



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Canek Aguirre

Interviewer: *Francesco De Salvatore*

Narrator: *Canek Aguirre*

Location of Interview:
Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314

Date of Interview: *09/13/2023*

Transcriber: *Paul Birdsall*

Summary:

From a childhood in Los Angeles to a distinguished career dedicated to public service, Canek Aguirre reflects on his journey to becoming the first Latino elected to the Alexandria City Council.

Table of Contents and Keywords

Minute	Page	Topic
00:08	4	Introduction
00:37	4	Family History & Life in Los Angeles, CA
06:23	5	Experiences & Family Life in Mexico
09:42	6	Life in Highland Park
21:06	9	Initial Interest in Education & Plans for the Future
25:23	10	Experiences in North Carolina
33:42	12	Meeting future wife
35:26	12	Post-collegiate life & moving to Alexandria
44:32	14	Obtaining first job in Alexandria
48:58	15	First Impressions of Alexandria
50:44	16	Work in the Alexandria School System & connecting with the Latino Community
57:31	18	Beginning with FACE program
1:04:44	19	Early Community Outreach Efforts
1:09:40	20	Transitioning to Medicaid Outreach Program
1:16:35	22	Becoming Involved in Civil Service
1:18:59	23	Work with Tenants & Workers United
1:29:02	25	Entrance into Electoral Politics
1:38:10	26	First Election Campaign
1:50:19	29	Election Victory, First Term and Pandemic Experiences
2:14:16	34	Reflections on the Pandemic
2:20:12	35	Second Election Campaign & Goals for Second Term
2:30:26	37	Closing Thoughts & Lessons Learned

General	Casa Chirilagua; FACE Program; City Academy; ALIVE; MRC; Tenants & Workers United; EOC; ACPS; State of VA Medicaid Plant
----------------	--

People	Joyce Woodson; Paul Smedberg; Tim Levain; Amy Jackson; Chris Hubbard; Kirkland Pike; Elizabeth Bennet Parker; Mohammed Seifeldein; Dak Hardwick; Willie Bailey; Allison Silberberg
Places	Los Angeles, CA; Highland Park; Mexico; North Carolina; Chapel Hill; Alexandria, VA

INTRODUCTION

Canek Aguirre [00:00:08] Hi, my name is Canek Aguirre. I am 38 years old and today is September 13th and we are at the Lloyd House in Alexandria, Virginia.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:19] Great. My name is Francesco De Salvatore. And we are at the Lloyd House. And today, September 13, 2023. So, yeah, thank you for being here. And I want to start with, can you tell us a little bit about where you grew up?

FAMILY HISTORY & LIFE IN LOS ANGELES, CA

Canek Aguirre [00:00:37] Sure. So, I'm originally from L.A. Born and raised. Specifically in the Highland Park neighborhood, which is Northeast L.A. And, you know, growing up in L.A., definitely in my formative years, formed a lot of who I am and how I respond to things, I guess, if you will. I'd say that I had a good childhood. I know that for a fact. One of the things that I never take for granted, and I always say is one of the advantages that I had is that I had both of my parents. And so, when I would go home, I knew that I would be safe and that I'd be loved. And my friends knew that, too. So then, you know, I'd have people come over to you.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:01:18] That's cool. That's great. Can you tell us a little bit more about your parents?

Canek Aguirre [00:01:22] So both of my parents are from Mexico. They're both from the state of Puebla and the city of Puebla. There's actually a lot of different interconnections with how they met. But my mom, she came with my grandfather back in 1959. They crossed in Texas and she was about three or four years old at the time, and they ended up living all over the country. And when she went back to Mexico for the first time since they had left, she was in Puebla and that's where she ran into my father. They were penpals, if you will. They sent letters back and forth. And then my father came in 1980. They got married in Jacksonville, Florida, drove up to North Carolina and then drove across the country to L.A. So my parents have been in Los Angeles since 1980, or at least that's when they got to L.A. And then I came five years later.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:19] What was it like for you to talk about their migration?

Canek Aguirre [00:02:25] It's always interesting to talk about my parents migration because they had very, very different experiences. You know one, my dad coming as an adult, right? Not really knowing any English. Granted, you know, my grandparents, on my mom's side and my mom, they didn't know English either, really. But, coming in at such a small age, it makes a big difference in terms of adapting to the language. The other big thing is that, you know, my mom's side of the family, my grandfather basically prohibited speaking Spanish, so pretty much everybody lost the language. My, the eldest son, my uncle, he still understands some of it. Doesn't really speak that much. And my mom is basically the only one that got back to a close to fluent

level because she started being a bilingual teacher. And she was taking courses in Spanish and relearning the language and she wanted to make sure that her children would know Spanish. And that's part of the reason why, going to Mexico, kind of like intentionally looking for someone. And so growing up, you know, my mom spoke to me in English and my dad spoke to me in Spanish.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:03:39] Uh, what was it like for you to be caught in that kind of cross-cultural?

Canek Aguirre [00:03:47] I mean, I don't know. It seemed normal. Plus, most of the kids in L.A. were going through the same thing. You know, I think the advantages that I had is that I started going back to Mexico when I was very young. So the first time I went back, I was probably like two years old. So then all my dad's family speaking Spanish to me, you know, 24/7. So really Spanish was more my first language than English. And then when I was in school, I would actually help translate for some of the other families. So be an interpreter, if you will, because it's just language, knowledge and stuff like that. Yeah, I think it's always been, I grew up in a time where there was a lot of conflict around language and bilingual education. And, you know, the irony is when you go to private schools, they all want you to learn another language, right? But, for whatever reason in public schools, no you can't have another language. Right? And it's like, it doesn't really make sense because plenty of studies have been done, you know, when you're bilingual or multilingual, you're able to multitask better. You're able to carry more things in your head at one time. Process things a little bit faster. So, I'm pretty grateful to my mom for, you know, being intentional about me learning another language. And it's been also, I mean, I've gotten almost every single one of my jobs because I speak more than one language and specifically Spanish. But, the other part of it was just working with kids a lot because my mom's a teacher. But that was my phrase. You know, Spanglish is a thing, right? Because, whatever word comes to your mind is kind of what comes out first. So, you know, growing up, there was definitely a lot of Spanglish. And when I was in second grade, the teacher asked us to say the alphabet. And I, you know, very eager, threw my hand up, did the alphabet, she was just kind of staring at me in this weird way. She's like: 'No, no, no, that's not right.' But then one of my little classmates, like, stood up was like: 'No, no, he did it right. He just did it in Spanish.' Because, you know, when you're a kid, you not really thinking about it. Right? But, I think in terms of the language, I've never really had too many issues in terms of culture and finding your place and identity. I think that's where it was more of a transition or more of a difficult thing to try and figure out.

EXPERIENCES & FAMILY LIFE IN MEXICO

Francesco De Salvatore [00:06:23] What are your memories, some of your earlier memories from visiting.....

Canek Aguirre [00:06:26] Visiting Mexico?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:06:27] Yeah, Mexico.

Canek Aguirre [00:06:29] Ah man, the food, the smells and the laughter and being with my family. My cousins. I'm an only child. So, then I feel like growing up, my cousins were kind of like my brothers and sister. So that's a lot of fun memories. And we're from the part of Puebla where the actual Battle of Cinco de Mayo happened. So we literally live at the bottom of where the battle was fought on a empanada. How do you say that? The cobblestone, the cobblestone, cobblestone hill that leads up. And so when I would be in Mexico, we'd actually be playing in the fort where the battle is actually fought so.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:07:18] I was curious, like what your memories are coming back to L.A. from those trips. Like what was that like for you as a young kid?

Canek Aguirre [00:07:33] It was always good as a refresher for language because sometimes I find would myself trying to think like, 'Oh, how do I say that word?' But then having been to Mexico, then I was like, I've come back refreshed and, you know, my vocabulary pumped up some more, if you will. Definitely a little sense of loneliness because, well, both my parents come from pretty big families. My dad comes from eight, my mom comes from seven. And being the only child and really nobody else around us. I had one cousin, but she was in like Orange County. And so it was further out and didn't really see her too much. So yeah, a little bit of loneliness. I definitely miss some of the food. But there's definitely, you see the differences between, you know, the countries and, you know, the money that the United States has and then the poverty that's in Mexico and the pollution. So like, one of those things that you'll smell a lot is trash or smog and pollution from vehicles and stuff. And it's not, it wasn't the same in L.A. Granted, you know, I grew up when, you know, it was kind of L.A. In the smoggiest of times and you look up and you couldn't see the sun because there was so much smog. And they would literally keep us from going outside to play because the air quality was so bad. Right? But, it was still noticeable. Right? The difference between turning a faucet and the hot water just coming out for your shower as opposed to needing to, you know, hook up the gas tank and waiting a little bit for it to heat up and then letting the water run and everything. So definitely things here and there. But yeah, I think it gave me more perspective, if you will.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:09:42] Can you describe Highland Park for us? Describe it vividly. Like what did it look like? Where did you grow up?

LIFE IN HIGHLAND PARK

Canek Aguirre [00:09:55] Oh man. So, I grew up on a dead end street. There was a hill across from us, and the path on the hill is known as the Donkey Trail. Don't ask me why. I have no idea.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:08] Wait, it was called a Donkey Trail?.

Canek Aguirre [00:10:09] Donkey trail. Yeah. It was all pretty much single family homes on my street and I feel that I grew up in a safe neighborhood and a good place. Other folks might see it differently, just because, you know, up on the Donkey Trail there was people having sex. There

was drugs. There was people drinking. And, you know, things happened in my neighborhood. But at the same time, I always, you know, felt good. And, I think the other thing that I have to note about that is just that, you know, when you think about L.A. and gangs and everything, I was in an area that was totally controlled by one gang. And so there wasn't, you know, a lot of turf wars and shootings and things like that. That's not to say that there wasn't other things going on, but compared to other parts of L.A., I feel pretty good. The main drag in Highland Park is York Boulevard and Figueroa. And so I grew up, you know, along York and Fig. But, I ended up going to school in Eagle Rock, which is the neighboring community just north of us, because I was in a magnet program. And otherwise I would've been zoned to go to Franklin and some other schools. Most of the shops would close like at nine and be shuttered. There was only one place that was open late, and that was the pool hall. People would get stabbed. But, my neighborhood's changed a lot since I went to college and went back. It's very, very different. But the way I grew up, it was still, you know, and it was very walkable. That's for sure. It was very, very walkable. And so the irony is when I got out to Alexandria and we were living in Del Rey, it did actually kind of remind me of being home because it was kind of a small knit community, easily walkable, you know, the stores, of course, being very, very different. You know, I grew up with a panaderia and taco stands and tamales and the shops and stuff like that. But yeah, it was still very walkable, got around a lot walking and I'd walk to school almost every day. Trying to think how, density was probably close in comparison to Alexandria. It's very, a very working class Mexican neighborhood. So it was probably like 98% Latino in my neighborhood, predominantly Mexican. So I'm trying to think what else about Highland Park.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:13:24] Who are some of the people that shaped you during childhood?

Canek Aguirre [00:13:30] Folks that come to mind, you know, my parents, of course. The big one is my father's mother because she helped to take care of me a lot. One, when I was in Mexico and then two, she had come to visit a few times and, you know, my parents would be at work and she'd be the one taking care of me. So I'd be in the kitchen watching her cook. She'd be singing. Just her life story in general. She went from living in rural poverty, coming to the city in Puebla and living in urban poverty, having eight children by herself, raising them, and in a space that, you know, people won't be able to see this but, you know about the size of where I am right now. So, you know, eight kids and a mom in a tiny space and everybody thinking that the kids were going to be, you know, drug addicts and prostitutes and criminals and everything. And several of them ended up getting master's degrees, several, you know, graduated from college. So she just, she means a lot to me. And school? I don't know. I think the only person that I would give credit to is Mr. Williams. He was college career counselor because he was kind of looking out for me. My high school was a seven through twelve school, and he met me when I was in seventh grade and kind of was tracking me as I was going through. And he's the one that really kind of opened my horizons, if you will, because I remember walking in to the office one day and he's just like, 'So we need to talk about schools. Where are you thinking about going?' And I was like, 'I'm going to go to PCC or GCC', the Community College in Pasadena or Glendale, because that's where all my friends are going. And I was going to hang out with them and like, his head dropped and he started shaking and he's like, 'We need to talk because you could go wherever you want.' And I didn't

know what that meant. I had no idea what that meant. But yeah, so Mr. Williams was, was always there looking out for me.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:16:07] What do you mean, 'you didn't know what that meant'? Can you tell me more about that?

Canek Aguirre [00:16:13] I guess it's one of those situations where, you know, this was my neighborhood and I wasn't really planning to go anywhere. Right? Like, I don't know what else is out there. I didn't really care to know. I was like, I'm happy here. I'm happy doing my thing. And, you know, at that point I was like, 'Oh, you know, I'll be like my mom. I'll end up being a schoolteacher,' just that instead of elementary school, I wanted to teach high school and teach high school math. And everything that I needed to be able to do that was basically where I was. So I didn't really think about, you know, going to a different part of the state, let alone a different part of the country. So yeah, that really kind of blew my mind when he was like, 'you can go wherever you want.' And I was like, I don't know what that means. And I don't think I actually visited any schools outside of California. I applied to a couple of schools outside of California, but I didn't visit any of them.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:17:16] Can you tell me more? Because I know you helped your mom. Will you talk more about those experiences?

Canek Aguirre [00:17:24] Yeah. So my mom switched careers. I want to say it was like 92, 94. She decided to become an elementary school teacher. She ended up teaching everything from K through six, but her bread and butter was like first and second grade. And when she was first starting out, she had a first and second grade combo class and I would actually go help her out. The hard thing to explain to people is that in L.A., we had tracks and so because the schools were so overcrowded, it was kind of like a situation where, say, two tracks were on and another track was off. And basically there was kids in the school year round. Some of the tracks were like, what our traditional school is like, right? You have the summer off. But then the other track, which my mom was on, she was actually in school during the summertime, and because they didn't want to leave me by myself, I would go and help tutor some of her classes. And because I've always been a little bit more advanced academically, you know, I was basically showing the kids how to do some of their math problems or help them with some of the reading or writing stuff. And after a couple of years doing that, my mom ended up kind of lending me out to other classrooms. And that went on probably until about seventh grade. So, probably like a solid six years I was doing it and then I would do it more sporadically because once I got to seventh grade, you know, I started doing summer school or whatever. And I think, I learned a lot doing that because it taught me a lot of patience because you can't really get mad at another kid for not understanding how to do something. You know, you're just trying to find another way to make them understand. And so that also, I think, helped me with my own mental flexibility and trying to explain things. And I will never forget one of my favorite memories of doing this. I was trying to show a younger student how to use a computer because computers were still, you know, relatively new at that time. And I was like, you have to push the button. Push the button. And the kid is just looking at me. I'm like,

all right, let me try in Spanish. I'm like, Dennis, get harder and harder and push button. And the kid's still staring at me. And there's another kid, you know, standing next to me and they're like, "puchale." "Puchale." And the kid was like, "oh, puchale." So he starts pressing the button, right? But, you know, they didn't understand English or Spanish, but they understood the Spanglish version of it, right? Because there's a lot of different words. You know, it's like parking in Spanish. It's this lesson on mental and now what people use as part cable, which is a real word, but it's what goes across for the Spanglish, if you will. But that memory with that young kid in Portugal there's so many different lessons there, you know, between patience, language, culture, you know, trying to figure out different ways to try and explain something to someone and 'Aha' moments and everything. It was just a lot.

INTEREST IN EDUCATION & PLANS FOR FUTURE

Francesco De Salvatore [00:21:06] Hmm. That's great. So is that where you think your interest in education came from? Started?

Canek Aguirre [00:21:14] Yeah, definitely. You know, like I said, I thought I was going to be a high school teacher. I really loved math. And so I was like, I'll teach math. I'll teach algebra, because I remember growing up a lot of kids either hated math or hated algebra. And, you know, algebra was one of those courses that you needed to be able to graduate high school, right? And there's actually a really famous teacher classroom movie with Edward James Olmos, where he's in the East L.A. High School. And, you know, basically he gets all the kids to do like one of the AP courses or something. And in a school, in a classroom where that's not supposed to be possible. You don't see my mom being a teacher, definitely some inspiration there. Working with kids, I enjoy doing that. I think to this day, you know, I still have a good rapport with children in general. I'm able to relate easily. I think that's part of the reason why I was successful in the school system here in Alexandria, because I was able to relate.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:22:25] So, you mentioned you were told to broaden your horizon for college. So where did you end up going?

Canek Aguirre [00:22:35] So I ended up, I thought I was going to go to Cal Berkeley, but the only thing they were offering me was loans. And money was definitely, you know, even though my parents told me not to think about it, it was definitely at the top of my mind in terms of, you know, how the heck are we going to pay for any of this stuff? And one of the other schools that I applied to happened to be UNC, Carolina, UNC Chapel Hill. And honestly, I applied to that school kind of as a joke because my mom had gone there back in the seventies and I was like, 'Oh, you know, sure, I'll apply there.' And the thing is, like, my mom never talked about her college experience. Like, didn't watch any sports. Zero Carolina gear. Like you could not find a Tar Heel anything in my house. So that's why it was like, it was a strange thing for me to do but I was like, you know, my mom went there, whatever. I'll put in an application. And I think another opportunity there, was to meet some of my family that I never met before. So when my financial aid package came back and Carolina was basically paying for half of it, off of an academic scholarship, it was kind

of difficult to say no to. And I said, you know, I'll see another part of the country. I'll get to meet family that I've never met before. And, you know, I got on a plane and I crossed my fingers and I said, 'Please Lord, let me like this campus and I'll try and make it work.' It was a culture shock getting there. You know, I mentioned earlier like my community was 90% Latino, predominantly Mexican. And now, I'm at a school that's less than 2% Latino and predominately not Mexican. And, you know, there's all kinds of dynamics in that. But, I just never really found my place there. And so, I really had a difficult time. It's not to say I didn't have any, you know, good memories. I mean, I enjoyed playing rugby. I met lifelong friends, several of which I'm still in touch with today. And I think the biggest thing is, you know, I found my wife there too, so I can't complain too much. But, I definitely have a little bit of a love hate relationship with North Carolina.

EXPERIENCES IN NORTH CAROLINA

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:23] Yeah. So, can you tell us specific experiences where you were actually experiencing a cultural shock? What were some of the specifics?

Canek Aguirre [00:25:37] I think the first thing was just the very strict white and black dynamic. It was like, if you're not white, then you're black. And if you're not black, then you're white and I'm like, but there's more cultures than that. There's more nuance, right? Because, what if you're an African immigrant? What if you're a Caribbean immigrant? What if you're Asian? But, a lot of what I would see is that whether you were Asian or Latino, if you grew up in a white neighborhood or a white area, then you gravitated more towards the white student population. But if you grew up in a more predominantly black neighborhood, then you would gravitate there. But there wasn't really anything else. And so, that just didn't really make sense to me. Coming from a place where, not only was I the predominant population, but it was very much clear that, you know, we're a multicultural society. You know, it's not just Asian, right? It's Japanese. It's India, Korean, Vietnamese, you know, Burmese, like Laotian, and you've got all these different things. And the same thing in Africa. You've got, what, 54 different countries? And then within each of those countries, there's different tribes. And then you go to Latin America and it's the same thing, right? And so, it just, it didn't fully compute with me, kind of people's worldviews and experiences. And I think the other thing, too, was, you know, some people would tell me, like, 'Yeah, I never saw a white person until I got here. I never saw a black person until I got here.' And I was just like, I don't know how you, what type of life that is? Right? Like, that was difficult for me to wrap my head around. And then, like I said, I never really found my place and I never really found a place where I was comfortable. And that's, you know, that's part of the reason why I tried to drop out a couple of times from school. You know, after my freshman year, I had gone back home to L.A. and I had like a really great summer. And I was like, I don't know, I don't want to go back. But, I went back and I was determined, 'Look, I'll finish my sophomore year, then I'll transfer back home to L.A. and do something.' You know, either one of the universities will take me or I'll just go to, you know, the community college and do that route again. But, you know, it didn't really work out. And I had a really rough sophomore year. A couple of people passed and it just was really difficult. And I didn't think I was going to come back for my junior year, so I was going to drop out again. But, I ended up going back to North Carolina for my junior year and I didn't have

anywhere to sleep because I didn't have any housing, because I didn't think I was going to be in the state. So that was, you know, just adding more and more difficulty to my situation there because, you know, I left a place and I didn't realize, number one, how rooted I was there and how much pride I felt being from L.A. And it's one of those situations where you don't appreciate something until you don't have it anymore. Right? And, you know, my entire support system and network, like all of that was uprooted. And I didn't have anything really in North Carolina. You know, I had my one aunt and my cousins who I love. And, you know, it was great to be able to have them there a couple of times because I wouldn't have had anywhere else to go because they closed the dorms. And I never understood this. Right? And, you know, when people talked about housing insecurity for college students and I was like, oh, I look back on it like, 'Yeah, that was me.' Because, you know, when they closed the dorms, I didn't have money to be able to go back home. Like, I had enough money to go back home for the summer, and then come back essentially. I didn't have time. I didn't have money to be going back for Christmas and Thanksgiving and Spring Break and whatever other freaking break was going on. Right? It's like, 'No, I got to save my money.' I literally failed a class. Bowling. I'll say it. I failed a bowling class because I had an airplane ticket to go back home. And if I had done it a day later, it literally would have been like \$300 more, which of course, I didn't have. And I told the guy and it was like, 'That's on you.' I was like, 'Sweet. Thanks, bro.' So I failed bowling, but whatever. I wasn't going to spend 300 more dollars. So yeah, like I said, going to North Carolina was a real love-hate relationship. Some good things happened, but, you know, there was a lot of difficulty, a lot of character building.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:31:00] What did you study, though?

Canek Aguirre [00:31:05] I actually did Latin American studies with a concentration in Spanish literature. So a lot of poetry. Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:31:13] Why did you decide to major in that?

Canek Aguirre [00:31:19] I don't remember who told me this, but it stuck in my head. They said, 'it doesn't matter what degree you get in college, because more than likely whatever job you have isn't going to be anything related to it. So just do whatever the heck you want.' And for whatever reason, that stuck in my head. And I was like, 'Oh yeah, cool.' Because originally I wanted to do Chicano studies, but that's not offered really on the East Coast too much or outside of the Southwest, to be honest. And I found out that Carolina had like a really, really great, Latin American Studies program and I was like, 'Cool, I'll do that.' So geography, politics, society, you know, all that stuff. Economics for Latin America, which I'm glad that I went through because it really helped to like, fill in some details because as a kid, I was, you know, kind of curious on my own and I would do some of my own research and anecdotally, I kind of know some stuff. But, going through the courses actually helped to fill in a lot of specifics and details. But, I also, Carolina only lets you have two majors or a major and a minor. Otherwise, I would have had like four or five minors because I did get an official minor, I think, in African-American studies. But, I also had a minor essentially in biology and chemistry and Spanish, and I was like a class or two away from a from a minor in chemistry or excuse me, physics, because a buddy of mine had

convinced me to kind of like, go on the pre-med track. And so, I was taking a bunch of those science courses. Plus coming out of high school, I was a big math and science guy, so like, I kind of wanted to do that anyway, but I always kind of think back and like, 'what would have things been like if I hadn't been, got like an engineering degree or something?' Right? Clearly, I wouldn't be here in this position now I don't think, because my trajectory probably would have been a lot different. But it's still, you know, every now and then I wonder like 'I wonder what that would have been like?' But yeah, it's I think, the path I took eventually got me here. I do appreciate that, however difficult it may have been.

MEETING FUTURE WIFE

Francesco De Salvatore [00:33:42] Can you remember, can you describe how you met your wife?

Canek Aguirre [00:33:46] Yeah. Yeah, I know. I know very well how I met my wife. We had chemistry together. Literally and figuratively. Freshman year, second semester, we were both taking chem lab and a guy that I just met, we decided to be partners. Lab partners. And he's still a very, very good friend to this day. He was also another out-of-state student, and a girl had a crush on him. And that girl's lab partner happened to be my future wife. And so, we're at a lab. He's here, I'm here. The other girl is here. And then my wife is over here. And so, you know, she's flirting with him. And then we're just kind of naturally talking and getting to know each other or whatever. And throughout the years at school, we kind of stayed in touch. But, usually one of us was in a relationship. And it wasn't until senior year, her last semester, my second to last semester, because of course, I needed an extra year since one year, one semester I got the full alphabet. But yeah, so we started going out senior year and didn't stop going out.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:18] So, what's her name?

Canek Aguirre [00:35:21] Her name is Ajusha. Yeah.

POST-COLLEGIATE LIFE & MOVING TO ALEXANDRIA

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:26] And so what, after school, what kept you in North Carolina?

Canek Aguirre [00:35:34] Nothing, really. After school I went, so it was a transition period. So, my fifth year I would actually go back and forth to South Carolina where Ajusha was and we would visit each other. And she would come up and see me every now and then. And we were kind of figuring out, because I was graduating in December of 2007. So, we were trying to figure out, you know, kind of what our situation was looking like, because I was dead set on going back to L.A. So, you know, after graduation in December, I actually packed my car up and one of my cousins came with me and we drove cross-country. I kind of duplicated my parents trip back in 1980, when they got married and drove across the country. I kind of replicated that and I went back to L.A. and, you know, I probably would have, because she came to visit me. I wanted to go visit her. She was working on a campaign. And so, like I wanted to go help her out on her

campaign, drive back across the country from Denver back to North Carolina via New York, Chicago and New York. Yeah, and I was pretty much ready to, you know, stay in L.A. But, you know, in 2008, we lost our home the week of Christmas and didn't really know what to do. And that's how I ended up back in North Carolina. And that was a very, very difficult two years, 2009 to 11, because I was working four jobs. And, you know, it was like 80, 90 hours a week. I had managed to get it down to two jobs, which was nice, but it was still, you know, 60, 70 hours a week. And, I can't say that I was making much money either, because when I had four jobs, I was working at a grocery store, a fast food burrito place, a sit down, casual, fine dining type place and I was working at the hospital, at the UNC hospital in their clinical patient, the med school's clinical patient program where the irony was that I would basically pretend that I didn't speak English. But, it was for the fourth year med students. They go practice on real people, right? And try and figure out what their ailments are, what the situation is, and dealing with different things, like someone who doesn't speak English. Right? That job I enjoyed immensely. Plus it paid well, which is the big thing. But, I was still, you know, I was always exhausted. I would basically just get up, go to work and then go to sleep for a couple of hours and then be back at it and still barely being able to, you know, pay the rent and support myself. I think a couple of big things: one, since I was at a restaurant, I didn't always really need to worry about food, so that was a cost that wasn't too heavy. And fortunately, the bus system there was free too. So, I didn't have to worry about transportation costs. So, it was really just the rent and utility bill. But, like I said, it was still difficult a lot of times to be able to to make the rent and the utility bill. And yeah, just, it's like I'd be up like six or seven in the morning and be at work and I'd be working probably until, you know, anywhere between two and four in the morning. So, that was that. So, I got home at three and had to be at work at seven. That's like, 4 hours of sleep I guess I was getting a day. So, yeah, it was a rough two years.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:39:58] What was it like losing your childhood home?

Canek Aguirre [00:40:02] Don't want to talk about it.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:40:07] And I guess, what is it like thinking about those years? Those tough two years? You were working a lot. What's it like right now?.

Canek Aguirre [00:40:19] Um. You know, I like to joke that, you know, a lot of character building. But yeah, it was a struggle. Also pretty lonely. Again, no parents. Not really family because I was working all the time. So I, you know, every now and then I'd be able to see my aunt and my cousins. And then Ajusha had actually moved up to the D.C. area, because she had gotten an internship on the Hill. And that's eventually what led to me coming up to this area. But yeah, it was a, it was rough. Yeah, it was rough. But like I said, I found out a lot about myself. Resiliency, resourcefulness. You know, I think the good thing is that a lot of the skills that my father taught me in terms of just survival came very much in handy. And yeah, it was, you know, basically it was, if our relationship was going to continue, it was like, you know, one of us has to move one place or the other. And, you know, my prospects weren't looking too good. So it was like, let's go check out DC. Like, what do I know? And so, I migrated up this way to meet up with Ajusha and,

you know, see what was going on. And two funny things that come to mind: number one, I thought that we would only be here for like a year or two. 12 years later, we're still here. 14 for her. And number two, she might deny this, but she gave an ultimatum. So, first off, let me tell you what happened when I moved up here. So, I leave North Carolina in the middle of the night, had packed all my stuff up, and it's a four hour drive, right? So, it's not like from where I was to to her place was a quick drive. This is a four hour drive. I get up into Arlington, get to her place, and then she tells me, 'Oh, yeah, by the way, we're running a 5K in the morning.' And I'm like, 'Excuse me?' I don't even remember how this happened. I think one of her friends might have been in town, and that's why we ended up doing this 5K. So, and of course, you know, still thinking that I'm an athlete, I'm like, 'I got to run this thing.' So, I run this 5K, go back and get to her place. And I'm looking around, I'm like, 'Wait, did you pack anything?' She was like, 'No.' So, I have to pack all this stuff up because, you know, we're on the clock, right? For the rental truck and everything. Pack all her stuff and get to Alexandria. We were moving into Auburn Village on Ashby Street, and I'll never forget this, because I'm like, I'm exhausted. I'm about to pass out between the drive the night before, you know, running the 5K, packing all her stuff in the morning and then finally getting over here and trying to unpack. The neighbor across the street, actually, like walked out and was like, 'Hey, you need some help?' And I was like, 'Please. God. Yes.' So, he helped us move in, you know, took back the truck and then passed out. So, it was hard. And then, the ultimatum I was given was, 'you need to find a job in two months, otherwise you got to get out.' Luckily, though.

OBTAINING FIRST JOB IN ALEXANDRIA

Francesco De Salvatore [00:44:32] Did you find a job in two months?

Canek Aguirre [00:44:34] I did. I did. I was very lucky. So, I'll never forget, I got here, was it June or July? Yeah, I think it was June. June. Barely in two months. Yes, barely. So, I got here in June of 2011 to Alexandria. I really didn't want to go back to the restaurant business because, you know, no health care, no other benefits here, just paycheck to paycheck. Don't get me wrong, I love the restaurant industry. Like I had a great time. But it's hard work. And like I said, no benefits, no retirement or anything, you know, health insurance. And I had gotten a few offers from local restaurants here in Alexandria, but my wife had actually, girlfriend at the time, but, you know, Ajusha, she's the one that ended up finding the job. It was a job with Alexandria City Public Schools. And I didn't think that I was qualified for the job. And so I had applied in late June and hadn't heard anything. Didn't hear anything in June. Didn't hear anything in July. And I had completely forgotten about that job. And plus, I'm coming up on this two month ultimatum. Right? And then I get a call in August from George Washington Middle School. And they're like, 'Yeah, we want you to come interview for this position.' And I was like, 'Oh I didn't even know you were still hiring for it. Yeah, I'll come in for an interview.' And that leads to a really great small world story because I get to this interview and there's three principals because at the time it's one campus, but two schools. And it was a weird experiment that the school system was going through. Since then, they've gotten rid of that and just said, 'We're just gonna have one campus, one school.' And anyway, the principals are in the room, three out of the four, and they're interviewing me and the

head principal from one school says like, 'Where are you from?' I'm like 'L.A.' He kind of chuckles. And I'm like, 'Oh, that's weird. Wow. I wonder why this guy's laughing?' And he says, you know, 'What part of L.A.?' I'm like, 'Highland Park.' Then he laughs again. And now I'm kind of like, feeling some kind of way. I'm like, 'Why is this guy laughing about, like, where I'm from? Like, where I grew up? Like, that's kind of disrespectful.' So, I'm getting a little upset. And so I, you know, as politely as I can, I'm like, 'What's so funny?' And he says, 'No. So I was born in Pasadena, grew up some, spent some time in North Cal, came back down' and sorry, Pasadena is literally on the border with Highland Park. So, this guy is essentially, like practically from the same neighborhood I am. Just like a neighborhood over. Basically, think like Alexandria and Arlington or something. That's kind of like to put it in a local perspective. And then he goes on to say that he went to college at Occidental College, which is the school I had to walk through every day to be able to get to high school. And it didn't stop there, because I was like, 'Oh, do you do any sports?' He's like, 'Yeah, I played football.' I was like, 'Oh, wow. Like, do you happen to know DeLeon?' And he was like, 'Yeah, I played linebacker with him.' And I was like, that blew my mind because here I am, 2000 miles on the other side of the country. Don't really know a soul other than my wife. And this guy played football with my high school football coach. Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:48:43] So, you obviously ended up getting that job, right?

Canek Aguirre [00:48:45] Yeah. Yeah. I did end up getting that job. And little did I know, that that job was going to basically be the springboard or a precursor to everything else that I ended up doing in Alexandria.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF ALEXANDRIA

Francesco De Salvatore [00:48:58] What, when you first moved to the area, what was your impression of Alexandria?

Canek Aguirre [00:49:03] Oh, that it was really hot. Like I said, it actually did remind me a little bit of being back home, just because of the walkability. And, I got this sense of community that, like, people kind of knew each other. You know, if I was new to the area and wasn't part of that, you know, close knit community yet, I still can, like, sense it around me. It's definitely more urban than Chapel Hill. More opportunities.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:49:43] Well, what neighborhood did you move to?

Canek Aguirre [00:49:47] Del Rey.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:49:48] Del Rey.

Canek Aguirre [00:49:48] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:49:49] So, can you describe what the area looked like at that time?

Canek Aguirre [00:49:59] Vibrant. I'm not sure, like, you know, small shops. Not a lot of, you know, chains, if any. Very walkable, bikeable. Lots of green space, variety of housing. You got some real nice single family homes. But, you also had, you know, it used to be the Calvert Del Rey Tower now. So you have a, you know, high rise, you have mid-rises. We were living in a two story, I guess garden style sort of apartments. Lots of brick. Definitely a lot of brick. But yeah, it just seemed like a really, it seemed like a really cool place.

WORK IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM & CONNECTING WITH THE LATINO COMMUNITY

Francesco De Salvatore [00:50:44] Did you, when you first came, were you able to connect or at least see like the Latin population here?

Canek Aguirre [00:51:01] In my first month or two, no. Once I got into the school system, that kind of changed everything. And I think, I give a lot of credit to having worked in the school system for my success here in the city of Alexandria because you have a lot of folks, you know, they'll commute into DC and come back. My wife was one of them. And it gives you a very different perspective and experience. You know, you're outside of the city for most of the day, and then when you get back to the city, you're basically just at home, right? So then, you're not exploring. You're not really interacting. You're not really engaged. But, being in the school system, part of what attracted me to the job in the first place, besides the benefits, because I really wanted to have health benefits again and go see the dentist. The middle school at the time was 30, 30, 30. It was 30% white, 30% black, 30% Latino. And I was just really like, kind of blown away by that because that doesn't always really happen, right? It's usually predominantly black, predominantly Latino, predominantly white. But, you don't really see a lot of schools that have that like mix. And I think, that's one of the things that I came to appreciate with Alexandria was definitely the diversity that we have in the city. And, being the bilingual parent liaison, while I immediately got plugged into the Latino community, specifically, and the Arlandria-Chirilagua neighborhood and interacting with the different nonprofits and businesses there. So, one of the first events that I had to put together, I actually got food donated from like three or four restaurants in Chirilagua. And so, like, I think that was a good like, 'Oh, you know, the community's charitable. The community cares, wants to support the kids.' And then, I also had a chance to to work with a couple of nonprofits early on. So Casa Chirilagua was maybe a year or two into their existence. And so, I was working with them closely and helping them out with stuff. Community lodgings and tons of workers both have been around for a couple of decades before I got here. But, I definitely got to see into a different lens by going and working with community lodgings and tons of workers.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:53:41] Can you recall some of the students that you worked with during that time?

Canek Aguirre [00:53:45] Yeah, I can recall a lot of them.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:53:47] Which ones were your top? What were the ones that stick out?

Canek Aguirre [00:53:51] I mean, in terms of what?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:53:53] Just memories with them.

Canek Aguirre [00:53:58] Again, I've got a bunch. I don't even know where to start with that. Doing the intramurals with the kids was a lot of fun. I remember one time, one of the kids got hit by a ball on accident and like, I could tell that he had completely seen red and he was about to go charge this kid. And I had to get in front of him and I like yelled his name out at him. And you can see him kind of like snap out of it and look at me. I'm like, 'Where are you? You okay?' He's like, 'Yeah, yeah.' I was like, 'It was an accident.' He was like, 'Oh, yeah, I guess it was.' I was like, 'We cool, we cool?' Because the kid was basically my size and, you know, at the middle school it's six through eighth grade. We had some pretty big kids for middle school. And then, you had the other kids that looked like they were still in elementary school. Right? So, basically someone my size going after someone that was still like, you know, maybe five feet. So, I had to make sure that I got myself in there. I've actually, because a lot of those kids are grown now, and I actually keep in touch with a few of them and, you know, keeping a couple of fights from happening, and I remember one student came to me and was like, 'I'm going to get jumped after school. So-and-so is going to come after me.' I was like, 'I'll take care of it.' Like, I went to another student's classroom and I pulled them out a little bit. Actually, I just waited at the door when the bell rang. I just kind of stopped them and I said, 'Hey, let me walk with you to the bus. I wanted to ask you some stuff.' And, I was actually doing something that way that I normally do, which was just asking the kids how things were going, how they like the class. The specific student had been bumped up to an honors class, and so, I was keeping my eye on them to see how they were doing. And, they looked really confused. They're like, 'Why are you asking me these questions?' Right? I'm like, 'No, I want to see how you're doing in the class.' They're like, 'No, no. Things are good. I'm adjusting to this or that.' I was like, 'Cool,' get them on the bus and, you know, fight averted, you know, stealthily. Nobody had to know. Just me and the other kid. I also have some other memories. Not so fond. I partially don't feel like I'm at liberty to discuss some of them. But, yeah, there was definitely some other situations that are not as nice, but we had a really good year. We had a really good year. And my subsequent job, I ended up going back to the school as much as I could. And, I remember talking to one of the teachers and she was like, 'That was a really good year. We had a really good, solid team of people that year.' And so, for that person to be able to recall that, like sticks out of my mind and it's like I feel good about that year that I was there at the school.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:57:02] And it was just the beginning of you really working there, right?

Canek Aguirre [00:57:04] Yeah, that was my very first year. It was my very first year. It was so funny because in my second year people were like, 'Yeah, you have been here for like five years, right?' I was like, 'No, this is my second year.' And even, once I had left the school system, you know, seven years later, people were still like, 'Oh, are you still at the school.' I was like, 'No, no,

I left the school a while ago.' But, I feel like that tells me that I left a pretty significant impact in what I was doing.

BEGINNING WORK WITH FACE PROGRAM

Francesco De Salvatore [00:57:31] And so, how long did you work before you started working for FACE [Family and Community Engagement]?

Canek Aguirre [00:57:40] Well, FACE is part of ACPS [Alexandria City Public Schools], so I spent one year at George Washington Middle School as the bilingual parent liaison. And, because of the work I was doing there, I got noticed. And former school board member, Margaret Lorber, she actually was the division wide parent liaison at the time, she came to GW. She's like, 'Did they talk to you? Did they talk to you?' And this is like right outside, like the buses had just taken off and I was like, 'Did who talk to me? What are you talking about Margaret?' She's like, 'Oh, come on, come on, let's go inside.' And we go inside and she's like, 'Yeah, this position opened up, you really need to apply. I think you'll be great at it.' And I was like, 'Oh, okay. Cool. Like, let me look it up right now.' And it was the Community Engagement Specialist. I think that was the title. But, the FACE program was a new program. It was kind of a reincarnation of Family Academy. Karen Parker Thompson had run the Family Academy and they brought in this new person from Saint Louis, her name is Shanna Sampson, and they brought her in to be the manager for the FACE Center, kind of give it a little bit more structure. I don't know all the details behind the scenes in terms of funding and support from the administration and from the school board. But, you know, they were like, 'Yeah, we want to do this family community engagement center. We want to create welcoming spaces for families' because honestly, ACPS did not have the best reputation for being welcoming to minority and immigrant families. People just didn't really feel comfortable coming to the school. One of the biggest wins that we got at the time, while I was still a bilingual parent liaison, was getting a direct line for me to my office. I don't know if I should mention her name or not, but one of the PTA members came to my office one day and was like, 'What can I help you get done, that'll have the biggest impact?' And I said, 'Having a phone number that goes directly to me,' which she was like, 'All right, I think we could do that.' And she ended up getting me that phone line. It ended up being a big difference because, you know, people call in to the main office and they get lost with whatever. But, then if they called me directly, then I either handled their situation or was able to do a warm handoff somewhere else. But just, you know, like I said, creating a space where a parent feels that they can be heard and get what they needed essentially. Right? So, it was FACE Center. It was a three person team. It was me, Shanna and Linda. Linda was our admin person, who also had close to 20 years of experience in the school system at the time. And so, she knew everybody. She knew how to get things done. Shanna was kind of like the big idea person. And then, I was the implementation arm. And so, if your idea wasn't too far out there, like I'd go execute, otherwise I'd be like, 'Hey, given our capacity, what if we shifted a little bit this way?' But, we were like a well-oiled machine, man. We, I don't even know how many, we put out a report. We were doing two or three workshops a night. Yeah, it was crazy. And we were pumping out crazy amount of workshops, both for parents and for students, on a variety of topics. Everything from computer literacy to like, 'Who's my teacher and how do I contact them?' And

yeah, it was a whirlwind. It was a whirlwind. But that really, you know, I went from working in one school and basically one community in Alexandria to working at all the schools in Alexandria. Across all the communities, working with nonprofits, with churches, with the city government and the different school groups and everything. And so, that's really what kind of expanded my knowledge. And, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention this one last thing about the FACE Center. So, I've been in the system for about a year. Shanna has been in the system for a couple of months and we get tasked with doing this really big Back to School event. Right? And, we're going to have a guest speaker. We're going to give away backpacks and school supplies. We're going to have food and it's like, 'Yeah, we should have some vendors.' It's only the three of us putting this whole thing together. And depending on who you ask, you get varying stories on how the night went, but I remember like yelling and screaming being like, 'Please. We need more help. We need more support.' And people were like, 'You'll be lucky if you get, you know, fifty people at this thing, maybe a hundred, right?' We'd be very lucky. What people I don't think totally realized, is that we were doing a level of engagement that hadn't really been seen before. Knocking on people's doors, handing out fliers, making phone calls. We had over 70 vendors at the high school, at ACHS [Alexandria City High School], and we were just given the auditorium and the cafeteria, basically. That was like, and outwards, which if you know the school, there's not a lot of space because we didn't have like any of the classrooms or anything. And I think the other big difference is that we provided transportation and I don't think people had really done that before. So, we had bus routes from across the city that would come drop people off at the high school and then go back. And, we had over 2000 people show up and it was a madhouse, but it was a raging success in terms of being able to get parents and kids and the entire family to come out to an event. Yeah, so that was really cool. That was a lot of fun. And we did that twice. And the second time, they still didn't give us more access to the high school. We still had limited space. And the irony is, you know, a couple of years later I'm in my other job and, I'm in Fairfax County, and I mean, they're utilizing the entire high school space and they're putting on these massive, massive Back to School events, which basically we had done, but with, you know, very limited space and very limited capacity in terms of who was working on it because, I mean, they had full blown committees. We had like three people.

EARLY COMMUNITY OUTREACH EFFORTS

Francesco De Salvatore [01:04:44] Talk more about like, what did you do to make the engagement successful?

Canek Aguirre [01:04:52] It was a lot of door knocking and then transitioning to phone calling. And I think part of it was making sure that we had a good system set up for that. But, really the one on one engagement and delivering on things. I guess let me take a step back. So, part of the job that I had with FACE was to either establish or reestablish relationships and communication with different nonprofit partners. And I definitely ran into to some of the nonprofits that were either reluctant or just straight out, like, 'You're just another ACPS guy, you all talk a big game and then don't do anything.' So, the first thing that I went out to do was to make sure that I delivered for them, because once I started delivering for them, they knew that, you know, one: I can be

counted on and trusted. So then when I came back and asked them for something, they would deliver for me. And so, the partnerships with those nonprofits was, I can't even tell you how valuable it was. Because they had more of the trust and relationship with the families than we did. Right? We built our reputation out with our workshops and people were enjoying them. But, to get to people in those workshops in the beginning, we needed help from our partners to be able to get the word out to people. So, we would go knock doors in the neighborhood. We would send flyers home, we would make phone calls, and we would have our community partners double down on all of that. Right? And so, that's what really helped to make sure that we had people showing up at all these workshops. And because we would follow up, because, you know, these parents, they come and have a great time for the workshop, but then they might have other questions about something else going on in school. And so, we would help them follow up with that and report back with our community partners as well. And so, you know, it's just a big feedback loop helping each other. And because, we make sure that that loop was actually circulating and working and not just going in one direction, that we had a lot of success.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:07:17] Well, what needs did you find that the families had?

Canek Aguirre [01:07:24] I mean, everything. Every family had some type of need. I can go through a whole list of them. But, I mean you're talking about housing and childcare for the kids that aren't in school yet. Who the heck is my teacher? How do I call the school? How do I make an appointment to go to the school? I don't understand what these grades are, like does that mean my kid is doing good or bad? I don't know. You know, food insecurity. Where can I go get a, you know, a food pantry and get some extra food for my kids? You know, where are summer school activities? I mean, the list just goes on and on in terms of needs. So, I mean, this is what made me a resource myself, being a resource hub, because I constantly had to be figuring out some of these issues for the parents and for the families. And so like, okay, where do I get this? Where do I get that? Who can I connect them with? And who, when I connect them with, is actually going to get it done? Right? And not push them aside or tell them like 'Yeah, get in line' or whatever. Right? So, yeah, I mean, there's just so many different things. I mean, healthcare. Right? Like immigration issues, legal issues. I mean, there's just a little bit of everything. As affluent and wealthy as a community we are in Alexandria, we still have very, very deep pockets of inequity and poverty. And, I think sometimes people forget that. But, it is there and it's not there for no reason. Because, if we're being honest with ourselves, a lot of the cheap labor force that has helped different parts of our economy, whether it's restaurants or hotels, comes from these immigrant groups. Right? So, yeah, it's something that we have to be cognizant of and being intentional with the way we're approaching things and trying to provide support.

TRANSITIONING TO MEDICAID OUTREACH PROGRAM

Francesco De Salvatore [01:09:40] All right. So, yeah, could you maybe tell us a little bit more about, so what happens after FACE?

Canek Aguirre [01:09:47] So, I think part of irony is that, so having done that large scale Back to School event where we had, you know, over 2000 people, one of the vendors that was actually participating took notice of what I was doing and kind of followed the workshops that I was doing and then, you know, participated again in the second Back to School event where we had even more people than the first time. And, she basically reached out and said, 'My company is having an opening and I really think you should apply.' And, my initial reaction was, 'I don't know anything about marketing', because she said this is a marketing position. And I was like, 'I don't know what that means.' But, she was like, 'No, you'll be perfect for this. Like, it's basically a community outreach job.' And I was like, 'Oh, okay, well, sure, I'll apply.' So, I applied to a job with Anthem Health Keepers Plus, which is a managed care organization for the State of Virginia Medicaid Plan, which is ingrained in my mind because I had to say that over and over again all the time whenever I was introducing certain things. But, you know, I went from working in one school and one part of Alexandria to working across all the schools in Alexandria. Across the entire city of Alexandria. And now, with this new position, I was working across all of Northern Virginia. I covered 18 different jurisdictions from Winchester down to Fauquier and Culpeper. The bulk of the work though was done in what most people consider Northern Virginia, which is Loudon, Prince William, Fairfax, Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax City, Falls Church City, Manassas Park in Manassas. That's nine? Yes. So, that's where I spent probably 80% of my time. And, I was informing people how Medicaid worked, informing them how they can apply for Medicaid. But, at the same time, a lot of the work that I was doing was kind of social work adjacent. I say adjacent purposely because I don't want to say that I was being a social worker, since I'm actually on the board of social work for the state of Virginia. And, I have a lot of respect for the folks that have their degrees and then had to go through the entire process to get their degrees. But basically, I had my Medicaid population and anyone or anything that interacted with them, I would involve myself with that group. So, I worked with churches, local nonprofits, local and state government, schools. I literally was on the advisory board for every single Head Start Northern Virginia, helping guide them with not just health stuff, but also outreach. I was, in a way kind of like a nonprofit mercenary, helping different groups, you know? Whether it was event planning, strategic planning, how to do community outreach, I was kind of involved in helping all those different things across all of Northern Virginia, across a variety of different groups. Yeah, and I loved it. It was another job where, you know, I was providing a service to others. I was helping them with things that they needed, which healthcare's one of the biggest issues in the country. And, at the same time that I was doing, you know, health stuff, when you're dealing with the most vulnerable communities, there's going to be other issues that you run into, right? So, transportation issues, immigration issues, legal issues, housing insecurity, food insecurity, child care. I mean, you name it, I was having to deal with it. So, that's why I would say, while I would deal with my Medicaid population directly, I would also involve myself with everyone that had an impact on their lives. Because I had to know what resources to be able to provide them, to help them with whatever need that they had. And, you know, this is getting more into the social determinants of health and equity work, basically. Right? So, I was kind of ahead of the curve on a lot of people when we're talking about social determinants of health and and equity, because I didn't realize it, but I was working on it since I was at the school system, but really actively talking about it in 2014 and really trying to make pushes from my outside role. I then, let me take a quick

step back. So, being at FACE, we were running workshops Monday through Thursday. And so, like every single one of my nights was taken up. I didn't have any free nights. And every now and then, I would have to be working on Saturdays, too. So with my new job, I had a lot of flexibility. I still did nights and weekends, but not every single night and not every single weekend. So, that actually gave me the opportunity to participate in other things. And that's why I got involved with the Partnership for Healthier Alexandria. I got onto the steering committee for that, started advocating for different ways for the city to actually do community engagement. Because at that time, they were kind of experimenting with pop ups and like showing up at grocery stores or bus stops. And, there was actually some pushback internally to be able to do community engagement like that. But, from my position on the Partnership for Healthier Alexandria, we were really try to push that, 'No, that's a good thing. That's a good thing. Let's do that.' I was also, at that time, involved on the leadership council for the Alexandria campaign on adolescent pregnancy. And so, same thing, you know, pushing from different places to try and make some change in the city, because I felt that the city was a little bit more open and willing to change some things, as opposed to the schools where I found it a little bit more difficult to create change. Like I said, I have some more free time because of my job and I got involved with....oh, I took City Academy. Yeah, that's what I had time to do. City Academy. Because, they would meet on Thursdays and I've been interested in doing it for a couple of years, but I couldn't do it because I was at work.

BECOMING INVOLVED IN CIVIL SERVICE

Francesco De Salvatore [01:16:35] Can you describe what the City Academy was?

Canek Aguirre [01:16:38] Yeah. So, City Academy is a program that Councilwoman Joyce Woodson started back in, I don't know, maybe the early 2000s? And, it's basically an opportunity for residents to learn how the city operates, what all the different city departments do. And you go in once a week, it's like 6 to 10 weeks. Don't quote me on the number, I can't remember. But, different department heads come in and they basically explain to you what their department does, how they operate, how you would interact with them. And, part of the impetus that I did that, you know, having been the parent liaison at GW, like I wanted to know how to provide more resources to my families that I was still working with. Right? Because, even though I left the school system, I was still in touch with a lot of people. Plus, with my new job at Anthem, I was still in the community doing things. So, the more information and knowledge I could gain, the easier it would be for me to provide services and suggestions and resources to others. And so, that's kind of why I wanted to take City Academy. And because of City Academy, I learned about boards and commissions, which I didn't really know anything about before. And, after graduating from City Academy, I joined the Health Services Agency of Northern Virginia, and that was for the first Board of Commission I was able to serve on, and later on I was serving on the board for Tenants and Workers United. And because I was there, I got appointed to the Economic Opportunities Commission, which after a year I think, I was the vice chair. And then, the second year or third year I was actually the chair. And I didn't realize it at the time, but apparently the EOC was a springboard for a lot of different council candidates and past and present and future council members. Because, I think Paul Smedberg, Tim Lovain and Alison Silberberg, more recently, Kirk

McPike and myself had all served on the Economic Opportunities Commission. And yeah, I didn't know it at the time. You know, it's kind of, telling the future, if you will.

WORK WITH TENANTS & WORKERS UNITED

Francesco De Salvatore [01:18:59] So, tell us more about your experience with the board at Tenants and Workers United. What are those experiences that stand out to you?

Canek Aguirre [01:19:07] I was a little surprised at first when I got invited to be on the board. I had worked with them while I was in the school system to help, you know, provide some connections with, you know, a parent-teacher day, parent-teacher conferences, just different events that were going on. And then, when I was at FACE, they would help to kind of spread the word a little bit for events that were going on. And, I would try and help them out with whatever I could. And, they asked me for a brief amount of time to be an interpreter for some of their meetings. And so, I was involved with that for a little while. And, because of some work I'd been doing in the community, and they saw, you know, interacting with me as the interpreter, they later on extended an invitation to participate on their board. And I was like, 'Oh, sure.' Because, you know, coming from L.A. and always kind of being socially conscious, this social justice nonprofit was right up my alley and I was like, 'Yeah, I would love to, you know, help out and everything.' It was, I came in at a kind of a difficult time financially for the organization, but it really helped to get the nonprofit back on its feet. Provided a little bit of stability. And then, I think the other thing that was really important was to kind of reestablish relationships with the institutions in the city, with both the schools, the city as a government and a couple of other organizations, because Tenants and Workers has a history of ruffling feathers, to put it nicely. But, they've been on the right side of a lot of things. And it's funny, because you look back at some of the history of what they've done, now it's kind of like, 'Yeah, that makes sense.' You know, they had push for banning the box, they had pushed for better pay for childcare providers, they pushed for making a full penny for affordable housing. So, a lot of things that now are just kind of like commonplace are like, 'Yeah, that makes sense.' They were kind of at the vanguard of a lot of it back in the day and had a lot of pushback. And, you know, people don't always like to be held accountable. So, when you have certain tactics and it can, you know, it could create a lot of tension. And I think that I helped to smooth over some of that tension when I got on the board. And they're still doing what they do. Right? They're still agitating and they're still trying to hold people accountable. They're still in the vanguard of a lot of different issues. And that's what I really appreciate about them. But, being on Tenants and Workers and being on the Economic Opportunities Commission at the same time, really gave me a platform to advocate for affordable housing. And, I've actually talked about this from the dais along with Kirk, but when Ramsey Homes was being constructed, Ramsey Homes is an AHA [Affordable Housing Alliance] property that was slated for demolition. The conditions there were terrible. The electrical panel couldn't handle the AC or the heating units were constantly bust. People were having respiratory issues because there was so much mold. I mean, there's all kinds of problems. And, the proposal was to put in a four storey apartment building, all affordable, and people were very much against it. The residents actually asked for a special vote, which meant that there had to be a supermajority from council to be able to pass it, which means it had to be

like six-one. It was one of the longest council meetings. There was a public hearing, I think that started at nine-thirty and went to like one in the morning. And, that was the first time that I spoke in front of council to kind of give my thoughts on affordable housing and everything. And it was very contentious, but ended up passing. It's there now and nobody notices it. Nobody knows that it's, I mean, unless you're in the city and around it, nobody realizes that it's an affordable housing complex, you know? But, it's in a great position. It's blocks from the metro. And actually, last year I was at the the burger joint at the seminary, and one of the staff members that was working there was talking about how unaffordable it is in the city and how thankful she was for having the place at Ramsey Homes, which is called The Lineage now, I think. And they were saying like, 'Yeah, I wouldn't be able to live here if it wasn't for this Lineage place.' And I just broke out in a big old smile. And you know, it means a lot when you're just like, 'That's why we fought for this. So that someone like you can live here in the city and be here.'

Francesco De Salvatore [01:24:39] Can you describe some of the night? So, you gave testimony. Can you talk more about that? Talk about going there that night, what did you say?

Canek Aguirre [01:24:52] Like I said, it was really contentious. We got there early in the morning, waited for hours, and then finally got the opportunity to speak. I remember my comments were geared around my own personal experience and trying to gain a foothold here in Alexandria, myself. And, I described myself in terms of the area median income, because when I first got to Alexandria, I was, you know, 20-30% of the area median income, because in the school system, as a parent liaison, I think I was making 18 or \$19,000. And then, with my stipend, I was doing Saturday school and I was doing intramurals. I think that got me up to like, maybe 21, 22K. And so I said, you know, I am 30% of the area median income, and then I got promoted and now I am, you know, 40% of the area median income. And then, I got my job with Anthem and now I'm, you know, 60% of the area median income. And basically, what you're saying to me, if you don't want to build this building, is that you don't want me or my wife here. So, I was really trying to personalize it, to say we are two individuals that are active in the community. We're renters, because there is this whole farce saying that renters don't care about the community and that homeowners are the ones that have the ultimate say in everything because they pay taxes, even though renters pay taxes through their rent. Right? And, you know, it was basically just saying, asking the city to keep creating spaces for individuals that are trying to live here because the whole affordable housing thing gets thrown into a lot of dog whistles. I'll just say a lot of racist things where people are like 'My home values are going to go down.' You know, crime is going to go up. You know, pollution, traffic, all this other stuff. And it's just, this is not really true because people don't understand what the area median income means and what affordable housing is. That's why we try to phrase it as housing opportunities, because everyone needs a housing opportunity from, you know, the college student that's just coming back from school that, are they're going to live in their parents basement or are they going to have to go live, you know, in Winchester? You talk about young professionals that are just getting started. You talk about seniors, right? Do they have a place to age in place? Can they downgrade, if they want to downgrade? Can they stay in their home if they want to stay there? So, housing opportunities affect everyone of all ages. So, it's something that we have to constantly be looking at here in the city. Ever since I got here, it's

always been a problem. It's always been, you know, and NOVA [Northern Virginia] does their health assessment. What's the number one thing? Housing. The community health assessment that we do with the partnership of Healthier Alexandria and the Health Department, what's the number one thing? Housing. From children, youth and families from the schools, what are the issues they say? Housing. So a couple of years ago, when I finally started getting to the national stage, I was happy that people were finally listening, that, you know, housing is just this incredible need and we're just in a huge crisis around it. But, I feel like I'm getting away from things. But yeah, that's kind of the gist of what happened that night. And like I said, how I try to personalize it to what I was contributing, what I and my wife are both contributing to the city and how we were trying to hang on living in the city and how we could have used these different housing opportunities to be able to stay here.

ENTRANCE INTO ELECTORAL POLITICS

Francesco De Salvatore [01:29:02] And so, how did you then start getting involved with Electoral politics in Alexandria? When did that start to crystallize?

Canek Aguirre [01:29:11] The earliest I can kind of remember that was probably 2015. But like I said, like my family and I have always kind of been politically conscious, so we've always kind of paid attention to things and voted. So back in 2012, I did pay attention to the City council race, and I was really intrigued because it was a massive race. I think there was like 14 or 15 people running. And, the other thing that stood out to me was that there was actually a Latina running, Vicky Menjivar, who's been in the community for decades and a lot of people know her and respect her, including myself. And, I didn't think that Latino people could run in Virginia. I didn't really think that was a thing. I was like, you know, in California and Texas, Arizona, New York, Florida, it's like, sure. Chicago. But, I was like, we're in Virginia, like Latino people? Like, they got a shot? So, she actually came in seventh place in the primary and was a few votes shy of the sixth place person. And, for those that don't know politics in Alexandria, since 2012, Democrats have taken every single seat on the council and mayor. So, she was literally a couple hundred votes from being the first Latina or Latino to be elected in the city of Alexandria. And so, that kind of stuck in the back of my head. Right? 2015 comes around. I'm on the board for Tenants and Workers. Tenants and Workers traditionally puts on a candidate forum. That year, we did it in partnership with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and with the Parent Leadership Training Institute, PLTI, and I ended up moderating the forum. And so, that year, there was not a heavy primary. There's actually no primary. It just went to the general election. And, did we knock doors that year? I feel like we knocked doors that year. So, I hadn't really been too involved in politics in terms of like knocking doors and some of that stuff. But yeah, I did it back in the Obama campaign because I was trying to impress a girl. Shout out to my wife. But, I knocked some doors when she was running some campaign stuff out in Colorado and a couple other places. And so, I think that's when I got involved with the local Democratic Party too was probably 2014 or 15. So, that's kind of where I first got involved with some of the political stuff. Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:32:17] And, what was it like for you, those sort of initial dabblings into politics?

Canek Aguirre [01:32:25] It was interesting, you know, coming from an advocacy place because there's different rings to it. Right? So, I was very much on the outer ring, just kind of advocating like, 'Oh, yeah, I might show up to an event or show up to a rally, go to a march or something.' Right?' And then from that ring, you move into something more like knocking doors or text messages or sending letters, and then you move in another ring. Maybe you're lobbying directly to a legislator or decision maker. You move in another ring and you might be in the room where the decisions are being made. But, it doesn't necessarily mean that the people that you're talking to are going to do what you're saying. Right? So, part of the reason that I decided to run was to be in that inside ring and say, 'Well, I can be in that room and I can be directly lobbying someone, but if they're still not going to go with what I want them to do, then I need to be the person making the decision.' So, that was one part of the impetus to run for office, There was a bunch of other reasons too, but that's kind of how my involvement kind of grew closer and closer, which, you know, the irony of it all is that, you know, I was never really too interested in politics. And, you know, we come from a family that, high mistrust of government and authority. And, you know, that's the whole reason that my grandfather left Mexico. He didn't really believe in politicians. My dad had a very high mistrust of authority and everything, again, coming from Mexico. But, yeah it's, having been advocating in the school system. Having been advocating in the Medicaid world. Having been advocating from the nonprofit world for, you know, housing and criminal justice and issues in the school system. It really got to a point where it's just like, you know, are you going to complain about this or are you going to try and do something about it? And yeah, all that kind of led to me finally kind of deciding, because I had been a precinct captain as well for the local Democratic Party. So as a precinct captain, you have your precinct, you try and get voters out at that precinct. You try and get volunteers out at that precinct. You staff the Election Day, which shout out to all the precinct captains. Man that's, it's rough work. And like having the staff poll all day. That is not easy. I mean, if it's nice out for like the primary, like cool, but November, if it's raining, if it's snowing, if it's just cold, like, oh man, it's so rough. I remember one year I had to keep on going inside the rec center, Cora Kelly now Chick Armstrong Rec Center, because my feet were freezing. So, I'd have to go in and like, make sure my feet were still okay. And then, I would go back outside because, you know, the precincts open at, what, 7 a.m.? 6 a.m.? And then, they go all the way to 7 p.m.. So, you're out there for hours on hours. And yeah, so that was definitely going, plunging head into to some of the grassroots politics and some of that stuff. But yeah, that started happening in 2015 too, I think. So, that's how I started dabbling in all that stuff. And I guess 16 and 17 come around, then in 17, you know, I was really excited because, you know, since I had been the emcee for the last forum in 2015, I had all these ideas about how like, 'Oh, we're going to like have this running thread for all the different forums.' I'm going to connect with everybody that's having a forum to make sure that, you know, we have this running conversation. We're going to have a hashtag and like, do this stuff on social media, make sure everybody stays, you know, informed. But, we were having a meeting. Some folks from the nonprofit and some community members, and we were kind of discussing like, you know, who is going to jump into the race? Who has already jumped into the race? Who is someone that kind of knows the issues

and can speak on them? Who is not just going to show up for a photo op? And, you know, the folks kind of turned and said, 'Well, you should do it.' And I said, 'You who?' Because like I said, I had all these grand plans, right? Like, I'm gonna do all this stuff. And yeah, after some arm twisting and deciding, you know, didn't want business as usual. Got the okay from my wife, because you got to, you know, get that okay too. Decided to run for council.

FIRST ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Francesco De Salvatore [01:38:10] Can you talk about that first election? What was it like campaigning?

Canek Aguirre [01:38:16] So the first election was really interesting. It was a large field. I think there was like 12 or 13 people running. A very diverse field. The first thing that comes to mind, is that I really wanted to push the conversation. So even if I had lost, things that didn't always get talked about, would get talked about. And, I was actually very successful in doing that because after the first two forums, after I brought up certain topics, all of a sudden everybody was talking about that as we were moving forward. So, mission number one was accomplished. I had a lot of trouble raising money because it was, you know, first time. And it's a weird situation and I didn't really like it. Most people don't like raising money. Making those phone calls is really very awkward and weird. I guess it gets easier the more you do it. But like, doing it the first time, oh man, it was like pulling teeth. I hated it. The good thing is that we had a lot of volunteer support. And the better thing was that I had a campaign manager that was a wrecking ball and knew how to do everything. They knew how to cut turf, they knew how to do messaging, and they knew how to do social media. They knew how to create the artwork and stuff and the layouts for what would be my yard signs, what would be the website, what would be the fliers that we would pass out, all the campaign literature that we had. And the person was also my wife, which made it a little bit complicated. But, you know, it gave me a very big advantage because she had so much experience in the political realm and being able to do all these things. And I mean, for somebody like that, you're probably dishing out 3 to 5k a month and she was doing it for free. So, that was definitely advantageous. Kind of a secret weapon, if you will, that helped to turn the tide in a lot of things. I think we had a really good message. The platform ended up being housing, education and health, and I kind of fell into that one because housing came from my own personal experience trying to get a foothold in the city, my housing insecurity when I was in college and also losing my home when I got back from college. Education came because my mom was a 20 year elementary school teacher back in L.A. Plus, I spent three years in the school system locally here in Alexandria, and the health part came because I was doing Medicaid, you know, that was my day job. I wanted to throw in transportation. That got vetoed by my team because I've had a lot of different experiences with transportation growing up, not having a car and trying to get around, being at the university, having a free bus system, which was kind of the idea later on which I was on council for making a free bus. But, we'll get to that later. And, you know, being here in Virginia and seeing how difficult transportation was for people. I didn't mention this before, but when I was working at GW, I helped start up a parent group, kind of like a PTA, but all in Spanish. And the topics were very different. It wasn't fund raising and other stuff. It was like, 'How do I contact my teacher?'

You know, like 'what happens if there is a disciplinary problem?' 'How do I just participate in the school system?' Things like that. And the reason that it was successful, is because I would physically go pick people up and bring them to the school because they wouldn't be able to get to the school on time otherwise. This goes back to the bus issue that we were talking about, or if they had a couple of kids with them, then they can really do it as easily. So, transportation was always kind of big on my mind, but I'll touch on that a little bit more later. But yeah, so that was the platform and thankfully it rang true with a lot of folks. And I have to give a shout out to Ewon Thompson, he was I think a 10th grader at the time, and I always joked that he had his own little splinter cell, but he was really pivotal in being able to knock a lot of doors for me. He got some of his friends and other high school students to participate and was a key component of being able to get the message out there too.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:43:54] Can you describe the other candidates that you ran against?

Canek Aguirre [01:43:58] Oh man, there are so many. I'd have to get a list. I could probably, you know, break it down person by person. But, let's see. So, I'll go off of the people that I can remember. So, there's Elizabeth Bennett Parker. She was new to the city, helping with a nonprofit. She was a co-executive director, I think for 'Together We Bake.' And, I think she was born here in the city. But again, like I said, she had just come back to the city, was kind of like a newer person in the city. You had John Chapman who was generational, has been on council for multiple terms now. Born and raised in Alexandria. His issues were similar to mine, you know, when you talk about housing. He's also a business advocate. You had Mo[hamed] Seifeldein, he and I were the lowest fundraisers in the race for those who won. But, him winning was also historic because he was the first Muslim, the first renter, I believe, and, you know, first Sudanese, first immigrant born candidate to win. One, two, three, four. Oh, Amy. Amy was on there. Amy Jackson. Del Pepper won again. And then Justin Wilson beat Alison Silberberg for mayor. And who else was there? Ashken had to drop out because he had issues with his employer. Robert Ray lived in Old Town. Lives in Old Town. Chris Hubbard, I think he ran. Mark Schiffer was running as an independent. Who else was, who else came in? Oh, Dak Hardwick, former ADC [Alexandria Democratic Committee] Chair, member of the Alexandria Chamber. Who else? Willie Bailey. Willie Bailey has been a huge part of the community for decades here in Alexandria. His nonprofit, 'Firefighters and Friends', has been doing amazing things for many, many years. He himself is a great story. Having grown up here in Alexandria, gone to the military, came back, firefighter, got on the council in 2015, currently on the school board. So, he's done a lot of really cool stuff. I'm trying to think if there is anyone else. I mean off the top of my head, that's who I can remember.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:47:18] And what were the issues being discussed?

Canek Aguirre [01:47:23] Housing for sure. Housing was a big one. The other one related to housing was the Meals Tax. So, Alexandria was proposing a 1% increase in the Meals Tax thanks to Willie Bailey. And, there was a lot of backlash, which, you know, basically for \$100 meal, you're adding a dollar. For a \$50 meal, you're adding \$0.50. So, I didn't think it was going to be the end of the world. Plus, all that money was going to go straight to affordable housing. So, I

thought it was a great idea. It did put us as the second highest tax rate in the region. But, I can live with that. It's an expensive area, and other places weren't that far behind from what we were proposing. And Meals Tax, housing, to a lesser extent lights at the high school because there had been an agreement between the community and the high school to not put lights on. However, the advancement in technology really made lights feasible so that it wouldn't, you know, interrupt the community. You know, they wouldn't have these lights coming into their homes. And that's literally the case, because I remember when I went to the first night game at the high school, it was actually a little bit too dark in the surrounding area. Because the field was beautifully lit. You could see everything on the field. But then, when you got to certain sections on the other side of the field, it was actually a little bit too dark. It was like, 'We have got to put some lights back there so like, nothing happens.' What else was an issue? Potomac Yard Metro was definitely an issue. Paul Smedberg. That's who I forgot. Paul Smedberg was also running. He is a five term city council member, incumbent, known for doing a lot of transportation stuff, being aware of a lot of fiscal things, being a budget guy. And yeah, Potomac Yard Metro was definitely controversial because at that point, I think because of cost, we didn't have the southern entrance that was proposed. That didn't come back into play until the Amazon announcement, because I think the state ended up putting in some additional money to make sure that we can build that southern entrance. What else? What else was going on in 2018? Yeah, I can't remember. But, those are the ones that kind of come to mind.

ELECTION VICTORY, FIRST TERM AND THE PANDEMIC

Francesco De Salvatore [01:50:19] That's great. So, yeah, talk about when you first found out that you won the election.

Canek Aguirre [01:50:28] I was a little bit in shock. The other thing too, real fast, like, quick advice, free advice to anyone that decides to run for office. Don't move while you're in the middle of a campaign. Like, highly, highly do not recommend that, because we decided to move from our apartment to a condo that we bought in late 2017, early 2018. I think we bought maybe in like December of 2017 or January of 2018, and then moved in like February or March. And oh man, that was a big pain to try and do that while also running a campaign. So, don't move while you're running a campaign. But, there's a really nice community room that we have at our condo and we were having, you know, a watch party or whatever. We were watching the results coming in and it was kind of a close race. I remember Elizabeth was blowing everybody out of the water. Like that was the surprise of the night, like, because she was such a newcomer, nobody really knew what was going to happen there. But I mean, I think she won every single precinct except for like one or two. And then John was coming in second, which wasn't surprising because everybody thought John was going to be first that year, but he was coming in second during the primary. And then the other surprise was Mo. He was coming in third place and then it was between me and Del for fourth place and between Willie and Amy for sixth place. And at that point, when we realized that, like, I was solidly like in fourth or fifth, you know, we weren't worried about being sixth. It was literally going to be fourth or fifth, which means we made top six, because in the city you have to be top six to get on the council. Right? And yeah, I was, I couldn't really believe it. I was

like, 'Oh, crap.' And people were like 'Speech, speed, speech.' But, my wife had actually just left to get pizza. And I said, 'I'm not saying a word until my wife gets back.' Right? Because, so much of this is because of, you know, the work that she had done. And so, she gets back with the pizza. And, you know, I don't even remember what I said to everybody. I really don't. I was just, I was exhausted. But, I felt great that day because I think at the time, we might have only had 26 precincts. And I made it to like 22, 23 precincts, which is a lot. It's hard to make it to ten precincts in a day, and I made it to like 22. I was very proud of that. But yeah, it just felt really good. The weather was really nice. I was going around having good interactions with people. You know, I think I was playing the Wakanda Forever soundtrack, Black Panther soundtrack while I was driving around. Yeah, I just felt really, really good that day. And so, I was exhausted that night and like I said, I really honestly don't remember what I said to everyone. And then, you know after, I was with my folks and my volunteers and family and everything, and we went to where the ADC was having the kind of after party or whatever celebration. And yeah, yeah, very surreal.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:54:39] And so, what was it like the first year serving on the council? What was it like for you entering council that year?

Canek Aguirre [01:54:49] So, the first year was really interesting because you know, you get in and you're kind of like, 'How do I do stuff?' And one of the frustrating parts, is finding out how much stuff you can't do because we're not given the authority. Because, if it's not in our charter, then we have to ask the state for the ability to do something. So that was a big kind of eye opening moment, like, 'Oh, I can't do that. I can't do that. I can't do this. Okay, so how do I try and get something done?' And, we also had two very controversial issues. First one, I would say would be on par with some of the other issues that I'd seen in the city. And this is over a Halal butcher shop. A lot of people were against it and very angry. You know, we said there's going to be blood in the streets. And, the issue that I kind of took with that is, that they were putting this place literally across the street from the hazardous waste disposal site for the city. So where people take things that they can't throw in the trash, they take it there, right? Like hazardous materials. It was in an industrial zone. It's not on the main street. That one ended up being very, very controversial. And, I think it was like a four-three or five-two vote and that happened early on. That was like February or March. So like, when they say you get thrown into the deep end, you get thrown into the deep end. Luckily, that's how I learned how to swim. So I was used to it. The second one that really surprised me, though, was the Seminary Road issue. You know, we're talking about a point nine stretch of road, where one of the biggest complaints was that people were just driving too fast. And so, a road diet was proposed to go from two lanes in each direction to having one lane in each direction, with a center turn lane and putting some pedestrian crosswalks and everything. And so, this is 2019. The vitriol was just very, it was just super bad. I hadn't seen anything, and, you know, I got here in 2011, and in eight years I had never seen anything that controversial, that divisive, where people were just literally foaming at the mouth, yelling and screaming. And, I wonder how much of that has to do with, you know, the 45th president getting elected and the partisanship just getting really, really crazy. And, you know, they used to say that streets and roads are nonpartisan, but that's not really the case anymore. And, I guess people being more willing to be rude, if that makes sense. More open and being nasty? I don't know. I'm sure people have been studying this

since that presidential election, and you know what's been happening in the country and everything. But, it's gotten all the way down to, you know, the local level and local politics, whether it's council, board supervisor or school board, you know? So, like I said, I had to learn fast, got thrown into the deep end. And then, the next two years were really crazy, because that's when the pandemic hit. And I mean, you talk about having to learn on a curve and having to, you know, pivot and adapt and be resourceful and just basically change everything that you know. I mean, that's what happened. And I mean, 2020 was extremely, extremely difficult. And, I probably say that from a position of privilege because, you know, we didn't get sick immediately. We had jobs that were paying us. We were able to stay in our home. You know, we didn't have the food insecurity or the housing insecurity or the illness. But, I do believe that, you know, they kind of say sometimes the right person in the right place at the right time. I do honestly believe that for myself and being in the position of council when the pandemic hit, because a lot of things that I championed or got done, either wouldn't have got done or wouldn't have been prioritized if I wasn't here. And frankly, I know that I saved a bunch of lives at the end of the day. I helped create multilingual information, making sure that we were communicating to people in different languages, whether it was through email blast, posters, mailings that went out. Our health department was doing a great job of that. One of the people that was in charge is actually someone that was actually on my campaign. And then ironically, I interviewed for the position in the health department, and she got the position and was instrumental in a lot of what we did in the city. And, I was actively going. I didn't take a day off until probably Christmas, because every single day I was either at a food distribution, a testing clinic. Eventually, when we got the vaccine, I was at some of the vaccination clinics. I've been a part of the Medical Reserve Corps since like 2014 or 15, and this is exactly what the Medical Reserve Corps is for. And so, we got activated. I was at the call center. I was doing whatever I could with the Medical Reserve Corps [MRC]. And, I think a lot of that helped to inform some of my choices being on council. I remember one of the earliest things, the schools were providing food for all the families because, you know, the schools have been closed. And, I went to the food distribution site and there was people not wearing masks, people not wearing gloves, people getting out of their cars, walking up to get the food. Not enough signage. So, I talked to the health director. I talked to the superintendent, and we fixed that immediately, because I didn't want one of the food distribution sites to then become a virus distribution site. Right? Like, that's the last thing that we needed. Going to some of the other food distributions, working with our non-profits, just saying, you know, 'What do you need? How can we support you? Do you have enough volunteers?' We had city staff that started, you know, they couldn't do their normal job because there wasn't anything to do, because everybody was staying home. So, then we shifted them to be volunteers and help with other things, whether it was with the MRC or helping with the food distribution sites and ALIVE. There was, I would stack our city's response up against anyone else in the region. I think, we definitely had our struggles. We were late with some of our multi-lingual communication. We definitely could have responded a lot faster with that, but I would definitely stack our response up to anyone. There was a lot that was happening. Oh, I mean, I had a bunch of documents created. I mean, we had documents created so that people knew what to do from a medical standpoint, from a health insurance standpoint, where to get help standpoint, where to get food standpoint. Right? Where to get financial help for paying the rent because we, at the beginning of the pandemic, had one of the

highest positivity rates in the entire state. And, I think it was something on par with like Wuhan, because in 22305, I think we had something like close to like a 50% positivity rate or something like that. And, the other thing that I wanted to make sure that we were communicating was that, there are circumstances that make other individuals and communities more susceptible to the virus. Specifically thinking about Arlandria, Chirilagua and parts of the West End, where you have folks that are essential workers so they can't stay home. They're being told to go to work. They don't have their own transportation. So, they're getting on a bus, which is an enclosed space with other people. So, that's multiplying their risk. They don't have easy access to health care. And so, you're just compounding factors. And at home, they're probably in a place where they're having to share space with multiple people. So, being able to isolate isn't really an option for them. So again, compounding factors, right? Compounding factors. And so, it just makes certain populations much more susceptible to getting some of these viruses. And it's not because they don't care. It's not because they don't want to get it, right? It's like their situation puts them in a position where they are just going to get it. And, it was really frustrating because it was kind of like watching a slow bullet hit the community. And, I remember doing an interview with someone in 2021 probably, and they were asking, you know, kind of 'Why? Why do you do all this? Why do you care?' And it's just, because I see myself in the community. Right? Like I see my parents. I see my grandparents. I see myself. And so, it was really important to make sure that we were allocating as many resources as possible to the places that needed it the most. That was crucial. And, I think that showed later on when we were getting our vaccination rates. And, when you looked at the vaccination rates for the city and how we were doing, that we were able to not only create relationships, trust in relationships, use trusted messengers, and then provide easily accessible spaces for people to go get these vaccinations and get the messaging out there that we were successful as a community to get a high percentage of our residents vaccinated later on. But yeah, there was it was a lot during the pandemic. It was really stressful trying to help a lot of folks out with different issues, whether they're being evicted or, you know, if they're just sick and don't know where to go or what to do. Yeah, it was pretty crazy. It was pretty crazy. Then, you know, working a full time job and not really getting any rest. And then, in 2021 having to basically run again and yeah, it was all a whirlwind. It was all a whirlwind. And at the same time, we were trying to roll out, because we hired our first Race and Social Equity officer, I think in January or February of 2020, and then the pandemic hits in March. So, they never really got a chance to get off the ground. And, you know, part of the reason that I ran a second time was, one: to help ensure, you know, our COVID recovery and two: to continue the race and social equity work. So, to give you another example, the businesses during the pandemic, right? And, I'm not trying to be critical of staff. You know, they're working and doing everything they can. But, you know, sometimes they miss things. And that's why we're here. Right? So, when the pandemic hit and businesses were closing, they made sure to help support some of the businesses. And they had on their website, 'Well, these businesses in Old Town and Del Rey are open.' And I was like, 'Come on guys, there's businesses in Arlandria, there's businesses in the West End.' And so, I was able to make sure that a lot of them got onto the website as well, to help support them, to make sure that they stayed in business. We had a really great Back to Business Grant opportunity, but again, where we were lacking was in the engagement and communication of it. So, there was a lot of minority owned businesses that just weren't aware and can apply. I know for a fact that I got

thousands of dollars, tens of thousands of dollars to multiple local businesses here because I personally went and like delivered the information to them and said, 'You need to apply to this. Like, call me if you have a problem.' Yeah, I mean there's just, there's so many different things going on. Making sure that, you know, our federally qualified health clinic, Neighborhood Health, that they were getting the funding that they needed. You know it was, when we first found the site or when they first put the site at Casa Chirilagua, they originally had been looking to do a site across from their site on Glebe. And I got a phone call from them. I connected them with our staff and was saying like, 'Why aren't we getting this done?' And then ultimately, that conversation led to getting the site at Casa Chirilagua, which was great because that's in the middle of the community where a lot of people are, so they can easily access. I had started the conversation around an Eviction Prevention Task Force in March of 2020. I was like, 'If this thing's going to go for a while, like, we need to start putting people together to make sure that we can pay attention to evictions.' That conversation, along with a couple of other conversations that were happening in the city, ended up leading to the Prevention Task Force that we currently have, which is a really great multidisciplinary group. What else? Language access stuff. Communications. Engagement. The businesses. Pushing the MRC. As you can imagine, the Medical Reserve Corps, like the numbers swole, right? Because people are like, 'Oh, how do I get involved?' And you know, I was a big, big proponent of pushing how to get involved with MRC. And our Medical Reserve Corps was a model for most of the region as well. Like, our call center was a model for the region. We were getting a lot of accolades for that. What we were doing, the way that we were prepared, organized, executing. So, that was kind of my first term in a nutshell. Is there anything I'm forgetting, that comes to your mind?

Ajusha Aguirre [02:11:58] Talk about the start of the Spanish text line.

Canek Aguirre [02:12:03] Yeah, I started a Spanish text line, which was frustrating because of my work across the region in the Medicaid field. There was a CDC study done in Prince William and I participated in it, not just as a survey taker, but also they interviewed me for, you know, different things because Prince William was also having some of the highest positivity rates in the state as well, because their health department, their health district was woefully underfunded for years. They didn't have the people, they didn't have the relationships in the community that they really needed to have. And that always frustrated me, because I really wanted to be down there to help out. But, when the recommendations from the CDC study, that I specifically waited for to be done to present to council, was to start a Spanish text line, which we still have today, and we have over 300 people on it, which doesn't seem like a lot but, the surrounding jurisdictions have, you know, less than 100 people signed up and their larger jurisdiction is us, but they didn't have the same relationships. So, the Spanish tax line I think was very important. We're still utilizing it today. What was the other one you said?

Ajusha Aguirre [02:13:27] Oh, I was thinking about the hand-washing stations.

Canek Aguirre [02:13:30] Oh, yeah. This is one that I actually picked up from Seattle. So, I was on a national call and they were saying, you know, if there was something that we had known

beforehand that we could have done, what would it have been? And, it was to have hand-washing stations. They have a much higher homeless population. But, the hand-washing stations that we implemented across the city, that was because of me as well. And it was helpful, because that was one of the big things that we needed anyway. People needed to be constantly washing their hands. And, a lot of the materials that we created from our health department ended up being copied by the rest of Northern Virginia as well. So, really proud of that too.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PANDEMIC

Francesco De Salvatore [02:14:16] How do you think the pandemic has shaped you? When you look back on it now, having to work on all those different projects and bring that kind of change, how do you think it has changed you?

Canek Aguirre [02:14:46] I've always tried to be cognizant of the privileges that I have. Right? Going back to having both parents. Both my parents speaking English. Both my parents being citizens or permanent residents and me not having to worry about being deported or my parents being deported. Having graduated high school. Having graduated college. And, I think this was another reality check knowing that, you know, I was gainfully employed. I got to work from home. I got to be virtual. I got to stay in my home. I had health insurance. So, when I did eventually get COVID, I was, you know, taken care of and the pandemic just really exacerbated and highlighted a lot of the inequities that we have, not just here in Alexandria, but across the country. And, for all the bad and all the difficulty and all the sadness and tragedy that came out of it, and I say this in the most respectful way possible, there is also opportunity that came out of it. And, it was opportunity to do things that previously would have been more controversial or might not have been able to be done in the first place. I think about, because you know we got the unprecedented money from the federal government, the ARPA [American Rescue Plan Act] Funding and, you know, we're now six months into a universal basic income pilot program for the city where we have, oh, gosh, I am going to get the number wrong. I think, like 250, maybe 270 residents in a pilot program where maybe 180 of them are getting \$500 a month. No strings attached. We were able to pilot that. The outdoor dining that we have across the city, being able to close a block on King Street and have that be a pedestrian way. I mean, some of these things weren't going to be possible. Right? So, there are certain opportunities that were given. And, I think especially around equity, there was a lot of things that we either weren't going to be able to talk about or weren't going to be able to move forward if the pandemic hadn't happened. And like I said, you know, part of the reason that I wanted to run again, was because of the race of social equity work that we had been able to start in the city, and that I wanted to make sure that we not only continue, but also that we build it into the foundation of our community and of our staff. Because, when you talk about institutional and structural change, that isn't something that happens overnight or even happens over a year or two. These are long term things, that need to be cultivated and nurtured to make sure that they endure. So, I think it imbued upon me the fact that, you know, I needed to pay a bit more attention to this, and that this was going to be something that, to make sure that it lasted, that I was going to have to put in more years, and that I would also have to find more people to help make sure that it kept on going. That's a lot of words and things that I said, and I don't know

if that totally, really answered the question at all about how it impacted me. Again, very fortunate. You know, didn't lose my parents, didn't lose my grandma. We didn't really lose anybody to the Coronavirus that was super close to us. Did I know people that did pass during the pandemic? Yes, absolutely. Do I know other folks where it devstated their family? Yes, absolutely. So, again, just very, very fortunate.

SECOND ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND GOALS FOR THE SECOND TERM

Francesco De Salvatore [02:20:12] So, now you're in your second term. And so, what are the most pressing issues now, for you, on council that you see going forward now?

Canek Aguirre [02:20:23] Let me take a quick step back and say, so I had to campaign again, right? And, that was a very interesting campaign, because it got kind of nasty and we haven't really seen a campaign like that in Alexandria in I don't know how long. Not in my time here that I can recall. And, not that many others can recall either. But, you know, it was very clear a certain set of values versus another set of values that were happening during the primary. Certain folks were against infrastructure, transportation projects. They were against housing. They were against some of the race and social equity work that we were doing. And then, there was the other group that was in favor of all those things, and it was another heavily contested race. Again, I think 12 or 13 people running. And, I think what made me very happy is that Alexandria, in my opinion, sent a very clear message what direction we wanted to go in. And that was, 'Yes, let's figure out ways for affordable housing. Yes, let's support transit and public transportation.' Oh, one thing that I forgot. So, we made the buses for free during the pandemic. Right? And, that's something that I don't think we would have been able to get done before the pandemic, because that was something that I had been thinking about as soon as I got on a council. But, I just didn't think the community was ready, even though I knew we had a good bus system, we had the density, we had folks who would be willing to ride and more if we made it for free. So, the fare-free bus, you know, the race and social equity work and like I said, Alexandrians sent a very clear message, because the six of us that were in favor of that all got elected. The mayor that was in favor of that got elected. And, even the next two people, seventh and eighth place, they too were in favor of those ideals. And, the other folks came in very distant last, if you will. So, it was a tough campaign. Like I said, it got kind of nasty. But, I've got thick skin.

Francesco De Salvatore [02:23:16] What do you mean it got nasty?

Canek Aguirre [02:23:22] People were getting a little personal and not really sticking to the campaign issues and accusing people of things. Making things up. There was a lot of misinformation. And again, I think this also goes back to the last two presidential elections and what has been going on there and people being emboldened to do crazy stuff and think that they can have alternative facts which don't exist. Right? You're not entitled to your own personal facts. Like, facts are facts. You can't just make things up. And unfortunately, there was people that were just making things up and and outright lying, right? So, it makes it really, really difficult. And, you have to constantly be pushing back on that. That's one of the things that I found. I have

definitely been a voice on council for pushing back on misinformation, disinformation, lies, those types of things. And, I kind of wish that others would kind of speak up a little bit more as well. But, I have just found it in me, that that's where I kind of draw the line. I can't have somebody, you know, lying about something and not respond to it, for better or worse. Second term. Second term. I think the city is still facing the same issues. You know, when I ran the first time, you know, people would ask, you know, 'What are the top three things facing the city?' I'd say, 'Housing, infrastructure and how we're going to pay for it.' And, it is still very much the same. In my first term, we did pass funding for stormwater, which was a historic investment, because frankly, we're in bad shape when it comes to deferred maintenance in the city. And, this is across the school buildings, the city buildings, the city infrastructure. But, we at least took a positive step in terms of our stormwater and sanitary sewer. We made a historic investment when we decided to tackle the combined sewer outfalls here in the city, which is a half billion dollar project. Hazel's doing a great job. That's the name of our drill. But, we're still facing a lot of the same things now, going into the middle of the second term, where we're still having a lot of major infrastructure issues that we have to address and we have to figure out where we're going to get the money from it. It was really great, we passed the first collective bargaining ordinance in 40 plus years in the state of Virginia. We put in place an independent community police review board. That's gotten off the ground now. In the first term, we handled a lot of really heavy issues that were very complex that we really had to dig into. I remember, I asked for a special session just to make sure that we could go over the police review board and collective bargaining, because they were just such intense issues that we had to tackle in one meeting by itself. So, having gone through all of that and two really tough campaigns, I remember joking with a couple of my colleagues that this next term was going to be a little bit easier. And, knock on wood, it has been. But, when you go through a pandemic, not having a full pandemic makes life a lot easier. But still, we're doing some cool stuff, making some investments into things that we had not previously. We've really, I've helped triple the size of our communications department. We went from, you know, three or four people to, I think we're close to around twelve now. So, if we're going to really do the community engagement and communication that we need, this is the size of the team that we have to have. You know, oral history is very important to me. We lost a lot of people during the pandemic and we weren't able to get their stories recorded. And so, I'm very happy with what we're doing at OHA [Office of Historic Alexandria] now, our Office of Historic Alexandria and everything that's been done. Shout out to Francesco. And yeah, I think, you know, it is what, almost two years into the second term? And, I think there's still a lot of work that needs to be done to complete some projects. Oh, we got the Potomac Yard Metrorail done. Forgetting about that. Yeah, there's a lot of really cool stuff that's been happening in the city. A lot of transition, a lot of change. I think it's been for the positive. Opened a new school. We built a school. Finally going to demolish the old Patrick Henry Elementary School and put it in the fields over there. Building the new Minnie Howard Campus of Alexandria City High School, that should be coming on in another year or so. So, there's a lot of really cool things happening in the city. Virginia Tech is being built, you know, that's going to be open in another year or so. Oh, wow. Yeah. I can't believe I forgot about Landmark [Mall]. Yeah, I mean, that was like, 30 years in the making to finally get that project done. Because, there was three different owners on the land and then it finally got consolidated into one owner and then we were able to move forward. Consolidated everybody into one DCHS [Department of

Community and Human Services] building, over on the West End, the new Del Pepper [Community] Center. We're going to build a brand new hospital at the Landmark [Mall] site. Yeah, there's a ton of stuff happening in Alexandria. It's a really exciting time to be here. And, on top of already being a cool place to be at, like, we're just kind of expanding things even more. It's been really exciting.

CLOSING THOUGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Francesco De Salvatore [02:30:36] Before we go to a closing question, is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to share?

Canek Aguirre [02:30:49] Well, we could do a whole segment on favorite places to eat, so maybe we'll save that for another time, because I do love, you know, a lot of different food places here in Alexandria. But yeah, like I said, maybe for some other time. But, outside of that, and I think we've talked about a whole lot of stuff. Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [02:31:13] So, I'm curious. This is more of a general question. You've probably learned a lot of lessons in life, but what is one lesson that you find very important that you've learned?

Canek Aguirre [02:31:30] Patience. Definitely patience. And, this goes across a lot of different things. You know, like I said, I learned a lot of patience growing up, working with kids and students. When I got here to Alexandria, working with middle schoolers, had to have a lot of patience. Building coalitions have to have a lot of patience, right? To be able to bring diverse groups together to, you know, support something or someone takes a lot of patience. Being on council takes a lot of patience. You know, you have to give people space to give their opinions and to have their say. And you have to do it in a respectful way. So, definitely a lot of patience. I think that's one of the biggest things. I did remember something that I wanted to mention that I didn't say before, though. One of the things that I find intriguing about the DMV area in general, and what I'm excited to be a part of is the Latino population in general, because it's very nascent. You know, in the Southwest, they've got hundreds of years. Latinos have hundreds of years of being in the Southwest. They've got, you know, 100 years. And in Chicago, they've got several decades. In New York, probably close to 100 years in New York, and, you know, several hundred years in Florida as well. But, here in this area, you're talking about the Latino population that really didn't start getting here until late seventies, early eighties. You had some in the early seventies, but not that many. And, it's kind of hit a critical mass point where, you know, folks have graduated from high school. Have graduated from college. Have started businesses. They're starting to get elected. And, it's been really cool for me to be able to see that, not only as a Latino, but also to be participating in that and kind of nurturing this critical mass and trying to see it grow and come into its own. Because, I think about, we are in a Latino Heritage Month now from September 15th to October 15th, and before I got on council in 2019, we hadn't done a written proclamation for Latinos since 2005. So, it had been almost 15 years. And this year, is actually the first year in the city where we have a large scale, coordinated Latino Heritage Month. We're going to have a bunch

of different events in a bunch of different places. We're putting flags up at Market Square, and that's something that we've never done before. So, from a somewhat selfish and cultural perspective for Latinos in the DMV, I just think it's also an exciting time and place to be.

Francesco De Salvatore [02:34:34] That's great. I'm curious, if you could hold on to any memory from your life forever, what would that be?

Canek Aguirre [02:34:50] Oh, wow. Well, I said one of them, when I was trying to teach the student how to push the button on the computer. And he said "puchale." That's definitely one. Meeting my wife is another one. And, the multiple interactions that it took to kind of finally go out. I won't go into the specifics, but when we went and had breakfast at a Ye Olde Waffle House definitely comes to mind. Time with my mama and nana. Certain times with my parents, times with my Aunt Crocio. Time with my Aunt Gabby in North Carolina. Yeah, several. A lot of memories, lots of memories. Being here running for office. Yeah, it was a lot of stuff. A lot of stuff. But, those are the ones that definitely come to mind first.

Francesco De Salvatore [02:36:01] Right. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me and laying out all these different chapters in your life.

Canek Aguirre [02:36:09] Thanks for the opportunity. I really appreciate it