

Aya Yanga

00:00 My name is Aya Yanga, today is May 13, 2022 and I am interviewing Pedro Rios through zoom for the University of California San Diego Race and Oral History project.

00:19 Do you agree to grant the university permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Pedro Rios

00:26 Yes. I agree

Aya Yanga

00:28 Could you tell me about yourself.

Pedro Rios

00:31 Yeah so, my name is Pedro Rios and I'm the director of the American Friends Service Committee to US/Mexico border program. I am from San Diego and born and raised and have spent most of my time here and i've been with the Organization for 19 years.

0:53 The work that we focus on is on border and immigration issues and upholding the basic protection of civil liberties and civil rights for migrants.

01:06 And it's work that is extremely important for the region because it's a region that has evolved and changed over many years..

01:18 Because of border policies we've seen our region militarized and that impacts both residents, as well as people who pass through the borderlands, primarily migrants who are seeking a way to leave dangerous places in their home countries or seeking opportunities for employment or seeking to reunite with their loved ones.

Aya Yanga

01:45 What made you want to join the AFSC Program?

Pedro Rios

01:50 I was transitioning from one job to another, and so, it happened to be that the AFSC was hiring and, at the time it met the criteria of the type of employment that I wanted to have, which was both using my prior job experiences as well as my academic experience as well and combining them to work on immigration issues and border issues, and so I thought it fit perfectly for me.

Aya Yanga

02:27 What is it that you like most about the program?

Pedro Rios

02:30 I like interacting with people, many of whom are able to really show changes in their lives by, despite the many challenges that they encounter because they don't have

02:50 a status in this country, or they they don't recognize fully as people who can contribute and participate in the United States, but yet through their actions through their

03:03 ability to survive, despite so many complex challenges they really become a beacon for how as human beings, we should strive to

03:15 improve ourselves and oftentimes the challenges they face are challenges that the State imposes upon them

03:26 and it's better that they raise their families, they're able to work in San Diego, they're able to contribute to their community in a positive way and I think that that really showcases the degree of human spirit that people have, in spite of the challenges that they face.

Aya Yanga

03:46 What are the current key issues that the AFSC are concentrating on with their efforts?

Pedro Rios

03:53 We are currently working on the area border and immigration issues, and so we have our focus is both, well I shouldn't say both it's on different levels so it's at the local level, at the State level, and at the federal level.

04:12 At the local level, a lot of our work involves providing know your rights presentations to migrant communities, providing opportunities for people to present complaints against border officials for mistreatment, or for abusive practices, we also run a program of leadership development, and we encourage people to

04:41 organize themselves with their community in order to effect the change that they would like to see that they've identified

04:47 and determine it's important for their lives and their livelihood. At the State level, a lot of our work is advocacy on state based issues of legislation that impacts, the lives of migrants and their families, right now, one of our key

05:04 areas of focus is on the vision act, if we've passed, it would prevent the state of California from transferring migrants under their custody to ice and to

05:17 federal immigration authorities, and this has been a problem because though people have spent many years in some cases under the custody of the state of California,

05:28 when they're done with their sentencing oftentimes, they will be sent to ice and are subject to deportation from the country, we would like to see that stopped, we don't think that people should be subjected to that, it imposes a higher amount of penalty

05:52 for crimes that were committed but have been resolved and the penalty oftentimes is deportation, which involves and includes separating their loved ones from their families

06:05 sent to countries where they might no longer have connections to and it's not only an unfair practice but it's not just that people should live through something like that.

06:16 And then finally at the federal level, a lot of our work is working towards issues of accountability and oversight and transparency for the border agencies that work on immigration issues and

06:30 that work can be intense, because we also support families that have suffered through a loss of a loved one and our work plan is to accompany those families in the process and to seek their direction and how we advocate for policy change at the federal level.

Aya Yanga

06:48 Are you able to tell me more about the issue in the southern border?

Pedro Rios

06:52 Well, there are many issues in the southern border, but in particular I think what I can focus on for the purposes of this interview would be

07:04 on how border communities have been militarized over the course of several decades and the militarization allows for the US authorities to trample on the basic

07:19 protections that people would expect to have so oftentimes there's a degree of

07:25 not respecting the fourth amendment in border communities, because of the amount of power that agencies such as the border patrol

07:33 have and it's a power that they abuse and overreach, and so the border agents with border patrol in particular oftentimes are involved in cover ups of crimes, manipulating evidence.

07:54 and not being forthcoming about actions that they've been involved in which would constitute some level of malfeasance and so,

08:03 that together with how our communities have been militarized that has increased the number of people that die attempting to cross into the US, it's like the backdrop of the conversations that are taking place around border enforcement issues.

Aya Yanga

08:24 I have actually read one of your articles, how do you address the common misconceptions about the border region and underscore the importance of nonviolent direct action in amplifying voices from the region.

Pedro Rios

08:37 One way that we do, that is to try to have directly impacted people speak on their own behalf it's trying to create the spaces,

08:48 where people are able to share their stories and their testimonies and their experiences, but also their dreams or desires or wishes for what a safe and sound community would mean to them.

09:06 What we've done in the past for Nonviolent direct action has included a large action at the border field state Park, the intention, there was to address the increased detention that border authorities were

09:27 creating precisely around the deaths of children and the incarceration of migrants and the lack of responsiveness for upholding

09:40 basic human rights of people that were detained, so we brought together around 400 people, most of them represented clergy and because of that representation, they were bringing all the different

09:54 constituencies, that they were part of within their faith communities and the intention was to conduct a water ceremony at the border wall at friendship Park, but the border patrol agents prevented us from doing so and they actually also arrested over 30 of our participants

10:14 and for us it was important for that direct action to take place, because we

10:18 could no longer stand on the sidelines and just watch as children were dying under border patrol custody for that people are facing

10:28 different types of levels of mistreatment by border authorities, and it was important for us to show through the members of the faith communities who are there, that everyone wants united on calling for the restoration of peace and justice in border communities.

Aya Yanga

10:46 hey, it's good that someone cares at least.

Pedro Rios

10:52 Yeah, I think it's definitely, you know a lot of people came out and they demonstrate that they care about this issue, but I think more than that, it was the demonstrating the

11:05 commitment that they have to put their bodies on the line to call out the injustice to demonstrate that the policies that were

11:14 being put in place at the time were horrendous and we're subjecting people to all types of state and non-state violence, both here in the US and in Mexico in particular.

Aya Yanga

11:27 How have immigration enforcement practices and policy harmed both border residents and migrants?

Pedro Rios

11:36 Well, as I mentioned earlier, there has been a process of border communities being militarized and where the priority is not only the militarization of our communities, but it's also

11:46 how private companies through contractual agreements that they have with the US Government will profit off of human suffering

11:54 and what I mean by that is that they profit whenever they detain someone in an ice facility or privately run facility.

12:02 And so, for us it's important to call that out, it's important to demonstrate that we don't agree that profit motive should be what drives policy, especially if we continuously see how people are harmed by those misguided policies.

11:21 And so, you know, we've seen people that have died in detention centers, people that don't have access to even appropriate masks to prevent the spread of the pandemic, of the COVID-19 virus, we've seen retaliation at detention centers but even beyond that the detention center we've also seen that

12:44 heavy footprint of enforcement by ice when they're going to people's homes and asking them for documentation or are seeking someone out and will lie to people in order to gain access to their homes or will use violence to apprehend people so, for instance we've seen cases where worksite raid that was taking place and ice agent sought out the workers and in two cases they pulled their guns at the

13:15 fathers who were taking their children to school, then detained the fathers and left the children by the side of the road, so that's the type of violence that that has a direct impact on people's lives in what we've been able to document there's definitely a lot more

13:35 examples that I can provide but I'll leave it at that, for now.

Aya Yanga

13:40 Are there any policy changes during the Obama, Trump, and Biden administration?

Pedro Rios

13:46 There have been numerous policy changes in each of their administration's.

13:52 Starting with President Obama, for instance, there was a shift away from the war on terror in terms of how Obama framed policy and instead of using the war on terror.

14:10 He would talk about the spillover violence, meaning that a lot of the violence that the US Government was responding to was because of violence that was coming in from Mexico, but from my perspective, that was just an excuse to try to

14:32 use and increase the type of enforcement practices. Obama was nicknamed the deporter-in-chief because of so many deportations that took place under his administration.

14:45 And then under the Trump administration, his administration changed hundreds of laws related to immigration and really severed and decimated the refugee program so even now under Biden, it's difficult to get some processes started because they were completely decimated under the

15:10 Trump years in the White House but President Trump also brought in, not only the changes to laws, but he also brought in a lot of people into his administration that were connected to

15:22 white supremacist and officially recognized hate groups, the policies that we have now in place, Title 42, that President Biden continues to implement were thought about by

15:42 someone in the Trump administration, who has known ties to racist organizations and who has espoused himself racist ideology and racist thinking and so,

15:58 the changes have been profound since then and under President Biden, a lot of the policies that were in place under Trump continue to date in terms of denying

16:10 people who are seeking asylum, the ability to begin an asylum process and that has created conditions where migrants are pushed out

16:20 to many more dangerous crossing routes where they are injured, or they are increasingly dying in record numbers and that certainly has been the case in Arizona

16:31 where more people are dying in the last couple years that have died in prior years, so it just demonstrates how people are risking their lives, even more precisely because of policies that have been placed under Trump and now under President Biden.

Aya Yanga

16:48 Do you think that there are any improvements in their policy?

Pedro Rios

16:52 Not yet, I haven't seen any improvements, yet that we can point to that are significant when President Biden first took office, he did

17:02 issue some memorandums executive orders that, for instance, targeted the construction of border walls and that was promising

17:10 but we do know that there are still levy walls being built in southern Texas, and these levy walls are so much shorter than Trump border walls but serve the same purpose of blocking people from entry.

17:25 There's still a lot more that President Biden could be doing that he's not doing continuing, for instance, the Title 42 order that he continued for up until May 23, is when it's supposed to be rescinded but there was a hearing today that might prevent that from happening.

17:50 The migrant protection protocols or what's, also known as the return to Mexico program, it's a part of the Trump administration's legacy that President Biden continues today and, which causes a lot of harm, it forces people to be in unsafe places and makes them have to make desperate decisions about how to

18:17 save their lives, whether they stay in danger in Mexican border towns or if they cross into the US through dangerous routes and also possibly see or find danger because of white supremacist organizations that are along the border lands and finding ways to try to apprehend migrants themselves.

Aya Yanga

18:42 How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you?

Pedro Rios

18:47 Well it's affected our work in that way, now we have to work from home, and we continue to do so, at least my team does, with few opportunities to go into the office unless we need to

19:01 We, but it did also make our our team and other organizations creative in terms of actions and activities, for instance, because of COVID-19 there have been many more

19:14 what are known as car caravan protests and it's a way of ensuring that we're not placing ourselves at risk, but we're also continuing to express our sentiments about a particular issue and those activities are done safely.

19:30 There has been a move to begin going back to some of the practices that we've had in the past, but those haven't been done fully and then the biggest impact, I think, has been to how we meet with Community members, so we haven't done some of the presentations that we normally would do

19:53 because that would involve bringing people together in person, and so we want to avoid needing to do that, until it's absolutely necessary that we can

20:03 and safe that we're able to bring people together, where they learn together, they asked questions together, and they discuss issues related to immigration, about the rights about things that are taking place around the Community.

Aya Yanga

20:16 What were your feelings when COVID-19 first hit?

Pedro Rios

20:20 Well, I think, probably, similar to what other people felt just a lot of concern a lot of worrying about in which direction the

20:29 pandemic was going to take how long it was going to last what protections were available for my family and for those around me with my limited contact and just trying to be creative about how I maintained contact with people related to to my professional work, how do we ensure that our projects keep moving forward with the least disruption as possible.

Aya Yanga

20:57 Are there any demands made to the current administration in serving migrants that are infected with COVID-19?

Pedro Rios

21:06 Yeah, I mean the biggest demand has been calling for liberating people that are in detention centers because we don't see how it's possible for people in detention centers

21:18 to practice safe social distance and it's just not practical, also because when people have died at a Detention Center, that could have been prevented, and so, for us it's important to point that out

21:35 and that each day that people are held in detention increases the probability that someone new will die, and there are actually more people in detention for immigration reasons now under Biden than there were

21:52 entering the final years of the Trump administration so that's a direct demand that we have of the Biden administration, to free them all, to free

22:03 everyone who is locked up for immigration purposes, and also to explore how to free people in jails and prisons as well, during the pandemic it's probably the least safe area that someone can be

22:20 especially with a high concentration of people in a locked area.

Aya Yanga

22:28 Is there any aid being provided or coming from AFSC in serving migrants that are infected by COVID-19? If any, what are they?

Pedro Rios

22:38 We don't have any direct aid for that specific purpose, our program in San Diego it's not that we don't do, like provision of services in that way, but if that's a need, we will refer the individuals to other organizations that do provide that need.

Aya Yanga

23:02 I see.

23:04 Well, that's the last of the questions. Thank you for joining me today.

Pedro Rios

23:10 Yeah, thank you for asking the questions and feel free to be in touch if you have any other.

Aya Yanga

23:14 All right, thank you.

Pedro Rios

23:15 Okay, all right bye.

Aya Yanga

23:18 Bye.