, and then ICE comes here because ICE has a tendency of - that happened to my community too. Growing up, we couldn't give out our address in any applications, because ICE would literally come knock in our doors and growing up I remember my teacher would say like, "Oh, like if ICE comes do not open the door, just go sit down, hide. If you don't open the door, they don't have jurisdiction of coming in." And so a lot of people are afraid of ICE coming to their home. I have to always reassure them, no, this isn't like that, this is with the city of Austin. And if they come, this is my number, I'll be there. So I think that there's more of that relational trust.

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María Del Carmen Unda 14:43

And so we've been helping them out with other rent relief resources. We've been trying to get them in touch with other community organizations that have been donating food and other resources, water. I think this week I'm gonna try to focus on vaccines, because a lot of people just haven't gotten their vaccines from Academia Cuauhtli because once again, they think that you have to have documents or a social security number to get a vaccine and so that's not the reality of things. So you see all these White people getting it, and then the people that are actually essential workers doing construction and waitressing, they're not getting it. So that's kind of what my community activism looks like.

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María Del Carmen Unda 15:38

Now cause of COVID and all these crises that have just been happening, I haven't even had a chance to think, I feel like it's just a boat sinking, and you're taking it out bucket by bucket, you know what I mean? And I haven't had a chance to step back and think about the big picture, because there's a bigger picture. That could have easily been solved with if we had a living wage, or if we had the infrastructure to - if you have electricity when it snows. So I feel like it's been hard because you get so accustomed cause you're like, "Oh, if I didn't help them, then they wouldn't made rent, and then they would have been homeless." It's learning how to just balance that out. And then also doing my PhD. So it's been non-stop. Yeah, but I'm learning. I'm not anywhere near what I would want to be as an activist. I see other people that are full time activists, and they're doing amazing work. And I was just like, "I wish I had time." But that's what my activism looks like. That was a

long rant.

A Aysha Moneer 16:56

No, no, perfect. This is your narrative. You mentioned COVID changing things, how is working Academia Cuauhtli now in COVID? How did that change things? And also, being a student?

M María Del Carmen Unda 17:15

Yeah, I think COVID highlighted into a flashlight a lot of the educational inequities that have been going on in Austin that I have literally been writing about, lobbying about. I've had so many meetings with so many representatives, and I'm like, "Here's the data. X, Y, and Z, this is happening. This is the new policy we should implement. HB 3, the House Bill 3, was not enough for teachers, especially teachers of color." And then COVID happened, and it was about a year ago, right? I remember because it was Friday the 13. So it was March 13, Friday the 13.

M María Del Carmen Unda 17:58

So when that happened, a lot of the inequities that have been already happening, everyone on the news was talking about it. When COVID happened, I don't know if you remember, a lot of the West Lake moms started creating pods. Do you know what a pod is? Okay, so a pod is the learning circle, kind of like what Academia Cuauhtli is. Yeah, you have a little like school and let's say you have six kids and you have one teacher and it's very Montessori. They make it happen.

M María Del Carmen Unda 18:41

Anyway so when COVID happened, I saw that a lot of pods were popping up. People were scrambling to get education, education scholars from like UT Austin's College of Education. And they were paying good money. So I'm still in the listserv from like UCLA, I still get emails from UCLA, job opportunities, because I do have a UCLA degree. And so I had a lot of Beverly Hills moms email me, and they're like, "Oh, we would love it if you can work with our kids." This is really weird. I can't do this. And it was really tempting, because they're like, "You know what, I have a spare bedroom in my guest house in Beverly Hills, and I'll pay you like, four grand a month, and you don't even have to worry about rent or food. And I was like, "Oh, that sounds like a really good deal." It was so hard to say no, and I was like, "No, that's not ethical."

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María Del Carmen Unda 19:43

You see that, the Beverly Hills moms, and then I see my students here at Academia Cuauhtli, and they didn't even have WiFi. They didn't have laptops. Everyone's in one small room and to see these drastic social inequalities. So right away when COVID happened, we went to AISD [Austin Independent School District], and we're like, "Yo, we need to figure out WiFi and laptops," because I don't know, they were in La La Land or something. And they were like, "Oh, yeah." Because we're always in conversation with them, we're always talking to them because I am a scholar, and so I always just have conversations with them. So then great. We got some laptops, and then they got WiFi buses roaming around the streets of Austin.

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María Del Carmen Unda 20:37

But I don't know, they weren't really thinking or I don't know. I feel like they get lost in bureaucracy because if they were me, if I were the superintendent, I would have done a survey: what do people need? We need to have some sort of survey calling people, what are the needs of the community? But those things never happened. So then we took it upon ourselves to call people, families in Austin because Academic Cuauhtli has a lot of great scholars. And one of those scholars was Dr. Emilio Zamora, Emma Mancha-Summers, Dr. Chris Milk, Dr. Angela Valenzuela, and they created a survey that was needs-based.

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María Del Carmen Unda 21:21

And then we just started calling around people to see what their needs were, just calling everyday mom and pops and figuring out like, "Yo, what do your kids need in terms of school?" And a lot of them were like, "Well, we don't really understand this BLEND software." So we were on the phone trying to figure out that tech issue. And I'm a doctoral student. So like I think I was tech savvy. But this BLEND thing, I don't know where they got it from, it was really hard to navigate, because to set it up, you had to be at a certain WiFi and then have your school's login. And then you have to figure out - it was chaotic. So we were like, "We need to have a tech support person or something." Yeah, it's been hard. So we figured that out. We were on the phone with like, a lot of the parents.

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María Del Carmen Unda 22:18

And then now, what we're doing too is - a lot of these policies, education policies that are passing because of Mike Morath - so for example, he still wants to have STAR, the kids still have to take STAR, and we're like, "Why? The kids are trying to survive, let them be kids. I

don't know what your obsession is with the STAR exam." We shouldn't even have it. So I don't know, that's what I've been focusing on a lot. This month, too. Canceling the star, I'm telling all the parents like, "Yo, we need to opt out." We wrote an opt out letter. So I did that here in Austin. And then I did that home in Weedpatch cause I also have a parent group of moms that trust me, I'm like, "This is what the research says, it's racist. The only thing it calculates is your resources."

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María Del Carmen Unda 23:19

COVID has definitely brought a lot more work for me. I was already trying to abolish the standardized exam, but the fact that Mike Morath still wants the kids to take it in person, during COVID, during a pandemic, that doesn't fly with me. So I'm gonna continue working on that. There's other alternative ways to do accountability in schooling. Research says that there's other more authentic ways to do it, that are more, what is it? What do they call it, evidence based research? So there's other research that says like, "Yo, there's other ways to do accountability, and it's not standardized testing." But I think that there's a lot of people making a lot of money, a lot of lobbyists making a lot of money, and so it's not gonna go down without a fight, because there's literally hundreds of people making billions of dollars off the backs of our students, our teachers, our community, and it's not okay. In my lifetime, I would like to accomplish that, abolish the standardized test.

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Aysha Moneer 24:38

That's awesome. I completely agree with [you on] standardized testing. And how was it being a student right now? Your Ph. D. program, how has that changed during COVID?

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María Del Carmen Unda 24:51

Yeah, it's been a balancing act. It's been so different, because I haven't been able to see my colegas, my colleagues. Usually when this stuff happens, I'm able to go to school and talk to them about it like, "Yo, what are we going to do about standardized testing?" Or like, "Did you see that XY policy passed? Who do you know, how are we going to change this?" It's been really hard in that sense, because you do need that. I personally do need my community for professional and emotional sanity. So in that sense it's been really hard.

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María Del Carmen Unda 25:34

Online learning, yeah, I can do it. We can read and we can talk about X, Y, and Z. reading.

I've had more time to write because I'm just in my office by myself. It's very different. I did not expect this to happen. I don't think anyone did. I think I live a really privileged life. I don't have kids or I don't have a mortgage. I don't have a spouse. I'm just able to do research and activism full time. I feel very privileged. I have food, a job, but other people don't. I have my health, I have my family. I thank God every day I wake up and I'm like, "Thank you for giving me life, for giving me health. I don't know why I survived or why you decided for me to survive, I mean, decided that I should live, thank you." It's been very different being a student, for sure.

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Aysha Moneer 26:51

Lastly, just wanted to open up this space for you to go back to anything that you wanted to or anything we missed. Anything you want to share about social justice, community organizing, cultural responsive learning, just anything you want to say.

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María Del Carmen Unda 27:12

Yeah. I guess whoever will end up reading this, any future activist, I think a lot of the times - and I think [indiscernible audio] says this a lot - we never get a seat on the table, and that's fine, because we can just make our own table. That works even better. For the longest time, I wanted a seat at the table and now I'm like, "Do I though?" I'm just gonna make my own table. And be in community. I see a lot of activists, big time activists, because I talk to other activists on social media and other things. Some people can be really petty. Just don't get into that, have lots of love and warmth for the younger generation and everyone's just trying their best. Just try to be open-minded and try to keep doing your own thing.

A

Aysha Moneer 28:16

Awesome. Great. Well, thank you so much for being here. I'm going to stop recording now.