

Miguel Robles

📅 January 25, 2021 ⌚ 42:02

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

California, Texas, diversity, The University of Texas at Austin, Hispanic, communications, Indonesia, teaching abroad, COVID-19, pandemic, teacher, community, grassroots organizing, Texas identity

SPEAKERS

Miguel Robles, Eleonora Anedda

- E** Eleonora Anedda 00:04
Today is the 25th January 2021. My name is Eleonora Anneda. I am working as an oral historian for the Institute of Diversity and Civic Life. I am in Sardinia, Italy on a Zoom call with Miguel. Miguel, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're joining this call from?
- M** Miguel Robles 00:25
My name is Miguel Robles and I'm joining from Houston, Texas.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 00:31
Thank you. Would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood?
- M** Miguel Robles 00:38
I was originally born in Whittier, California, which is in Los Angeles County. When I was around three, my family and I moved to Houston and I've been here ever since. Then I went to university at UT Austin and then I've been in Houston.
- E** Eleonora Anedda 01:04

What was your relationship like with your family?

M

Miguel Robles 01:07

Well, we were pretty close. So, we moved to Houston, just me and my parents. All of our relatives were either in Los Angeles or in Phoenix, Arizona. So, when we moved over, it was really just us three. We kind of have to be close. I didn't have any cousins, or there wasn't really much close family around. I was six when my little brother was born and it's just been us four here. We do see our family, our relatives from other states, but it's not very often that we see them.

E

Eleonora Anedda 01:44

Was it hard to have to move away from your extended family at three?

M

Miguel Robles 01:57

I don't really remember because I was pretty young. I don't remember it being hard. Well, when we first moved here, we moved next door till I could. I don't know how we're related. I think it's like my dad's second [or] third uncle and they have kids my age. So then it was like, "Oh my cousins" - but I wasn't - we lived in that house for like a year so we're kind of close for that year. But then we moved more on our own and from then on it - I became more - I don't wanna say assimilated - but I was already in school - I had friends. It wasn't too much of an issue for me at that point.

E

Eleonora Anedda 02:47

You said you went to UT? I was wondering if you could tell me what you studied there.

M

Miguel Robles 02:52

Yeah, so I studied Communication studies with a focus on human relations.

E

Eleonora Anedda 03:02

Can you tell me a little bit more about the program and why you decided to join and what excited you about it?

M

Miguel Robles 03:11

Yeah, so I initially joined in high school, I wanted to move out of state, I wanted to move out of Houston. I mean Texas in general, I wasn't really feeling the whole Texas thing anymore. Me and my family, my parents moved as well. So I just felt like it would be like a big thing for me to move as well. I had been planning to move out of state, but it's so expensive. So, my dad said, "Just go to community college for a year and we'll figure it out - just transfer out."

M

Miguel Robles 03:47

I went to community college in Pasadena, which is 10 minutes away from where I live. At that point, my grades had been a lot better and I hadn't considered UT in high school because it's such a good school. By that point, I just applied just to see what happened and I got in. I was like, "Well it's less expensive and it's probably a better program than I would have gotten into out of state." So, that's why I applied.

M

Miguel Robles 04:15

In terms of the program, I initially went into it wanting to focus on political communications. But as time went on, I realized I was more into interpersonal aspects of communication and the different intercultural communications. That's why I wanted to focus more on that. My program specifically, what I decided to focus in was more intercultural, and conflict mediation kind of communication.

E

Eleonora Anedda 04:53

That's interesting. Things that I have considered too. Who do you consider to be your mentor? Is there a professor or a teacher in school, a family member that has guided you through the years? [It] can be more than one.

M

Miguel Robles 05:12

I would say for each situation, each part of my life, I would say there's a different mentor. I wouldn't say I have one main mentor. Again, growing up, it was just us and my parents. They didn't know much about the college experience. I was living a completely different life than they had lived. So, figuring it out together made them more into that mentor role instead of just being a parent. But then once I was in university, again, I wanted to focus on conflict and mediation. There was one professor in my program who taught that subject in different classes. So, I would take all of her classes and did research with her and became pretty close with her. She kind of became my mentor. I would ask her a lot

about life after college, after graduating. I also did research with one of her PhD students, with a teaching assistants. Even now, we'll do calls just to catch up and for me to get advice and just pick her brain on maybe going into academia and what life has been like for her and stuff like that. So, I would say as of right now, [my mentor] is maybe that teaching assistant who I still talk to.

E

Eleonora Anedda 06:50

You've been talking a little bit about what interests you and I was wondering if there's a correlation between what you were talking about now and you joining IDCL later.

M

Miguel Robles 07:07

So, when did I apply? I think that was my second year, so by that point I was a junior and I had been more interested in working in communications. In researching organizations around Austin and trying to intern, I came across IDCL, and just the whole focus on diversity and civic life interested me a lot because I had started out wanting to work in the political realm and civic engagement was where I was more interested, in that type of environment. That's when I moved to UT, that's when I became more interested in diversity because that was the most diverse situation I had been in. So, just being able to learn more about that. And then when I got to IDCL, there was a big focus on religion. Being at IDCL that's when I ended up becoming very interested in that, and ended up taking more classes in college about religion. I would say, I didn't really know what to expect going in, but then once I was there that flourished a new interest for me.

E

Eleonora Anedda 08:32

Just because you mentioned it, has any religion shaped your life?

M

Miguel Robles 08:44

I would say yes, in terms of Christianity as a whole. But there have been different sects of Christianity that have been a part of my family's life. My dad's family's Catholic. My mom's family's Adventist, but I grew up going to an Evangelical church. We would go there for a few years. Looking back on it now, as a child I don't know if I was invested in the church from, like a theological aspect or more of a sociological [aspect], and just the stories and how we translate them into our lives now. I stopped going at the beginning of high school. Since then, I wouldn't really consider myself a religious person, but it's something that does interest me because it's so something that's very important to my parents [and] my family and I see that and I just find it interesting.

E

Eleonora Anedda 10:04

Yeah, I just wanted to ask just because you mentioned it. So, in terms of your work at IDCL, could you say a little bit about what you did? And what was [it] about the multiculturalism and diversity work that IDCL did that excited you?

M

Miguel Robles 10:35

I was one of three communications interns at the time, and my specific roles included running the Twitter account, so like social media stuff. We had this campaign - I forgot what our social media campaign was - but trying to branch out the campaign. So, getting T-shirts, getting people to wear the shirts, getting stories on different backgrounds here in Texas. We also did an event at UT, where we invited students to share their stories on how their backgrounds have shaped the way they thought about what being a Texan is and how there is no one story of Texas, but many different stories. To answer your second question - how it excited me - again, that was the first time I learned in depth about what diversity means and that's when I started learning more about intersectionalism. So, how diversity, race, and ethnicity also plays into religion, gender, and sexual orientation. That is where I guess I put it all together. [I also worked on] a mapping project, where I looked for different organizations in Austin and mapped them out. You would notice patterns on where certain religious institutions in Austin were placed and that was usually where certain populations would live. Like if you found mosques in a certain area, that was where the Muslim community lived. I didn't really know where people were congregated.

E

Eleonora Anedda 13:12

I know that IDCL is a fairly young institute, but is there something that you think IDCL hasn't done that it maybe should do?

M

Miguel Robles 13:28

Hmm, that's a good question. I'm not really sure. Because at the time, at least for me, that's when I started to hear more about organizations promoting diversity and being an ally and things like that. At the time, IDCL was doing trainings on how to be an ally and there was a workshop at South by Southwest. So, that was the beginning for me to see organizations out there doing the groundwork and doing trainings and pushing these ideas out to make them more applicable, not just theories and ideas. I don't know how much has happened since, but I can only imagine they have done a lot more and grown a lot more from there.

E

Eleonora Anedda 14:45

Thank you for that. So, about Texas. I was wondering if you could describe your relationship to the state?

M

Miguel Robles 14:59

I have a love-hate relationship with Texas. Coming from California. One time I went back around 13 for a family reunion and I accidentally said, "Y'all," which I never say. I do not say "y'all" in Texas, but for some reason there I said it, and my aunts made fun of me for it so much. So, I was like, "No, I'm never saying y'all again - never." [Also], just the political environment in Texas is not one that I am a fan of. At least where I grew up, it is very Hispanic - a big Mexican population, but then 10 minutes east it is Pasadena, where it is a more white population and it's more conservative. So, there would be times where you feel a sense of, "Do I really belong or feel comfortable in this environment?" When I left Houston for Austin, I felt more pride being from Houston. When I graduated, I joined the Peace Corps and went to Indonesia and was there for a year and a half. I was one of two people from Texas, in the cohort - we were those people from Texas. I was wearing my Texas sweatshirt that I am wearing now and I was being very prideful of Texas, but then when I got back to Texas I was like, "Oh my god, I hate it here." I don't know if I associate my childhood here. So, I feel like a child when I'm in Texas and I just have always wanted to branch out. There's nothing too wrong with Texas, but I guess it's just my association with being a child here.

E

Eleonora Anedda 17:32

I was trying to figure out the timings in my head. I was wondering when you joined the Peace Corps?

M

Miguel Robles 17:43

I graduated from high school in 2015 and then I went to community college immediately after graduating. I did four semesters in one year. So, I graduated with my associate's degree in 2016. So, a year later I transferred to UT. I was at UT for two years, graduated in 2018. So, I was 20. I graduated in May and in September, I moved to Indonesia and I got evacuated last March because of COVID and I have been in Houston for a year, but what feels like ten years, but it also feels like a month. It all happened pretty fast, so to me when I think about it, it's one big mush.

E

Eleonora Anedda 18:49

Yeah, it blurs a lot. That is very relatable. But yeah, I was asking about the timings because

I thought that you might have been asked to fly back home because of COVID. How was that like?

M

Miguel Robles 19:05

It was pretty hectic. It wasn't expected. Because in Indonesia, at least when I was there - not that it wasn't taken as seriously, but it wasn't as big of a thing in our minds. Like we would see news in the US - I would talk to my mom and she would tell me about the toilet paper thing that happened here and people just purging everything from grocery stores. And when I was going back, I was like, "Should I bring toilet paper?" and then I was like, "We don't even use toilet paper here." I just didn't know how to prepare coming back and it was just pretty hectic. From one week to the next, our lives got uprooted and we were back to 2018.

E

Eleonora Anedda 20:05

What were you doing in the peace corps there? What was your task?

M

Miguel Robles 20:09

I was teaching English at a middle school. So, we were all teaching English, but I was at a middle school.

E

Eleonora Anedda 20:27

That's so sad that happened to you. How long were you supposed to stay in Indonesia?

M

Miguel Robles 20:33

I was supposed to stay for 27 months. So, that's two years plus two months of training. And I was there for 19 [months]. So this past December, I was supposed to finish. So, I still had nine months left. So, around a little after the year mark, I got evacuated.

E

Eleonora Anedda 20:58

Apart from the pandemic - what did you like about that experience?

M

Miguel Robles 21:06

It was just a really big learning moment. It really opened my world up to a completely different world. That's a very big question, that's a big answer. But there are a lot of aspects that I liked. I really enjoyed my host family situation, my school situation - I was very close to my students. I loved my school and we were starting to hit the ground on actually getting projects done around the year mark, and that's when I had to come back. But it was a really big learning moment - I met a lot of new people that I'm still in contact with. It was a good reset. I enjoy always having things to do. And when I was there, I was always busy. Which definitely is something you have to shape for yourself when you're doing something like the Peace Corps. It's very easy for someone to kind of just do the minimum, and not really do much. But it was a good opportunity for me to throw myself into everything. I feel like that's why it went by so fast for me, because I was just constantly busy, which was what I wanted and I feel like I got a lot of good work done with my community.

E

Eleonora Anedda 23:02

And then you flew back, and all the work -

M

Miguel Robles 23:07

All the work kind of halted for a bit. But very excitingly, I had books that were supposed to be donated to be sent to me school that I ordered January-ish. They were supposed to be there in about six months, but because of COVID, they just got to my school yesterday. So, they sent me pictures of the books and the new bookshelf and stuff. That was exciting. I'm glad that it's been sustainable so far and my teachers are doing the work that make sure what we started doesn't end with me leaving. Obviously that's the goal - when I leave, everything still continues and grows from there.

E

Eleonora Anedda 23:55

Was it hard to leave?

M

Miguel Robles 23:58

Yes, so hard. I would say maybe a few days before or the week before students were sent home. So, they weren't able to go to school anymore. I wasn't able to see my students, parents weren't letting them leave their house because we didn't know how bad COVID was, nobody knew what to expect.

M

Miguel Robles 24:23

I wasn't able to see my students, so when I left - Indonesian culture is very ceremonial. It's not like I can just be like, "Oh I'm leaving" and then just leave. There needs to be whole event at the school. All the teachers have to go and give a speech and usher me out. It's not just a me thing, it happens for everyone that teaches at the school or is part of the administration. My counterpart asked five of my students to come back. I got to see them. It was five or six students that I had been closest to. [I] had to explain to my other students what was happening, [they asked], "Oh do you have COVID?" and I was like, "No, that's not what's happening." Also, since they're all beginner English learners, trying to explain across the different language - and I wouldn't consider myself fluent in Indonesian. So, just having to explain the situation and not having my students understanding. I had become close with my host family - yeah, it was pretty hard [to leave].

E

Eleonora Anedda 25:55

But it sounds like you had a wonderful experience nonetheless even though it was cut short. So, going back to Texas, have you seen it change during the years before the pandemic?

M

Miguel Robles 26:21

I don't know if Texas has changed or if I've changed or if my ideas and just values have changed, or if we changed together - kind of grew up together. So, trying to answer if Texas has changed, I think it has. I've seen more of a focus of inclusivity and a push toward equity. Not so much from the top down, but from the bottom up if that makes sense. We are seeing a lot more focus on grassroots organizing and trying to make changes within our smaller communities, rather than going for the whole state. But again, I don't know if it's because I am interested in that and seeing that change or if everyone is seeing that change as well. Also, migration from different states or immigration - we're seeing a lot more people coming from California. So, that's more of a cultural shift - [we] are seeing a lot more diversity in everyday life and different ideas, and who our leaders in Texas are. Not just Texas, but in our local communities.

E

Eleonora Anedda 28:15

Similarly to that, what does Texas mean to you?

M

Miguel Robles 28:49

What I think of now when I think of Texas - whereas different from before - I think more of people that are willing to fight for what they wanna see in the future.

M

Miguel Robles 29:10

Again, I don't know if that's just me coming into that myself and surrounding myself with like-minded people or if I'm really seeing that shift as a whole. I think it is just as a whole, people are willing to fight for a better Texas. Because people here are very prideful of Texas and living to their best abilities. People have different ideas of what that means, but people are willing to fight for a better Texas, as cheesy as that sounds.

E

Eleonora Anedda 29:58

Do you define yourself as a Texan?

M

Miguel Robles 30:02

If you would ask me this five years ago, I would have said no. But I would say now, yes, I would consider myself a Texan, yeah.

E

Eleonora Anedda 30:16

If this was five years back, you would have said no and then what would you have defined yourself as?

M

Miguel Robles 30:23

I would have said something really dumb. Like, "Oh I'm not from one place or something like that." I was very stuck on like my California roots even though I had only been there for three years, that's where my family is - when I think of family, I think of going back to California. I feel like that's where my family kind of started.

E

Eleonora Anedda 30:52

I was wondering if - partially because your family is from California - but do you see a difference in how the Hispanic community is in California versus Texas?

M

Miguel Robles 31:16

Yes and it's a kind of hard to explain, if you're not Hispanic. I'm gonna - focusing more on Mexicans. People who immigrate from Mexico to Texas are different than people who immigrate to California geographically. There's a huge difference there and even just

people who are Chicanos - so Mexican Americans from Texas and from California. Food is different, language and dialect is different, behavior, music - because Mexico is diverse within itself. If you look closely, you will see differences and the two influences of states and cities they are coming from. I'm not sure if that was too broad of an answer, but it's kind of hard to explain but I would say yes [laughs].

E

Eleonora Anedda 32:50

You don't have to explain this directly to me. I just ask questions. I was gonna ask you, if you had to explain this to a Latino, what would it would you have said?

M

Miguel Robles 33:14

It's something that me and my parents actually talk about a lot. My parents had more of a life there and I'm just influenced by them. But with my mom - when she would work in Pasadena - she would have stories of when her coworkers were saying something, but she would not understand, even though they were speaking Spanish, they would have different colloquial [terms] [for] things. There's this one subculture in Mexican culture - I can't remember what the terms are - but in high school, people called it one thing and I was like, "I'm pretty sure it's called something else." So, then when I talked to my parents, they were like, "That's what we called it in California."

E

Eleonora Anedda 34:51

I understand. I have one last question for you. Before I ask that question, I was wondering if there's anything that you'd like to share that maybe we haven't talked about? Or that I haven't asked you?

E

Eleonora Anedda 35:16

I don't think so? [Are you asking] for anything specifically?

E

Eleonora Anedda 35:33

If there's a story or an experience that's important to you that you might want to share with a future person that's listening to this interview? You can take all the time you need to think about this, no rush.

M

Miguel Robles 35:57

I don't think so. I feel like there is just so much in a person's life. Once it's drawn out it's there, but trying to draw back on it, it's kind of just a lot. So, no - nothing specific.

E

Eleonora Anedda 36:35

This interview is going to be archived and hopefully people will listen to these interviews in 50 to 100 years. So, I wanted to ask if there is a message that you'd like to send to the future, something that you would like to tell to people your generation of people, future generation, what would you like them to know?

M

Miguel Robles 37:29

Hmm. I guess just keep moving forward. There's so much to learn about different people and the world is much bigger than just what's around us. Keep fighting for Texas - wanting to see a better Texas one day. Whatever you're fighting for and wanting to see in the future. I feel like there's still a lot to learn and a lot to see. I'm just excited to see what's coming from us.

E

Eleonora Anedda 38:21

Specifically to you, what are your future plans?

M

Miguel Robles 38:26

My future plans - um - I feel like since coming back from Indonesia I have this attitude that the future is not controlled as I had always thought it was for me. Because I'm definitely the type of person that plans ahead. In college, at the very beginning, when I started, I knew all the classes I was going to take for the entire time I was going to be there - I had it all planned out. I was like, "Okay, I'm gonna finish in December, maybe stay longer." And then I planned to stay in Indonesia and maybe move elsewhere abroad. But for the foreseeable future, that's not a possibility, not an option. I think just right now, I'm just trying to take it one day at a time even though the days seem like they're 10 years long, and also like they're an hour long. But as of right now, I don't have much set. I'd like to

move back to Austin and go back to grad school and just keep learning.

E

Eleonora Anedda 39:54

Is there a program or a course that you've already set your eyes on?

M

Miguel Robles 40:02

Yeah, there are a few I have in mind. I am interested in going back and learning communications again, focusing more on intercultural communications, or just cultural communications. Having just been in a completely different country and culture and being around Islam all the time and having to come back to somewhere where I'm around Christianity or not even much of a religious environment. So there's that. But then also, I just liked in Indonesia, working with people a lot. So, I'm considering social work and eventually maybe even doing research in social work after having done some direct service work.

E

Eleonora Anedda 41:12

That's great. I think it takes a lot of strength to do social work. It's very wonderful but draining sort of job [laughs]. All the praises to social work.

M

Miguel Robles 41:29

Yeah.

E

Eleonora Anedda 41:34

So is there anything else you'd like to add?

M

Miguel Robles 41:44

No, I don't think so. We've talked about a lot.

E

Eleonora Anedda 41:49

I just asked to make sure. Okay, so thank you, and I'll stop the recording.