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Things Will Never Be the Same: How Corona Further Exposed Our System's Limitations Documenting the Pandemic through Highlighting Community Mutual Aid Efforts

by Pico Villa

The pandemic in the U.S. has exposed the core framework of our government by revealing advantages available only to those who can provide a great sum of capital that goes directly back into benefiting the system. In spite of the great need for assistance for the working class and colonized peoples, the U.S. government, a system that functions within a colonial and late-capitalist state, continues to feed the masses with a “bootstrap” narrative leaving many people houseless, jobless, hungry, and desperate. This narrative lingers within and has become a part of our everyday lives causing us to think that once everything goes back to normal a functioning economy and society can proceed as before. Many activists have been working on and writing about this crisis as an opportunity to detach this skewed reality of going back to normal from our thinking once the pandemic is over. The ongoing saying, “Things will never be the same/Things will not be going back to normal” reflects collective thinking among marginalized communities, specifically the efforts to educate folks about the individualist mindset we have been fed and that has been hurting us. This approach leaves out the opportunity to instill a community-based aid system where there is no reliance on a hierarchical system that perpetuates harm through white supremacy and capitalism, but instead, provides communities with the proper resources in order to survive no matter race, socio-economic status, disability, etc. The current system has created the lived realities of eviction, hunger, and unsheltered peoples, now considered normal and a part of everyday life. The normative is no longer being tolerated and transformative change is in the making thanks to many mutual aid groups and organizations stepping in to show the community that the reliance on others, rather than government entities, can become a legitimate mode of survival. We do not have to go back to thinking that the government is the only support we have. We, as a collective, can refuse to go back to the “way things were” because we know we have the power to create permanent change. “Things Will Never Be the Same: How Corona Further Exposed Our System” is a photo and oral project that highlights the work of mutual aid organizations/groups and illustrates the change they are creating through alternative systems of support and resource allocation that challenge the idea of going back to the previous status quo.

Albuquerque Mutual Aid



Pico Villa, “Queer/Trans Mutual Support,” 2020

Right now, what we’ve been providing is care packages for at-risk community members who need them, such as, those who are immune-compromised, people who lost income, whatever that looks like. We don’t really have any barriers in determining who receives support so anyone who asks, we will provide for them the best that we can. Right now, our care packages consist of food and snacks; we try to provide more meal prep options rather than just boxed food. When we put the food into the bag, we ask ourselves, “does this fit into breakfast, lunch, dinner?” We also provide different hygienic products that people can request, like bleach, toilet paper, hand soap, and other hygiene products, and yeah, that’s been most of it. I don’t think we see this need calming down anytime soon. It’s not something that’s happening because of the pandemic; food insecurity has existed here in New Mexico for a very long time but now that we’ve been through the pandemic, we have developed a way of redistributing food resources on a broader scale. This has been the norm for everyone else, minus the pandemic, but these things, like issues of food insecurity, state violence, all of this has been the norm for people of color for like ever. It feels like everyone else just got on the same page as us. I don’t think there is any reason for our work to stop. The vision when we first started this project was that it would be something that is sustained by the community for the community and that’s really come to light in the past couple of weeks.

-Jonathon Juárez (He/Them)

We've been able to get a system together that is able to respond to a bunch of folks' requests within 24 to 48 hours. As soon as the people requesting care packages fill out the form on google forms, within a couple of days, they have bags of food at their door and that's only because of the way the community has been able to come together, from the folks who are preparing care packages to the folks who are driving all over the city and outside of the city. Mutual aid is something that I've always done as a working-class Trans person. Anytime that I've had a friend who is houseless and needs a place to crash for a little bit or someone who doesn't have food, I've been like, "Hey, come over and check out my pantry, take what you need." I want to share what I have. That's something that has existed in Trans communities where people just naturally take care of one another because of the ways that a lot of us don't have access to traditional family support. And so definitely, for me, this has inspired and formed a lot of the ways that I offer community support and community care. Now, it feels kind of like that but just on a bigger scale. It's also amazing to see how many Trans people are involved, how many Queer folks are involved in mutual aid in Albuquerque. I think that the reason this work exists is because of the fact that when humans are in a place of crisis, the place that we look to first is each other for support, care, validation, and strength. As you know, capitalism and the systems that are built to oppress us have let everyone down during the largest crisis of our lifetime. Showing up for one another regardless of what's in our pockets or what our status is, is important work because it's reminding us that humans actually have the ability to participate in solidarity with one another."

-Miriam (They/Them)

Los Jardines Institute



Pico Villa, “Radical Queer Farming,” 2020

I work with *Los Jardines* Institute, which is a community farm that's open to the community; anybody is welcome. Everything that *Los Jardines* does is rooted in work that Sofia and Richard, who are its coordinators, have been doing for decades, since the 1970s. They've been a part of so many movements that call for liberation, Land Sovereignty for Indigenous peoples, antinuclear work, and many other efforts that resist extractive industries that poison BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities. We welcome folks to volunteer at the farm. We know a lot of folks are unemployed right now. We had a couple of people come by and say that it's really dark right now. They don't have a job, are stuck in the house, and so, they're looking for somewhere to go and also have some food. We welcome people to come and visit. The other part of the mutual aid work we do is sell our produce to the Agricultura Network. They distribute it to the community whether that's through food boxes for school or hospital drives. Richard and Sofia work hard to keep *Los Jardines* Institute going. We are not a 501C3, we are a grassroots organization that survives through donations and funds put in by Richard and Sofia. Nonprofit organizations seem to have more money to keep things going without constant struggles but that is not the case for *Los Jardines* Institute. Of course, it's not always a struggle but there is beauty in it. We come from struggle and we want to lift our people up and let them know we are in this together. We love the community. Whenever anyone comes to visit LJI, Sofia, me, or whoever is there, we always ask, do you want some food to take home? We have food, please take it and come back and help us in the field! We

aren't a huge mutual aid network but we serve the community in any way that is possible. I think mutual aid and the work that we're doing are important because everything is being dictated by a constant cycle of oppression. People who say that they can't wait to go back to normal are not doing community work in any capacity. You and I both know things have never been normal and will never go back to the way they were. There was never a "normal" for us with all this chaos, especially with what our Black and Indigenous relatives are forced to deal with; our communities have to create our own joy. While I think that can be a very ignorant statement, I also understand that people miss going out together and building that sense of community. It would be great if there was a new normal that gave the land back, no police or federal government, and made it mandatory to provide mutual aid to BIPOC communities because it's a fucking human right.

-Sarah Quevedo (She/They)

La Raza Unida



Pico Villa, "Chicanx Solidarity," 2020

I'm a member of *La Raza Unida* and have been a member for a long time. I used to be a primary organizer but now, I'm just a member. Most of what we're doing right now is providing support for security for gatherings and events. So, depending on the event, some of that is very formal and some of it's very informal. We try to follow the lead of folks who are organizing and just try to provide extra eyes for people who are trying to cause problems and, depending on the event, sometimes keeping an eye out for the police, you know, when there were riot units and figuring out where the armored vehicles were, those kinds of things. Something that is important to mention right now is the public health aspect of social movements. A lot of movements have that built-in, even though they may not use that term. You know, because they're about protecting and serving their community. I think it's very important, and it's clear to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. We're the ones getting most exposed because of the type of work we do and we're being told everything's fine. If you look at our history, we've been getting decimated at different periods of time and keep being told that everything's fine; this is no different. I think, at least, a portion of our communities knows that, right. They have that history and they're aware of it. Other people don't have that history but they can see through it and then there's the group of people who buy it. I think that's a very important role that a lot of people are playing. It was interesting. It's like leadership's not coming from above anywhere, which gives us the opportunity now to provide our own leadership. You know, for us, that means collective leadership and community leaders because it's clear that that's not happening at the

national level. It happens at the state level here and there. It's not consistent though; cities are also not consistent, right? I think it's important for people to say, look it's our health, it's our life, it's our community, we're gonna take care of it, whether you support us or not. I think we're moving in that direction and are forced to move in that direction and so hopefully, it will take root and it doesn't just become a short-term thing. If it takes root, people can start to think because how else could we be in charge of our community, to protect ourselves, and take care of ourselves?"

- Enrique Cardiel (He/Him)

Pico Villa is a Non-Binary Chicanx from the *Fronteras* (El Paso, Texas) going to graduate school in Chicanx Studies. The multiple identities that I hold were seeded in the borderlands but flourished once I moved to New Mexico through community support and the education I received at the University of New Mexico. Both El Paso and Albuquerque have allowed me to express my identity and political awareness through creative work. I believe in building solidarity and awareness for Queer and Trans communities by providing oral stories along with visual representation I source from the community.