

Transcript

0:00:00 – Sound Effects Explanation - Opening consists of sound effects emulating the noise of New York City. The voices of people walking on the sidewalk serve as a backdrop to the rising sounds of traffic, subway announcements and ambience, and ultimately the repeated honking of a car horn. This is followed by silence, and wind sounds to mimic a deserted New York City, or that which could have been found during the COVID-19 pandemic.

0:00:34 – The idea of a silent New York can only be conjured up alongside an unimaginable catastrophe. One that the city, despite its size, its resource, and its strong-willed people, found itself powerless to defend against. COVID-19 was the perfect storm that brought New York to a screeching halt. The normally bustling streets left devoid of sound, devoid of people, and devoid of life. The eerie quiet that hung over New York, etched hauntingly into the memories of its citizens, was only interrupted by passing ambulance sirens. Each time one went by, it was clear why. (Sound of passing ambulance sirens)

0:01:14 – On March 20th, 2020, then-Governor Andrew Cuomo issued the New York PAUSE Order, which two days later would close all businesses deemed non-essential. It also forbade private gatherings, instituted social distancing guidelines, and asked citizens to limit their use of public transportation for only essential work. With these new measures in place, New York City became the most populated ghost town in history. On the day of issuing, there were 1,942 new cases. Daily average cases peaked less than a month later on April 15th, at 5,426. They then steadily declined, with averages in the hundreds persisting until the end of the year, when holiday gatherings and virus mutations resulted in another wave of cases. By years end, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers had been diagnosed with COVID, while over 24,000 of them died.

0:02:08 - Living in Astoria, Queens as a 22-year-old college senior, the onset of COVID was swift. NYU's classes went remote on March 9th, 2020, and the prospect of further shutdowns convinced me, as someone living by himself, to get out while I could. I moved back home to spend quarantine with my family, and Queens would soon become a global epicenter. While living in my childhood bedroom in Scranton, Pennsylvania, I felt a keen desire to get back to New York, but what I saw on the television kept that urge at bay. The image of refrigerated trucks holding hundreds of bodies, deserted streets, and mass burials were enough to convince me that my love for the city did not surmount my instinct of self-preservation.

0:02:50 - I was accepted into Columbia University's Oral History Masters of Arts program in early 2021. I knew that I was returning to a changed city, and felt guilt for running away when things got bad, only to return when things looked brighter. I felt I owed some sort of debt for my opportunism, and so sought to learn more about what the city I love had gone through while I was away. At the beginning of my first semester, I became an intern with MISSING THEM, a project carried out by the non-profit newsroom, THE CITY, and the Columbia School of Journalism's Stabile Center. MISSING THEM seeks to provide free obituaries to New Yorkers who died to COVID. After submitting a request for an obituary, I interviewed dozens of families trying to find out what it was that made their loved one who they were. People talked about their relatives' jobs, children, hobbies, inventions, dreams, and the memories that they shared.

They also expressed regrets, and admissions of blunt honesty about the less happy times, and the grief that hasn't subsided since their loss. I wrote over 30 obituaries based off of what could be shared over the span of half an hour.

0:03:57 - As a student of oral history, I saw within this approach traits that coincided with an oral historical methodology, and ones that contrasted it. The deep listening that goes into oral historical interviewing requires time, verbal space, and an attention to emotion and body language that this work, by virtue of it being conducted remotely and within the confines of a 200-to-250-word limit, simply did not allow. This, and my ongoing interest in the City amidst the pandemic, led me to imagine the possibilities that an entirely oral historical approach to storytelling could do in recording the highly emotional and complex experiences of New Yorkers during the pandemic. This story is a symbol of what is possible when utilizing an oral historical approach in recording the life histories of those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It allows a narrator to tell his own story, interconnecting the way of life he knew before the pandemic, with the shifting realities and discoveries brought about by the tumultuous period. It also illustrates the relation one has to histories that otherwise appear alien, and finally, allows connections to be forged through the building of honesty, trust, and genuine human care.

0:05:11 - In the first days of my internship, I combed through the articles we had published by that point. One of them had an image of several people wearing white and black uniforms digging a mass grave. There were several wood coffins stacked atop and next to each other. was Hart Island. Hart Island is the largest mass grave in the United States. It has been in use since the nineteenth century, and is due to run out of space for burials by 2027. The article notes that one in ten of New York's COVID victims were buried on Hart Island in 2020. This amounts to about 3000 burials if the 780 bodies waiting to be buried in refrigerated trucks at the time of writing all arrived there. This represents a remarkable detraction from the island's standard burial rate. 2020 saw two-and-a-half times more burials than the year before, and 1,000 more than 1988, the worst year of the AIDS epidemic. As I read, I thought about what it would feel like to have a relative buried there. A scarier proposition, though, would be having someone buried there without being offered a notification. For many, they will never know that their parents, siblings, or extended family are buried alongside a million people who met similar, isolated fates.

0:06:27 – I found one submission, before I even conducted the interview, to be different from the rest. Angel Irizarry contacted us to write an obituary for his uncle, Cesar Irizarry. His submission lacked a lot of the info necessary to create a profile for his uncle, let alone write an entire obituary. He didn't know when he died, where, or what his life was like in the leadup to his death. Angel and I scheduled an interview, during which he told me he had not had contact with his uncle for decades, nor had any of his family. Angel called him a "lone wolf" and told me that as a result of them not knowing where he was when he was alive, they didn't know where he was in death, either. I immediately had a gut feeling that Cesar was buried at Hart Island, so I told Angel I would look into it to see if I could be of any help. After accessing the island's database, I found Cesar buried in plot 412. I called Angel back immediately to let him know, and

he was grateful to finally know where his uncle was, but I could hear in his voice that he didn't *really* know where he was.

0:07:29 – Hart Island is small; it's about a mile long and a third-of-a-mile wide. Located in the west end of Long Island Sound, it is only accessible from a ferry terminal at City Island in the northeast Bronx. City Islands beaches and boating culture have allowed it to become New York's version of a seaside getaway. As people scan the picturesque waters, Hart Island interrupts their gaze. New York City bought the sliver of land from Edward Hunter in 1868 for \$75,000. It had been bought from the Siwanoy tribe over two centuries prior, and its ownership was bounced around until New York declared the island to be under the jurisdiction of the Corrections Department. Prior to the purchase it was used as a Civil War prison camp for Confederate soldiers, and a burial ground for the Union. The first burial of a civilian took place in 1869, initiating a century-and-a-half long era of burials for the city's poorest and most alienated. With the cemetery being run by the Corrections Department, prisoners from the city's jails, including Riker's Island, would serve as the gravediggers. Each pit typically holds 150 bodies stacked atop and alongside one another in wooden coffins. Surprisingly, the island has served many purposes while operating as the city's burial ground. These include the reinstitution of a prison camp for Germans captured offshore during the Second World War, a quarantine center, a missile facility, and a drug rehabilitation center. A businessman from Barbados even sought to turn part of the island into an amusement park for the city's African American community. In the years preceding the AIDS epidemic, use of the island's buildings had ceased, and its primary use was solely as a public cemetery. Hart island has seen the burial of thousands of AIDS patients. Amongst a sea of white poles jutting out of the ground, the island's lone individual gravesite is designated "S.C. B.1. 1985." This stands for "Special Child, Baby 1, and the year of the child's death." This is where the city's first pediatric AIDS victim is buried. Despite the more than one million bodies buried there, Hart Island is relatively unknown to the New York community. Many people are unaware that the island exists, let alone that there is such a place where the city buries people. Those who *do* know about it often do not have positive things to say about it. Expressions of fear are followed up by comments like "that's where you go if you're poor and unloved," or something about how it's *just* the homeless that are buried there. In reality, each person buried there is a person, and deserves the same respect as someone buried in a private plot. In that same reality, the City has allowed Hart Island to fall into disrepair, and has instituted harsh visitation policies that have prevented friends from visiting, and denied families the opportunity to visit their loved one's grave, relegating them to a small gazebo. These issues have led to local organizations taking the city to task over the horrible conditions they find in and around their loved one's plots. Efforts made by The Hart Island Project and the Picture the Homeless Oral History Project, and other groups and unaffiliated families, bring to light the humanity that each person buried there possessed, and the utter lack of it shown in the burial process and surroundings on Hart Island. Beyond the decrepit buildings, touching the shorelines, skeletons have become exposed due to the erosion caused by Hurricane Sandy in late 2012 and its blame falls at the feet of the many city governments that completely overlooked the possibility of this happening, and the impact that it might have had on the families of those buried on Hart Island. Some changes have been made since the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation has taken jurisdiction from the

Corrections Department in 2019. This move was made to ensure better access for visiting families, which has been achieved through a more streamlined visitation process, although one that feels a bit more surveilled than one would expect at a cemetery. Visitors can now go to the island after scheduling online on one of the select dates that there is ferry service. After signing a waiver at the dock, they board the ferry, then a bus, and then they are led to their specific gravesite by a parks security officer. It is also important to note the controversy that has arisen since the decision has been made. A \$33,000,000 contract to a landscaping company with no cemetery experience, while continuing to employ the services of a Rikers Captain who oversaw burials pre-transfer in the same position. President and founder of The Hart Island Project, Melinda Hunt, has stated what seems obvious, but for some reason has not been acted on. She says that "in order to restore public confidence, New York City should hire an experienced cemetery manager to oversee management of Hart Island." Until then, there is still much work to be done. New York State formally declared Hart Island eligible for listing on the State and National Registry of Historic Places due to the same buildings that many feel disrespect the memory and burial place of their loved ones. With burials soon ceasing, calls for a memorial for all of those buried there, but especially the victims of the Spanish Flu, AIDS, and COVID, have come about. The DeBlasio administration claimed it would consider legislation for a memorial, but that it had no proper plans in place for its construction. All of the things that Hart Island can be are unknown. It can be a place of refuge, a place of memorial, a place of grief. Instead, it's a world of its own balancing its visitors on a precariously thin emotional line, managing the active deep human feelings inherent in visiting a loved one, and the anger, regret, and desperation found in a place so obviously forgotten. (Sound of waves crashing)

00:12:59 – A dispute that occurred decades ago led to the alienation of Cesar from his family. This confused young Angel. His wondering where Uncle Cesar was could have been chalked up to youthful curiosity, but instead he carried this with him throughout his entire life. This is the story of Angel's search for Uncle Cesar. I travelled to Fredericksburg, Virginia to meet Angel and his family, and talk with him to get an understanding of how far back, and how deep, the absence of Uncle Cesar went. What I heard in those conversations was a story of personal transformation, one that led to a desire to right the wrongs of his and his family's past, and one that ended on an island, just off The Bronx.

0:13:40 – Sound Effects Explanation – The ambience of an airplane pre-take off, followed by the sound of a plane taking off from outside, that of a train, and finally a doorbell.

0:14:01 – (Tyler) – So, why Fredericksburg?

0:14:03 – (Angel) – So my move to Fredericksburg was basically orders that I got in the Marine Corps to come to Virginia from Okinawa. So when I came, a friend of mine, I was his Corporal, introduced me to his cousin and uh, you know, we got married, had children, and I decided that this was a good place to raise my kids. A suburban place, a place with single family home and trees and sidewalks, you can hear the birds chirping, the crickets at nighttime, you know? Away from the city noise, away from the ghetto, away from the things that were easily utilized to take me into the streets, or take someone else into the streets, and I wanted to raise my kids in a

place that I felt was safe for them, and this was the area I decided to stay in and raise my children. I lived the urban streets and I raised my kids in the suburban streets. You know? (Chuckles) In the suburban way.

0:15:00 – (Tyler) Can you tell me more about where you came from?

0:15:02 – (Angel) – So I was born in York City, Pennsylvania. Small town, but it's a town that is full of depression. You know, a lot of people doing drugs and gangs and stuff like that. All of my family is either in Pennsylvania or in New York in the Bronx. I would kinda just go between both places. I would go to the Bronx and live that life with my family, my grandparents, God bless, rest their souls.

0:15:28 – (Tyler) What does *that* life look like?

0:15:30 – (Angel) – Well it's the life of a divorced kid (laughing) (Tyler: Yeah...) My father and mother divorced when I was three years old, and due to that divorce and from living in separate households, my father, he decided to kinda like go the right way, and my mother not so much. She decided to go the wrong way and live a unruly life which led me to living an unruly life as a teenager. At one time she was there, and then she was very absent. Drugs, alcohol, hanging out, partying. Myself would have been left at people's houses. And then growing up in the inner city you become part of that inner city 'cuz it's all you know. You know, living Section 8, welfare... The street life is something you have to become part of cuz if you don't you just get eaten alive. And so, I became part of that street life. I hung out at all times doing the things that the kids of the streets do, messing around with alcohol as an underage. You know, hanging with kids who do unruly things until my father was able to get custody of me.

0:16:39 – (Angel) - My father was a very hard man. When you live a rebellious life you go against responsible people, and my father was that responsible person who of course I would buck up against because of who he was. He grew up in the hard likes of New York City, and just as, you know, I spoke of a person growing up in inner city, he grew up in the inner city and dealt with the things that the city bring forth. You can only imagine growing up in the Bronx in the sixties and seventies, what the lifestyle would be like. So if you ever saw that movie, *Warriors*, (chuckles) then that's the type of lifestyle you could see how things would have been in that timeframe so... My father, he learned from any mistake that he has created and he became the man that my grandfather wanted him to become, a respectable, hardworking man. Family comes first. He's the type of man that I sought to be, and the man I am now..

0:17:37– (Angel) - I am a Christian. I was raised in a Baptist household, but my Christianity came alive in 1997 when I got into a bad car accident and technically was killed. To reflect that... if I don't do something with my life, these are the streets that I'mma die in, whether it's from a stray bullet or whether it's from a vehicle or what have you. In that hospital bed I called out to the Lord, asked the Lord to forgive me. I told the Lord I knew I wasn't right with him, and for him just to be there for me. I knew he was real! After I got out the hospital, I went to my father, I said "all things were gonna go wrong in my life what I was gonna do I was gonna go into the

military,” So I picked the hardest one, the Marine Corps, ‘cuz I was a hard head. Course in boot camp you get kinda like that gel religion, you know you get away from the drill instructor you go to church. When I was in Okinawa, Japan, I was drinking pretty heavily and fighting a lot. And a Staff-Sergeant, friend of mine, wasn’t a friend at the time, he basically told me that he was gonna throw me in the brig if I didn’t go to church with him on the next Sunday, and so I went to church with him and I actually felt the power of the Holy Ghost. From that point I started thinking differently, I started seeing things differently. I was a very agitated individual, someone who would pretty much punch someone’s lights out if they looked at me wrong. But when I became a Christian, just knowing that I could walk by faith and not by sight, I got out the Marine Corps after the 9/11 bombings because my wife was pregnant and I wanted to raise my child, I didn’t want to be away from my child. And so, I stepped out on faith and got out the Marine Corps which I was told was impossible, but I was able to get out. And, you know, I’ve seen through prayer people be healed, I’ve seen people be delivered, I’ve seen people be set free. And I’m a professor of that, because I’ve seen it, I experienced it myself. I know that through Christ all things are possible and-and I believe in that and I hold onto that. That’s why I am the person I am now.

0:19:44– (Tyler) - If you didn’t find Jesus, where do you think you’d be right now?

0:19:49 – (Angel) - I’d be dead or in jail. I don’t see anything other than that.

0:19:56 – Sound Effects Explanation – The sound of Latin music begins playing. This is a recording from one of Angel’s family gatherings. It carries until Angel begins speaking, under which the music begins to fade out.

0:20:03 – (Angel) – We would get together once a year, twice a year. We would call it kind of like family reunions. Got some good Puerto Rican food; rice and beans, pasteles, pastelitos, some people drank cerveza. We’d play some salsa, some meringue. And my grandfather played the guitar, my father would be on the maracas, another brother or myself would be on the congas. We would just jam, we would just party. The good thing about it is everyone was talented so it didn’t sound like a, a bunch of craziness, it actually sounded pretty good. It was a great time, just a time of fellowship a time of loving each other. That was the time that it would feel like our family was more personable than distant. Even if we had different views, you could see the comradery in us when we all got together. My family’s a loving family, very private though. A lot of them don’t want to speak about their lives. So, what I could say is that my grandparents were the glue that kept us all together. And uh, they’re gone, and so right now we’re just trying to find a way that we can kind of like keep that comradery.

0:21:06 – (Angel) My grandfather migrated to the United States from Puerto Rico as a young man. My grandfather came over first to establish a life and then once he was established, he went and got his wife. You know a hardworking man, worked in restaurants. He actually told me that he learned English in a restaurant. All the time I would look at my grandfather I would see the spitting image of my father. You know I looked up to my father so when I saw my grandfather, I looked double-y up. And uh, his voice would be like a voice that could calm a

storm. He would just say (mimicking his grandfather's voice, a soft affect accentuating genuine care) "Hey junito, cómo estás? How's everything? How's the family? Dios bendiga!" That's how his voice was. You know just very sweet and very soft. And always was someone who would want the best for you. He loved to cook he loved to joke. My grandmother and him would love playing dominoes, and our conversations, I would make sure when I seen him that I was in the room where he was at. And I was talking to him. And if he needed anything I was the one getting it. If he needed some water I'd get him some water. I just wanted to be around him 24/7 when I was with him. He just was a sweet spirit, a very calming spirit. He would do anything, he would give anyone the shirt off his back if he had to, that was my grandfather.

0:22:27 – (Angel) Cesar was born to another woman that my grandfather was with. So, Cesar stayed in Puerto Rico until he was about 17 years old. His biological mother died, and when she died Uncle Cesar had to live with another uncle on his mother's side. And apparently, there was some unruliness that he had. That uncle decided he couldn't take care of Uncle Cesar, and so contacted my grandfather and basically said "You need to come get your son." And then my grandfather came and Uncle Cesar lived with my grandfather, my grandmother, and his siblings in New York. When he got here my grandfather had him work with him. Worked as a busboy, and also washing dishes. This was in the early seventies before I was born yanno I was born in '77 so I wasn't there, but from some pictures that I saw, I mean he's posing with my grandfather and my grandmother, and they, they look like everything is cool. With my grandfather it's easy to get along with him as long as you're doing the right things. If you start doing the wrong things... he's not the type of man that's going to be stagnant and not say that you're not doing the wrong thing's, he's going to tell you that and then if you have a rebellious attitude you gonna buck back at him, if someone bucks back at him then of course there's going to be some kind of hostility. He was a free willed person, came from Puerto Rico from a farmland, avocado farmland. So, just imagine going from that to going to New York and seeing that big city and so much temptation and whatever else is there, somewhere down the line there was an altercation involving some kind of alcohol abuse and something happened between him and my grandfather which made Uncle Cesar get banished from the family. I don't know the exact details; I can't tell you what it was but alcoholism can tear a family apart and I believe that's exactly what happened. I believe that alcoholism played a factor in ripping Uncle Cesar from the rest of the family.

0:24:35 – (Tyler) - When the dispute happened what was the family's response?

0:24:39– (Angel) I mean I think there was the denial of him. I mean even in the obituary, he's not listed in the obituary of my grandfather. So, there was a denial of him, but one thing that I do know, again, third-party information of course, but when my grandmother died, before she died, they asked her how many kids she had and she listed Cesar as one of her kids. And the same thing with my grandfather, they asked him how many kids he had and he listed Cesar as one of his kids. So, I truly believe that whatever the altercation was in the past that my grandmother and my grandfather both forgave Uncle Cesar. Now whether the siblings forgave him or not, that's up to them, that's between them and God.

0:25:27 (Angel) – I met Uncle Cesar like once, I really don't remember how it went. I just remember that he looked a little bit like my father, he looks a lot like my grandfather, and I remember asking my father who he was and my father told me that he was my uncle. And so I always knew that Uncle Cesar existed, I just never really had the relationship that I wanted to have with him.

0:25:51 - (Tyler) - As a kid did you notice Uncle Cesar's absence?

0:25:55 - (Angel) – Of course. My father would always talk about Uncle Cesar, but then I was always like “Well where is he?” (Chuckles) And then my father would say “No one knows,” and, yeah I always knew he existed, always knew he was out there, always knew he was my uncle, just never knew where he was at. I just took what my family told me as gold, “Oh, he's the uncle that was banished he's the uncle that no one knows where is he at.” But I always knew Uncle Cesar was there, always. I asked about trying to find him several times and I just was told that he lives in the streets, no one know where was at. And, think of New York, New York's a big place, five boroughs, streets is a big place, dangerous place, if someone wants to stay hidden they could stay hidden, so, I didn't really push forward past that.

0:26:47 - (Tyler) - What would it have looked like to find him?

0:26:50 (Angel) – I mean I'm kind of like an emotional cat, I try to give him a hug (Chuckles) you know? Try to talk to him, about, you know, his past, talk to him about what he's doing in the future. Find out what's going on with him, just try to gain rapport, communicate with him. And see if he would love me the way that I would want to be loved by him. And, I would try to influence the family to let him back in. I believe that would be my motivation, to get him back. Let him know that he's loved, let him know that I forgive him, (Chuckles) if I could even forgive him. What's like the deepest thing that could happen that you can be banished from your family? I'm not holding grudges against him just because other people might hold grudges against him.

0:27:33 - (Tyler) - Was it hard not knowing where he was?

0:27:36 - (Angel) - Of course, especially during this time of COVID. People were speaking amongst their own groups. People weren't even leaving their house. So if he doesn't have family, if he doesn't have friends or if he's on the street, what does he have? In that timeframe everyone needed to be comforted, and if you didn't have that type of comfort... you could be living in depression, suicidal ideations, something crazy could be happening with him. So, of course, it just opens up the door for the what-ifs... I was a very good detective, very good, and I found people all the time. And I knew that there were databases out there that a civilian could use to find people. This day and age they have Facebook, they have Twitter, they have Instagram, and you know they have all those other type of social media platforms, there's what we call digital fingerprints and so of course, if-if someone's missing I'm going to find that person. I mean I tried to find my grandfather on my mother's side, I didn't find him because he's dead, but I found my uncle trying to find him, and I brought my uncle together with my

mother. And so of course, if there's a family member out there and I have the ability to-to-to track them down and find em' I would. And you can't find em' then all you have is the what-if. I'm the type of cat that don't want to live in the what-ifs. I don't like to live in the place of grey. I want to live in the black or the white, if it's black it's black, if it's white it's white. I wanna know the facts, I wanna know the truth.

0:29:05 – (Tyler) What kind of perspective does a success like that add to the struggle to find Uncle Cesar.

0:29:11 – (Angel) - It makes you feel that it can happen, it makes you feel that if you have some sort of diligence you can find somebody. And um, I was able to find Uncle Cesar, but the sad part about it is found him too late... My grandmother died from underlying health issues December 27th, 2019. She just missed COVID. COVID did not affect us personally until 2021. 2021 was hell for my family. I caught COVID March 6th, that same day, my aunts called and told me that my grandfather was dying because he has COVID. That same day, my father-in-law contacted me and told me he has COVID. A day later my grandfather died. A month later, my father-in-law died. I couldn't go to my grandfather's funeral, I had to watch his funeral through Zoom, because I had COVID. There's times that I sit back and I think of my grandfather, I think of my grandmother, and I think of my father-in-law and it brings tears to my eyes. When you look at the percentage on what people say is, COVID only affects that one percent, one percent don't mean anything to you when you're not affected by it, but when you're affected by it one percent's everything. And unfortunately, I had three members die of COVID.

0:30:44 – (Angel) - I found out that he died after I found him. When, when uh, his father died I wanted him to know, that his father passed. I found this address on a civilian database that I used when I was in law enforcement, and I saw that Uncle Cesar was connected to that address, and so I sent my aunt and she went and spoke to William who was living there and that's when she was told by William that Uncle Cesar died from COVID.

0:31:18 - (Tyler) - When you found out what were you feeling?

0:31:22 - (Angel) - It's like crushed dreams of ever meeting him. Him experiencing my kids and experience my successes in life, for me ever learning any knowledge or wisdom from him, it was just crushed dreams... From the time that I met him, I mean I was probably like ten years old or something like that, you know I'm going on 45 now. I just have figments, pieces of a puzzle that will never be, completed. There's so many pieces, there's so many what-ifs, there's so many unknown factors... the only time it will be completed is when I get to heaven and if Uncle Cesar's there I can speak with him and ask him. Holding a grudge didn't work out for anybody. My uncle still died and he died alone. What did it prove? It didn't prove anything. Maybe if Uncle Cesar had the type of family that people would want, maybe things would have been different. But, again that's a what-if. You can't live on what-ifs. I'm not saying Uncle Cesar is out of the ballpark with anything. 'Cuz he could have located his family and-and made amends himself too. I'm a different person than them. I know that, I would want my family to be together. I know that I would want my family to be unified. Cesar took care of William,

William was disabled, he's in a wheelchair, Cesar was there to help him get around, do what he has to do. And whatever type of care that Cesar did for him, gave William an admiration for him. Uncle Cesar's birthday was April 9th, and William texted the family and told the family to remember Uncle Cesar and to celebrate his birthday. I don't know William personally, but what I do know of him is that he loved Uncle Cesar. I know William loved him like a father, which showed that Uncle Cesar had some kind of impact on William's life, so it does show that whatever occurred in Uncle Cesar's life, maybe he decided to change, maybe he decided to get his act together. I mean, the stuff could have happened when he was like in his early twenties, how many kids in your freakin' early twenties do you know that does everything right? I look at kids that are in their freakin' twenties and I'm like "that could be my kid." (Laughing) You know what I'm saying? So, I could relate to kids in their freakin' twenties, and, or, you know teenagers, a lot of kids are freakin' knuckleheads. You know? I was a knucklehead. Doesn't necessarily mean I'm gonna just down you and-and cut you out.

0:33:58 – (Angel) I saw that MISSING THEM writes an article about New Yorkers that died from COVID and I felt that was kind of a way of honoring Uncle Cesar's memory. I had to fill out a form, and then I received an email from you. And then we spoke on Zoom, and then we spoke about Uncle Cesar's life, as much information I could give you about Uncle Cesar. And no one knowing where his body was, you had a suspicion that he could have possibly been buried at Hart Island. And you said you was going to look into it, which you did and, you confirmed that he was buried at Hart Island. From what I know, if Hart Island could cry out I feel like it would cry out because it's a lot of lost souls there, people who kind of who been forgotten by their family by their friends.

0:34:48 - (Tyler) - How does it feel knowing that he's buried on Hart Island?

0:34:52 - (Angel) – I mean it's horrible man, it's horrible. Because he does have family... It's hard for me because when I think of Hart Island, I think of lost souls.

0:35:05 - (Tyler) - You call them lost souls, what do you mean by that?

0:35:09 - (Angel) – My law enforcement career I dealt with overdoses and I dealt with homicides and I dealt with different types of deaths. And people who died of an overdose looked like they were just in so much pain and so much agony and so much struggle. I seen people who killed themselves look like they was in so much pain, so much struggle. And I seen people who died in their sleep with a big ol' smile on their face. And so I feel that people who die alone, that's considered a lost soul. I feel like their spirits call out for someone to love them, and if Hart Island can speak, Hart Island would scream. Because there's people who died there that were homeless. People who died there that were forgotten, people who died there that was prostitutes, people who died there that were John Does. Lost souls. Someone who is alone, isolated, feels like there is no hope, I feel like that's what Hart Island's all about.

0:36:06 - (Tyler) - What do you think about finding out about Uncle Cesar's burial on Hart Island from someone like me, as opposed to maybe someone from the city who should have done it originally?

0:36:15 - (Angel) – I mean I just think that it was a blessing that you was able to locate him. I didn't care who would've told me where he was at as long as I found out where he was at I'm good with it. But, you and I established a rapport. I mean it was great that you found out but it also showed to me that you was a man of your word, you said you was gonna do it and you did it. And you just didn't do it on *your* time, but I felt like you immediately did it. I think you told me the next day that he was in Hart Island which to me spoke a lot about your character and your diligence.

0:36:54 - (Tyler) - I appreciate that, thank you. Personally, uh I was happy to have been able to bring some sort of...

0:37:02 - (Shared) – Closure.

0:37:03 – (Tyler) – Yeah.

0:37:05 -(Angel) - Its good stuff man. its why you're here. You know? You showed that you was a man of passion. And, you know I told you that I believed in you. I don't trust everybody, I don't trust every Joe Shmoe, you gotta prove yourself and to me you proved yourself. That's why you're here, you know what I'm saying? I'm treating you like family, you know? You're sitting here, relaxing, you know? You're talking to me, you met my family you came to my household, you know what I mean? If I didn't trust you or believe in you, you wouldn't be here.

0:37:37 - (Tyler) - As we prepare to go to the island, what are you thinking?

0:37:42 - (Angel) – I don't know man. It's something that is kind of surreal. It's a sad fact that I wouldn't be able to say to Uncle Cesar you know "love ya man" and you know "I'm here for you if you need anything." "This is my kids, this is you know, my family." I don't have that man, all I've got is memories (chuckles) which I really don't have. So I have to develop an emotional status within myself on what I'm going to deal with when I go there. Am I gonna stand before it? Am I gonna cry? Am I gonna be silent? You know? I don't know. 'Cuz it's something that is gonna have to happen when it happens. We'll see but to be able to go on Hart Island, you know, we just spoke about it and now it's going to be a reality that we actually gonna walk on it. And I wanna give him kind of like a funeral, give him the Last Rites, open up the Bible and give him to scripture. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, let his body be laid to rest.* So maybe he'll feel some peace, or maybe just peace within myself... My goal and my wish is to remove him from Hart Island and give him a proper burial. But, I'm not the next of kin. So ultimately, you know it's up to his siblings to make that choice.

0:39:00 – (Angel) – (Birds Chirping) I'm here with my father Angel Sr. as well as my man Tyler Brady in front of his apartment. It's about 9:30 in the morning on a Sunday and we're about to

go to Saint Raymond's Cemetery to go see my grandparents, as well as go to Hart Island and go check out the gravesite of my Uncle Cesar. It's a beautiful day, the sun's out, the birds are chirping, feeling good and just excited to see the sights that we're gonna see.

0:39:36 – (Airplane overhead)

0:39:45 – (Angel) – My grandfather, he loved his wife so much when he lost his wife he just wanted to be with his wife. And he was hurting, and uh, the lord you know took him, he's with his wife now. And he's in Heaven and it's a beautiful thing. And he'll always be in our hearts, and in our minds and... always, so... Mirar! Mirar! (Distantly) Excuse me!

0:40:20 – Conversation persists until 41:38

(Stranger) Okay, let me ask you a question. Now do you know what section...

(Angel Sr.) – Yeah, yeah, show him the statue.

(Stranger) – Do you know what statue?

(Angel Sr.) – (Stammers) I think it's over that way.

(Stranger) – Okay, get in the car.

(Angel's) – Oh okay, gracias, thank you man.

(Stranger, now in car) – Okay I'm gonna take you, we gonna find it now.

(Angel Sr.) – We're almost there now, I know!

(Stranger) We'll find it, don't worry.

(Text message alert)

(Angel) - Please, I've got money for gas and anything that you need.

(Stranger) – Oh no, it's okay bud don't worry about it man.

(Angel) – Thank you man.

(Stranger) – I'm not loaded but...

(Angel) – You're doing good.

(Stranger) – I do good.

(Angel) – That's a blessing. Thank you. Thank you so much, yeah.

(Angel Sr.) - One Bronx, one Bronx man (Stammers) helping the other Bronx man. What part of South Bronx you was born at? South Bronx?

(Stranger) – Yeah I was raised over by, you ever been to Willis Avenue?

(Angel Sr.) - Yeah! (Laughing) Willis Avenue!

(Stranger) – Yeah that was years ago when that shit was burning.

(Angel Sr.) – Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!

(Stranger) – Okay now see this section here what it is, these are the Holy Cross.

(Angel Sr.) – Okay.

(Stranger) – Okay, now...

(Angel) – This looks like, the area.

(Stranger) – Just remember you gotta get close to the highway over here,

(Angel's) – Yeah, oh okay.

(Stranger) – So when you come in when you're close to the highway just take, the Holy Cross is right there.

(Angel) – Uh huh.

(Stranger) - Before the Holy Cross.

(Angel Sr.) Before the Holy Cross.

(Stranger) - My parents are right over there.

(Angel's) – Oh praise God. Thank you so much!

(Stranger) – Alright guys!

(Angel) – God bless you.

(Angel Sr.) - Your parents, your parents, your parents raised a good son!

(Stranger) – They say that you know but I have my doubts!

0:41:38 – (Angel) – This is them. This is the first time visiting my grandfather's gravesite. It's a beautiful tombstone, (Sound of weeds ripping) my father right now is ripping weeds out of the grass to, you know, show respect. You can see the admiration a son has for his parents cuz he's basically mowing the lawn with his hands. Right where they're buried at you have the big Holy Cross showing that Jesus is watching over them and, it's-its beautiful. (Weeds ripping) See how the angel came out of nowhere? How do we know that he was not an angel? What was in me, for me to stop him? And then for me to get my father to come up and speak to him. Gave us a ride, got out of the car, walked up to the sites. Angels come in disguise man, I offered him money, he wouldn't take it. He didn't want nothing from us, all he said was "God bless you, I'm glad I helped you." He got in his car and he took off. We'll never see him again! So, Lord, I just thank you for blessing us this day, thank you for letting us make this trip, for the gentleman that picked us up and helped us find the location of abuela and abuelo's gravesite. The honor that my grandfather and grandmother gave me while on this earth, the relationship I had with them I would-I would never give away for anything. Amen. Ohhhh abuelo... You got your, you got your wish. You're with your wife now, man. Love *you* man, love you abuela, forever. (Airplane overhead, kiss sound)

0:43:55 – (Dock chatter, sound of waves hitting against it) – (Angel) – We are here at the beginning of the ferry, to go to Hart Island. At this time, we're gonna go see the-the gravesite of Uncle Cesar. It's beautiful outside, the feelings is sort of expectations. Once we get on the ferry we'll see how you know emotions go, but I'm not the type of guy that- that shows emotion. (Ferry horn blare, then the sound of the engine) So right now we're on the ferry going over to Hart Island. They say it's about a twelve-minute ride. Once we get there they're going to put us on a bus, we have to wear our masks when we're on the bus. The ferry doesn't look like a boat that you would think a ferry would look like. Looks like it could be a-a ferry that could hold like uh, a vehicle or something like that. We're going to be directed to our designated site and uh go from there. (Noise of the engine) The way I could describe it looks like some old barracks, kind of like a little fortress. Bunch of old buildings. Broken down, windows are all out. The police even described, said some of the buildings could be demolished at any time, they could fall down at any time, so. You gotta follow where they're going and-and make sure that you don't uh deviate from the location where you're supposed to go. They really want you to keep to that site, they don't want you to walk around and interfere with someone else's celebration or anything like that, so. If you can describe Hart Island from what I see right now it looks very scary and very sad. (Chuckling) Just looks like a very scary, very sad place. Looks like a

place where I did like military training at before. If it's a cemetery then it's a sad cemetery (chuckling.) Like it doesn't-it doesn't look like a cemetery. It's a very uh desolate area very, desolate place, so. I'm interested to see what the-the gravesites look like. Do they actually have anything but someone's name, and like what the gravesite actually states? Um, but yeah, looks like a very sad place, at this point. If you look across from the water it's so beautiful over there at City Island, (chuckling) and you look across over here it look like it's a horror movie. Yeah we're pulling up to the dock, we're about to dock so you might wanna step, step aside...

0:46:20 – (Angel) - We're on the bus right now, it's a very bumpy ride. Looks like we're just going through kind of like, woodland. We see tombstones here and there, the one that I was able to read said 1983 on it, and it was just literally right beside the road, like it wasn't, you know it wasn't like placed in a place where you think that a tombstone should be it was literally just on the side of the road, so. There's weeds everywhere, it looks like it's a swampland. Definitely looks like there's probably like some snakes, and all kinda you know insects, and probably rats and everything all around this place. Uh, you know, some of the parts look like people live there. Like right now I'm lookin' and there is trailer parks and there is barbecues, looks like they're cutting wood and everything like that as well, so. Yeah, looks like someone is livin' there. So, I mean it's hard to explain, to me it just looks like you see like the desolate buildings, the windows are all out of the buildings, you see construction work. It looks like the place is definitely, very disturbed, doesn't look like a place that, you-you wouldn't even think there would be bodies here but there is there's bodies that are here, there are a lot of John Doe's and a lotta Jane Doe's here. And uh, we're going to the location where my uncle is buried and uh we'll go from there.

0:47:48 – (Angel) (Sound of walking, birds chirping) How do they get assigned like where to go, is it just wherever's open?

0:47:52 – (Security Officer) – So they open section-by section...

0:47:54 – (Angel) – Uh huh.

0:47:54 – (Security Officer) – Um, so when they open the section and they bring the bodies...

0:47:57 – (Angel) – Uh huh.

0:47:58 – (Security Officer) – They have the names and the plot, they put them in the, in the ground.

0:48:02 – (Angel) – Uh huh.

0:48:02 – (Security Officer) - And then they mark it where they are.

0:48:04 – (Angel) - Wow.

0:48:04 – (Security Officer) – Yeah.

0:48:08 – (Angel)- It's-it's hard to believe there's actually bodies here.

0:48:11 - (Security Officer) - Yeah I know, hello? Oh that's right-that's right, okay my bad, I'm sorry General. Alright, thanks...

0:48:20 – (Angel) - So were walking up to plot 412. Right by the smokestacks. Okay we gotta stand here?

0:48:29 – (Security Officer) Y-yeah this is your spot.

0:48:30 – (Angel) – Oh this is it?

0:48:31 – (Security Officer) – Yeah this is it.

0:48:33 – (Angel) - Right here.

0:48:33 – (Security Officer) – Yeah right where this...

0:48:34 – (Angel) – Oh.

0:48:35 - (Tyler) - He's, he's here?

0:48:36 – (Security Officer) - Yes, yes. Right here.

0:48:37 – (Angel) - Doesn't even have a cemetery spot. (Sound of texting)

0:48:45 – (Security Officer) - If you need anything I'll be over here.

0:48:45 – (Anegl Sr.) – Alright, we appreciate that.

0:48:46 – (Angel) -Thank you.

0:48:47 – (Security Officer) – You're welcome.

0:48:52 – (Angel) - Yup this is where Uncle Cesar is at. Man. Like I said, you know, I'm not a very emotional guy, but, this kind of like takes the cake man. Like you-you cannot tell. Like, you, we just rode on the bus right over it. They put a block of wood, where his tombstone would be if he had a tombstone. His body is right under here, by the condemned buildings. This is horrible. He isn't someone who's forgotten. He has family, you know.

0:49:30 – (Angel Sr.) – We always loved him. Never forgot him. Never did. He had a sense of humor, he was al-, he was a joker at times. Loved watching television, loved movies, loved to

eat too, (Angel laughs) oh yeah, loved to eat... We had a lot of good times. Just the alcohol, took a hold of him. That kept him distant from the rest of the family.

0:50:07 - (Angel) - Alcohol can destroy families.

0:50:09 – (Angel Sr.) Oh yeah. He loved his whole family. Just when he started drinkin', he was, got out of control. Usually people that-a-abusive drinkers they don't realize they have a-have a problem. So they don't a-accept any help.

0:50:36 – (Angel) - Uncle Cesar were here. we just left abuelo's grave and, it's definitely hard to believe that you're right here. I know I didn't, know you in life, I'm sorry for that, I know that there were circumstances that led to that. But I never forgot about you, I always thought about you, always asked about you. I don't know exactly why you had to come to this- area here. but we're here for you, and everything that uh we have done as a family against you, we ask for forgiveness and everything you have done against us we forgive you. I know William said that you was like a father to him, I would have liked to have seen that, and I would like to know maybe if you had any kids. I have children, I have a biological daughter, a stepson, and-and a granddaughter. And everyone's doing good, my daughter's name is Jalacia, Keyshawn, and-and Leilani's the granddaughter. But everybody's uh, everybody's doing good. I started off a little rough as a knucklehead, but I finally got my act together. I wish I coulda known you more, wish I coulda spent time with you. I know that alcoholism and-and whatever else plays a part in some of our stories, and ev-, I even was down that road too with alcoholism as a young-as a young man. But uh, I'm doing better now. And your brother's here, your brother's here, Angel Sr and he just built you a nice um shrine with a cross that he literally hand made. And uh, we love you man, and uh maybe somewhere down the line the family will decide to move you from this place. 'Til we meet again Uncle Cesar, God bless you, Dios bendiga, ashes to ashes and dust to dust... God bless you Uncle Cesar. (Sound of Angel writing in the dirt.) So, I wrote in the dirt "Forgiven + loved – Cesar Irizarry" So now, if a vehicle or somebody comes by, they gon' know that Uncle Cesar is right here.

0:53:36 – (Angel Sr.) - We'll let the family know.

0:53:38- (Angel) – Yeah we found you. We found you. And y-you do have family, you have loved ones.

0:53:46 – (Angel Sr.) - We'll continue talking about him.

0:53:49- (Angel) – Yup... Is that the bus? Yeah? Yeah. Alright. Love you Uncle Cesar, God bless you, and now that we know where you're at we'll come here again and visit you and hopefully we'll speak with the family and-and maybe they'll come and, get you out of here. (Bus sounds) There are people here, lost souls, and they're looking for some love. And may the-the souls of all these people here, may they find favor and family and friends to come and-and-and visit them. Life is too short to be holding grudges, let 'em go, forgive each other 'cuz you never know when the Lord is going to call you home. It's been a journey man, it's been a journey, and it's

sad that something had the spark in me because of this COVID thing and I wish that, you know, I would have got that spark way before this happened.

0:55:03 – (Angel Sr.) – No everything worked out perfect, it was meant to be for all of us to unite and be here, you know?

0:55:11 – (Angel) – Now we know where he's at. Now we have a location. In life I couldn't find him but in death I know where he's at... (sound of birds) no longer lost.