

Interview: Juan Manuel Patraca (English)

CT: Today is January 22nd, 2022. This is an interview for the custodians and janitors in Colorado oral history project funded by an Archie Green Fellowship from the Library of Congress. As a part of this project, we are interviewing people employed in the janitorial field to record their stories, document their skills and knowledge, and better understand their important role in our communities. The recording and transcript will become a permanent part of the collection of the Library of Congress.

CT: I am Cynthia Torres, and I am joined by our interpreter, Rosabelle Rice, and collaborator with the CU Boulder Latino History Project, Betsabet Samarripa. And today we are speaking with Juan Manuel Patraca. We are recording in Denver, Colorado, and the time is approximately 12:15 PM. For the record, do you give us permission to record your story?

JM: Yes, of course.

CT: Could you please give us your name and the year you were born?

JM: My name is Juan Manuel Patraca Carmona and I was born in 1964.

CT: And your current job title?

JM: I am employed as janitor.

CT: We are going to get to our questions, and if you want to pause at any moment, just let us know.

BS: Will you please give me your name, your age, and how many years you have worked as a janitor.

JM: My name is Juan Manuel Patraca Carmona and I am 58 years old, well, I'll be 58 this next ██████ May. I have been a janitor around 19 years.

BS: Tell us a bit about your early life and your family. Where were you born, and how did you end up in Colorado?

JM: Well, I will tell you a synthesis, because really, my life is very long and I have to make a synthesis. First, I was born on a ranch by the name of Paso La Venta, municipality of Purga, and that ranch is 40 minutes from the city of Veracruz. From there, at the age of 4, we went to the port of Veracruz, and there is where I spent my youth. I started to work at the age of 5, because my father died at the age of 30 and I was 5 years old. Then, my mother, who was illiterate, but with an enthusiasm for the family to get ahead, took me to a blacksmith. And, I was 5 years old, and the owner of the shop asked my mother, "What do you want, lady?" My mother told him, "I am bringing you this boy so he can learn to be a blacksmith". But I should be in school. But my mother was in dire need of help and she had me start to work. First I felt starting to work at the age of 5 as a suffering, but then I saw it as a life learning experience. Then, my mother, with her innate wisdom, told me, "I am going to give you the second gift of your life. First I gave you life, and now I am going to teach you how to work". Then the

blacksmith found a place in which he could utilize me. He made a motor and I would spend the day turning a crank on that motor. And that crank would fan the fire in the forge in which the blacksmith would place the irons/metals. He would then pull out the hot irons and would pound them into different forms. When I got older and stronger at the age of 10, the blacksmith had me take the hot iron from the forge and I would pound it to bend it. From there, when I turned 13, I started there at 5 years old and left the blacksmith at the age of 13, I had different trades. First I was a shining shoes, then would pick up balls in the stadiums, and would deliver merchandise from a miscellaneous store. I then left Veracruz and went to Acapulco, Guerrero, and work at selling auto parts. Then, there, I suffered a great misfortune; I lost my family in an automobile accident. I was the only survivor of that accident. The dairy company vehicle with which I had the accident was very powerful, and invested a lot of money to put me in jail. All the inquiries said that I was innocent, because the dairy trailer driver had fallen asleep and had crossed over into my lane. With the corruption we have in Mexico, I was sentenced to 100 years in prison. When I was sentenced, I awoke from the lethargy that I was in. I had a deep lethargy and suffering from losing my family. Then to hear that I had 100 years, that I was going to spend the rest of my life in prison even though I was innocent. I then asked the public ministry to give me permission to make a phone call. I had a friend in Veracruz that was an attorney. I told him briefly what was happening to me. He came, and within 2 months he got me out of prison. Then I returned to Veracruz, from Acapulco to Veracruz. As soon as I got to Veracruz, I got my backpack and went to the first gas station I could find. I asked a truck driver where was he going. He said he was going to Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, and I asked him for a ride. We got to Ciudad Victoria and the truck driver got me in contact with another truck driver, and that's how I got to Agua Pietra, Sonora. I was searching for work, and wanting to forget all that had happened to me in the past. I started to work in Island Signal, a factory where they made seat belts for all types of autos. But the working conditions, and the abuse by the supervisors was constant.

CT: What gave you the impulse to become an activist? That particular moment?

JM: Well, that was the second impulse that changed my life. The first one was when we had to leave Veracruz, because they took our lands. I hurt for my mother that had her husband, I hurt for my father. And I told my mother "someday I will return these lands to you". I think that was the first moment that I became an activist, because I lived that nightmare. I feel that when all of that happens to you, there is an internal revolution. When I arrived in Agua Prieta, and I saw that panorama of Sodom and Gomorra, I asked myself, "I want to help, but how can I do it?" There is always a light that illuminated me and told me, "If they don't know how to read and write, first they need to be taught.". Because I remember a phrase that Christ said "The truth shall set you free". I started the task of teaching, then when they learned, we created committees. That's when we convened the march of 3,000 people in Agua Prieta, and it was when we got noticed by Mexican Republic. Then, yes, it is true, I changed the lives of 10,000 people in that maquiladora. But also, I was getting death threats and attempts. They would say, "Kill the leader, and it's over". That's when I started to flee and I returned to Veracruz, and

took some time to rest. I then returned, but not to Agua Prieta, I returned to Piedras Negras, Coahuila. But all along the border that I visited, it was the same situation of poverty, labor abuse and abysmal wages. I needed to work, and found work at General de Cable, a maquiladora. I started again to organize people so they could have a better level of life, better salaries. Then I began an independent union in that maquiladora. We were able to gain the trust of a man that was very powerful, affiliated with the PRI political party. That man was so powerful that he managed the governments of Coahuila. He was not going to permit that an unknown would beat him in an election. But we did beat him in the election. The result was that he chased me until I crossed the border. By that point, I had gotten a tourist visa. Then, because my life was in danger, I called a cousin that lived in Austin, Texas, and he told me he would help me. I arrived in San Antonio, Texas, and it was the first time I saw the Border Patrol. In the Greyhound bus station I saw a black man and a Chicano in their green uniforms. I was not aware of any of this.

CT: How old were you at this time?

JM: 35. Then, what I did observe, was that there were little groups of Mexican people. And little by little, I was left with only one lady from Amarillo, Texas. Everybody had been deported, but I thought that they had just left in buses to their destinations. I had no idea that they were being deported. Then the two Border Patrol agents came over to me and the black one said to me, "where are you going?". And I told him that I could go anywhere. Then he said, "show me your permit/visa that allows you to be in the US". I took out my visa and showed it to him. He then asked me for the permit that is issued by the consulate—and I showed it to him. He then asked me again where was I going and what was I going to do in the United States. That's when the lady told them very sternly "he already showed you his permit, he already showed you his visa, you don't have nothing else to ask of him!".

CT: How did you end up in Colorado?

JM: There (in the bus station), the lady bought me a ticket to Denver, Colorado. And that's how I got to Denver.

CT: How did you end up being a janitor?

JM: When I arrived, I started to look for work and the first thing I found was for a janitor.

CT: How many years did you work as a janitor?

JM: I'm still working; 19 years. And when I return, I believe I will still be a janitor.

CT: Would you please tell me about your days or most memorable experiences as a janitor?

JM: I think there were 2 instances that marked my life. The first one was when the man, the owner of the company, gave me the job. Because getting work is a synonymous with wellness. Consequently, one can pay our needs. Then, he hires me, I feel very enthusiastic and I show up to my area of work. I did not know what being a janitor entailed, because I had always worked

in the fields. The supervisor's assistant showed me the area of work and what were my responsibilities were going to be. The first company I worked in was Commercial Cleaning Systems. Since I was new, I did not know what to do in that company. I started earning about \$5.50 an hour. I remember I started part-time, and all was good during four months. I would do my job and they would pay me. In that building there were 10 employees. Then, there is the second thing that changed my life. The union was organizing to obtain better wages. I searched for justice and dignity for cleaning workers because we were paid very minimal wages.

CT: Could you tell us a little about those people that you worked with during the years, and speaking about people whose rights you were trying to help.

JM: So when the union tried to organize the suburbs, the owners of the companies went to talk to the workers. I met three owners of Commercial Cleaning. But when they arrived they asked us to line up and started to point fingers and talk to us. They told us, "if you join the union, you will be fired from your jobs, because we want you to know that you are disposable and have no rights in this country". Then they pointed to each one of us and told us, "are you going to march for the union?". So then, for fear of losing their jobs, they would say "no". But when they came to me, he pointed at me and I pointed at him. I told him "I am going to march. And if I am fired, I want you to give me my check. Now, bring me my check, but I am going to go and defend my rights. Because if you gave me my job, now I want to get justice and dignity in my place of employment." The "gringo" turned and said did not tell me anything. Then, the union did come into the building and the first thing they did was name me a delegate and eventually to the board of directors.

CT: Were most of your co-workers also immigrants?

JM: Yes, all.

CT: Did they have families?

JM: They did have families. Well, their lives changed because there was no more abuse. Salaries rose from \$5.50 to \$9.00. But I did not think that my words would change the lives of my buddies, and mine also. I just followed my instinct of being a good activist.

CT: How has COVID changed your work or the type of activism?

JM: Yes, for sure, I think that it has impacted everyone. It changed the way we work. In fact, when it started, people that needed to go out and we had to go clean. Daily, every 20 minutes the plant was disinfected. Everywhere anyone would touch, had to be disinfected.

CT: Did you have the equipment necessary to be safe?

JM: Yes, sure. In fact, the company....it did not affect me in my work or in lessening my hours, because the brewery Coors is Golden, never stopped operating.

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CT: You have to have your beer.

JM: Consequently, other businesses like restaurants, there were a lot of people that lost their jobs. But the people that worked in the brewery....

CT: When did you start with the poetry, and how has it helped your activism and all of that?

JM: Well, in fact, you could say that in my platform, it did, right? Inclusive, I see it as a trampoline being a janitor, because if it hadn't been for that job, I would have never written poetry about the workers. For example, I wrote "Justicia Por Janitors" (Justice for Janitors), which is a poem emblematic of the struggle of the union in the United States. And I was inspired by downtown California and Champa. There we gathered, there was a gathering of almost a thousand immigrant workers. There is where I recited this poem and these people...well, their consciences were opened. And after I published my first book, I went to almost all of the United States, declaiming that poem in locals of SAU.

CT: What is the name of that poem?

JM: Justicia por Janitors (Justice for Janitors)

CT: Can you tell us a bit about that poem?

JM: Yes, I can tell you. I used to know it by memory, but it's been a long time that I don't recite it....

HERE MR.PATRACA RECITES *JUSTICE FOR JANITORS* IN SPANISH

(Transcribed in English at End of Transcription)

CT: It is incredible and very powerful.

JM: I said that poem in front of Obama in the capital, and Luis Gutierrez, the senator from Chicago or that area. They and all the audience stood up and applauded. I was very moved because I never thought I could move the people. But when I saw that mass of people stand up and applaud, I was moved because I could do something so powerful. These are things that I can never repay, I can now die in peace.

CT: Could you tell us, who for you, was the singular person that was most significant in your life?

JM: Without a doubt, my mother made me what I am. There is a large age difference between my brother and me, my brother is 90 years old and I am 50, 40-year difference. When I return to the past and I see my illiterate mother, with all the disadvantages of the world, to have reared a family of 10, made them grand, give them, maybe not an education, but by example of

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life, that to me was the biggest thing that I could have. She was the best character of inspiration.

CT: With all that you have accomplished in your life, is there anything that gives you the most pride?

JM: Yes, of course, the thing that gives me the most pride is to have liberated all those people and give them quality of life, better wages, but above all, the teaching and inspiration that they can defend themselves. And the most important thing, to have taken away their fears, because fear not only holds you back, it makes you go back.

CT: What advice would you give someone that is starting as a janitor? Is there a general advice that you would give these youngsters that are starting their lives with the same life experiences very similar as yours?

JM: Yes, in fact, my mother always told me that one should be the best in whatever you do. And always be respectful of the property of the third person, in other words, do not steal. I think that was my best advice.

CT: These are all the questions we have for you. Is there anything that you would like to share with us regarding your history?

JM: Let me think, because there are so many things that I could share. I have always said that having been a janitor was the platform and trampoline that let me write four books, and I am writing the fifth. Because the lives of these people are carried in these chunks of paper. In reality, I am a vehicle that God gave me the talent and grace of these people to have existed. Then, at the root of all of this, I have participated in two poetry festivals, one in Los Angeles and one in Miami, where I have lived together with people that attended a university. And when I recite my poem about an immigrant mother and justice for janitors, I see that these people that attend a university, stand up and applaud. Then they tell me that the intellectuals, that most poets write about love, but you write about the people, about looking for justice and dignity for them. And that makes one as if he is out of context. But I, inclusive, in the Miami festival, there was a woman from Chile, and she told me that when I was reciting the poem about an immigrant mother, she could visualize in a fourth dimension. She asked me who were the two women that were beside me. I told her they were my mother and my aunt. That they are still protecting me, have never left me, have always been there for me. They have saved my life infinite times.

CT: How beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing this history with us.

JM: No, thank you for listening to me. I always say, when I recite a poem, “thank you for listening”, because sometimes people are so giddy in life, that they took a moment to listen to me. Because of that, my next project in life is to return to the ranch and to start cultivating the land. Now, my struggle is to help the planet. Because one, in the first culture of being a human being is the agriculture. If we don’t take care of the land, which is the only home that we have,

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there will be chaos. I am always dreaming that I am already at the ranch. I don't want fame. Because life is simple, and one is a common person.

CT: I am waiting for your book of poetry about the planet and the land, and everything related to that.

JM: That's why I want to go, because the tranquility is with the land. I feel it is a debt that I still have to repay.

CT: Thank you for your time, and thank you for all you have done. Thank you very much---and of course, for the book.

JM: I'll wait for you to read it and for you to give me your opinion.

Justice for Janitors

by J.M. Patraca

from his book: *32 Biographies of Humble People*

United States, country of immigrants

World power, belligerent

Beacon of social justice and peace

Nation of a suspended dream waiting to be grasped

From our origins we migrate

With a sublime illusion, heart in hands

Leaving families, ancestral ways

Weaving through our path of a thousand uncertainties

Here we ought to feel privileged

But please, let's not forget our brothers

On the border folded and forgotten in the eternal dream

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While chasing their own sublime illusions north

With empty pockets and sick bodies we arrived

Searching for a new home

If no one, friends or family, awaited to welcome us

The streets or Samaritan House would be the port in hand

We spun in the mud sinking towards our precious dreams

Success, at any price

Looking for a job became our path to martyrdom

We don't speak English and, by our own people, we are thrown to
the lions

At last we find work, settle in

Give thanks to God, we have succeeded

But the sheep skin soon falls from our bosses

Showing their angular teeth of wolves without soul

In every Hispanic they see a jumble of hands

To them we are machines not humans

And to pour salt in the wound

They make a fellow "paisano" our supervisor

Each time we pause

They invent new ways to work us harder

And we sadly pride ourselves setting Guinness World Records

For running, at their whim, faster than Superman

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In the workplace, my paisano
Becomes my archenemy
The footman of the slave master
If I complain of his injustice, my dreams he will crush

Fellow paisanos, friends, let's not forget
Organizing ourselves is our strength, our trusted way
We are the hands of God, since creation
The indisputable support of this big nation

We must wake from this taciturn dream
Not abandon this world to impunity
Speaking out with faithful courage in the streets
Proclaiming, justice now! Respect our common human right

Brothers, with justice for janitors at the vanguard
Galvanized by our heritage and wisdom
Armored by our hard won contracts
We will strike the death blow to impunity and injustice

We stand here, brothers, as human beings, not as invisible hands
In the streets with our placards we are invincible
Organizing with SEIU we are of one mind, one atom, unfurling
We must fight together in fierce passion, noble cause, as one heart

Brothers and Sisters:

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We will not give up until our enemies recognize our working rights, which by divine justice, universal and human, belong to us. Let's continue to denounce injustice. By doing that, we will build a better world and always, always truth and reason will assist us.