

Interview 11/18/20

Jose Rolon

VC: I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: We're here with Jose Rolon, wedding planner and single dad of three school age children, and we'll be talking about these aspects of Jose's life and how they are affected by the pandemic. Welcome Jose, thanks for joining us today. Let's start with your most important role, that of being a dad. So tell us about your family and how you guys are managing.

JR: Oh, gosh, well, thank you for that introduction and thank you for saying "Jose". I love that. Yeah, you know, I'm a single dad of three beautiful children. My son is seven and my girls are six years old and I wasn't always a single dad. That wasn't the original plan. My husband and I, after we got married, at some point got really excited to start a family, which we did. We went through surrogacy and when our son was two months old, we had this crazy idea of having more kids, and so we went for it. And we flew down at the ten week mark to our surrogate's appointment and realized on that appointment that we were expecting twins, which was insane. And, on the eleventh week, unfortunately when my husband went away on a business trip, he unexpectedly passed away. It was a heart attack in his sleep. And so to be struck with that amount of grief of just losing my husband on top of being eleven weeks pregnant with twins, it was really, as you can imagine a really challenging time for me. Then, you know, according to the state of Georgia, at twelve weeks you can't make that decision any more to follow through the pregnancy, so for me I was very clear in the very beginning that I was likely going to abort because I thought who am I to raise three kids on my own?

VC: Wow.

JR: But then the very last day, which was the sixth day after Tim's passing, which happened to be the day of his funeral which happened to be the day I had to make the decision. I woke up that day and realized that my son just lost his father and what if something happened to me? I didn't want to leave him alone in this world. So I not only made the decision to follow through the pregnancy, but I actually announced that we were pregnant while giving Tim's eulogy. So as you can imagine, the audible gasp – so that's how I became a single dad. You know, we have been thriving and living life to the fullest for the past seven years.

KK: It's an absolutely amazing story. It's sad but it's not because you have your three children, and how are you doing especially during Covid, the challenges as a single dad with the three children?

JR: Yeah, that's a great question. I think through Covid, to be honest, like a lot of us parents single or not, we've been forced to do triple duty, so you know we're working

from home. We're not only being parents but we're teachers as well and for me that's really challenging because it's really cutting into what's possible and what can be, like our hours are being diminished with all the stuff that we have to do. But, I have to say that the way for me to break up that craziness and the routine, is to have fun with my kids. We've gotten a lot of attention by creating Tik-Tok videos, where some have gone viral. And people ask me, you know, how did you start doing it? I don't play instruments, I'm horrible at sports and I'm horrible with arts and crafts, but I do know how to capture memory and I do know how to be creative with video to create those memories. And so for me, that was a great way to just break up the day with all the stuff we have to do on our to-do list. Now if we're keeping it real-real, I started it really because I just wasn't getting laid. (laughter) You know, when you reach a certain point and when your kids and your stress level has reached a bit of a tipping point, a way for me to rejuvenate as a dad is to go out on a date, or be intimate with someone and, Covid didn't allow me to do that. So you know, for seven-eight months I had to think of another way to have my creativity flow out so really that is part of the reason why we also did a lot of videos.

VC: That's great, and I've seen a lot of your videos and I think you do a terrific job. They're really great. And your kids are really excellent video subjects. They seem to enjoy it too, right?

JR: They do, we like it. I try to make it fun for them. There are some that might be a little more work for them but I will, you know, like any other parent, will say "all right, if we do this one and if we do it right, we'll get some ice cream and it really works. But overall they actually do enjoy it, I mean there's been some Tik-Toks that we've done that they came up with on their own that they wanted to do and I think they've gotten better and better, they've grown so much since March.

VC: Yeah, well you guys seem to be enjoying that very much. And I personally enjoy watching your stuff too. In terms of being a single dad, in these times during Covid, what do you see as your biggest challenge?

JR: I think my biggest challenge during Covid is to, I mean, keep everybody level. You know I think, myself included, there's a bit of a balance. You want your kids to be well, be healthy and be happy. But, I also want to make sure that I am well, and I am happy. And you know, some people operate – and some might consider this selfish, but, there are parents that will tell you, "I put my kids first." It's not to say that I don't put my kids first, but I will often do things for me first because if I'm in a good place then my kids will be in a good place. So that means, you know, stepping away for a little bit and going into my room and watching a movie or, I don't know, it's just different things like locking myself in the kitchen and baking something for myself. That's the balance, right? That's sanity. I recently, after eight months, got an au pair, her name is Julia and she's from Poland, and that was after eight months of being solo with them around the clock. So now that Julia's been here about a month, which has really helped, yeah, and allowed me to do things for myself, go out for walks, enjoying a bit of that, doing some more virtual dating, which has been really wonderful. I will also say I think schooling is

a bit of a challenge because I'm not very good at – I'm not a teacher, and so I do worry about my kids falling behind a little bit. Particularly one of them who I think may have a learning disability but, you know, we're gonna take it one day at a time.

KK: This is pretty challenging for all parents. All of a sudden you're part teacher too. What you just said about taking time for yourself is very good. And it's great advice.

JR: Yeah, Kathleen, it's that analogy of like when you're on a plane, you know, who do you put the mask on first? Do you put it on yourself or do you put it on the kids? You're putting it on yourself first right? And then you take care of your kids, because when you put it on yourself, you're calmer and you can focus and you can be really present in what you need to do in your task, so that's kind of how I operate. Even when Tim was alive we always said we would put each other first, because if we put each other first we're in a happy place which means we would really be able to provide for our children. And so, that's how I operate.

VC: I think you are on the right path. So now, let's move on to your wedding business. How did you begin this business and what led to your making this choice?

JR: After Tim and I got married in 2010 I really loved the process of planning our own wedding and at the time, I was a video editor, and what I was doing was taking people's old home videos and creating short films out of them. And so at that point, when we got married, I was so ready to do storytelling in a different way. People thought I was really good at planning our own wedding so I thought why don't I really and truly consider doing this for a living? And I did. I wanted to get away from the computer and I wanted to get away from the editing. I love love, I mean my birthday is on Valentine's Day. It's kind of crazy that I figured this part out a little bit later in life, and when I say that, I was 33 years old when I walked into the venue and I basically said, "I will intern for a year for free if you allow me to do events." Which is a bit unheard of, maybe not so much now during Covid, certainly back in 2010 you're used to interns coming out of college in their early 20's, but I knew that if I put myself out there, which is something I always recommend for people just starting out, don't let your pride or your ego get in the way, just get there and intern and everything will work out. And, of course, I was getting paid within a few weeks and I was negotiating a salary within six months. But yeah, I was at this great venue for two years and I launched my business in 2013 and it has been really wonderful. I've done over 200 weddings and the press has been really good to me so far, and I've had write ups in the New York Times and all the wedding publications and now, I'm doing a lot of speaking as well and so it's been really wonderful.

KK: Now since Covid, what has happened to weddings? What has happened to the people that have maybe planned this two years in advance and now we're hit with this. How has that affected your business?

JR: Yeah, well it has affected my business and my industry as a whole and it's also affected a lot of my couples. The majority of my weddings have moved from 2020 to 2021, and now I'm moving a couple into 2022. And the four that I had this year turned

into micro weddings, so we've gone from, one wedding was 170 down to 47, one was 160 down to 26 guests. And, I just had my last one a few weeks ago which worked out really very well, it was an outdoor event, it was safely done, I really was proud of not only the guests but also the vendors that we brought on board, everybody did things responsibly. Although my next year is looking pretty good, and hopefully now with this announcement of 90% of the vaccine being there, hopefully not too many 2021 weddings will go into 2022 and hopefully more 2021 weddings will come into play and we can get working again.

VC: Yeah, we're all really hoping that, you know, this vaccine is going to be successful and we can at least start to see some return to some semblance of normalcy, right? So you say that the weddings that you've done have been outdoors, have you had to do some very interesting, creative things to make these weddings happen and fun for the couples?

JR: I think the first thing is to make sure the floor plan is abundant in terms of space. So instead of eight people at a 42 inch X 8 foot table we're putting four people. We also created a floor plan where there's pods, sort of like pod families. This is where this family's going to be, this is where that family's going to be, this is where the siblings are going to go. You know, we also have had caterers wear masks you know, or wear double masks. We had one wedding where it was important to the bride that they did face shields. One creative thing that we've done is we've allowed our caterers to change into colored gloves in between courses so that there's this appearance from a guest perspective that they're being responsible, they're being creative and they're changing things out. I know that a lot of event planners have shifted into virtual events but I refuse. I'm not there.

VC: You have this very interesting venture called Impact with Choice. Do you want to tell us a bit about that?

JR: Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up. Impact with Choice was a way for my business to give back. I wanted to have a model that was different from the stuff I'd seen out there. A lot of businesses will, often perhaps say, give 10% of the proceeds to the LGBT community, which is really fantastic and incredible. But I wanted to do a model where people got to choose how they want to make an impact and so the way that I've done it is when couples sign on with me they have one of three ways to make an impact. You can donate your flowers, donate your food, or donate your registry. So for 2% of your budget, we work with a floral company -- Forget Me Not is the name of the floral company -- they will go in, they will take your flowers and they will repurpose these flowers perhaps, let's say you had a mom that passed away from breast cancer, we can donate it to a hospital where women are undergoing breast cancer treatment. For 1% of your budget we can have -- we donate to Chips Shelter-- and so what that does is -- I operate on a \$100,000 budget for your wedding, so for \$1,000 you're feeding up to 72 meals, but also you're housing a mother and her infant for a whole month, which is really fantastic. And, then if you want a free option, COCObundle who I partnered up with, instead of your guests registering --- getting things off your registry for your home,

you're getting things off a registry for someone who's coming out homeless into a brand new home. Then as a return for our companies, we offer a wellness package once you make that impact. So once you've chosen your impact then we in turn have partnered up with six wellness partners and you get to choose three out of the six wellness partners you get for you yourself as a couple. So you want couples therapy, Pilates, yoga, you want a nutritionist, you get to choose. So that's Impact with Choice.

VC: That's awesome! That's awesome! Now, do you find that this is particularly relevant during the time of Covid, this giving back?

JR: I do, I do, and right now I am actually looking at the model a little bit more closely to see how I can incorporate a little bit more of what we've been dealing with, not just Covid but, you know, there's Black Lives Matter as well, you know, what's the percentage of people that are going into Chips Shelter are black or people of color. So these are new things that I'm starting to look at. For example, the online registry with, COCObundle which organizations are they looking at exactly and can we have more of a focus that perhaps is focusing on LGBT people of color, or someone who has been taken out of their home because of Covid. So these are all things that I'm looking at right now. So I think Impact with Choice, it was relevant before Covid and is far more relevant going into 2020, 2021 and beyond.

VC: I know you touched on this a little bit, when you were discussing parenting but you have these three lovely children and this business, so how do you, how do you keep the work-life balance?

JR: Ay, ay, ay! Well listen, it's hard. I think that one of the things I try to do is, you know, in my contracts I'm very clear about my office hours. I think that when you're a creative, oftentimes people don't see that as a 9 to 5 job. So in my emails and in my signature, I do have office hours Monday through Friday 10-6PM. Now we know there's been a bit of an adjustment because of Covid, but if you have that as a base, as a foundation in the beginning, in your signature and in your contract, it makes things a little bit easier because at least you know, they know after 6PM they shouldn't be expecting to hear from you. So then you can focus on being a parent, you can focus on cooking and bathing your kids, or even if you're not a parent, just focusing on yourself and your own sanity and well-being. We all have to make adjustments as a result of Covid, but, you know, one day at a time, one kid at a time, one client at a time.

VC: That's great. That is great, and I think you just answered the question I was going to ask you next which is what advice do you have for anyone that's running a business and being a parent at the same time?

JR: You know, that is a good question and I think what I'm going to add to that is advice during Covid, right? And so, what I will say to this. Don't let pride and your ego get in the way of getting work in order to support your family and yourself and your home, right? So if there is an opportunity to work part time at your local store, or retail do that, and we're all in the same place here. I've been fortunate through the videos I

wasn't expecting to have any income come through that but as a result of having just fun and being open to possibility, now we're generating some income from sponsorships. Keep those creative juices flowing and be open to work that could come to you in order to do what you have to do. Especially as New Yorkers, we're hustlers, you know, and don't stop hustling, you know, it'll reward you in the end.

KK: You are amazing and you certainly just helped me! I don't have kids, but everything you've said is for everybody, that we should get down, and we should keep on keeping on.

JR: Exactly. Exactly. And look, it's really easy to get exhausted; it's really easy to get tired. We're all experiencing the days are long, right? Like when are we going to get out of this? And so, you know, one day we're going to look back and we're gonna be like, wow, did that really go down? And it's going to be really a small part of our history, a small part of our lives and so we really just have to keep that in mind, that we are going to be at the other end of this and you know, keep doing what we're doing until we get out of it.

VC: Absolutely. So well Jose, just thank you so much for sharing your story, your experiences with us. It's absolutely been truly inspirational.

KK: Absolutely. You have motivated a lot of people today.

JR: My pleasure. Thanks for having me and I was really happy to break up my day to be with you guys today so this feels really good. Thank you.

VC: It's been great, and thank You.