

Access

Oral History Interview with Rebecca Toledo

Conducted by Bon Malana on August 4, 2021

Bon Malana [00:00:01] Okay. So, today is August 4th, 2021. My name is Bon Malana. I am interviewing Rebecca in-person. This interview is being conducted as part of a project organized by the National Humanities Center in conjunction with the University of Washington. And our goal is to collect, preserve, and share the stories and experiences of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. And to start, tell me a little about yourself and your professional career.

Rebecca Toledo [00:00:38] My name is Rebecca, and I am a licensed practical nurse. At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, I worked in a long-term care facility as a nurse on the floor, and currently I work as a home health nurse and where I go into people's homes and take care of them.

Bon Malana [00:01:01] Okay. And what motivated you to pursue your profession?

Rebecca Toledo [00:01:06] My grandma was a nurse. My mom was a nurse. My uncle's a doctor. My cousin's a doctor. So, it's kind of in the family.

Bon Malana [00:01:14] All right. And I know that you held or you have two different positions during the time of the pandemic. For both of those positions, well, I guess for one of them, you wouldn't be- you wouldn't know but what was the typical day of work like for you pre-pandemic? And then if you can compare, what's- what your work life look like during the pandemic.

Rebecca Toledo [00:01:41] Yeah so, you know, normally I would be on the floor working, passing medications, helping with hands-on care as well at my place of work, the biggest change when COVID started is the workload increased for one, and part of that was all the PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] we had to don and change from patient-to-patient each time we went in the room. And then we also had to hire at the long-term care facility. We had to hire nurses to come in to help. And we had a few nurses and other personnel that-that quit when COVID struck.

Bon Malana [00:02:41] Okay. And I know you said that the workload increased. Were there any new responsibilities that you had to take on?

Rebecca Toledo [00:02:56] Yeah, I mean, we had the thing that comes to mind is we had to check vital signs on all our patients every shift. That added to the workload, because normally we would only do that in a long-term care facility for someone who was- had a change in condition. So, we were doing that on all our patients every 8 hours and just, I mean, we had some very sick, ill patients and they required more care.

Bon Malana [00:03:33] And what was that process like for you personally? You know, having to deal with that extra work through-through the pandemic.

Rebecca Toledo [00:03:44] Stressful, a lot more stressful. I'd come home and I'd just be, you know, depleted. More so than usual. I thought for sure I was going to get COVID after my first client because we weren't- we were somewhat prepared, but-but not- we figured we're in a small facility, we're not going to get hit. But

unfortunately, we did early. And I remember my first patient, it was March 23rd. And so, yeah- I lost my train of thought.

Bon Malana [00:04:28] It's okay. You can take- you can take your time. So, the question was, what was the process like for you, like, personally? I know you talked about stress, of course.

Rebecca Toledo [00:04:40] Right- right. And fear, I mean, we were afraid for ourselves, our families and the other residents. And, yeah, I worked with a lot of dementia patients. So, trying to have, you know, keep them isolated from, you know, apart from the other residents was a challenge and that was stressful, yeah.

Bon Malana [00:05:16] And you were talking about in the workplace, you guys were a small facility and you didn't expect it for you to hit. Did you feel that your work environment was- was prepared and during that time, did you feel like you were adequately supported as a worker?

Rebecca Toledo [00:05:44] I feel like we were supported, but yet the PPE, personal protective equipment, was a challenge in the beginning, I think, as it was for everybody in the nation. So that was a challenge. And, you know, at first we just were surgical masks and no eye shields and no n95s. And that- that changed pretty quickly. We, we were able to get all those supplies, but- and supported by other members of the- the facility. Yeah, I think we were supported. I think it was a learning process. Nobody really knew how to handle it at first, in the very beginning, yeah.

Bon Malana [00:06:39] And how did the community that you were in, how did they react to the pandemic?

Rebecca Toledo [00:06:46] The community? Oh, that's an interesting question. Like, how did the community react? Oh, all I could think of was everybody was in shock. And I think the community overall was very supportive of healthcare workers in general. Yeah, but I initially everybody was just in shock I think. Didn't know what to do, what to think. And but I think the community was supportive.

Bon Malana [00:07:29] And I know one thing that we see nationwide is there's some skepticism about the pandemic, whether if it's, you know, COVID efficacy of masks or even the vaccines. Have you noticed if this had any impact on the community itself or have any impact on the work that you did?

Rebecca Toledo [00:07:57] I don't- I don't feel like it really had any impact on the work I did. The- the COVID pandemic, I think, overall, there is some, negativity about, you know, wearing masks and getting vaccines. And I mean, we're inundated with that on the news. Plus, we have those people around here as well. At the facility not, you know, there were a few. But when the vaccine came around, like I'd say, 95% of the residents got their vaccines. But as far as people in the- the workers in the facility, no, I don't feel like anybody was opposed to, you know, COVID precautions and masks and vaccines. There were a few people. Yeah, but overall, I think most people were working in the health profession or as far as the community, we have our share of anti-vaxxers and- and it bothers me quite a bit. And now that

the Delta virus is here, I'm even more concerned. And in the beginning, yeah, we didn't know, you know, who, who was going to die and who wasn't that got it. My husband got it. He didn't die so that was good. And we both got the vaccines as soon as we could, you know.

Bon Malana [00:09:49] And kind of switching topics now during the pandemic, did you notice, if any at all, did that dynamic change with how you interacted with the patients?

Rebecca Toledo [00:10:06] From how did the COVID- how did COVID impact my interaction with patients? Well, I mean, you had to wear a mask and goggles and suits, so it's hard to project warmth, you know, through all that, those layers. And, I think they felt a little more isolated, as far as my relationship with, I worked there, I worked in the facility for quite a while, so I knew everybody pretty well because it's long-term care. And, yeah, some of them became very sick and, and their thought processes were different. So yeah, I mean, that changes the dynamic between you and them. But yeah, I- I don't know that it really, other than you felt more distance from your patients with all the gear you had to wear. And yeah, it's like wearing an astronaut suit.

Bon Malana [00:11:16] Did you notice any like a trend with overall of how it impacted the patient themselves? I know one thing that you you talked about, which I've noticed with-with previous interviews as well, is that feeling of isolation. And one thing that's popped up on the news is, you know, families can't visit their families that are in, you know, nursing homes or things like that.

Rebecca Toledo [00:11:46] Right, yes. Yeah. It impacted the residents quite a bit because they couldn't see their families. They could through the window at one point. But yeah, I think that isolation made a big impact on their lives, their quality of life. Definitely. My mom was in a this is just personal, but my mom was in a long-term care facility in Indiana. And we couldn't see her. And that was her last year alive. So, I had a personal, yeah, I felt that as far as my clients, you know, their separation from their family, my separation from my mother, I could empathize.

Bon Malana [00:12:41] And as a- as a worker at the- at that facility, did you feel like you had a responsibility to somewhat, you know, give some extra care to them because of that extra isolation?

Rebecca Toledo [00:12:57] Oh, yeah, yeah. We- the residents couldn't see their family, so we basically were their family. You know, their primary social socialization was with us. And of course, you try to give them more. There again, we had some barriers because you're not supposed to hug them anymore because of COVID and all that. But yeah, but there again, social activities, activity department was- was also cut back because you couldn't have group activities for a while. And when you did, they had to, you know, sit quite a ways apart. So, we did the best we could and, yeah.

Bon Malana [00:13:52] And how did, how did the residents, you know, react to not having that time with-with them, like with each other or even their families or I guess specifically with-with that social aspect not being there anymore?

Rebecca Toledo [00:14:08] Well, we had some patients that, didn't understand, of course, because they have dementia or whatever, they didn't really understand. And you couldn't- they wouldn't wear a mask. They didn't understand that. Most patients, I think, I mean, people are strong and I think they- they got through it. They, you know, they adjusted. It wasn't ideal, but they adjusted and- and most of the people got through it. Most of the patients got through it because they're tough.

Bon Malana [00:14:52] And I know that you said that, you know, you've known some of their residents for a really long time. Do you have anything in mind, any special moments that you shared with them, with- with-with the residents, anything that stuck out to you that's maybe, you know, really important so, really meaningful to you.

Rebecca Toledo [00:15:15] Well, there's so many meaningful moments with my residents, and I can't really, I don't really know that it's just during the COVID pandemic that I can remember any things super special at that time, because there are a lot of special moments all the time. But, I'm trying to think of one. Yeah, I had a patient who got COVID and he got through it. He was, he's 100 years old and strong guy, but he- he couldn't, he got through the disease itself or the virus itself, but then couldn't, couldn't get back his strength. So, as a result of having COVID, he passed away. But the- the day or two before he passed away, I took him outside; was a nice day, sunny; took him outside in the sun and he got to enjoy being outside. And- and that was really precious to me. And I hope to him I think he appreciated it because that was one of the few times he got to be outside after he got sick so.

Bon Malana [00:16:37] Thank you for sharing that.

Rebecca Toledo [00:16:39] Yeah.

Bon Malana [00:16:40] So I can imagine, you know, and that could be one of the highlights, as you could say, during- of the pandemic. Were there any other events to you that stood out? That could be a highlight. And in contrast, like for you, what were like the lowlights?

Rebecca Toledo [00:16:59] Oh, let's see. What else? Trying to think of other people. So, another resident I had was super sick with COVID, and she had a lot of behavioral problems. It was really hard to- hard to control. But you still give- you still give the best care you can. And it was even though it was really difficult, she got through that and she got better and she's doing really well. And now we have a really good friendship, actually. They don't- she's not there anymore and I'm not there anymore so we are friends. So, it was good to see that she got through the she was already sick and then she got COVID and then she made it through that. And now, yeah, she's living a good life, so. And then some bad experiences during COVID was the fear I saw in people's eyes and not so much the residents because well, yeah, I just didn't see it as much in the residents. But in the caregivers I saw fear. And that was and I saw people walk off the job and that was a really low point. That was hard

to take. And then of course, we had a, we, most of our residents made it through the sickness itself. But after the sickness, they- they were either falling a lot or couldn't get their strength back. So, in a way, they- they passed as a result of COVID and that was hard.

Bon Malana [00:18:55] And I know that you talked about some of the caregivers, you know, making that choice of-of-of leaving their position. Can you expand more on that? You know, what was- what was it like, why are they, like, why they left if you knew the reasons why.

Rebecca Toledo [00:19:14] Yeah, some of the reasons why my coworkers decided not to stay on the job and left. They had some- had some good reasons. I mean, one nurse was pregnant and we didn't know at the beginning what- what it would do to a, you know, a fetus. Another nurse had an elderly mother staying with them. Others didn't, you know, like a housekeeper left. And she was, she's probably in her seventies, so she was probably worried about herself because we knew it impacted the older population more. So those were some of the reasons why people left when they found out there was COVID in the building.

Bon Malana [00:20:10] Just choosing my next question.

Rebecca Toledo [00:20:12] Yeah, yeah. No worries. Such a serious subject.

Bon Malana [00:20:17] It is- it is. Yeah, but let's see? Yeah. Okay. Oh. At any point in the pandemic, did you feel, like, completely overwhelmed at any point?

Rebecca Toledo [00:20:33] Yeah, in the beginning, when the pandemic hit our facility. Oh, yeah. I felt very overwhelmed. We had an outbreak of thirteen residents and then seven workers, I believe it was. And I thought for sure I was going to get it because one of the first residents to get it in the facility I had to draw blood and they were coughing, right, you know, in my face. And I was only a short distance away. So I- I didn't, I never did get it. At that point, I haven't gotten it yet but yeah, I was- I was afraid. Yeah and I was afraid of my- bring it home to my husband. I might give it to other patients. Yeah, it was- there was a lot of fear involved at that point.

Bon Malana [00:21:44] And what was, like, the- what was the atmosphere like at work during that time?

Rebecca Toledo [00:21:49] Panic. Well, it was, there was an another nurse. we were pretty sure that this resident had gotten it, but I think a lot of people were in denial about it. Even the doctor, you know, doing all these other tests, but not the COVID tests. And so, I think people didn't want to believe that it was possible. And so, there was some denial there, but panic also. And yeah, chaos. So, a little bit chaotic trying to put safety measures in place. More safety measures than. Yeah.

Bon Malana [00:22:42] And a follow up question to that was how did you, how did you get through it? You know, what, what motivated you to keep going?

Rebecca Toledo [00:22:51] Yeah, it's a good question. I felt like it was my duty. It's like you're a nurse. You-you kind of, you know that you're going to encounter diseases and viruses, and- and that's part of your job. Just like a soldier going to war, you know, your life is going to be at risk sometimes. And- and you have-you're kind of tough. You have to be tough as a doctor or nurse. You know, there's some, there's- there's some kind of strength there. And so, you- yeah- you take it day-by-day and you might want to stop and quit or whatever, but you don't because it's your job and you have and you feel like you have a duty, and you want to, and you want to help people. I mean, that's- yeah.

Bon Malana [00:23:51] Yeah. And a little bit different topic now. What do you think was done well at your workplace.

Rebecca Toledo [00:24:03] What was done well, at my workplace was we did start wearing surgical masks early on. They were limiting visitors already. We- there was a doctor and a physician's assistant that were actually the ones that brought it in because they had worked at another facility that had to break out before they knew they had a breakout. And so, they came in and- but yeah, they limited visitors pretty early on and mask wearing. So I felt like we were, they were a little bit better than some other places. But kind of slow to get going on full PPE in the beginning.

Bon Malana [00:24:52] Yeah. And in contrast to that, what do you think could have been improved and you might have already answered it.

Rebecca Toledo [00:24:57] Yeah.

Bon Malana [00:24:58] With that slogan.

Rebecca Toledo [00:25:01] Right, well, I mean, hindsight is always, you know, you know everything in hindsight. I think they did the best they could with the- the knowledge that we had and the resources that were available even.

Bon Malana [00:25:17] One thing that I did note is you said, you started to limit visitations early on.

Rebecca Toledo [00:25:30] Right.

Bon Malana [00:25:31] And, you know, for some people, that's one thing that they- that they didn't want to do because, you know, they wanted to see their friends or parents, whoever it may be. Did you face any criticism at all as a healthcare worker?

Rebecca Toledo [00:25:50] No, I didn't. I didn't- I didn't face any criticism because I was a healthcare worker. No, I didn't encounter that at all. Now, the higher ups might have-might have gotten some guff from family members, but I don't know, yeah.

Bon Malana [00:26:15] That's all right. And again, switching to a different topic, the you talked about, you know, the lowest lows for you. What was the turning point of the pandemic? You know, was there something specific that- that made you think it's going to be okay from this point?

Rebecca Toledo [00:26:36] Yeah, after the initial outbreak at the facility and we only really lost one patient, in the middle of having the virus anyways, and then you saw people getting better. And we never, they never really had a lot of hospitalizations here, even at PeaceHealth. And so, we began to see people that were surviving or quite a few people were surviving. And so, and then you knew a lot of people that had it that some people didn't get very many symptoms. Some people were fairly sick but still got, you know, didn't have to go to the hospital or anything. And so, we knew more about it and I'm trying to think of the real turning point, but I think the real turning point was after our initial outbreak and we saw that people actually could survive it and actually get better. Not everybody, but most people got better. Then it's like, okay, this might not kill us. So, you know, I think we can. We can get through this, yeah.

Bon Malana [00:28:00] And has the pandemic have any effect at all on your- your professional philosophy? So, maybe like how you carry your job specifically, has that changed in any way?

Rebecca Toledo [00:28:17] Could you be more specific?

Bon Malana [00:28:21] I guess like- like how you perceive things through your work?

Rebecca Toledo [00:28:25] During my work has it changed? I- I don't know. The thing that comes to mind were how it's changed my work is I'm a little more cautious about wearing a mask. And if someone has cold symptoms, I'm more cautious, and more careful about sanitizing my hands and just, you know, overall cleanliness. And, you know, I do a lot of sanitizing and cleaning and hygiene is a big thing that has changed, I guess, cause I wasn't so obsessive about sanitizing my hands all the time, and now I am obsessive.

Bon Malana [00:29:26] So, and as we continue to deal with COVID now, do you have any particular hopes or worries about it in the future?

Rebecca Toledo [00:29:39] Yeah, tons and tons of hopes and worries about COVID. I'm hoping more people get vaccinated so we can, you know, get rid of it. We don't have more mutations that are bigger and better than this current Delta variant. I'm really concerned about this. I, because I've been exposed numerous times to COVID: my husband had it, my sister had it, we think my mom had it and that's why she died but we're not sure. And then, so I- I mean, I never got it, but I feel like with the Delta variant, it's like, they say 1,000% more contagious. I feel like I could easily get it, although I am vaccinated, so I don't feel like I would get really sick. I still don't want it though, and I know if I get the Delta variant I can give it to you or somebody else, you're probably vaccinated as well, but-but then we could give it to someone who's not vaccinated. And a lot of people think, well, they chose not to get vaccinated. I still don't want to give it to them, but yeah-yeah, there might be more to add to that but I don't know.

Bon Malana [00:31:13] And one thing that is, you know, talked about a lot and I noticed that you mentioned before is, you know, some of the frustrations you expressed for the people who, you know, who are anti-vaxxers.

Rebecca Toledo [00:31:27] Right.

Bon Malana [00:31:27] Maybe who don't you know, they don't follow CDC [Center for Disease Control and Prevention] recommendations, you know, if you could have like a conversation with them, like, you know, what- what would you say?

Rebecca Toledo [00:31:41] Oh, I-if I had a conversation with a anti-vaxxer or I don't know, I would just say get the damn vaccine, you know. And I- I watch a lot of news, so I'm not totally unbiased. But there was, I just watched the news and there was a guy who's they want to ventilate and he's he hadn't got the vaccine and now he's really, really sick and he's telling people to get the vaccine. I think that's the strongest advocate for getting your vaccine that there possibly could be. I don't think I'm going to change anybody's mind. I could just witness to them about how it impacted my life with my mom and my husband. But more than that, I don't-I don't know how I could really influence someone to get a vaccine because it's so polarized. I think it's very- it's been made very political. And I think in any other- under any other day and age, under any other administration, it would have been so politicized. And like with the Ebola virus we had, like, one person get Ebola in America. And I feel like, yeah, I just feel this didn't happen- it didn't have to happen this way. I feel like we could have shut it down a lot quicker if we would've had a different if we would have had different leadership and that's political.

Bon Malana [00:33:22] Looking back at the past 18-months, what have you learned from your experiences? Was there like any meaningful lessons to you?

Rebecca Toledo [00:33:36] Any meaningful lessons? Life lessons from COVID? Oh, yeah, the world is an interesting place. Life is interesting. I think, yeah, my thinking is very existential, but it's too complicated.

Bon Malana [00:34:01] You can share if you want.

Rebecca Toledo [00:34:03] It's just, I think, this- this is the wave of the future in a way. I think we're going to be getting more and more viruses coming around with everything. I don't know. There's, you know, global warming. There's too many people already here. And COVID, I- I think that, yeah what do we learn? We learn that life is fragile, and we have to think about other people, not just ourselves, you know? Get the vaccine, I think, for other people, you know?

Bon Malana [00:34:51] And, you know, going-going through the pandemic, you know, people tend to focus on the-the bad cases; the what went wrong. For you, what- what was good? What was something good that came out of the pandemic?

Rebecca Toledo [00:35:07] My husband survived. I was in quarantine a couple of times, so I got to spend more time with my sister and her husband, and that was kind of nice. We were in quarantine together and that was a special time because you

don't- a lot of times you don't get that downtime. You're working. You have to work, work, work. And so, that was good. You know, being in quarantine was kind of a blessing in a way, because I got to spend more time with my family. My sister and her husband have been working from home for over a year. They have the luxury of doing that. And so, they've, they've adjusted well and yeah-yeah. it's kind of sad, though, that we don't get to, to be as social as we used to be without the masks and all that. But yeah, good things, the good things that come from COVID, I mean, I don't know, just the things that I said my husband survived and we, you, it makes you appreciate the things you have, of course, as all adverse events in your life do.

Bon Malana [00:36:40] Okay, and was there any topic that I didn't ask about that-that you wanted to share something about?

Rebecca Toledo [00:36:53] I think I shared most everything; we talked about my mom. Yeah, I can't think of anything right now.

Bon Malana [00:37:06] Okay. Yeah. Or do you think should I asked- was there a question that I should ask that I didn't? Guess that would be a different way to put it.

Rebecca Toledo [00:37:18] Yeah, Oh, well, I guess I didn't talk much about, you know, doing home healthcare and how the only thing I have to add, you know, doing home healthcare, like, with- I've ran into one person that did have COVID. When we went into the house, he was really sick and- and we put him on precautions. And then he did have COVID. He was in the hospital. And then I had a resident or client last week that had cold symptoms. And I was concerned about, you know, being exposed to COVID and then going to see other resident clients and maybe passing it on to them, yeah.

Bon Malana [00:38:11] Okay. Well, I think that wraps up our interview. I just want to say thank you.

Rebecca Toledo [00:38:16] Yeah, you're welcome.

Bon Malana [00:38:16] Like how people I think people now really appreciate the free time that they have. So, I want to say thank you for taking your time to do this interview with me.

Rebecca Toledo [00:38:27] You're welcome. No problem. You know, you get-you get in your mind how it's going to flow, kind of, you have this thinking and it was a lot worse. It was it was heavier than I thought it would be. Yeah. I thought-I thought, you know, you happy-go-lucky; easy. But it was a little heavier than I thought it would be talking about the past year and how it affected everybody.

Bon Malana [00:38:58] We actually talked about this during to- prepare for this project. We were we- we had one question was like we- we had hoped that this interview would be somehow therapeutically for the people who are being interviewed. You know, maybe we were hoping that the questions we asked them and even just the whole process of reviewing, you know, it gives them the time to maybe reflect on things that-that they hadn't had the chance to think about.

Rebecca Toledo [00:39:30] Yeah, or didn't want to think.

Bon Malana [00:39:31] Or didn't want to think about, that could be it.

Rebecca Toledo [00:39:35] Yeah, just get it out.

Bon Malana [00:39:36] Yeah. So you think that, you know, it was this like a, like a nerve wracking interview for you?

Rebecca Toledo [00:39:45] I mean, it was- I wouldn't say nerve wracking, but it was more a little more intense than I expected it to be. Yeah. I thought, you know, I don't know. I didn't, you know, I got through that hard time when, you know, we had to wear the hazmat suits and all that. That was- it was really tough. But then we got through it and things were okay. But I thought, I don't know, I guess I just didn't think it was as impactful as maybe less so. But it's good. That's good. It's good to get that out and talk about it and stuff.

Bon Malana [00:40:33] Well, I'm yeah, I'm happy that, you know, you think that, you know, this was a good interview. Hopefully it-it had some benefits for yourself, right?

Rebecca Toledo [00:40:46] Right. Yeah. Thank you.

Bon Malana [00:40:48] Thank you.

Rebecca Toledo [00:40:48] Again, thanks.