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Transcript of an interview with

Rafael Gonzalez

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INTERVIEWER: Sisonke Msimang

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Rafael Gonzalez

My full name, if going by tradition in Latin American culture, is Rafael Eduardo Gonzales, but also adding my mother's maiden name, Castillo. I usually prefer everyone calling me Raf Gonzalez. I identify as an Aspie, which is short for Asperger's Syndrome. But, or just, I just call myself an Aspie. I think there's some people say, 'Oh, we just refer to you in the spectrum,' or something. Nah, I just prefer to be frank and say no, 'I'm an Aspie, that's it.' Because on the spectrum kind of doesn't make sense to me, you're on the spectrum of what? That doesn't make sense. So I say I'm an Aspie and they say, 'Oh, what's that?' And then it's easier to explain that. But I also say I'm autistic, but I'm a high functioning, so therefore I'm independent. I don't really see myself as, 'Oh, I'm special.'

In terms of job, I see myself more as a sort of a writer. I like writing. I'm in the arts. So what I learned at DADAA is I'm more of a non-disciplinary artist. I don't follow specific disciplines. I'm also good at art. I'm good at writing. I'm starting to get into my confidence into performing. So I'm a bit layered. DADAA, well, it's hard to explain the abbreviation, but DADAA is group in Fremantle and they also have branches up North and South. They are disability in the arts. It's an organisation that tailors to offering mentorship and, you know, workshops for people with disabilities to pursue their arts. But they've been long association for twenty-five years in Fremantle. So they've been really good people.

Sisonke Msimang

So can you tell us a little bit about what your life was like in the months just before COVID hit?

Rafael Gonzalez

In the months prior to the lockdowns and the COVID scares, I was in the middle of going in between jobs like transitioning between what was good for six months and I thought, 'Now I'm ready to move on to something' and there was a job opportunity to work at the cafe that was being built by DADAA and I thought, 'Oh, that's great. I want to work there and I feel more enthusiastic about that.' I was just going into the formalities and all the paperwork. I remembered this one train ride into the city and I received a call from Homes West because I was on a seven-year wait list for an apartment. That's how long those things were. I think they check your records or like your history. Like do you have a criminal record or if something's come up and there's an opportunity. So I wasn't really thinking about Homes West for a while because I was still at home with my parents. So I was the last to leave the nest, as the expression goes, but I wasn't in a rush. And because in our culture, we don't really push our kids out, you know, at least make sure that they have a safety network. And for someone like me, who's autistic and is obsessed with routine and patterns. It was just something that I was so used to, and I was just comfortable with that. And sure, it was an extra ten minute walk to the station, but at least it's a ten minutes. And so I wasn't really keen on that at the time. 'Cause I told, 'Oh, it's a seven year wait list. So it's going to be a while.' Or maybe I'll find something in between then, if I got the money, but it's been hard. And then I got that phone call from Homes West and they said, 'Oh, well, we're just letting you know that we found a place for you.' And I was like, 'What?' And I was very shocked and I wasn't sure how to process all of this. So I immediately told my parents when I came back, like, 'Oh they found something for me.'

So I went back and told my parents about this and then they were really excited and I thought, 'Oh wow.' Cause I've been thinking about making sure I had a job. And cause this came up at the most awkward time for me, because again, this was again all before March.

So I was just absorbing all of that information and then my parents thinking, 'Okay, now you have to stop buying comics or DVDs and you have to save that money for the essentials. You need a fridge, you need furniture, you need a bed.' In the months prior to March, that was what was happening was while I was working, learning on the new job. I was also coming to starting slowly putting my stuff into my apartment and make sure it looks nice. So, during those months it was just trying to slowly settle in. And of course, flew over to El Salvador to sort out family drama, well to help them out. And then, it was just slowly building up. I think, mentally, I was feeling a little bit slowly overwhelmed about that. And we were trying to do the slow approach, just like put stuff in slowly. Like, so at least you have a bed and a fridge and just the essentials and also do an extra cleaning just so that way we're extra careful. And then of course we heard about what was happening with the Coronavirus at the time it was called, but I prefer COVID-19 because that seems more legitimate.

Sisonke Msimang:

Can you say a little bit about whether, by the time COVID-19 had hit, had you spent a few nights in the apartment by yourself?

Rafael Gonzalez

We didn't do that at first, but then when lockdowns were starting to happen and then we got the information. Well, my older sisters were like the, they were the bigger worrywarts. My second sister Raquel, she was the more anxious out of the sisters. The other one was the older sister Ana, she was probably dealing with juggling three kids and a job and also a good husband as well. But it was just that my sister Raquel, she was more anxious and she was receiving all of this information and she was making us all a little bit nervous a little bit. And because we were dealing with trying to get dad home, because he was getting tired of what was happening over there and was like, 'I'm coming home.' And then just coincidentally, the deadline for the border restriction was coming. I was like, 'Oh, okay, well you were lucky that you were just in time, cause this is happening,' and because then the cases we were hearing on the news, cases in Australia were already growing. And so then the border restrictions were being called upon. But what happened was cause I think is I was trying not to think about it so much. And then at the cafe we were just learning about relearning, about hygiene and also we were starting to implement, you know, sanitation. And so that was fine. Cause at least that was easy because hospitality, you have to be sanitising everything all the time or to clean everything. And that was what my job was, but at least, and also just trying to keep a friendly face to those who were uncertain of what was going on.

Sisonke Msimang:

So your parents are both from El Salvador. When did they come to Perth?

Rafael Gonzalez

The thing was my parents and my sisters arrived here in Australia on April the first, 1989. And my sisters were my sister Ana was eleven and my other sister Raquel was eight. At the time they arrived. They came here after getting their visas approved because they were trying to leave because of the civil war that was happening in El Salvador. And they were given the options of either to stay in Sydney or Perth, but because we needed to be as far away from the civil war as possible, we just came all the way somewhere that was quiet, which was Perth, of course. And, and I think that was probably for the best cause then two months later I was born. So because the thing was, my mum was seven months pregnant and she, I think because her English was better than my family's, they was learning, but my mum had some education in the US in the seventies. So her English was better. And so she was able to translate things for my family and to other families that came on the same plane.

And then there's the rest of my family's spread out. I have a lot of cousins in El Salvador. I'm still, I have some who are actually, I have three generations of cousins in Dallas. And I have some second cousins like distant cousins from my dad's side in Long Island, New York. And one cousin living in Canada in Toronto. Oh, on my mum's side, of course we have family in Spain and in Sweden. So it's a global family, a very global family.

Sisonke Msimang

And so, if we just come back to the months before COVID, did the idea that there's this new virus, as you started to hear about it and started to pick up on the news, did it cause you anxiety?

Rafael Gonzalez

I tried not to think about it too much because I already had two things that were making me anxious already. But the thing was, before the early days, we didn't think the Coronavirus was going to be happening here because we think back at all, the previous viral scares pandemics that were very minor compared to this one, like the Swine and Bird Flu or the Zika virus. So we didn't think it was going to happen, but of course then this happened and then a lot of things started to spiral, that's what I would call it. Things started to spiral out. And I think it's because, again, because when my dad was coming back, the thing was, my sister believed that, 'Oh, if my dad was coming back and he has to isolate for two weeks, anyone who's staying near him had to also isolate and you know, not go out.' So therefore that kind of incentivised my sisters and my brother-in-law to say, 'Oh, no, you probably need you to be in your apartment.' So then I was just bringing whatever I could bring. It felt like a giant, big shove into my apartment. And so, but I was still kind of working for a while and then things started to escalate after that.

Sisonke Msimang

Can you tell me about your first night in your apartment by yourself? Did it feel momentous?

Rafael Gonzalez

My first night was daunting because it was completely different. And also I needed some assurance. So my mum was just getting some more stuff for me. And we would just try to

make sure that I was okay and just sending me text messages, making sure that I was fine and I thought, 'Okay.' And the next day I had work at the Mad Butcher, at the time. But like I said, I wasn't sure how bad my anxiety was at the time, but then it kind of started to hit the next day, because the thing was, I think it's because especially as an autistic person, it's hard to adjust to changes cause we love having our particular routine or we're so used to our surroundings and being into this, it was just an adjustment at first. And the thing was, the next day after my first night, I thought, 'Oh, thank God.' Cause I was also on a clock cause there was only one bus that goes into the Mad Butcher, which was really shitty. But I had to be there at a certain time to get to that bus stop. Because if I didn't, it would take forever. And the thing was, I was going in. But then I was like, 'Oh no, I didn't change shirts.' So I went, got changed, but thing was, I left the keys inside and I already had the set locked up. And, but the thing was, I didn't have a spare key on me. I was like, 'Oh no, no, no, no, no, no.' I was fretting and I knew I was going to be late. I was crying a little bit. And of course I didn't have the button to get me into the elevator. So I just went down the emergency stairs and I was calling my mum because I was really fretting because I was locked out and because my keys were in there. And my mum gave me this advice through the first day, 'If you have money, it can be solved.' And so we had to call a locksmith immediately after work or send them a text saying I need help getting into this. And so and I gave them my address. And my mum, she gave me a lift to, and then she told me that as soon as you were done at work, you call me. And then we drive all the way. So I was a little bit tense about that. I think this was just what you call the calm before the bigger storm that came up later, which was when the lockdowns were starting, but at least we got the managed to sort out the locks. But I think for me, I used to say this, I know a lot of people say, 'Oh, don't worry, everyone's gone through this. It's not just you.' But you're telling this to a person with autism and it is harder for them to process this stuff.

When lockdowns were happening, the cafe had to close because of the lockdown. So that was one of the things that was starting to unravel. And then when they were telling us these things like, 'Oh, you can't go to these places. You can't, you can't go to the movies. You can't go.' And I couldn't go out to the city. And the last time I went to the city prior to when lockdown got bad it was very empty. Train was very empty. I remember that I even saw a news crew that were looking at how ghastly that area was. But I think for me it was because that was happening. Like when the cafe had, they told us, the operators had to tell the bosses, have to tell me that the cafe had to close because of that. And even DADAA had to suspend mentoring sessions. And then they told us that to maintain that 1.5 meters. A lot of things were telling us, 'Oh, you can't do any of this.' Like I mentioned that, 'You can't go to these places or you'll have to do takeaway.' But I think what really, really hit me was all of this, 'Oh, you can't touch anyone.' And here's the thing, the old stereotype of autism is that autistic people don't like being touched or they feel like stranger-danger stuff. But for me, I am the opposite. I like to see my spiritual animal as a grizzly bear, like the California grizzly bear. Like they usually sleep late. I wake up late, I eat and I sleep a lot. And also I like hugs like any teddy bear. But when the isolation thing happened, I thought, 'Oh, okay. We just wait two weeks. And then hopefully things will be okay.' We all thought that this was just only for a couple of weeks. That's what we thought. But when they said, 'Oh, this is all we're going to have to, we won't be able to do anything for a while to stay home.' And that's when things were starting to just get really

bad. I think then at some point I don't know what happened, but I think it was like the more Raquel, my sister, became very anxious about and started spewing all of this stuff. I think on top of what I was going through, I felt like I was in silence because it's like, everything I used to take advantage of, or I used to enjoy has been taken away from me. And so then it just, I came to the point where I just crawled into a little inflatable couch and I just started crying because I just, I felt really insecure. And also the fact that I couldn't get a hug from my mum. And so that that really hurt me a lot because I really needed my security because I felt very insecure and it just really hurt because cause I, I really needed them when things were like getting really shitty. I'm sorry. It's like you were at that point where you really needed a hug from your mum, but just you couldn't get it. And I'm just thinking back to how bad that was. Even I try to maintain my focus at work. I mean just saying you're fine. You're not really fine, but you're fine. But it's just then my coordinator from AIM employment from the Autism Association came and she saw me. Cause I really needed a hug back then. And the only thing she could do was just tap me on the shoulder, which I felt I really needed that.

So then the next day after work, I went to go to do a session at DADAA. I had a session with my writing mentor and she helped me discover Zoom chats to help keep my sessions going. And so that kind of helped a little bit, but the first two weeks of the lockdown thing just really hit me so much. And just only we can only do like WhatsApp, FaceTiming and stuff. But just, it just did not feel the same. It just, it didn't really help. I couldn't go near my family or we can only do my sisters were trying to make sure my parents were okay. And so they went to make sure that they got the groceries like to and just put them at the door so that way we can only do that, but I couldn't do that. It just felt unnatural to me. So just only communication, that's what we kept up. But then my parents were bringing me like some stuff. But my sister was like, 'Oh, just give it to us. Don't give it to mum and dad' because they're at risk or 'cause that's why we were trying to maintain that distance because they were the vulnerable ones. But it just really hit us. And I think I try to keep a brave face for a while. And luckily, luckily I knew how to look after myself. Like I knew how to take a shower. I knew how to do all that stuff. I knew how to, I even had a spare vacuum. Like they gave me one of their old ones. So that way I can make sure I keep my freaking apartment cleaned. And then but also my dad also was able to give me some souvenirs, from El Salvador, like specifically the snacks from his home village, that really helped. But also, I also know how to cook, so therefore, I can cook pasta, so that's easy. So that was not a problem. I like going to Coles cause it was easier for me, but you have to maintain your distance. And because for me, at least, it was just a walk between my apartment and also the shopping centre. So that was easy. But just see limitations and not going out and also being cut off from the gym. Cause I try to maintain some exercise, but it was just, I was hovering near the fridge I was doing that. I constantly, because I was insecure and I was very anxious and I just needed some comfort food. And so I just felt really and I definitely have admitted to it is that since lockdown, I have put on more weight. I was always, cause I've always been very insecure about my looks because, yeah everyone admits to the pandemic weight. And again, and we were trying to keep alert as well, but I was at that point during the first few weeks where we were only hearing the same stuff on the news and it was just, it was just becoming so damn depressing. I think it really didn't help with anxiety a little bit. Over time we learned that this was a case of

separation anxiety. So I think that was probably what I was developing. I didn't think of it if at the beginning, but then slowly things were starting to make sense. So like, 'Oh, I was going through separation anxiety.'

Because I think at first I thought it was just because of the pandemic, but then I know that a lot of people would have gone through this. With being the first time alone or something. But then we were just hearing all these news and well, I mean, in the early days it was just becoming the same and it was and I was constantly starting to burst into tears. And so I came to that point, I thought, 'Enough, I just don't want to watch the news.' I couldn't stand it. It was just that every time, the first thing that pops up 'COVID-19' or whatever bullshit president Trump was spewing. I did try to watch The Project because that was easier to watch because they get what the news was and dissect it, those who were feeling insecure. At least I was grateful for that.

What I bought immediately was a laptop luckily, but they were nearly like almost sold out because everyone was buying laptops. So luckily I bought mine. It was the only display model they had and it was the only one I can afford at this point. Cause I didn't want to overdo it. And that was when I still had enough money. Luckily when lockdown happened, I had all of that stuff prepared, but it was just I think, yeah, like at the end the writing kept me going. And it was just like having a conversation and that was helpful. And my coordinator at AIM Employment through the Autism Association agreed to do this, we still maintain our distance just to only like grab a cup of coffee and just to have a quick chat. So that way she knew I was okay. I think her bosses implemented that at least it maintained conversation, you know, communication so that they check that we're okay. And that we're not feeling shitty or feeling like we're about to, like, we felt really insecure. So it was good for a while. I think then things got better when they announced the Phase One thing, which was you can have up to 10 people in a room and I thought, 'Oh thank God.' And that was our family. And we missed one of my sister's birthdays. I think we also missed the anniversary of when we first arrived. 'Cause, we like to do that. We get together to celebrate that. So we missed that. We just had a virtual toast, but it wasn't the same, but that was the opportunity to make up for lost time. So we had one immediate family dinner the day they announced it. We just cared about seeing each other again.

Sisonke Msimang

Tell us about what it was like. Did you go over to your parents' family house?

Rafael Gonzalez

The first time I went to see my family again, during Phase One, we also tried to maintain that social distancing, just to be on the safe side. My older nephews, they understood that. But my youngest nephew, Matthew, sweet kid, he didn't understand what was going on. And he just gave all of us hugs and God, we needed that because we all felt that. But truth is, before Phase One my mum came to the car to give me some supplies, and we just said 'Stuff it.' Just gave us a hug. I really needed cause I really missed it. And I really needed that. We did that before Phase One was approved, but I just thought I really needed that and my mum needed that too.

Before the lockdown, we only saw each other through the cars, but to physically see each other was it was sometime, I think ,prior to May. So it was somewhere in between towards the end of April. It's because everyone was saying how WA was coming out of it a little quicker than everyone else's because I mean, it took Melbourne and Sydney a while, but then we also what happened to them now. And for me not seeing my full parents, completely, and my sisters, completely, I mean, there was even a time I went to stay over at my sister's Raquel for a weekend just so that I didn't feel alone. But I think as good as my sisters were. I think I needed it more for my parents than everyone. The first family night we had since lockdown which was on a Monday and I just still remember that day when Matthew, my youngest nephew just gave us all hugs. And it was so sweet because we really needed that. And for him is because he missed all of us. He really wanted that too, but he didn't understand what was going on. And eventually we all just started doing it and just, we all started hugging each other, like 'Fuck the rules' because was just too much. And I think at the same time, the more I'm talking about the good part was that, because we all needed that serotonin level, we really did. It was just sort of like soothing and healing. And so it really helped after a while I know. And when the situation kind of started to get better here. And then suddenly people were starting to, because while people were working from home, I practically didn't have anything to do. It was just like exhausting not having to do anything. And I kind of am still exhausted 'cause I don't even have anything, although nowadays I'm okay now, but it was just that those early days were just really shit.

Sisonke Msimang

That's very beautiful. Because lots of other people didn't even miss their family. So I was going to ask you, how has it made you think about living on your own now?

Rafael Gonzalez

There were times I was tempted that I wanted to go home, but then I just thought, 'Nah, just try it up and just battle through it.' So I just kept on going and I thought, 'Oh, look, I'm near the train station. I'm just, it's only just two to three minutes to me now. So I don't have to fret about being late or gonna miss the bus.' But I think, yeah, it's just that prior maybe because at the beginning was that separation anxiety. And so now that that has subsided, it kind of, before lockdown, I was in the middle of quitting from the butchers. I was the middle of, you know, I already gave them my letter of resignation. And then when I heard about what happened with the cafe, they were offering to keep the resignation letter on hold and just to keep me going for a while. But both me and my coordinator both agree that look, we were disappointed by what happened with the cafe, but I didn't lose any sleep with leaving the butchers. I didn't lose any sleep from that. It was good. I appreciated the help I got or having worked for a while, but it was just, that sort of job was not me. And my dad was constantly complaining, like, 'Rafa, why do you have to go to that place? You have a qualification, you have a diploma.' Because I think it brought him back bad memories because his mum, she was the village butcher. She would cut up the fine meats or chicken to sell at the markets. I think it must've brought him bad memories. But again, I wasn't really losing any sleep from quitting that place. 'Cause that was not me anyway.

Sisonke Msimang

So now we've come to post-lockdown, everything is back to normal, sort of. Have you gotten to the point where you actually appreciate it or do you still feel like this is something you've got to do in order to have your independence?

Rafael Gonzalez

Well, I think as I've been independent before I moved out, like when my parents were going on a cruise or they went for a trip like up north or down south just for a couple of days and I had the house to myself, which was like every older kid's dream is having the house for themselves. Because again, here in Perth it was just getting better and better. So I didn't really feel that much. I mean, at the back of my mind, I always am worried that if I've screwed up something here in the apartment. Like, did I say something that's gonna ruin my chances of staying here? And it's like, that means I have to move back. Because what kept me going is, my rent has been paid on time, because I have a disability support pension at Centrelink. Which of course, a lot of people who knows Centrelink knows how very rigorous that is. But luckily I didn't have to wait in line to get a number. I actually had a number for years. So I've been on the pension, but we made an agreement to do a rent deduction plans. So therefore, my rent's paid on time. So I don't have to fret about, 'Oh, I'm late on the rent.' No, it's been already paid off. So I didn't have to worry so much about that. And I think I didn't have to worry about the electric bill for a while, because I registered for myself the first time and I was given like credit. I'm always dreading that when that time comes, that I have to start paying again, I was like, 'Oh great.'

Sisonke Msimang

Can you say a little bit about what you feel like this entire period has taught you? What are your lessons that come out of the lockdown?

Rafael Gonzalez

What I have learned since the pandemic is to be grateful to have the people who you're close to. Is to be grateful that you still have a connection. And because if you're on your own and you're alone completely, you don't have a support network. Probably because I would say, because I'm autistic and that I need that support all the time, but the thing was having, and also because I see a therapist. So I do go every two months cause it was getting too expensive and Centrelink being the, I have a right to say this, they tend to be the douchebags these days. Because nowadays it's like, you try to go in and you want to talk to someone at Centrelink and it's like, my answers for the first, the compulsory three questions they keep saying is at the beginning and say, my answers are 'No. And No. And I haven't been on holiday for three years.' The things I learned is being grateful to having a support network and always have communication opened and be grateful that you also have, because I think we're all grateful because unlike what happened years prior as you didn't have much communication, or you didn't have any way access to the outside world or virtually. So luckily we had the internet compared to back in the day.

END.