

COMMUNITY ARCHIVE: COVID-19 EXPERIENCES ORAL HISTORIES

Eric Vasquez Interview

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Virtual Meeting, Manistee, Michigan

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Eric Vasquez Interview

ROBYN PIERCE: My name is Robyn Pierce working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is October 25th, 2020. This interview is of Eric Vasquez about the effects of COVID on his ability to work. The interview will go into detail about his job as a delivery supervisor, both before and after the shelter in place order was issued. Eric lives in Manistee, Michigan and works at the United States Postal Service. This interview is being recorded remotely and will be housed at the Reuther Library which is part of Wayne State University.

The Reuther Library will keep administrative information about this oral history project, such as interview releases and deeds of gift, in its case files. Case files are in a locked nonpublic area of the building accessible only to the Reuther Library staff. In the event of a criminal investigation or legal discovery proceedings, the Reuther Library could be compelled to turn over holdings in case files that are otherwise closed to the public, including the case files for this oral history project. [00:01:01]

So thank you for joining me today for the interview. The first question I ask everybody is, Do you have an affiliation with Wayne State University?

ERIC VASQUEZ: No, I do not.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay. So could you give me a description of what a delivery supervisor is?

ERIC VASQUEZ: A delivery supervisor is somebody that kind of just oversees the normal day to day operations of the post office. What that entails is coming in making sure things are properly staffed, making sure equipment's up and running. You're managing people just make sure you have enough personnel for the workload for the day. That in a nutshell is basically what I do.

ROBYN PIERCE: And do you guys work five, six, or seven days a week?

ERIC VASQUEZ: My office works seven days a week. Our Monday through Saturday is a normal mail day delivery, and then our Sundays are what's been called Amazon Sundays, where we

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deliver any parcels that are in the office usually brought in by Amazon trucks. [00:02:07] And then some postal mail's delivered that day, as well.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay. So could you walk me through a normal day before COVID so we can get a comparison?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Sure. A normal day, well, prior to the whole COVID shut down. Pretty laid back. Come in about zero six thirty, my folks normally wouldn't show up till zero seven thirty, so I have a little time to ease into the day. We have clerks already there working in the morning as early as zero five thirty, so just check in with them make sure things are good. People—my carriers start trickling in, they get situated, they punch in, they start sorting the mail for the day. So pretty basic once they're up. They have their stuff ready to go, they're out of the office by about nine o'clock. [00:03:01] And then that's when our front window opens for retail. And that's, you know, retail—some days you're busy, some days you're not, depending on the time of the month. Things like that, but otherwise I just, yeah, take phone calls from customers, and tackle any issues the office has at the time, and be there to field any mistakes or something that comes my way. I'll take care of them, clean them up.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay.

ERIC VASQUEZ: Other than that, I'm usually out at about three thirty and back home.

ROBYN PIERCE: Nice.

ERIC VASQUEZ: Yeah.

ROBYN PIERCE: So the first confirmed case in Michigan was early March, and then it was very soon after that everyone started closing down. My timeline says schools closed tenth of March, and restaurants, bars, entertainments closed on the sixteenth. Did you guys close down your building?

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ERIC VASQUEZ: No, at no time did we ever shut down. We were still running seven days a week, even at the very beginning of the COVID pandemic. [00:04:03]

ROBYN PIERCE: Did you go down to a percentage of workers so you could—how do I say this—did you make it so that not so many people were working at the same time?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Unfortunately, we're not able to do that. But with the size of building that we have we were able to have people start in shifts. So, instead of everyone coming in at zero seven thirty, we'd have about a quarter of them come in at seven thirty, another quarter of them come in at seven forty-five, and so on. So we did staggered start times. On a weekly basis we would have some safety service talks where we would all gather around, just run through anything that's come up through the week, or the last week. Just talk about safety. But those were no longer held, we wouldn't gather around everyone would stay where they're at, and you pretty much had to yell across the office as to what's going on, but. [00:05:01]

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. Was it hard to manage the different shifts? Or was it relatively easy to make that change for you?

ERIC VASQUEZ: It was pretty easy. Just repeating yourself three to four times in the morning was old. But otherwise, it wasn't too bad, you just catch everybody as they're coming in and, you know, relay any info you got to give them, and they go right to work right away. So it wasn't too bad.

ROBYN PIERCE: Did you get furloughed, or did you guys participate in the rolling furlough at all?

ERIC VASQUEZ: No, nobody from my area that worked for the post office did any of that. I heard some district offices—they weren't furloughed, they were set up to be able to work remotely, though. But someone in the delivery field, like myself, we wouldn't be able to do that.

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ROBYN PIERCE: So can we talk about the protocols that you guys had to put in place? I assume that the stuff that you did at the beginning of March probably looks different then it looks now. [00:06:03] So let's start with when the stay-at-home order was issued. What did you guys have to change to stay— besides the shift changes—what did you have to do to stay safe in the building?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Well obviously we started doing was—it was so wild, wild west at the beginning nobody really knew what to do and, with the post office our policies are always changing from day to day, just because the size of the operation we are. So, I mean, it started as soon as they were getting info from whoever it was—the CDC or any department, health departments—they'd implement right away. So, of course, masks were a big thing as soon as that was found to be a good way to go we received orders that that was now the standard in each office. If you're not in your own individual workspace working, and you weren't able to maintain that social distancing, you had to have a mask on. Like, if I was sitting at my desk by myself working I was ok, but as soon as I got up from my workstation, I had to put a mask on and walk around and check out what I was going to do. [00:07:06] But, other than that yeah—masks, social distancing, additional cleaning—that was a big thing that was really pushed because you're only budgeted limited hours to do things. Well, COVID kicked off and at that point nobody cared as to what you spent as long as it was put into cleaning. So our custodial staff was really busy. So yeah, cleaning. Plexiglas dividers was the big thing. When it first happened we started with shower curtains which looked terrible. But, as time went on, we figured this is going to be it, we ordered a company to come to put real nice Plexiglas dividers up and looks more professional. But, yeah, definitely the beginning was—you just never knew what to do, or what to believe, or so you just went with whatever you were told and did it, so. [00:08:00]

ROBYN PIERCE: So those Plexiglas dividers, are they in between each individual workstation as well as at the retail counter, or only at the retail counter?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Nope, they're only at the retail counter. In the back, though, the carriers are still supposed to mask up when they leave their work area. Otherwise, yeah, up at the front

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they have the dividers and the employee—the clerks up there completing transactions, they're still masked up. And then, same thing, we request that customers do that, as well.

ROBYN PIERCE: Did you close the lobby at all during the stay-at-home thing?

ERIC VASQUEZ: No, the lobby was left open the entire time. We were normal business. Nothing was reduced down or nothing. We were rolling.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. Did you put in place a limit on how many people could come into the lobby?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Yeah, that was when that came down to where you know limit the amount of folks, they measured, you know, how big a lobby we had, how many people could actually be in it. [00:09:01] Then it was up to us and the clerks to just regulate if it was starting to get packed, we would ask people to step out. And when the vestibule, which we have—we're lucky enough we have a nice big vestibule—people could sit and wait from being outside. So, it's not a—

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, that's really cool.

ERIC VASQUEZ: Yeah, so it wasn't too bad. But I know some places weren't that lucky, but.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. You, I'm assuming, ask all the customers to wear masks, as well? Did you have any problem with anybody coming in that didn't want to follow protocol?

ERIC VASQUEZ: No, in the beginning we had a couple that didn't want to wear them. And, again the postal side, from what we thought, if they don't want to wear one that's fine, we're not going to turn anybody away. We'll still take care of them. That too, like I said, our clerks were protected. They had all the protective equipment they needed—hand sanitizers and masks and gloves and all that stuff, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: Very cool. [00:10:00]

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ERIC VASQUEZ: Maybe there was just one or two, or, somebody wanted to tell somebody else that they had to do something and a little argument. But usually it diffused pretty quickly and everybody'd go about their day, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's good. So was there anything that was going to happen at work, like a promotion or rearrangement of offices or whatever, that didn't happen because of COVID?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Not really. Not in my area, anyway. I know they planned on—there was things you heard here and there, just minor changes—but nothing ever came of it. So we're still same work structure, and nothing's changed there.

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, that's good. So you did not end up working from home during the order, so I won't have to ask those—

ERIC VASQUEZ: Nope.

ROBYN PIERCE: What's the biggest thing that you had to rearrange, that you had to deal with at work, to make sure things were going smoothly? [00:11:00]

ERIC VASQUEZ: With mine was actually just—a lot of it was when everybody did initially take off, that hurt a lot of our logistical process on moving items. So length of time that it took to get things was a lot longer, but it was always anticipated. So trying to get—talk to customers and explaining things like that to them that—this is what's going on, this is why your item wasn't received, you know, on that exact date. That was always—that's draining at the end of the day having to explain that multiple times, over and over. And a lot of people just not comprehending it. So there's lot of customer service side that was harder than anything else. Just because people are home they wanted their stuff, and they wanted it now. And, well, you're home from work, and the guy that worked in that warehouse is home from work, too, so nobody's doing the work anymore.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

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ERIC VASQUEZ: So that was just a hard thing was getting a lot people to understand that side of it. [00:12:01] Then just the same thing with businesses that were now closed, trying to accommodate them with, well we're still getting your stuff we need to get it somewhere. Just making all that initial contact. But now that we've gotten that it's been pretty good, and a lot of people are now more receptive to—okay this is how it's going to be. You know, and it is, there's nothing we can really do about it, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. So when the stay-at-home or stay in place order was issued did your Amazon Sundays get crazy?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Yeah. That was one big thing that we have seen with our line of work is parcel volumes are really heavy. A lot more people are ordering obviously, you know, things you wouldn't normally order that we've noticed. A lot more nonperishable through Amazon—cans of dog food, bags of dog food, pop—just goofy stuff that people normally wouldn't order through Amazon. [00:13:03] But they are now just because they don't have to go out which, you know, it's more business for us, we'll take it. So—

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. I bet people are ordering stuff that they can't find on the local.

ERIC VASQUEZ: Yeah, that was a big thing, too, was the cleaning products people trying to get and, same thing, they order something and just take a few extra days to show up, but usually did.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. So can we talk about school and your kids?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Yeah.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay. So I know some of your kids are school aged, so once school shut down what did you guys do?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Yeah, luckily enough our daughters are older so being home on their own wasn't a huge deal. But just shutting down as rapid as they did last year, it was just

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tough just not knowing what they were going to be doing. [00:14:02] Were they going back? Or, they weren't going back? Just the unknown. Our girls, they ran out the rest of the year, pretty much, they didn't do a whole lot of homework after that. It was just a few do these reports or something, and that was it. So that whole last part of the year was a wash, I thought.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, I agree.

ERIC VASQUEZ: Yeah, but then going into this year they initially started at home. My ex-wife and I, we discussed, we'd do nine weeks at home, see where things are at, and then send them back. Well, my older daughter, not a problem, she enjoyed it, she was fine being home. My younger daughter she had to be in school. So it was just better for her. So we talked to school, they took them both back, no problems. They've gotten right back into it. Wearing the mask was a big deal. Not being able to interact with as many kids as they used to.

[00:15:00] I think it's been a big deal just because, again, their age, they're social. But they're back at it. They enjoy it, they're glad they're back. I think it was a big help getting them back into school. Just being home as much as they were was pretty uneventful, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, I completely understand. (Vasquez laughs) So a just a couple more questions. Did you do anything fun with the stimulus check?

ERIC VASQUEZ: No. I think we just put the money back into the house.

ROBYN PIERCE: Man. So responsible.

ERIC VASQUEZ: I know. We're trying to, you know, be an adult.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. That's fine.

ERIC VASQUEZ: But, no we just put the money back into the house, and yeah that's been it. We didn't go anywhere, or really do anything, we didn't buy anything crazy, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. What are you looking forward to doing when all of this stay-at-home and COVID stuff is kind of lifted?

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ERIC VASQUEZ: What would I like? Just, I think just going back to being kind of normal again, where you want to plan to do something you don't think, well what is it like? Can we go there? What are the COVID numbers on all the specs here at home? We want to go do stuff, and it's like well—we just missed out on a big party last night just because it was a big party with a lot of people for Halloween. It'd be nice just to go out to—just do normal stuff and not have to plan for all the COVID stuff. It's terrible.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, that will be really nice. Well, I want to thank you again for your time. And I'm going to turn the recording off. Okay?

ERIC VASQUEZ: Okay, cool thanks!

ROBYN PIERCE: Thank you. [00:16:52]

End of interview