



## A Better Life?

### Making “A Better Life?”: A Conversation on Centering Underrepresented Voices in Journalism

Veteran editor and reporter Carolina González moderates a conversation with the Feet in 2 Worlds team on how and why we pursue immigrant stories in our podcast series, “A Better Life?”

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**Carolina González:** What happens when you bring a group of immigrant journalists together in a pandemic to report on the American Dream?

**Mia Warren:** As kids of immigrants, I think we kind of do have a lot of those internalized biases about the American Dream being real or not. So I thought it would be good to interview my mom, which was really difficult. But I guess what I learned most about the whole process is kind of being okay with not feeling great about the story for a while. You know, I think it took me until now, that I have a little bit of distance, to kind of make peace with the whole thing.

**Carolina:** I’m Carolina González, and this is “Making ‘A Better Life?’” a podcast from Feet in 2 Worlds. Last spring, as the coronavirus pandemic swept across the U.S., Feet in 2 Worlds assembled a group of journalists to investigate how COVID-19 had changed immigrants’ lives and challenged their ideas about the promise of America.

The result was a 10-part podcast series called A Better Life? It included personal stories, deep dives into people’s lives, a road trip, and surprising moments of hope and optimism. Half of the series was conversations with immigrant elders who talked about the challenges they have faced and advice that they have for the rest of us living with the pandemic.

The team of reporters and editors who made the series, as well as marketing and outreach team, was made up almost entirely of immigrants, the children of immigrants and people of color. It’s still uncommon for people from these backgrounds to be in charge of a news organization. So what happens when you center people from underrepresented communities in a project to tell stories from those communities?

Today, you’re going to hear from the members of the production team — what they learned, and how other news organizations can benefit from their experience. This conversation was recorded before a live audience on Zoom on December 3, 2020.

Let’s meet the panelists.

First, Zahir Janmohammed, the host of the podcast series. He is a Zell Writing Fellow at the University of Michigan and was one of the creators of the Racist Sandwich podcast, which was always one of my favorites, by the way.

Mia Warren is the executive producer and an editing fellow for Feet in 2 Worlds.

Jocelyn Gonzales is the series' senior producer and engineer and my sister from a different set of parents. She is the Director of PRX productions and the former executive producer of the Peabody Award-winning show Studio 360.

Next, Maritza Liseth Félix is a reporter and an editing fellow for Feet in 2 Worlds. This year, with Feet in 2 Worlds' help, Maritza created Conecta Arizona, a new service that brings information about Covid-19 to Spanish-speaking audiences in Arizona and Sonora, Mexico.

Next is John Rudolph, Feet in 2 Worlds' executive producer and founder. He was the executive editor of "A Better Life?"

So let's start off with how the team decided to make the series "A Better Life?"

This year's taken one unpredictable turn after another. And it's the same with the stories that "A Better Life?" tells. They started in some very unexpected places, like that question mark that's at the end of the series title.

One example that we can listen to is a clip from Mia Warren's story. It aired at the beginning of the series in August, but the story starts right when the pandemic hit home.

**Clip:** Mia: In March, my mom started talking about going back to Korea. She could get treated for her illness. She was *done* with the American healthcare system.

Heeja: It's despicable. It's the efficiency and the way sick people, especially elders, are handled. No matter how much you assert that you're hurting like hell, the help comes so slow and neglected. I had to yell many, many times to see a doctor. I mean, that's...it's just...unmerciful.

Mia: Her thought was simple. *If I go back to the country I left more than four decades ago, the country of my birth, I'll get better medical care.*

**Carolina:** So, Mia, let's start with you. So can you tell us a little bit about your feelings — all the feelings that came up for you — telling a story that's so close to you and some of the maybe ethical concerns about your position vis-à-vis your subject and your story.

**Mia:** First of all, just about the podcast series and sort of what made us decide to pursue this...a lot of us were kind of having conversations at the beginning of the pandemic about, like, WhatsApp messages that we were getting from our friends in different countries and a lot of folks that were saying, "Hey, how are you doing in the U.S.? It's really bad over there." And we kind of all shared this in our team meetings and made us realize that, Oh, okay.

So, a lot of us as the kids of immigrants, you know, kind of have this internalized notion that, like, we're in the right place. We're here to build a better life. That's what our parents did. That's why they came here. And it was kind of weird to be receiving all of these WhatsApp messages. When things got really bad in New York City, where I live in March and April, that's when I was getting a lot of these messages. So we decided to sort of focus on the immigrant experience in the United States and really examining that question of a better life, to hear from immigrants who had come here in order to build a better life and to see if Covid and the pandemic had changed their idea of a better life in any way. So that was kind of the motivation behind it.

And I realized kind of early on that my mom's story was a really good example of this. Um, she's a Korean immigrant and she's actually been in the country for more than 40 years at this point, more than double the time that she spent in Korea as a young woman. Actually, before the pandemic even hit the U.S., she was experiencing health problems, and I was very surprised to hear this in conversations with her, but she told me, "You know, I'm kind of done with this country. I want to go back to Korea."

And so that, kind of coupled with the WhatsApp texts that we were getting from our friends in other countries, made me really kind of examine my own biases about thinking that, you know, the American Dream is really real, which I think we question ourselves about all the time. But again, as kids of immigrants, I think we kind of do have a lot of those internalized biases about the American Dream being real or not. So I thought it would be good to interview my mom, which was really difficult. But I think what I learned about it was sort of allowing for a lot of time and space, you know, make sure that that vulnerability could really come across in her story. I guess what I learned most about the whole process is just kind of being okay with not feeling great about the story for a while.

You know, I think it took me until now, that I have a little bit of distance, to kind of make peace with the whole thing. But I think that that is sometimes what happens when you work on these really tough personal stories.

**Carolina:** So I do you think that, you know, having such a close relationship to your subject made your reporting and editing process different from when you do another kind of story? I mean, how do you override Mom, you know?

**Mia:** You know, I did kind of have to keep my mom at bay a little bit. She knew that I was doing this for a podcast, but I didn't offer that much information about it. And I think that honestly that helped the process a little bit.

And then also, I think, just, like, relying on...on my editors and my team here and our host, Zahir, to be able to tell me that what I was working on was worthy of this podcast, because it's really hard when you're so close to the subjects. You really don't know if the person is a good storyteller. It's just your mom. That was really important in the process to just really trust my team because especially in the scripting process, um, I couldn't really make head or tail of, like, the content and the story that I was trying to tell for quite a while. So going back to this idea of, like, time and space with these really personal stories, we did a lot of edits on the story. We did a lot of table reads, um, and spent a lot of time and probably a lot more than I would on any other story where I would just jump in

and start cutting tape and getting my hands dirty. So...and I think with this whole season, these are stories that we were kind of pursuing to, I think, in a way, like, start a healing process throughout this — this pandemic year and to try to make sense of what was happening. You know, by putting words down on a page, by producing this podcast. For me, it was kind of a healing process. And that doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to feel good to heal. It's going to feel kind of bad. [Laughs.] And sort of, you know, making sure that you're okay with that and trusting that the, the story's going to kind of be shaped as you go through this difficult process.

**Carolina:** Yeah, so I wanted to follow up with Zahir and with Maritza. Mia is talking about healing and you guys are, you know, doing this entire production in the middle of a pandemic. So trying to go through a difficult healing process in some way or whatever the process is...that you, these very various processes that you all went through. What were some of your biggest anxieties about reporting on immigrants of color and Covid-19, Maritza?

**Maritza L. Félix:** Hi, buenas tardes a todos, how are you? I'm really happy to be here.

It was challenging because here in Arizona, where I live, I live in Phoenix. Well, we have the Covid-19 situation. And then we have the border restrictions in place since the pandemic started and then there is so many undocumented people who was afraid of living in the shadows, but especially during these tough times and sometimes it was hard, because I'm an immigrant journalist as well. So I have felt part of their pain of what they were, like, uncertainty that they were living. And it was so easy to relate to them, that it was, like, I had to remind myself to be impartial, to be balanced, to be always trying to look for other voices for the stories that we were working on.

This is my first podcast ever, so it was a huge different dynamic. So I didn't know anything about microphones, apps, or anything. And Mia and John and Zahir were so helpful with it. So it was, like, we were trying to do everything remote. I was hiding in the closet. I have twins. So I had to hide in the closet from my kids, locked myself out, trying to, like, make the best of what I had at home when we were recording this, because we did two episodes from Arizona. And it was a very good experience because sometimes we listen to these stories and somebody else is telling them without this personal touch, without the magic of connecting actually with people without listening and understanding what their situation is.

And I think “A Better Life?” gave us a bigger view about the American Dream. That is not the same one for everybody. That not everybody wants to have, like, a big car with two blond kids, a dog running around and a big pickup truck outside of their houses. For Rosa, for example, it was just simply to be able to afford to go to Walmart and buy toys for the grandkids. Or stay here and without fearing to be killed in Sinaloa. For Elsa, it was to bring her parents to the United States, so they can get the best medical care that they could that they were not receiving in Mexico.

And what I like about this podcast as everybody's going to tell you is, like, we have so many accents and we have so many backgrounds. That is so important. At the beginning, since I have always worked in Spanish before, this was my first podcast and it was in English. And I have the Salma Hayek accent, and it gets better with time, but it's still

really thick. And I was afraid to be telling the story with this accent. But they made me feel comfortable with it. And they realized and they told me several times how important it is that we keep telling these stories, regardless of how we speak, or how broken can be...our English can be. So Zahir, what do you think?

**Zahir Janmohamed:** It's lovely to be here with everybody. You know, I think from the content side, what made me really comfortable about being vulnerable in my segment was *Feet in 2 Worlds*. I've benefited from *Feet in 2 Worlds*. It helped me immensely when I was working on *Racist Sandwich* in 2017, so I felt a lot of trust in this space. It definitely was an emotional process, partly because I think all of us were going through a lot with the pandemic, not knowing if we have it, not knowing if our relatives have it. I was tested over the summer before I saw my — my father-in-law.

So on a personal level, there was so much uncertainty and there still is a lot of uncertainty. I'm in Michigan right now. The numbers are super high. But there were also technical challenges as well. Like when I did the episode in Maine, interviewing two people. We were both wearing masks. We were outside. There was a lawn mower. I think there was a train passing below. So I think from a technical — these weren't, like, the most ideal situations to get audio.

And also, just like, I feel like when I interview people, like, I like them to see my smile, like, I like them to see...you know, and with the mask, you know. Just so it's...how do you earn trust? So that was a challenge. But I had a wonderful group of people to work with.

**Carolina:** So I want to move on to the next section, which I think is a really, really follows a lot of the stuff that everybody has been saying so far. Let's talk about the kinds of stories that the team pursued in the season and what informed decision-making choices as storytellers that you had.

First, we're going to listen to a conversation between Zahir and Maritza on the project overall and how it helped them reflect on how they approach stories.

**Clip:** Zahir: Did reporting this story shift your own understanding of whether it's possible to live a better life in America or what it means to live a better life in America?

Maritza: I don't know if it changed it because I'm an immigrant myself. I felt empathy sometimes with the things that she was telling me, because I have lived them myself, but what it changed to me, that it was very refreshing and very needed, is that sometimes we treat these undocumented workers like *pobrecitos* — like we say in Spanish, like, “poor guys,” and it's not because they're resilient and they're strong. And even though they're going through one of the most challenging periods of their life, they are willing to share with you these stories. And something that I tried to really mindful in, remind myself when I'm doing these interviews is, like, they're willing to share with you the most vulnerable times of their life for you to tell the story for somebody else to open the eyes to this reality that we're living in the United States.

It's not just to advocate for them because they don't need a journalist to be the advocate or give them voice because they have their own voices. It's just to echo their words. So everybody else can know the reality and then they can make their own decisions. But the thing that they're willing to open to you and talk to you about their fears about how the worst periods of their life, their most vulnerable moments...it is really important. And that's something that sometimes we, as journalists, take for granted.

**Carolina:** So that's great, Maritza. I wanted to ask you, you know, you talked a little bit before about the incredible challenges of everyday life that, you know, that people were dealing with. And I guess I wanted to know and understand — how did you think that you had to be accountable to the people that you're talking to for stories? And you know, what kind of traps did you find that you had to kind of, like, you know, look out for? What kinds of things that you have to think about as you are, right, doing the story?

**Maritza:** First of all, I think that “pobrecito” mindset that we, we used to always think about undocumented workers that they're unemployed, uninsured, undocumented. That's the first thing. Because we all have our bias. That's one of the things. And the other thing is, like, they trust you and they're telling you, as I said, the most vulnerable moments of their life and it's not easy. If you want to tell your story and telling the moment that you're so down...you don't want to share it with anybody. So I tried to make it as professional as possible. And try to get a bigger view for the audience that this time I wasn't writing for somebody who's going to read it in Spanish. I wasn't reporting for, for an audience that knows everything about immigration. Sometimes they don't understand. Sometimes they have false information about the process and how everything works and how an undocumented worker lives in the United States. So I tried to do the bigger picture, but following the human story. I think for me, people is the most important in every single story. And telling their story right, it was really, really key for me for this episode.

**Carolina:** But I guess — I guess I want to follow up on that, because I think any journalist would say, “I want to tell the story. I want to tell it right.” What does that mean, you know, what does that mean for you, how does that manifest? You know, how, when you're telling this story, and you're trying to avoid this pobrecito, you know, then what kinds of things? How are you doing that job of telling that story or what kinds of things are you doing, or trying not to do so you could tell that story the right way?

**Maritza:** Well, empathy is one of the things, and being human. We're taught in the university and in college to be impartial. There is no bias. The — you cannot be a human being when you are being a journalist. And that's not possible. When you're a journalist, you have to report from where you are at right now. And I'm an immigrant. So I was feeling some of the things that she was feeling too but I was making sure that everything that I was saying — so undocumented workers pay taxes. And I did all the fact checking just to make sure that everything that I was putting on was right. I was getting these numbers from, from the Homeland Security Department. I was trying to get everything on the record that I could to sustain what I believe that it was her story. Not the story that I want her to tell me. And I still follow up with her because I just want to double check that whatever I do is, like, I keep up with them. I think it is really important when we're documenting these stories about immigrants for “A Better Life?” that we don't just tell the story of the day

that they got to the border, the day that they crossed the border. The day that they got their court appearance. It's the next day. What happens to the next six months, what's going to happen with them the next year.

And that's something that we have been doing with Rosa. We're following up with her. She has a new job. Right now she's able to see the grandkids and she's not willing to trade anything of this, going back to Mexico.

**Carolina:** That's great. Zahir — I think, you again also refer to a lot of the same issues that Maritza is talking about and I think that it sounds like the process that you guys went through really made you think through, consciously, everything from the ground up. From the technical stuff, like you were talking about the masks, to, you know, how you handle your own POV. So I'm wondering how this series made you think differently about what your default setting is as a producer and a journalist.

What are the moments where you felt you actually had to slow down and go back to basics, just, you know, to step one, and instead of, like, trying to, you know, do this faster because there's all this urgency with everything that's happening to all these communities?

**Zahir:** I really wrestled with a lot of the ethics of interviewing somebody else. So, um, I live in Maine, which has the highest racial discrepancy between white and Black rates of Covid-19 infection.

And I approached the episode largely out of my frustration with the way I've seen reporting — largely by white reporters about Maine, which is like, “It's a great place. It's so welcoming to refugees.” And it's true on one level.

But when I hang out with people of color in Maine, we talk very differently. And I wanted to, I wanted to give space to that conversation. And so when I interviewed the two individuals — Mickey from ACLU and Safiya, who's a city council member in Lewiston — I spent quite a bit of time explaining my own point of view. And I spent a lot more time than I usually would, I think because of the pandemic and because the first time they would meet me would be me wearing a mask.

So I said, “This is where I'm coming from. This is who I am. I also want to say that I want to make sure that you're safe and you're comfortable throughout this process.” And I think I had to also acknowledge my own feelings of vulnerability because of Covid. You know, I also said on the show, like, my wife is pregnant, which is a very vulnerable thing to admit. So I feel like I'm very fortunate with the people that I met.

But I think for me, this whole, this whole pandemic has made me rethink and reexamine my own approach to journalism and the ethics. It's made me sort of double down. I mean, Katherine Boo, who's a terrific writer for the *New Yorker*, she always says as a journalist, you should lean into your anxieties, maybe not in life, but as a journalist in terms of, like, think about the people you're interviewing. These are their stories that you're telling, be gentle with them, be fragile with them. That doesn't mean you do, like, puff pieces but just be, be gentle and I tried to be gentle with the stories that I told.

**Carolina:** That's terrific. Thank you so much. And Jocelyn, we're gonna...I want to switch gears for a quick second, even though it's all related. You know, you've been with Feet in 2 Worlds, you know, pretty much its entire life as a project. And you've worked in all kinds of projects and shows in, in your work outside of Feet in 2 Worlds. So I guess I would love to hear from you: how was this series different from what you've done before in Feet in 2 Worlds and then outside of Feet in 2 Worlds?

**Jocelyn Gonzales:** I think all of the challenges of balance that Maritza and Zahir have mentioned and Mia also is we're always taught to maintain a line, you know, in terms of distance. And this year, there was no place you could go in the news, where your own experience, your own identity, your own family history did not come to the fore.

So the, the question of objectivity and lived experience — very blurry this year. And I don't think that you could honor the stories and the people that we were talking to without bringing your whole self into your reporting. And I think that is what sets off this season. It was very emotional for everybody. And I'm on the back end, just cleaning things up and editing.

But um...there were definitely moments that, you know, hit me like a dagger to the heart, just cutting it. And certainly with the Call Your Elders, like, complete joy and trust and hope that things will get better and we'll get through together.

So I think, like, this is very definitely one of those situations where all of us, I think, were wrapped up in the experience of making. And I would just say, like, in the newsroom and in other projects, I think this is something that happens throughout the media business — is where people were confronting their identity, their vulnerability in the stories they are telling. How much of themselves they brought to their work. And I don't — I think that those voices and those walls breaking down and changing and mutating is very important for this time. So I feel like the series was definitely in the moment, for sure.

**Carolina:** Great. And I guess, you know, if you can sum up in one minute, John. You know, we're, I know it's, like, I'm asking you to like carry anchor. So can you name, like, one lesson that you think you guys have gotten from doing this project that can translate to other kinds of newsrooms — I mean every newsroom, like Jocelyn said is going through so much right now.

**John Rudolph:** I'll try to do this as succinctly as possible, but there are two points that I want to make: One is: be intentional. We were very intentional about how we made this entire series. And the other is: focus on the work. And I'm going to just talk about each of those a little bit.

So in terms of intentionality. Before we decided to make “A Better Life?,” Mia and I had been talking about doing a podcast series, and we were kind of casting around. We were trying to figure out what Mia's signature project of her Feet in 2 Worlds fellowship should be for this year. And we knew it should be a podcast, because she has a lot of experience in podcasting, but we really didn't know the subject. And then the coronavirus pandemic hit and then it was obvious — it had to be about Covid-19 and it had to be about

immigrants and so it came together in this way. But every step of the process, we were very conscious that we were dealing with stories that were extremely sensitive, extremely emotional and from a variety of points of view.

In our weekly meetings, we would all check in about, you know, what's going on here? We wouldn't just be talking about the stories, although we did talk about them a lot. We're talking about what's going on in our group, as it grew and expanded to different people and we added different folks at the different stages. So, so I think that news organizations that aspire to actually embrace a variety, a wide range of voices need to not think that they if they can just bring people into a room, that it's going to happen. You have to take it every step of the way. And you have to be very intentional about it.

The second thing is focus on the work. So Jocelyn was talking about what a crazy time this is and how difficult and the challenges and so forth. But I think that the reason we are able to do the kind of work that we do is that we use the work as a framework for all of these conversations that we have about representation, about identity, about family, about race, about class, about economics, and about health and healthcare and immigrant status and so forth. It's always framed around the story and making the best story that we can. And that way, everybody is on the same page. We might have — we all have different perspectives and we got into some heated arguments, but we were always aiming at the same thing, which is, let's make the best podcast we can make. And we all agreed on that. And so, those would be, you know, my two takeaways.

**Carolina:** That's great. So, speaking of takeaways for the newsrooms and for journalism in general, I want to make a pitch. That, you know, that this project that, you know, we've heard has been doing such interesting work, it needs support. All these projects need support. They can't do it all by themselves.

So I would say that, you know, the work that Feet in 2 Worlds does, developing immigrant voices for journalists, fostering spaces to collaborate with newsrooms and producing untold stories from immigrant communities — it needs help. So if you want to support, easiest way is go to the Feet in 2 Worlds site — [www.fi2w.org](http://www.fi2w.org) — and donate.

And now we can move on to the third segment. After this segment, we will get to the Q&A.

So now we're going to hear from this team a little bit more about the challenges that, you know, laying themselves bare. We've been hearing a lot of references to that. And how close some of these stories were to folks and we want to talk about what lessons that they took away from this very different production experience in this very different time.

To get us started on that discussion, we have a clip from the story that Zahir was mentioning before with Black residents in Maine, primarily African immigrants in what is called the whitest state in the nation. So let's roll.

**Clip:** Safiya: I literally became numb to — to any hate, like...but there are times that I'm like, oh, wow. Like, you know, like, still hurts...

Zahir: Yeah.

Safiya: But the majority of it, I just...[Sighs.]

Zahir: I'm sorry, I'm just so sorry that you have to go through that, you know, like...your journey to America was already so difficult, like, I'm really sorry that you had to deal with that.

Safiya: And I continue to deal with that. Um, it's, you know, I'm an outsider...even on the council, and people are just, you know, micro-managing everything that I say or do. But yeah, like, I definitely became numb to it. I'm only 24 and, like, running when I was running for council, not even just, like, right now, but like the amount of hate I received just running was just — it was unbelievable.

**Carolina:** So, Zahir. You had talked a little bit before about, you know, how — you know, the challenges for telling these stories for you. And, you know, I think a lot of us are used to getting to these moments with our subjects, where, you know, we can get them to trust us, and they get to this very emotional point.

But there's this moment there where you're the one who has a little bit of a break in your voice. So can you talk a little bit about that moment and what was going on with you?

**Zahir:** Sure. So, um, I think I interviewed her...I think it was, like, soon after July 4, she just posted, like, a simple message on Facebook saying, like, "Happy Fourth of July. I hope, you know, America becomes more equitable." And of course this is right after the George Floyd killing. And the amount of hate, like, posted on Facebook was just astonishing. I mean, I had to go for a walk. My wife usually doesn't comment on Facebook — was reporting a lot of the comments to Facebook. But of course, Facebook didn't do anything.

I was nervous about Sofia's safety. Um, I've never really seen the kind of vitriol as I've seen in Maine, to be honest. And I've lived all over the U.S. Um, so yeah, I wanted to, I wanted to be honest with my feelings of anxiety about being a person of color living in Maine. And I thought, "Why hide that?" And I feel like if there's one thing that Covid has done to reporting, in a positive way, it's that, you know, sometimes journalists — we're part of the story, you know?

You know, as I was interviewing Safiya, there's a guy with a Trump sticker harassing her — that's part of the story. And so it, you know, John said it well a few minutes ago, like, if it helps tell the story better, then go for it and I'm thankful that the team allowed me to do that — to insert myself. And in this case I wanted to show...even just hearing that clip, it brings me back to a really dark place for me, this summer. I was frightened. I'm so thankful that Trump lost. I was absolutely frightened, I couldn't deal with another four years and, you know, I know some journalists don't talk about politics. I'm not one of them. Sorry. [Laughs.] I have to be honest with myself. So I was frightened, I was frightened for her and I still am frightened for people in Maine. But I hope there's a bit of respite right now.

**Carolina:** You know, I mean, the pandemic's really made us think very constantly — quite literally — about our physical safety, you know, are we about to be beset by this virus? But in the series, there's also this constant question of emotional safety, social safety. I mean, stuff that you just referred to, Zahir. So I'm wondering how we could think about “A Better Life?” as a safe space or safe platform for your subjects, for your audiences, and for production team and I would love to hear from Maritza.

**Maritza:** Well, when the pandemic started, that's when I met Feet in 2 Worlds and it's been the highlight of my year. [Laughs.] Having coffee every morning with John over a Zoom. When I was reporting on Rosa's story — if you haven't heard that episode, do it. It's about an undocumented worker who's a housekeeper, who lost her job during the pandemic and then the supervisor kept her check for a couple of weeks. So she didn't have any money. And she was afraid of getting Covid and getting deported — everything at the same time.

And for me, it was really important to keep her safe, with not mentioning her real name. That's something that she didn't ask me, but I did it. And to double check that whatever we post on social media wasn't, like, linking to her directly because we're Facebook friends now and everything.

And another thing for me...at the same time that I was working on the podcast, I was covering the protests for George Floyd, and I was, like, going outside and then my family — my twins were at home. My husband, my dog, everybody. And I was the one...I didn't put my life on pause. I was trying to make it as safe as possible, but sometimes it was so challenging — it still is, to balance work being a mom of twins, homeschooling the kids, trying to launch a new non traditional media outlet — Conecta Arizona — and trying to balance and everything. It was challenging and obviously takes a toll on you. I'm very resilient and I have a very sense of humor, so that that helps a lot.

But I understand that not everybody deals with the stress as the same way as I do. So I know the other journalists, my friends were having, like, breakdowns and I didn't want it to go that way. So that's why I use my support team. This team, that has been so so great with me.

**Carolina:** Mia, can you also talk about this, about, like, you know, in which ways this show became — either became or, you know, became a safe platform or a place for some safety? For your emotions or your thoughts about your ethics in your professional life?

**Mia:** Yeah, I mean, like, I think we all — maybe all of us — cried during this production process. Sometimes that happens behind the scenes, but like there were tears on Zooms for sure. And I feel like making the space for each other in that way was really good.

I was afraid I was kind of afraid of talking about immigrants rejecting America and sort of the backlash that that would cause, particularly in my mom's story, but I didn't read a lot of Facebook comments for that reason that I saw were popping up in response to that story.

And I think just as far as emotional safety goes, like, you know, you have to make space to be vulnerable about these stories because it's ultimately more important that they're

heard. Because these are stories that we're not hearing and being reported in the mainstream media, especially with regard to Covid. And I think, you know, throughout the pandemic, we're just seeing numbers and numbers and numbers and graphs and pies and all kinds of stuff. So really personalizing these stories and centering them in the perspective of a single person, I think, was a really effective way of talking about it and starting that healing process that I was talking about earlier.

I'm going to just refer to this Toni Morrison quote that my friend Aisha reminded me about, which is, "There's no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak. We write. We do language. And that is how civilizations heal."

**Carolina:** That's, that's beautiful. I would love to hear from everybody on the team, a little bit. Is there a particular moment where you said, oh my God, this is not, we're not in Kansas or not in Maine, or we're not in Brooklyn anymore?

**John:** Carolina, I'd like to just kind of take your question and turn it around a little bit. So, when *Feet in 2 Worlds* started back in the early 2000s, there had been an incident where the *New York Times* ran a story. This was this glowing story about a girl at a high school in Queens — your home borough — that was, she was undocumented, and she was the class valedictorian and it was this, you know, this wonderful success. She had risen up from all these hardship, and so forth. And after they ran the story, this young woman and maybe members of her family also, were deported because the *Times* had, you know, revealed their immigrant status. And I'm sure that nobody at the *New York Times* thought that that was going to be the result.

But it was a...it was a wake up call to me. And then as I started developing *Feet in 2 Worlds* and training and teaching other journalists and so forth, this was a story that I've told many times, because it's like, you have to be thinking about things differently when you're covering immigrant communities and you have to put yourself — as Zahir has indicated, as Maritza has talked about, as Mia has talked about — you have to put yourself in the shoes of the people who you are speaking to and find a level of of empathy and just understanding of what their circumstance is.

So actually the aha moment for me — I mean, there were many of them that came about, but it was kind of the opposite of what you were asking about. We would be sitting around having our weekly or, you know, sometimes more than once-a-week editorial meetings, and I'd be listening to the conversation and hearing people who were doing exactly what I've been trying to get people to do for the past 15 years and they did. And because of who they are and where they, you know, their background, their lived experience, of course that's what they do. They're thinking about the people that they're interviewing and the people who are there, featuring and I was like, "Wow, this is so refreshing. This is wonderful." And I wouldn't just — I wouldn't say anything. I just let them talk. And so that was, that was a really wonderful thing for me, for me to — to witness and experience.

**Carolina:** Thank you, John. That is...thank you so much for summing it up that way. So I think we're coming up on the end of this segment, and this is the fun part.

This is where we're going to start opening it up to the Q&A. So if you have a question, you should be entering it into the Q&A box at the bottom of your screen. I guess, then, I can start with a couple of my own questions because, you know, I feel like I've definitely been on both sides that John just talked about.

On the side where you're trying to tell a story sensitively and, you know, thinking about other people's well being and safety and what is really going to help them. But also, you know, thinking about the demands of how do you get to some of these details that you know that people don't think are anything. You know, sometimes when you talk to people and they talk about these incredible things that they've done in their lives, just to get, you know, to a small town, or to the Bronx or whatever, they don't think that much of it. But you know, trying to get them to understand the importance of their own lives is, you know, is really key. And I guess, you know, for Jocelyn or John, you know, do you think anything has changed in the 15 years since, you know, since Feet in 2 Worlds got started? Because on my end, I feel that, you know, it's kind of both.

Jocelyn:

Well, I think that maybe when we started, we might have been a curiosity as an organization, just because the communities and issues we were covering are usually the domain of parachute reporting. When something bad happens, we parachute into that community and we do not report out of that community, just into it, when a spike happens, like, some interest.

So from the beginning, to have reporters who knew their neighbors, knew the language, knew where people came from, from their home country and the particular struggles that each community has in making a new life here...that was a big difference. And I think for a long time, we were trying to knock on newsroom doors, trying to get them to understand the importance of this kind of reporting.

And then the thing that's changed to me a lot is the sort of flattening of the media landscape where, you know, I always love that line from Hamilton — “Immigrants, we get the job done.” Like, we figured out, a lot of us in all different sectors of the media, that we can make our own content. We can have our own power in the media. And, you know, up around us, more organizations like ours found their voices, found their spot in the landscape, and did good work as well.

So one of the cool things about this project is that we met other podcasts, who are like us, doing beautiful work, having beautiful writing, talking to their communities and bringing stories forward and that to me was, like, really special and different this time.

Carolina:

That's great. Thank you, Jocelyn. So there's somebody asking, you know, thanks everybody for their work, as do I, really enjoyed listening to the series.

So the question is — what do you envision is the future for “A Better Life?”, which I don't know. Is there a future for that particular series? And, you know, and where do you see, I would say, where do you see Feet in 2 Worlds going next? It's gone to election land. It's gone to, you know, persecution land, you know, many times. So, where, where does Feet in 2 Worlds go next? And is there, you know, does something come after that question mark of “A Better Life?”

**John:** You want me to respond to that?

**Carolina:** Sure.

**John:** Okay. Well, I'm not sure what happens to the "A Better Life?" podcast. I mean, there might be another series, there might be another season of it next year. But in terms of Feet in 2 Worlds and the work that we're doing, I mean, I think that this conversation that we're having now is actually part of the work that we're doing, which is really starting to share our insights and our best practices with other news organizations and other organizations generally that are really struggling with issues of representation and diversity and inclusion and all of those kind of buzzwords that don't really capture what it is we're trying to do.

But and just in terms very concretely, in terms of journalism...so one of the things that has happened over the past decade or so maybe longer, is that a lot of news organizations have included Black journalists, immigrant journalists, to diversify their new staffs and those people have then left those organizations, because they have felt like their voices weren't being heard, like they were being marginalized and that these were, in some cases, very hostile environments for them to work in. So there is a way for — there is a path toward becoming, including a diversity of people, a diverse group of people with different lived experiences in the news business. And I think that that's what we are trying to, to show the path toward.

And the other thing is, in terms of newsroom leadership. So, Mia and Maritza both are the very first editing fellows that we've ever had at Feet in 2 Worlds. Everyone in the past decade and a half before were reporting fellows, but Mia and Maritza are editing fellows because one of the things that I've come to understand is that there needs to be a path for people — for immigrants, for people of color — to ascend to the next level in the newsroom hierarchy. And that is an editor and, you know, beyond that, maybe a publisher as well.

And so that's why we are grooming people to take that next step, that leadership position within news organizations. And so those are...that's one of the directions that feed into worlds is going to continue to move in.

**Carolina:** Um, so there's another question. And I'm going to read it, just read it the way that it was written. Do you think there's a need to spotlight the courage of immigrants — not just the qualities that the U.S. are important, like qualifications or money — and Mia, I think you wanted to...you want to address that?

**Mia:** Yeah, I feel like yes, there's a need to spotlight the courage of immigrants, but also just spotlight all the different qualities of immigrants and their experiences and, in particular, their human relationships they have to one another.

So I guess that's what I mean by complicating the narrative of the immigrant story of an immigrant coming here and working really hard. And that's the end of the story. And I think a really good example of that from the series is actually our Call Your Elders

segments, which we produced every other week in the series. They're basically conversations that our reporters did with elders and their lives — immigrant elders in different communities.

And what's really special about these conversations is that sometimes there's just kind of goofiness happening. I'm thinking about the Call Your Elders conversation that reporter Florence Barrau-Adams did with her Haitian immigrant parents in Florida, and they're talking about kind of everyday stuff. About how they exercise around the living room and put on a certain song and how her dad does, like, five extra laps around her mom, when they're just trying to exercise in the living room. And I think that those stories really not only provided much-needed joy in between the like longer heavier episodes that we were tackling about really difficult things, but they also showed kind of just the complexity of the full immigrant experience, which, of course, includes joy and includes goofiness and includes accents and different textured voices. And so that was a wonderful way that we were able to provide a lot of different lenses in our storytelling of immigrant experiences in this series.

**Carolina:** Thank you, Mia. I want to get in one last question, because I know we're running a tiny bit over, but as usual, things take a while to get warmed up.

So we have one question where that's: how do you all think about teaching audiences who feel or believe that immigrant stories aren't relevant to their own? I have a lot to say about that. But maybe Zahir, do you wanna, you want to take that?

**Zahir:** I was hoping you wouldn't call me. [Laughs.] Um. I'm going to be honest. Honestly, who cares? I don't care. To be honest, and one thing I teach, when I teach creative writing, is not everyone is going to get your story. That's okay. A podcast for everybody is a podcast for nobody.

You know, at Racist Sandwich, not everybody liked it. My brother didn't like it. That's okay. I still love my brother. We can still be friends. That's fine.

So a podcast for everybody is a podcast for nobody. If people don't get it...and this whole notion that if we tell positive stories, then, like, you know, white people will like immigrants. I'm sorry. That's like, that — the 2000 — this last presidency put that fiction to rest. So let's just tell our own stories the way we see fit. Let's be true. Let's be honest. Let's be vulnerable and if people don't like it, who cares?

**Carolina:** You can support Feet in 2 Worlds' work and learn more about their mission. If you want to hear more stories like those in A Better Life?, to develop the next generation of journalists that reflect our country, and create vital channels of communication like Conecta Arizona, consider giving to Feet in Two Worlds. Visit [fi2w.org](http://fi2w.org) to find out more. To listen to the entire podcast series "A Better Life?", go to [abetterlifepodcast.com](http://abetterlifepodcast.com).

I'm Carolina Gonzalez, your moderator, and I thank you again for being here with us tonight.

This panel was produced by the Feet in 2 Worlds team. The panelists included host Zahir Janmohamed, executive producer Mia Warren, reporter Maritza L. Félix, executive editor John Rudolph, and audio engineer and senior producer Jocelyn Gonzales.

Anna Dilena is the assistant producer for A Better Life? Feet in 2 Worlds' intern is Kenny Leon. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is development coordinator.

Our theme song was composed by Fareed Sajan.

I'm Carolina Gonzalez. Thank you for listening.

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