

Undocumented Organizing Collecting Initiative Oral History Index

Name of Narrator: Jairo Javier Morales
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Summary: Jairo Javier Morales is a mixed-media artist and student affairs professional who led multiple social justice efforts at Ripon College. Morales notably came out as a DACA student at his college graduation ceremony in 2019 upon revealing custom-made fabric monarch butterfly wings attached to his robe. His graduation cap showcased his Mexican and queer identities and included a hand-written quote that says, “I am one of those people Mexico sent.” In this oral history, Morales shares stories of his childhood in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois, the roles education and community-based activism played early on in his life, what the process of getting DACA was like for him and his family, and social justice efforts he led in college through organizations like La Unida and Queer Student Alliance. He also speaks at length on political activism through art, building bridges amongst different student groups in college, the process of creating custom-made monarch butterfly wings, memories leading up to crossing the stage on graduation day, and embracing his own intersecting identities—that of being a gay Mexican immigrant. Morales was born in Michoacán, Mexico, and moved to Chicago, Illinois to reunite with his family at a young age. His community-engaged activist efforts started in high school through programs like MoveOn. At the time of the interview, he was a Resident Director at McKendree University in Lebanon, Illinois.

Some quotes were lightly edited for the purposes of this index. Verbatim quotes with some filler words can be found in the oral history transcript.

Keywords: Art Activism; Benito Juarez Community Academy; Coaltitional Politics; Coming Out; Cross-Ethnic Organizing; Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); Immigrant Rights and Jusice; Intersectionality; La Unida; LGBTQ Latinx Organizing; Mexican Migration to the U.S.; Monarch Butterfly; MoveOn; Queer Student Alliance; Ripon College; Social Justice; Student Organizer; Undocumented organizing; UndocuQueer

<i>Time Stamp</i>	<i>Description of segment</i>
00:00:01 – 00:00:44	Preface/introduction.
00:00:054 – 00:02:05	Jairo introduces himself. He was twenty-two years old at the time of the interview and Resident Director at McKendree University. He’s his mother’s third child and a first-generation college graduate.
00:02:06 – 00:03:03	Describes how learning he was undocumented at a young age has influenced the types of conversations he has with friends and in public spaces. “I just like to talk to people about life and sometimes politics and why things are the way they are. More-so because we are an immigrant family and I kind of wanted to understand more what that meant.”
00:03:03 – 00:04:24	DACA was signed just in time for Jairo to get an internship at the Chicago Architecture Foundation his freshman year in high school. After this experience, he decided to continue the path of education, leading him to resident life and student affairs: “I knew I wanted to go to school and I wanted to study and understand this life pattern. Am I the only one that's gone through this? And then later in college I find out there's a whole lot more that there is to understand and social rights and activism and socioeconomics taking part of the dichotomy of what somebody has to go through and that kind of stuff.”
00:04:48 – 00:06:52	Jairo was born in Michoacán. Narrates his family’s journey from Mexico to the Pilsen neighborhood in Chicago. Most residents in their new neighborhood were Mexican and Mexican American. There, Jairo attended a dual language academy from kindergarten to the fourth grade.
00:06:53 – 07:00:24	Shares memories of the first time he came across conversations around immigration at school. Peers at his elementary school would ask if he had papers or if he was “legal.”
00:07:24 – 00:09:46	Jairo realized the effects that not having a social security number would have on his future work endeavors. He recalls conversations with his mother around what a social security number is, working as an undocumented person and the temporary relief DACA provided: “I really did not understand what she was talking about. All I knew was I don't have this little piece of paper, this tiny square blue paper that had a couple digits on it with your name.” Edited quote: “...this would've been so much easier to digest if I had known earlier so then I could start understanding this. But again, I got lucky that Obama got into office, started the DACA program. I felt relief up until he got out of office because then that's when the panic starts again. It's like, Oh, my gosh. Are they going to continue the program? What am I going to do? I'm still nowhere near a pathway to citizenship.”

00:09:47 – 00:10:20	Jairo’s family has been working with an attorney since he was in the fourth grade to apply for a visa.
00:10:21 – 00:11:21	Shares how his family has been more honest with each other about their immigration status and his mother encouraging him and his siblings to be their full selves. Jairo had a talk with his young brother about potential consequences if undocumented members of the family are forced out of the country.
00:11:22 – 00:12:16	Gives an example of how his mother relies on women-led support networks in the neighborhood, especially in case anyone is forcefully taken away due to their immigration status.
00:12:37 – 00:13:45	Explains that kids would jokingly speak about (immigration) papers in elementary school and that they were likely around parents and community members who talked about these issues on a daily basis.
00:14:03 – 00:15:31	Jairo’s mother heard about DACA as soon as it was announced but it took a few months for the family to determine whether or not they could trust the process. They sought a lawyer to help them navigate that process: “I just remember feeling relief. I was like, Oh okay cool. So now I’m going to have a social security number so therefore I got this work permit. So I had to do my own mini research to understand what exactly DACA is and whether or not it was safe. Because although my mom did find out immediately we didn’t enroll in it right away just because of the fear of maybe this is a scam. They’re just trying to get people to sign their names down on something so they know where they live and how much they’re getting paid and what they’re doing and where they are so it’s easier to find us.”
00:15:51 – 00:23:35	Shares how his work aspirations shifted at an early age after he enrolled in an architecture drafting class at his high school (Benito Juarez Community Academy). Jairo got into an internship with the Chicago Architecture Foundation his freshman year, and his love for learning and school was cemented.
00:23:35 – 00:24:52	School was a place of comfort. Jairo would spend all day at school with his best friend, from 7am to 7pm. He submitted his college application at the school’s computer lab and made his decision there as well.
00:24:53 – 00:28:02	Worked with the BuildOn nonprofit, which was an entry-point to doing social justice-based work. He did community outreach for voting rights, worked at a food pantry, and led his first community event with the Roots and Rays Community Garden. He describes a community mural he helped lead.
00:28:03 – 00:31:39	Gives credit to his mother for his level of empathy and wanting to work with local communities. Doing volunteer work in high school was also important for Jairo to learn about socioeconomics, how to navigate city agencies, and advocacy tools that he would in turn use to help his family and neighbors: “I will forever thank her for my level of empathy just because we didn’t have that much growing up, either.”

	<p>“Just knowing how difficult it is to get through life made me want to get more involved. So when I did my first couple meetings with BuildOn, after that I was like I got to keep doing this because they're helping me out and I want to continue helping other people out.”</p>
00:31:40 – 00:32:24	<p>Describes the Pilsen neighborhood at the time that he lived there:</p> <p>Edited Quote: “...when the streetlights would go out everybody's like word on the neighborhood is you have to get home by this hour before it gets too dark. And then I found out, I was like, ‘You know we can call 3-1-1 and, like, just give them our location and they can come over here and try to fix the lights.’ [00:32:04] They're like, ‘What? People's job is that?’ We just thought the lights went out and they just never cared. And I was like, ‘No I just found out that we have a say and we can...call them every day, multiple times a day with multiple people and that's how you get stuff done.’”</p>
00:32:50 – 00:37:30	<p>Describes early encounters with BuildOn and completing over 400 hours of community service. He would meet with the organization’s members once a week at school, where they led group activities, ice breakers, and social justice workshops.</p>
00:37:47 – 00:43:20	<p>Memories of college application process. Benito Juarez had college preparedness classes and encouraged everyone to pursue a post-secondary education. Jairo received a scholarship for undocumented students called The Soaring Eagle Scholarship.</p>
00:43:21 – 00:44:49	<p>Jairo made the decision to go to college out of state (Ripon College).</p>
00:44:50 – 00:48:30	<p>Jairo worked as a dishwasher at his college dining hall to make up for tuition fees that his scholarships did not cover. He later worked at the Student Activities Office and as a Resident Assistant.</p> <p>Edited Quote: “Some people would peek their head through the little window on the conveyer belt and just see me over there just spritzing all their plates and stuff. Which felt weird to me because I was like, everybody else is doing ‘college’ jobs—working for admissions, being a tour guide, having these many off-campus jobs. And then me, this small Mexican boy, undocumented immigrant working in the dish room.”</p>
00:48:31 – 00:53:31	<p>Recalls how important high school was for him to socialize, get involved in student groups, and to have the space to complete his schoolwork. He also describes the challenges of getting work done at home.</p>
00:53:32 – 00:54:45	<p>Describes a time where he stayed at school until 11pm for a fundraising event to help a student-led group called Invisible Children’s Club. His mother would encourage him to pursue his academic path.</p>
00:54:46 – 00:56:04	<p>Describes his mother’s reaction to him leaving home for Ripon College. She wanted him to stay at home but Jairo wanted to experience something new.</p>
00:56:38 – 00:57:53	<p>Jairo’s first days at Ripon. He noticed that there were very few students of color in his class.</p>

<p>00:57:54 – 00:59:27</p>	<p>Recalls a conversation he had with his high school friends about what they wanted to get out of college. Jairo wanted to continue the type of work he did in high school but soon realized it would come with challenges. Ripon College was a predominantly white institution, the surrounding town was Republican, and students expressed views that did not align with Jairo’s point of view:</p> <p>Edited Quote: “So I was like, This is going to be really difficult for me. Maybe I shouldn’t have picked this school. But then that’s when I decided, I have to see this through. I came for school, I’m going to get this degree, I’m going to enjoy my time in school, because I love to learn and I like classes.”</p>
<p>00:59:27 – 01:03:47</p>	<p>Overview of student involvement and activism. Jairo’s involvement in student groups like the Black Student Union, Queer Student Alliance, and the newly-formed La Unida helped him create community in a small rural town. La Unida put political activism events together, including meetings on voter rights and a documentary screening for <i>The Dream is Now</i> with a talkback panel session. He came out as undocumented to the group before this event, so he was asked to participate as a panelist:</p> <p>“...at that panel, like, everybody in front of us was just professors and some students, just to learn this kind of stuff. And then I was just a little baffled on how many of the people there were asking us questions about, like, ‘Why don’t you just do this? Why don’t you just do that? Just start enrolling. Why don’t you just become a U.S. citizen?’”</p> <p>“Somebody’s like, ‘Well, don’t you think that it’s going to be difficult because immigrants are, like, not that great at applying themselves and getting stuff done?’ And I stood up. I was like, ‘I graduated with like a 4.6 out of high school. I did these many community hours. I did all of this and I did this. These are the jobs I did. Tell me that I’m not incentivizing myself. I’m putting work and effort. I’ve done these jobs and I’m paying all these taxes and I don’t get any benefits from them. Social security would be dead if it wasn’t for immigrants.’ So, then they were completely surprised, like ‘Whoa, we didn’t understand all of this, the pathway to just become a citizen is so difficult for people that aren’t born here.’ So then after that I was like, I like this group. I was like, I need to stay with them and then I did.”</p>
<p>01:03:48 – 01:06:34</p>	<p>Jairo ran for the Secretary position of La Unida and got good feedback from his peers. He also participated in a cultural diversity fashion show.</p> <p>“After that I just knew that this group was going to be my main focus. I’m going to do other things for the school but this group is my focus and I want to continue doing the stuff we do with this, like explaining what this culture is about, what struggles this community faces, that there are actual real struggles and it’s going to be difficult to get some stuff done.”</p>
<p>01:06:35 – 01:08:50</p>	<p>Jairo’s leadership in La Unida solidified as years went by. The group grew a reputation at Ripon for its activism, with leaders organizing events around</p>

	<p>the rescinding of DACA, getting involved with a local high school, and getting involved with the school’s diversity coalition.</p> <p>“...we were talking about DACA being removed, so we led a specific meeting on what does that mean. Does this mean it’s taken away? Whose lives are affected? I think we called it a community circle and we led it for the school. And we just talked about how many undocumented immigrants are there in the states. What exactly are their lives like? What do we expect out of this?”</p>
01:08:51 – 01:10:11	<p>Jairo helped create a coalition of different student organizations where representatives could get to know each other, share their own initiatives, and give each other feedback.</p>
01:10:12 – 01:13:56	<p>Overview of La Unida’s Hispanic Heritage Month programming efforts, with an emphasis on art as cultural awareness and activism. Describes an event where the group decorated the dining hall with <i>papel picado</i> (perforated paper), a piñata, and brought a Mariachi band for lunch. They also worked on altars with other student groups that were specific to social justice causes—from gun violence to Hiroshima, and from immigration to sexual violence.</p> <p>“...My last year I was like, we’re going to have to go all out on this one.”</p> <p>“So, when they went up, it was incredible. It was like 24-feet-long. It was really high, a bunch of colors everywhere. It was beautiful. I was so proud of that piece.”</p>
01:13:57 – 01:15:21	<p>Overview of discussion-based events hosted by La Unida. Topics mentioned are: The drug triangle in South America and a face-to-face event for people to dialogue across binary groups (race, sexuality, gender, economic class, ability).</p>
01:15:22 – 01:16:05	<p>Mentions that La Unida attended USHLI (United States Hispanic Leadership Institute). Jairo met Dolores Huerta at an annual USHLI conference.</p>
01:16:53 – 01:22:36	<p>Reflects on why it was important to center conversations on oppression, equity, access, and privilege in college. Highlights that these conversations were designed to have people understand how people navigate multiple struggles through an intersectional lens. Shares a memory from the seventh grade where he was called out for not having used YouTube before. Also recalls memories of not being able to spend money on food outings during college like his peers.</p> <p>“...I found it important to have conversations about social justice and social equity and disadvantage and oppression and all this stuff so they’d understand why it’s difficult for some people to understand some things or never have had experienced certain things.”</p> <p>“...Normalizing conversations about just regular life specific to intersectionality that multiple aspects of your own life are correlated and this</p>

	is why it's harder for you than it is for somebody else who doesn't have all the labels you do."
01:22:51 – 01:27:59	<p>Reflects on the importance of art as a medium for political activism. Recalls working with the Black Student Union to create a logo with a rising fist and the attention it received at school. Also recalls using art to advertise for a mock Quinceañera ball, and using a giant monarch butterfly to get people to share their stories as immigrants:</p> <p>Edited Quote: "Political activism through art is fascinating...because there's a message that's being sent out [where] you don't specifically have to use your voice. Your voice can quiver but the art you're using doesn't move unless you make it move. It provides that message that you're hesitant to do yourself or you're not always there to do yourself."</p> <p>Edited Quote: "I communicate through imagery, like, art representation. That's forever going to be my favorite mode of activism. I go to protests and whatever, but you don't always have that vocalization or that syntax in your vocabulary to be able to address certain things. So what better way to just create something that catches multiple people's attention?"</p> <p>"...I put their pictures all over the monarch butterfly to show that immigration is multifaced. It's not just one specific source."</p>
01:28:00 – 01:30:00	Remembers speaking with the Board of Directors at school after the administration realized that Jairo was calling a lot of attention with social justice work on campus. He played a major role in the school's diversity coalition, influencing the way people used art to make their work stand out.
01:30:01 – 01:33:39	<p>Describes two art projects he worked on in his sculpture course in college that made commentaries on immigrant experiences, U.S. Latina, Latino, Latinx cultural and political identities, and social justice movements.</p> <p>The first art piece was a 3-D, four-foot-tall woman out of cardboard titled placed over a boiling pot titled "Coming to America: The Melting Pot." The second piece mentioned was a 3-D reproduction of Cesar Chavez's hand out of paper plates and string, with the words "sí se puede" engraved in his arm. Though art was central to his educational experience, Jairo majored in business in order to better understand "why does the United States function the way it does" through a capitalistic lens.</p>
01:33:40 – 01:35:50	<p>Describes his thinking process leading up to the creation of a monarch butterfly piece he'd wear on graduation. Jairo's sculpture professor encouraged him to showcase his art piece at graduation. Jairo expressed fear of coming out to a broader public.</p> <p>Edited Quote: "These are aspects of my life that I'm really honed into: My queer identity, my Mexican identity, my identity as an undocumented student who made it through college and had to pay everything out of pocket."</p>

	<p>Edited Quote: “‘What’s scaring you?’ I was like, ‘Because it’s no longer going to be a group of my peers or college students...do I want to call out more attention to myself at a moment when I’m exiting the school and then trying to get these jobs together?...What if somebody sees it and they don’t like it so therefore they’re not going to give me the job? That made me really nervous.’”</p>
01:35:51 – 01:39:24	<p>Describes the monarch wings design and creation process. Jairo expressed doubts about showing his butterfly wings a day before graduation. This time his best friends encouraged him to follow through with his plan:</p> <p>“...not even my family knew I was doing this. Like nobody had a clue.”</p> <p>“What does this mean for myself? Is it going to draw somebody’s attention negatively? Is somebody going to start yelling at me as I’m walking the stage? Are they not going to give me my diploma for making a political statement, as they told me later?”</p>
01:39:24 – 01:42:00	<p>Recounts memories from graduation day, including crossing the stage and reactions from people in attendance.</p> <p>“I hear my name, Jairo Javier Morales. And, bam, I start walking and I just release the wings.”</p>
01:42:32 – 01:46:28	<p>Description of decorated cap and monarch wings followed by a reflection on how they speak to his identities and speak back to negative narratives around Mexican immigrants in the U.S. Also shares a bit about how he continues lead social justice-oriented work in his role as a Resident Director.</p>
01:49:26 – 01:51:40	<p>Shares thoughts on “cognitive liberation,” a term Jairo identified with after reading Walter Nicholls’ <i>The Dreamers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate</i>.</p> <p>“I think he stated it perfectly well. The only addition I would add, it’s not ever just a one aha moment. It’s multiple aha moments.”</p> <p>“...It took multiple areas of being cognitively liberated to understand that this struggle is beyond myself and beyond the people close to me. It’s not just Pilsen community. It’s multiple communities throughout the United States. And it’s so much that it’s down to the millions that are struggling with this.”</p>
01:52:22 – 02:03:03	<p>Reflects on his journey towards embracing his own sexuality from high school to college. A Ripon counselor and members of Queer Student Alliance were there to have difficult conversations with Jairo about embracing himself and his own sexuality. He realized that he was living two lives—acting straight in Chicago and being more like himself in college.</p> <p>“Choosing to start thinking about my identity was, on its own, just, difficult, and I avoided it for a very long time.”</p>

	<p>“I remember I was in my room and I just told myself, ‘Jairo you’re gay. Jairo you’re gay.’ And I just repeated that to myself and I just started crying. I was like, ‘Oh my gosh. Jairo, you’re fucking gay! Oh my gosh!’”</p>
02:03:04 – 02:08:18	<p>Memories of coming out to his family.</p> <p>“I was like, ‘I have to come out to my mom because I want to be okay with being myself anywhere I go and not have to shadow myself and hide certain aspects.’”</p>
02:08:20 – 02:11:35	<p>Shares his mother’s reactions to him wearing earrings and painting his nails.</p>
02:11:36 – 02:13:09	<p>Reflects on what embracing multiple identities would mean for himself and his social justice work. He partnered with Queer Student Alliance at school to engage with questions of queerness in Latina, Latino, Latinx communities.</p> <p>“...me coming out to myself allowed me to create a larger spectrum for political demonstrations that I did through the school that now no longer just specified immigration but also queerness in the Latino community.”</p> <p>“...it was an immense heat of passion or me to just come out multiple times. To be able to have the power to just do it again but for some other stuff was great.”</p>
02:13:37 – 02:17:07	<p>Reflection on what the monarch wings mean to him. His mother was confused by what the wings meant.</p> <p>Edited Quote: “...the wings to itself just demonstrate to me everything that I did to get to where I was on that day of graduation. You came from Mexico at a young age. You hardly remember any kind of memory from there.</p> <p>...And then seeing this woman in this house who's calling herself my mother and I was like, "I don't know who you are." Then learning to get through all of that. And then living in Pilsen, living in Chicago, having these laws, having these barriers to getting a job, having these barriers to where do I want to go for college and then being in college. What kind of jobs can I get? I can't really travel so I can't do study abroad like a lot of my friends.</p> <p>...But in everything you did, and then having this trauma with your sister, you still got here. And you found out a lot of stuff about yourself, you're finally accepting of all aspects of your identity. And now I'm just going to show it off to everybody and then live the rest of my life as those pieces.”</p>
02:17:29 – 02:21:36	<p>Describes what he does as a Resident Director and aspirations to work in Student Affairs to continue helping people. Credits his mother for teaching him to value being humble and empathetic.</p> <p>Conclusion of oral history.</p>