



Project: Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences

Title: Interview with Eduardo Diaz - Transcript

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Interviewer: Chris Kretz (CK)

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Summary: Eduardo Diaz is the Interim Director for Residential Education and Community Standards at Stony Brook University. In this interview, he discusses his role overseeing graduate and upperclass housing areas on the main campus as well as the challenges faced in implementing the campus shutdown in spring 2020. He also describes what living on campus was like during the shutdown and the challenges of operating housing in fall 2020.

00:00:02

CK: Today is Monday, November 23, 2020. This is Chris Kretz for Stony Brook University Libraries interviewing Eduardo Diaz for the Documenting COVID 19: Stony Brook University Experiences project over Zencastr. Eduardo, first of all, thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

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ED: Thanks for having me.

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CK: Can you tell us your position at Stony Brook and how long you've been at the university?

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ED: Sure. Actually, I am the Interim Director for Residential Education and Community Standards. Next month I'll be completing five years here at the university

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CK: Great. Congratulations.

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ED: Thank you.

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CK: Can you give us just a general sense of what that position entails—what's your usual duties?

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ED: Sure. I oversee the upper class apartment area and the graduate housing area [which] includes families over in Chapin Apartments, Chávez [Hall], Tubman [Hall], West Apartments, and Schomburg Apartments. So I oversee all those professional staff members there that run the buildings and interact with the students and the RAs [Resident Assistants].

The other part of my job I also do is—I oversee the whole conduct system within housing. So I have an assistant director, who reports to me, and we manage the higher level housing conduct issues within housing.

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CK: And if you think back to the beginning of the spring 2020 semester, what was on your mind before everything else started to happen? What was your main issue?

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ED: Before COVID? I think it was the traditional spring issues our students have. They're getting ready for spring break; they're ready for that break to happen.

The weather's about to turn, so they're excited about that—especially here in New York. So that was kind of our standard trajectory: getting ready for commencement, getting ready for the end of the semester, and transition into summer.

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CK: When do you remember first hearing about COVID or first having it on your radar?

00:02:04

ED: I think I remember hearing about it when it hit the news. The first positive case, I think, was in Washington, I believe.

And that's when it sparked—it hit our shores. I was like, Oh, Okay. So it's in the United States.

That was the first I think I remember of it becoming—there was a positive case.

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CK: And had you dealt with that kind of infectious diseases, in terms of the type of work that you do with dorms and people?

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ED: Uniquely enough, I went on a program called Semester at Sea. Basically, we take a bunch of—about six hundred students on a ship, on a vessel, for a semester. And we traveled the world.

This was around the time when H1N1 was a big deal. And we had a positive case there on the ship. Working quarantine, securing—especially on a vessel, how do you protect the student body from getting contagion on that? So I had a little experience on a smaller scale. It's not a pandemic but dealing with H1N1 was a big one for sure, as we were traveling—especially to China.

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CK: And I'm sorry, that program was at Stony Brook?

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ED: No. The program is based out of—it's a nonprofit organization that manages the staff that runs and works the ship abroad. And at that time, the University of Virginia was the academic sponsor that supported the academic endeavors on the ship.

So I worked for the nonprofit company called Shipboard in Student Education, which is coined Semester at Sea.

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CK: As it became more of an actual crisis, what do you remember of the first conversations involving your area about COVID?

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ED: I remember getting invited to a university-wide Responses Committee. It involved a lot of—all the major offices and departments in the university and how we're going to do this if it were to become an emergency. We weren't there just yet. I remember at the time—if it was February, beginning of February, I think—we started activating the emergency responses team.

So that was put in play. We were still meeting in person. We were in a classroom in the SAC [Student Activities Center] and [I] remember all of us being in there and kind of talking about scenarios of what to do next if this became a pandemic.

That was the beginning of it, and I didn't think much of it. I was like, Well, you know, this is protocol. This is what we should be doing, especially with students still here—[discussing prospects] of what could be.

You know, in those conversations it was all about infrastructure and safety: wifi and if we had to go remote. All the scenarios that we had to go through to—if what we live in now was going to happen, we started to work those exercises out

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CK: What were you most concerned about at the beginning?

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DE: I think for me [it] was the shut down. If that was going to become a reality in our minds, how we were going to evacuate. Because usually at the peak of the semester we are about eleven thousand students. Shy of eleven thousand students live in our residence halls.

And what was it even going to look like to evacuate a whole campus in a short amount of time, so we wouldn't have a breakout here for ourselves. That was on my mind. We hadn't gone there yet, but I know we were discussing how we would activate that procedure to get people out safely without having an outbreak.

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CK: So when that became the plan itself, how did you go about implementing it—or what were the challenges you faced?

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DE: Yeah, that was tough. I think that because there was so much information out there, and working in a SUNY [State University of New York] system, we had to work with the state: [with] the governor's office, and the chancellor's office up in Albany, and then ourselves and figure out the moving pieces, right? None of us had ever been through something like this before.

So to figure out when to do it. Because at first, they were heading to spring break. We highly encouraged people to take their stuff in case we went fully online. Decision making at the time was everywhere because the information was changing so much, so rapidly.

I remember being on so many phone calls, and in-person meetings, and a little bit of Zoom. We wouldn't have had as much Zoom back then, but I think it just became intensifying. The data changed so much that decisions were holding—let's hold because, you know, it involves budgetary issues if we do this; if we don't do this, we can have an outbreak.

I think the big piece for us here at Stony Brook was: we're heading into spring [break] semester, which I think was the debate of, What do we do?

We wanted for them [the students] to go and take their stuff for “just in case.” We weren't actually closing at that time, especially even at the moment of spring break starting. We still hadn't made a decision. They were still in the middle spring break while we made a decision to fully close

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CK: What are some of your memories of telling the people that you deal with—the tenants or the occupants of your dorms—what the final decision was and the days that they had to leave?

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DE: We finally made a decision that we were going to go to full shut down.

It was hectic. It was chaotic. It was not very customer service. It was an emergency and at that point, the university decided to shut down the residence halls and everyone had to leave within three days.

It wasn't pretty. I think of the conversations, the emails. A lot of the responses back [were], I'm already gone; what do I do? I can't get back to campus.

Some didn't feel safe because [of] the way the virus was spreading and how the media was reporting on it. So I think that also hindered us a lot.

It was really fast. We put in place a mechanism because we knew since borders had closed, some couldn't get back to their home countries. Especially in my area. I have a heavy international population in the graduate level. Some of them had to stay to continue the experiments or research at the university that needs a human interaction for it to continue. If not, whatever is happening in there will die.

So we knew we were going to have exceptions to everyone moving out. We were never going to be at zero occupants on campus, as much as we wanted that.

We ended up probably with a thousand that stayed on campus after we shut down and sent everybody home. And the people that didn't—couldn't—come back after we gave our final deadline to come back, we ended up packing up their stuff and they figured [it] out. We worked

with FedEx to ship out that stuff to them wherever they wanted—either shipped out or stored for them if they planned to come back in the fall.

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CK: So was the goal to empty the rooms, basically?

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ED: Yes. Our goal was to be at zero occupancy. The goal behind it was really to reduce density because at that time the information said—especially campuses like us—the more people together, the higher the risk of the virus spreading.

You know, at that point testing wasn't rapid. It wasn't where we're at today. So our goal was to get people out as much as we could because we didn't want to have an outbreak here and have students sick. We just didn't have—the hospital was already getting patients in. I remember around that time and through the rest of that semester, helicopter after helicopter—because we have the helipad here at the hospital—coming back and forth. Out of my office window, I could see the helicopters going back and forth. Between that and the constant ambulance, I'm sure it was hectic.

That was our goal, to de-densify the campus. Once we did that, we started moving people. We spread people out even more because we had all the space. With those about shy of a thousand students, we pretty much wanted to give them their own bedrooms, just to remove density. Because that's what the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines were at that time. So we did that for the people that were here.

Because of the situation we were in, we didn't know, we worked with our partners in dining, and they were great. They let go of their dining [restrictions] because mostly students have to buy a meal plan to eat on campus. But at that time—when that activated—our dining folks decided to just eliminate that, and anyone with a Stony Brook ID can come eat. Because no one knew, with all the restrictions of going to stores and people being scared of eating food and all that kind of stuff.

Luckily, we had that partnership with them that fed our one thousand students that were here on campus without having a meal plan.

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CK: Who were you meeting with throughout this time? Who's the team that you were—

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ED: Still working with that committee, for sure. It was every week we were meeting and discussing scenarios and what the next steps were.

And then working with the environmental folks here on campus, our facilities team, to figure out what the next steps as far as hand sanitizers, PPE [Personal Protective Equipment], what that will look like for students - I mean for us that are still here.

Our dining folks for sure, just monitoring what people are eating. And with the students and staff because our live-in staff were still here. The professional staff live here; this is their home. They had nowhere to go so we were working with them and sharing as much information as we could.

Like I said, a lot of information changed—it felt like minute-by-minute at that time, working under those conditions. The information changed so much because one day we would have a meeting and give an update, and the next day we'd have to have another one because the information changed from yesterday.

So that was a little point of frustration, for sure, during that time where no one really had much answers. We really went day-by-day, minute-by-minute to figure out what are the next steps and the safety protocols to figure this out.

We had to work with the Army Corps of Engineers as they were coming to campus to set up the five tents we have here on our fields. And they're still here—[the tents] that they set up through the federal government, working with the state to set those up.

We house some nurses here in our residence halls that were empty—to support the hospital. Nurses that needed to come stay here because they couldn't go home because of their families or the conditions from their home. So they stayed here with us during that time as well, since we had the capacity to put them in our halls.

So a lot of key players to work with [at] that time. We needed to. We needed the information to know what the next steps were going to be as we evacuated the campus but also at the same time [to] figure out what are the next steps come for the fall.

We did cancel our conferences. We usually have summer conferences here. We have children's camps, we have adult conferences, and then just the regular conferences for the school year that happen during summer. We had none of that this summer.

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CK: What were some of the common questions you were getting from the students or the staff that you were housing?

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ED: Refund, for sure. Number one was their refund, and when was that coming.

Because before the decision was made to close—we didn't want to close because we knew that was going to happen. So the refunds was the number one question.

The next piece was, What's next? They were like, What's going to happen for the fall? We didn't have much stuff in place. We didn't know how we were going to do it, how we can do it safely—to create those plans to come back in the fall. So we had not much of answers.

The remote [learning] was big. The really fast shift for them—I think it was shocking for everyone to move remotely so quickly, even though the university—we had two weeks. They extended spring break by another week, so it was two weeks of spring break so the faculty can get their stuff online as quickly as possible and kind of train some of the faculty in that as well.

But also I think Zoom for the campus was huge to get that contract in place faster than I had ever seen something come into place so fast. Zoom really played a key role to keep us connected since we were not meeting in person. And then having phone calls with, you know, twenty, thirty, forty people sometimes; or fifty people sometimes, is a lot. In our division here alone, in student affairs, there's over almost close to two hundred of us and to get information like that on a phone call, in a conference call, would make no sense.

So Zoom did help a lot to navigate those issues and kind of get some sense of seeing people in person, even though we were in a bunch of boxes.

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CK: So what was your daily life like? You were obviously working on campus. Were you coming in every day or staying on campus?

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ED: I live on campus with my partner. So I get to live on campus with him. At the beginning, a lot of it was remote because like I said, no one knew, right? A lot of it was push remote, push remote.

If you can, stay home. A lot of it was, "Stay home, save a life. Wear a mask. Wash your hands." That whole mantra. So for the beginning of maybe April, May, I did work mostly at home.

But that was getting complicated since we both work here at the university.

Luckily for me, my office is kind of separate from being in a common, typical office with a lot of people in it. So my office is a three-person office, but we're sectioned off with our own—there's a middle entranceway and then two separate offices. So luckily, I could come in to work with my mask and stuff and precautions. So I got a chance to work from my office. I'll be honest, it's still

lonely because there's not much interaction here in my office; it's just me. But it is safe. I don't have to interact with people or use other people's stuff, where some other people don't have the door barrier to protect them from other people being in the area.

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CK: What did campus feel like during this time?

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ED: I think I felt it the most when May came around. because in May usually we have these huge celebrations as the semester's ending for the students in general but also the commencement feel on campus. The campus changes a little bit, right? They put up banners. You see "Congratulations Graduates." You see the students that are graduating walking around with their robes taking pictures, especially in front of the main entrance where the Stony Brook sign is.

And it really wasn't any of that. It was really—you just had this feeling of something's wrong when you walked on campus.

From my apartment to my office, it's about a ten-minute walk. And if I saw a person, it'd be like a shocker to see them. There was really nobody out and about during those times because of the whole shelter in place and the lockdown put in place. There was really no one. If I saw a car or a person, [it] was a shocker in those times.

A lot of animals were much more out, for sure. You see a lot more deer on campus because I'm sure they can sense that there were not many humans around anymore.

So a lot more deer present in the common areas, especially in the quad areas [and the] center areas. They definitely were just coming around like it was just normal for them to be around. So that was interesting to feel, but you just felt this sense of heaviness on campus for sure because no one was here.

And where usually in May, it's thriving and excitement as commencement's coming around the corner.

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CK: And what did you do to take care of your own health?

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ED: I've been for the past probably ten years, a big fitness fiend. So I loved going to the gym, and with the lockdown that went away.

So we invested in Peloton and luckily we got in right in time before Peloton became so popular. Look at what it is now, but back then we luckily invested in a Peloton bike and the Peloton app.

And that kind of saved myself and my fiancé's relationship for sure because I think it helped with us getting just some type of activity with our self home gym that we made in our second bedroom. [That] was helpful.

And then with the app. I really picked up meditation a lot more which I never have before the lockdown. Meditation did help just to center me because, as [with] many of us on the planet, we lost control of a rhythm we were used to. The whole piece of everybody saying, The normal that used to be. That loss is now gone because that is no longer going to come back in the world we live in.

It was tough. It was tough but I think with the physical fitness, doing a lot of walks—I learned a lot of the trails around this campus, for sure. It has a lot of trails within the wooded areas that you can follow, which are fun to get lost in. There's a lot [of trails] to walk on this [campus].

I did a lot of walking—a lot of walking and running when the weather was nice outside to kind of disconnect [from] what the world was.

We couldn't go anywhere; there's nowhere to go. Anywhere you went, there was a mask. So I got a chance to do some physical activity outside—of course by myself—to not wear the mask or even think about what's happening in the world.

Because the media—the news and your phone always beeping [and] doing something. And the media—even watching TV, you would see a commercial about COVID and “Wear a Mask, wash your hands, stay home, save a life.” That was a constant messaging, and after a while it got pretty intense.

And also getting to re-learn my fiancé. I think that that also helped us with our mental health. It's almost like re-dating yourself. I think that happened during the lockdown. I got to know him much better than I ever did because of the lockdown. Because we were always together now versus living—which is very different. Now we were always together.

It opened up a different avenue of us that we were not used to because now we were always together 24/7, right? You get up and go to work in our different spaces of the apartment, but we'd still be in the same space.

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CK: Was there something you thought would be a bigger issue that turned out not to be?

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ED: Say it again?

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CK: Was there something you thought would be a bigger issue or challenge that turned out not to be as important as you thought it was?

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ED: I think the plan for the outbreak was one here. Especially when we put in those tents. We were bracing for it because the governor, working with the Army Corp of Engineers, put in these tents on our campus. We were all just bracing for that surge to come through because if—I don't know if you've been to campus but driving by them—it's pretty much its own village. It's these five huge, massive, white tents. It has its own roadway. It has stop signs. It really looks like a little village in itself. And it's all gated

So that was a little bit intimidating, especially running by it or walking by it as they were constructing it. Because that thing went up so fast. I've never seen anything go up so fast in my life.

To see that there—I think that was a lot to brace for. Luckily, up to this point, we haven't used them. But now we're on wave two—we'll see how that goes.

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CK: And since we're still really in this what was it like, coming back to campus or that experience in the fall?

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ED: It was pretty weird. Normally the fall is also a point of excitement. We have the band, the president speaks, and Convocation. The first-years are running around; they're excited to meet people.

There was not many of that, right? A lot of in-person things that we do in a normal school year were off the table. The check-in process was scheduled. You had to have a negative PCR test before you could even check in to the residence halls.

It was very slow. There was not much pomp and circumstance as far as moving in. It was pretty much: go to this tent, let's make sure you have the right test that you took, and if you have a negative test, then you can get a key. Welcome to campus.

Everything's behind a mask and a lot of signage and a lot of rules that they're not used to. It's a lot of no's coming into campus: there were no guests—even guests within your own building

couldn't come over with each other. You have to wear a mask at all times. You know, wash your hands.

And I think that set a whole different tone for this semester because it was very restrictive. Gatherings like they're used to—their common kitchens are locked down. There's a lot of limitations as far as gathering in the lounges. The whole typical college experience that we're all used to went out the window.

These first-years really had no [idea]—they have nothing to compare it to. Our returners are the ones that suffered the most, I think, because they're used to that. Being together in the dining hall—even going to the dining hall, it's one person per table. It's no longer the group eating, and loudness, and hanging out, and just how dining halls are a social space to be.

I think a lot of the social interactions went away quickly, coming into fall. Everything's either, We'll have a meeting via Zoom—the customer service, that face-to-face, was very limited interacting because we didn't want to create transmission or even have that.

You can't really talk to people at six feet apart. It's more like yelling.

It took away what the collegiate experience is, to live in a residence hall. And to build in that community has been pretty—it still is pretty tough to build a community as we're interacting with Zoom or just one-to-one because you can't have a group of people to hang out or have pizza night or donuts or massive sharing that college students are used to.

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CK: Is there anything that you feel has helped that in the fall, helped create that kind of community? Anything you've tried?

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ED: We've done smaller things to work through that. They're just on a smaller scale. So we try to have that. You know, college students love food, so it's all individually wrapped. It's all stuff that we get through the store [so] that there's no chance of transmission or, you know, especially the touching of stuff. So it's limited. They do enjoy those little interactions we can do with them.

We use Zoom quite a bit. But as the semester progressed and all of us are pretty Zoom fatigued, I know I can't - I wish for the day that we can actually either be in person or someone picks up the phone. Even this [interview] is refreshing, that I'm not looking at a camera to do [it].

We've had some activities outside. Socially distant, set up in advance when the weather was nicer, where they can interact. Socially distant with masks on. And they enjoyed it. It's smaller

scale. We used to have scavenger hunts for them and the whole class would be part of it. But it's just smaller and more controlled for their safety.

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CK: Looking back, is there anything else you would like people to know about this time and what you experienced during it?

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ED: I think something great that we did here is the testing. I think that we were ahead of a lot of our SUNY schools where we are now at the point—at the beginning of this, we started doing every two weeks testing. Now we're testing every week. And I think, between the testing and the students, [they] really bought into our rules and regulations and community. This is a community effort to keep it safe. We made it [to] Thanksgiving. We're heading into Thanksgiving now and we've fully gone to remote as of last Friday but the students made it.

We—well, I will say I—I was kind of skeptical. I didn't think we were going to make it past Halloween just because Halloween is such a big social time for anybody but more for college students, and I didn't think we were going to make it. I thought we were going to have an outbreak and send everybody home, but we made it. We made it. The halls are still open.

The students are welcome to stay. It'll become much more stricter staying for the end of the semester and winter break because it's fully online. We don't want to put our guard down, so they're moving to weekly testing. That'll be interesting to see how that's going to go for them.

You know testing is—for these students, it has become part of their lives. Just like the mask for us. It's just the normal thing to do. You know, leave the house with the mask, your keys, your wallet, your ID, your phone. Now the mask is part of it. And I think that's how it's become the normal for them now. It's all over campus now. It is what we do.

I walk around campus, even if I'm alone walking our dog, I have a mask on. It's just become part of the normal. And I think when people walk around with no mask on, they are quick to put the mask right back on. So it's interesting how the culture has changed for sure.

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CK: And just since you mentioned it, how did your dog handle the quarantine or this time?

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ED: I think he loves it. But I think at the same time he thinks, Are you all ever leaving?

I think there was a time where he would look at us and was like, You all are still here.

When we were going to work—both of us to our offices full time—he'd sleep most of the day. But now that we're always there, it's a constant, Let's go for walks. I think he's more exhausted because we take him for so many walks that he's like, God, we're walking a lot more than ever. So I think he's probably fatigued of all the walking. He's getting a lot of exercise during this time, for sure.

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CK: Eduardo, we want to thank you again for adding your memories to this project and we appreciate your time.

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ED: Thank you so much.

[end of interview]