



A Better Life? On the Sidelines

Covid-19 shut down or shortened most professional sports seasons in 2020 and even postponed the Olympics. What happened to all the people working behind the scenes at sports stadiums? Producer Khari Thompson explores how the pandemic affected their livelihoods.

Mia Warren: This is *A Better Life?*, from Feet in 2 Worlds. On this podcast, we're exploring the impact of Covid on immigrants in the U.S. I'm Mia Warren.

I've never been a big sports fan. But during the pandemic, when many indoor activities felt unsafe, I found myself at the ballpark in Coney Island.

Clip: (Announcer during a Cyclones game) "The second baseman, number 13, Luke Ritter!"

Mia: The Brooklyn Cyclones play at Maimonides Park near the famous Cyclone roller coaster, where they got their name.

This summer, I went with friends to a few games, and it was so much fun. We ate Nathan's hot dogs, drank Mermaid pilsners, and watched rollercoasters pass by in the background when the game got slow.

As I discovered, minor league baseball is great. But there's nothing like October baseball at Fenway Park in Boston.

Clip: (Announcer during a Red Sox game) "On an o-one pitch, Hernandez..."

Mia: And the 2021 Red Sox made it extra special when they booked their ticket to the American League Championship Series on October 11.

It was a raucous crowd, worthy of the greatest moments in Red Sox history. A sharp contrast to 2020, when fans weren't even allowed in Major League ballparks.

News Clip: (Newscast on Fenway Park without fans.) "It is an opening day like never before at Fenway Park. Dugouts extended to allow for social distancing. And fans not allowed, replaced by cardboard cutouts on the Green Monster and artificial noise over the speakers."

Mia: When sports seasons were interrupted by the pandemic, most of the focus was on athletes. When would they get to play again? Would they be safe from Covid?

There are thousands of people who work behind the scenes in major league stadiums. Their lives were disrupted by Covid too.

Producer Khari Thompson in Boston looked into some of their stories.

Khari Thompson: The COVID-19 pandemic changed professional sports. Games were canceled. Seasons were shortened. Players missed practices and playing-time after getting sick with the Coronavirus.

For many people who work behind the scenes at sports stadiums, the maintenance people, the cleaners and cooks, and security guards, 2020 cost them their livelihoods.

Lilian San Juan is a cleaner at Fenway Park.

Lilian San Juan: *Y no hay trabajo.*

Translation: “All of a sudden, there was no work. We went to work one day, and the next day they told us there’s no work.”

Khari: During baseball season, Lilian usually spends her afternoons and evenings working at the ballpark.

Lilian: *Sigo trabajando...*

Translation: “I started working in 2005, and I’m still there.”

Khari: She came to the United States from Guatemala in 1986 and has worked her share of odd jobs, cooking at restaurants in East Boston and cleaning.

16 years ago, she was working at a factory that made t-shirts when she saw one with the words “Fenway Park” on it.

Lilian: *Y viene a mi casa y le dije...*

Translation: “I asked my cousin who was living with us, do you know Fenway Park? And he said, yeah, I know it. If you want, I’ll take you there. And that’s how I started. I went to look for work, and I got a job.”

Khari: Lilian is not a sports fan. For her, there’s no magic about working at Fenway, despite the park’s history and its special place in the hearts of many New Englanders. Growing up in Guatemala, she says she didn’t pay attention to baseball.

Lilian now goes to one of baseball’s most hallowed stadiums every day, does her job, and goes home without much interest in the team, even when they’re winning.

Then came March of 2020, and the onset of the pandemic.

Clip: (Covid announcement from Governor Charlie Baker) “After discussions with health experts, local and federal officials, and other governors concerning the fight against Covid-19, I am issuing the following emergency order: All non-essential businesses shall close their physical workplaces and facilities to all workers, customers, and the public.”

Khari: Not long after Governor Charlie Baker announced a state of emergency in Massachusetts on March 10, Major League Baseball canceled the remainder of spring training and postponed Opening Day.

Lilian went from cleaning the stands, the suites and the bathrooms at Fenway in preparation for the season to sitting at home for the next three months without work.

Her layoff only lasted until July, but there was a catch. There would be no fans in the stands, which meant less work to do.

Lilian: Tú sabes que los camarógrafos seguían y...

Translation: “The cameramen, the reporters, they were all still going to the park, but not really anyone else. But they still needed to be cleaned up after. Only the senior people were working, the rest of us got very little work.”

Khari: Lilian was getting paid again, but the financial hit of reduced hours combined with months of not working at all was tough for her and her family.

Lilian: El año pasado lo que ganan fueron...

Translation: “Usually, I make about twenty to twenty-two thousand a year. But last year, they just didn’t give us much work. I made about half of what I usually make in a year, about ten thousand.”

Khari: On top of that, Lilian’s two oldest sons lost their jobs as well, meaning they couldn’t help chip in for the family’s rent. Only Lilian’s husband was able to stay working throughout the pandemic painting houses.

Lilian: Fue un poco duro quedarse trabajando...

Translation: “It was hardest for my husband to keep working throughout the pandemic because a lot of our friends got sick.”

Khari: And though Lilian and her immediate family avoided contracting Covid themselves, she says the virus has taken its toll on her extended family.

Lilian: Mi hermano. Mi primo.

Translation: “My brother. My cousin. Friends of ours died.”

Khari: Lilian says she got vaccinated as soon as possible and takes special care at work.

But not everyone at Fenway Park has been able to stay clear of the coronavirus.

The Red Sox made headlines this year for a massive Covid outbreak within their locker room that almost derailed the team’s season. Some of the team’s most prominent players aren’t vaccinated.

That’s led to some frustration for Lilian and her co-workers and concerns about their own safety.

Lilian: Por que ellos dicen no entren aquí, no pasan por allí.

Translation: “The Red Sox management would tell us ‘don’t come in this way. Don’t pass through here.’ We would hardly talk to them.”

Lilian: Comentaron una amiga mía en el grupo de Whatsapp que...

Translation: "They didn't want us in places where we could get the players sick, but now they're the ones getting sick. And we feel we're the ones needing to be protected from them."

Khari: Even after 15 years working at Fenway, Lilian says she doesn't feel any particular loyalty to the Red Sox. Technically, she doesn't even work for the team. She works for a contractor hired by the organization.

But she doesn't have any hard feelings about that, or wish the Red Sox had done more to help her.

Lilian: Fue algo de- mira, no fue culpa de nadie.

Translation: "It was no one's fault. It's a pandemic. We were all scared. It hit everyone."

Khari: Black and Brown communities have been hit especially hard by the coronavirus in Massachusetts.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Health, people identifying as Hispanic or Latino are currently testing positive at the highest rate of any demographic group in the Commonwealth, with positive tests among Black residents not far behind.

Those are the communities from which most of the state's immigrant workers come, says Roxana Rivera.

She's the Vice President of 32BJ SEIU, the Service Employees International Union, which represents 18-thousand workers in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire.

Roxana Rivera: We were fighting off both fronts for those workers that were continuing to work as essential workers as well as those that were unemployed.

Khari: One in six Massachusetts residents is an immigrant, and about 40 percent of Massachusetts workers in cleaning and maintenance work are foreign-born.

Between illnesses and job losses, Rivera estimates her union branch's membership declined by 4-thousand members in Massachusetts last year due to the pandemic.

Roxana: And we were hoping that with the vaccine in this past year, and this fall we would see another round of folks being recalled. But because of the Delta variant, that is delayed. And so, you know, we're looking at more likely springtime where there's another opportunity, I think, for folks to be recalled.

Khari: The fight for the rights of immigrant workers is personal for Rivera.

Her family is from El Salvador, and she says she got her start as an organizer advocating for immigrant day laborers 25 years ago.

Now, she says, the union is in a fight to save not just jobs, but lives.

Hundreds of immigrant workers represented by her union have been hospitalized for Covid-19, according to Rivera. Some have died.

Roxana: It was really tough, right. We heard of our first death of a member in April and I remember that because it was the same weekend that, you know, I found out my own brother had contracted the virus. And so, it was just very intense.

Khari: Rivera says union leadership lobbied the state and federal government to implement proper safety protocols and provide personal protective equipment for workers, which were lacking in the early days of the pandemic.

But she adds the sports franchises themselves — the Red Sox, the New England Patriots or the Boston Celtics for example — didn't take much part in those discussions. That's because they often don't directly employ cleaning and maintenance workers.

Roxana: The majority work for a cleaning contractor, right. It is difficult for us to have direct communication with those entities. It's largely through the client.

Khari: Rivera says many immigrant workers the union represents aren't U.S. citizens, some have temporary protected status or have permanent residency through Green Cards that have to be renewed. Both programs were limited by the Trump Administration.

But the union supports efforts to improve citizenship pathways for immigrants, as well as issuing driver's licenses to undocumented workers.

Roxana: You know, so there's other things that impact our members outside of the workplace because of being immigrants. And so that's why, as a union we have played a key role on laws that protect immigrants and people of color in particular.

Mia: We're going to take a quick break. When we come back, we'll see how workers are faring over at the football stadium.

Ad Break

Mia: This is *A Better Life?* from Feet in 2 Worlds. I'm Mia Warren.

Let's get back to how sports stadium workers are dealing with the pandemic. Here's Khari Thompson.

Khari: 20 miles south of Fenway Park sits Gillette Stadium in Foxboro, Massachusetts. And a Sunday afternoon at Gillette Stadium in the fall usually means one thing.

Clip: Crowd cheering during a Patriots game.

Khari: A packed house roars as the six-time Super Bowl Champion New England Patriots take the field. Fans have flocked back to NFL football games for the first time in two seasons.

64-year-old Maria Dominguez is at Gillette every weekend, though she's not watching the game. Still, she feels the buzz from the crowd.

Maria Dominguez: Sí se siente porque...

Khari: "Yes, you feel it," Maria says, "the noise, the excitement. It's contagious."

Maria and her husband Jose, who's 61, both work at Gillette Stadium for every New England Patriots and Revolution home game. Maria cleans the stadium from the bathrooms to the plaza, while Jose works as a maintenance man, and does some part-time security.

Jose Dominguez: Whatever they decide to do, that's what we do. It's like, walking and checking [that] everything's clean, everything is in the places, you know, right. Keeping the people calm, you know, there's no fights, there's no things like that.

Khari: Jose and Maria met 46 years ago in their home state of Puebla, Mexico, and moved to the U.S. 36 years ago after getting married.

Both worked a variety of jobs through the years. Maria usually found work as a cleaner and Jose split time as a maintenance worker and furniture painter.

Then, in 2012, Maria says she was looking for extra work when a co-worker at her morning job suggested going to Gillette Stadium.

She filled out an application that day and started work two weeks later.

Jose didn't join her at Gillette at first, continuing to work maintenance jobs elsewhere. But that changed in 2015 after Maria's mother died and Maria hit a low point, according to Jose.

Jose: And she wasn't really good. So once they- she invited me to go to Gillette Stadium to watch how, how was the people? How was the job he does and says, so why don't you come and work with me? Is- is let me think about that. And I said, well, why not?

Khari: As with many other Massachusetts workers, the Covid pandemic put the Dominguez family in limbo. The 2020 NFL season was played in stadiums with no fans in most states, including Massachusetts. And that meant stadium workers like Jose and Maria were not needed.

Jose: Somebody call from- from Gillette Stadium. And it says that they're going to close down. They will be closed the job because, you know, the pandemic it was critical. So we stay out for probably two or three months.

Khari: Maria said she applied for unemployment benefits while she and Jose were out of work. But Jose was too scared to apply. His green card, which allowed him to work legally in the U.S., expired in 2020. When the pandemic hit, he was still in the process of applying to become a U.S. citizen.

Though he had been here for decades and had been in good standing all those years, he couldn't help feeling afraid — especially with heightened anti-immigrant sentiment throughout the country.

Jose: *Y va ser como un especie de fraude o ilegal.*

Khari: “When I wanted to ask for help,” Jose said, “I was scared of being accused of fraud or of being illegal because I didn't have any information to give them to fill out the forms.”

Fortunately for Jose, he got good news before long: his U.S. citizenship was approved near the end of 2020 and he is now an American citizen. But his reluctance to apply for unemployment benefits during the height of the pandemic reflects the unease felt by many immigrants.

Almost a year later, Covid seems to have changed very little for the Dominguez family and for Lilian San Juan.

Jose and Maria are back working at Gillette Stadium every Patriots home game, and Lilian once again patrolled Fenway Park for a full baseball season with fans.

People don't usually notice them as they roam the stadiums or haul around their cleaning equipment. But they say the little acts of kindness they experience at games, people who stop to offer them food or drinks or just thank them for their work, make them feel seen.

Then, the fans go back to enjoying their game, while the workers go back to their jobs keeping sports stadiums up and running like they always have, even during a pandemic.

Mia: This story was produced by Khari Thompson. Translation from Spanish by Cristal Reyna Thompson.

A Better Life?'s executive producer is Quincy Surasmith. Jocelyn Gonzales is our technical director. Our editor is John Rudolph. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is our director of marketing. And Katelynn Laws is our intern.

Our theme music and original score are by Fareed Sajan.

A Better Life? comes to you from Feet in 2 Worlds. Since 2005, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and training immigrant journalists. The Feet in 2 Worlds network includes hundreds of reporters and editors. Some, like me, have been Feet in 2 Worlds fellows. Others have attended our workshops and contributed to our podcast and website. Together, we're making American journalism more reflective of the diverse communities that we serve.

To hear other episodes in this series, or to read more about the story you just heard, visit us at abetterlifepodcast.com. That's abetterlifepodcast.com.

I'm Mia Warren. Thanks for listening.

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