

Christine Gonzalez Garrett
COVID-19 Behind the Mask Interview
October 16, 2020

G. Barr: Good morning. I am Gabrielle Barr. Today is October 16, 2020, and I have the pleasure of speaking to Ms. Christine Gonzalez Garrett. Ms. Gonzalez Garrett is a Senior Human Resources (HR) Specialist at National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). Thank you very much for spending some time with us. So first, I want to ask how has COVID affected the way you perform your job today.

Garrett: Gabrielle, thank you so much for your time. I want to make one slight correction. I am an HR Specialist for the Office of Human Resources. I happen to hire for NIAID. I don't work for them. I just want to make that small clarification.

With respect to the way COVID has impacted the way I've done my job, well, I think about myself and how it's even more critical that I continue to provide a high level of service and consultative support to the divisions that I provide HR services for. I've definitely been working a lot harder having to acclimate very quickly to new administrative processes, much of which have been conducted online, having a very quick turnaround in terms of getting myself up to speed on things like Adobe and using pdfs and encrypting things differently, encrypting things better, and all kinds of different little tools and resources that I didn't think I would need prior to the pandemic, and having to work completely remotely. But now, definitely, I've gotten keenly aware of my work and, just like I said, I've been performing at a harder and a higher pace because I want to make sure that I keep the same level of service that I provided my customers prior to COVID-19.

G. Barr: What are some challenges you're having working from home? I mean it is a very different situation.

Garrett: I think the biggest challenge for me is the hard stop. I am grateful that I work with leadership within my branch division and all of OHR who really emphasize the importance of work, like work-life balance. I am fortunate that I have teenagers and so they're pretty self-sufficient. So, the biggest barrier for me has been to say, "Stop, shut it off, shut the laptop down," and then go do something else.

G. Barr: Yes. Definitely, I think many of us are having that. How has COVID impacted your recruiting for intramural and extramural positions at NIAID? I'm imagining a lot more applications at this time.

Garrett: Well, it's not just the applicants, the potential applicants, I definitely have seen an increase in the level of enthusiasm of potential candidates and people reaching out to me independently wanting to find out about opportunities or positions that I may have posted or just opportunities in general to work for the NIH. I think the biggest impact has been in my division. So I service the Vaccine Research Center, the Tech Transfer and Intellectual Property Office, the Laboratory of Allergic Diseases, and the Laboratory of Clinical Immunology and Microbiology. (To my knowledge), all but the Lab of Allergic Diseases is conducting work that has direct or indirect impact to COVID-19.

So, the Vaccine Research Center is very self-explanatory as they were in the news several months ago when Trump came to visit the NIH; he went to visit the Vaccine Research Center where Dr. Mascola

and all of the other staff are working on the vaccine. They are doing a wide variety of different things directly and indirectly related. I think, from my understanding, they're just taking their vast expertise and figuring out how to provide support and research deliverables for the virus, and then the tech transfer office (TTIPO) is working on the extramural side in terms of the vaccine production and making sure the licensing and patenting pieces are in place. They have been very key on making sure that they have enough staff; a lot of their staff are being stretched and so they are finding opportunities to fill positions. A number of my positions that received COVID-19 approval--direct higher approval by OPM--are with the Vaccine Research Center, so I've been working at a faster pace at a more intense pace to do my part to make sure these positions are filled.

G. Barr: Are the criteria for the candidates very different now because of COVID or not?

Garrett: No, the distinction with COVID-19 related positions is strictly related to how we're hiring. We just have a slightly shorter turnaround time in terms of when we send all of the applicants to the hiring managers. That turnaround time tends to be a little faster than with other positions that don't have the COVID-19 language in the job announcement or in the position description. But no, the standards of how to qualify for a position remain and that's straight from OPM and NIH guidance, so that hasn't shifted.

G. Barr: Well, that's good. What three words would you use to describe your work environment right now and being part of NIAID and why?

Garrett: What three words I would use to describe the environment? Passionate, intense, excited.

G. Barr: Right, so you've said in the past that working at NIH was a childhood dream for you. Why was it a dream? That's a very interesting and unique dream. How do you think you can leverage the current situation to make it a possibility for others?

Garrett: When I started college—short, short story—right before I started college my intent was to be a biomedical engineer. I worked in a lab and all of the research that I did when I was in high school the articles that I read always referenced NIH. I thought, wow, what a cool place to be! If I were to ever become a scientist, an engineer, whatever it was, like I said, my head was set on biomedical engineering. I thought it would be a really great opportunity to come and work for NIH, just to say I work at NIH.

I think now having the opportunity to actually be here and to be among such wonderful mission-driven colleagues, I think the best piece, the best part of me that I contribute to helping people realize their dreams is just the faith that they have with me. So one of the things that I do, as part of a service my division, my colleagues and I, we provide resume consultation services to NIH staff and contractors. So each time that I've participated in consulting with an NIH staffer or a contractor, the advice that I provide for them, the feedback that I give on their resumes-- it's sort of like a lightbulb goes off for them because I'm having them to reimagine the process for applying for a position on USAjobs.gov. And so, when I point out different things and see their eyes brighten up and the lightbulb go over in their head, I feel “okay. I've done something. I've kind of demystified the process”, if you will. I think in my general interactions with people I feel like just making sure that I am a warm person to understand that even though the process can be long, it can be a bit challenging, that the opportunity is

still there, and to not limit yourself to just one particular plan, one particular lane. So, I think just the advice that I offer, the feedback that I provide, when people ask, it is probably the best way that I can offer to someone the opportunity that yes, perhaps your dream can be realized. I also even from time to time will share my personal story about how I got here to the NIH and hopefully that's a source of encouragement for other people who are trying to be a part of this great organization.

G. Barr: That's really helpful. USAjobs.gov is quite difficult to navigate. What concerns has COVID brought to you in your family and what opportunities?

Garrett: I think in general, personally, the concerns that I have around me is for my neighbors, it's for friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and just the general public. The fact that I work in an institution, in an agency, where the scientists are driving, indirectly and directly, the policy. And then, unfortunately, there's a contradiction in how the information is shared to the masses. It's a contradiction unfortunately and it's becoming very politicized. That's a concern for me because when you're politicizing something like a virus, like a deadly virus, and you're politicizing people's livelihoods. That bothers me. As a family, I think my husband is (very) concerned. Again, I think with just the safety and making sure that we're safe and seeing how people, some of us are not following guidelines that are set out about social distancing.

I think the other concerns we have are with our children and their ability to adjust, but gratefully we have very strong-willed children and so they have been able to rise to the occasion when they've had moments where they were feeling kind of down or a bit of a way about something, like my daughter, for example. As a gymnastics coach and teacher, this year since the pandemic she hasn't been able to work. She enjoys gymnastics; she's a competitor; correction, she was a competitive gymnast and so this was her way of giving back. So, for her not able to see her kids, her babies, has sometimes posed some challenges. She's been a little down about it, but I think as a family we meet each other where we are and just provide support and just lots of hugs when necessary.

In terms of opportunity I think for our children to see how we work, like my daughter, specifically has heard me on the phone talking to colleagues or talking to my customers or candidates. Some days she just shakes her head, like "oh my gosh". Other days she's like, "wow". I think she has a greater appreciation and understanding of what I do and the same thing with my husband. My husband works for a nonprofit in DC and so for our kids to see him and his work is somewhat different. We're both working long hours, but he has sometimes been online until nine or ten o'clock at night because he has to. He has to work with West Coast affiliates and so he sometimes, like me, works 10-12-hour days. The difference is I can intentionally shut it off; he unfortunately cannot because he might be leading a Zoom call or providing some kind of technical support. So, the opportunity I think for us as a family has just been an opportunity for us to get to know each other differently, to spend time, to go for walks. We've always been on the go so much that making a point to stop and kind of go for a walk or do something just different without being in a car has been different, but overall, I think it's been a positive learning experience.

G. Barr: Has there been a sort of an emblematic COVID experience for you? I think we all have one. I went to my first Zoom wedding which was in a car, in my car, which was like I would never do that any other time but during a pandemic. Have you had any experiences?

Garrett: Yes, so of course, there is an uptick on lots of Zoom meetings and Zoom parties, celebrations, happy hours, book clubs. My nephew was dedicated with his church and so that was a Zoom call. It was a very different experience but a beautiful experience, nonetheless. I just think overall the uptick of using Zoom and Google and all kinds of things like WebEx and whatever else is out there to conduct business has been a definite change and a very noticeable one.

G. Barr: Definitely. How do you think COVID will impact the behavior of people in the short term and in the long term?

Garrett: I think it would depend on how you view yourself and your place in the world. I think COVID from a professional standpoint has forced individual divisions/agencies, inside and outside the government, to really reimagine productivity. I think in the short term, in my experience, people have been kind of personal. I know professionally, as opposed to starting off a meeting for me, some of the conversation might start with, Hey, how's it going? How are your kids? How's your mom? How's your dad? How are your pets?

I was on one call where we were just sort of waiting for the meeting to start and somebody had their camera on and they were showing their cat and the next thing everybody that had a cat turned their camera on and you see all of these beautiful animals and just seeing how the person on the camera is just holding on to their little fur baby. So, I think in the short term we generally have been providing a bit more grace to each other. There are still some very individualized thought processes and behavior, so I think in the long term I'm not sure what's going to happen.

My hope is that we're kinder. We continue to be kinder to each other especially after November. I hope that we continue to give each other grace. My hope is that we take our lives, our health, and our families closer, and take our overall health far more seriously and look at ourselves not as an individual but a part of the fabric of human existence. That's what I see and I think from that point if we see ourselves as part of the fabric then we will start to do things collectively—set policies that are more supportive of making sure that the person to the left and to the right of me or to the left or right of you are okay. Yeah, it can't be business as usual anymore. I mean everyone has been impacted by this virus in some way, shape, or form. So, I think at the root of everything that I just said is that people do not return to business as usual because it's not right.

G. Barr: So, you're from Brooklyn and so how did your family and friends fare there? I mean the virus had such a stronghold in New York in March and April and what was it like for you to see like pictures of New York on the news and in the paper?

Garrett: It was mixed. I do have some family up there. I have cousins, my stepmom, my sister, my youngest sister is there—she's a nurse at Sloan-Kettering. I believe she's been impacted tremendously; I would check in with her from time to time. It was hard seeing my city, my hometown, in the news in that way, seeing just the rapid increase in illness and death. It was nice to see resiliency. It was nice to see the Cuomo brothers, Governor Cuomo, just really kind of gave me chills, made me feel a little homesick, but it was nice to see Governor Cuomo take a level of leadership that was necessary, very similar to the way Governor Hogan took the reigns and had a very strong sense of leadership. It saddened me for a while just to see all the death and the sickness, but I was also encouraged because New York is resilient. I mean regardless of what's happening and the people changing the dynamics of

the population. We're still hardcore. I'm a Brooklyn girl to the day I die. I'm a hardcore girl. I am hardcore, meaning I'm passionate. I can be very serious. I'm very focused and very driven. That's how (I) we operate, and we take people at face value. If you're a friend to me, I'm a friend to you. You treat me kindly; I treat you kindly. You treat me some kind of way; you're going to get treated some kind of way. It's just been really hard at first, but I was encouraged because of just how we are as Brooklynites and as New Yorkers. So, I'm good.

G. Barr: This is a fun question: What has been your favorite article of clothing you can wear during a pandemic.

Garrett: I'm gonna see if I can grab it really quick and I'll show you. My favorite article of clothing has been my caftans. This is one of my caftans here and so it's a really long one. Ironically, I kind of came across wearing caftans very randomly. I have a friend from Brooklyn who started a page called "The Caftan Cutie". She's on Instagram and it's just been a really wonderful opportunity for women to just kind of embrace their inner Mrs. Roper—Mrs. Roper was a character from the 70s from Three's Company, and they had their own show called The Ropers I think. Mrs. Roper was known for wearing these beautiful, luxurious caftans, these long, long gowns, very forgiving with her necklaces and bracelets and all of that stuff. So, growing up in the 70s, you always kind of felt like, Oh, it'll be really cool to be like that older auntie and just wear your caftan and just kind of go out in the world. So, my summer times I've kind of going out in one of these. I've got like six of them now and I might be getting some more. That's probably been my favorite article of clothing. My second favorite has been leggings; they too are quite forgiving.

G. Barr: Yeah, there you go. Is there anything else you would want to share as a person who works for NIH but also as an individual living through the pandemic like so many other Americans?

Garrett: Well, I will say that despite the stress and the pressure that I have right now, I am eternally grateful for being a part of this great agency. Every time I see Dr. Collins post something or share something in an email, when I see Dr. Fauci on TV—whether it's something you know serious or even when it was something fun like the different memes that have gone out with Dr. Fauci's name—and then him being on TIME Magazine's front cover recently. It's just been amazing to be a small part of the process, that the fact that I am helping him to further NIAID's mission is really, really encouraging. It makes me feel really good and I think it drives how I work and why I'm really passionate about the work and wanting to make sure that I do it in excellence. I think going forward as an individual, the best thing that I can do is just live the way my creator intended—to live each new day is an opportunity; each day is a chance to do things different, each new day is a chance to change my narrative, and I think I'm just really grateful that for the most part my family and I are healthy. I work with great colleagues in my division, in my branch; We're like family and I'm just really happy to have a job because I know that there are lots of people out here who have been struggling through no fault of their own through the pandemic and, so I remain eternally grateful and eternally encouraged and inspired. I'm encouraged by everyone from all walks of life. I'm encouraged by the people that I work with here at NIH. I'm inspired by them and I do hope that this pandemic is the chance for us as people, as individuals personally, to do things differently and to really create a foundation for our future generation.

G. Barr: Well, thank you very much and I wish you all the best in your work and thank you all. You

and your family shall continue to stay safe.

Garrett: We are definitely staying safe, staying healthy, and just taking it one day at a time. So, thank you, Gabrielle. I really appreciate your reaching out to me. I really appreciate the opportunity to really just share my enthusiasm and offer my thoughts and insight to this great project. So, thank you again for your time.