1. **Stories**
   1. **Santiaga Gonzalez**

Born in Guatemala, Santiaga lived a hard life in her home country, trying to raise her five children, working multiple jobs and was still finding it impossible to make ends meet. In 2008, Santiaga decided to immigrate to the United States to build a better life and made the even more challenging decision to leave her children in Guatemala for two years until she was able to reunite with her children in D.C. and begin their new lives.

Like many individuals across D.C, COVID-19 has gravely impacted Santiaga’s life and left her in a state of uncertainty. Before the pandemic hit D.C., Santiaga worked a full-time job that provided her financial security and allowed her to spend time with her children. That all changed in March of 2020 when Santiaga lost her job and spent months unemployed, not knowing how she would pay her bills and feed her children. After four months of uncertainty and stretching every cent, Santiaga took it upon herself to become a street vendor and sell tamales, atole de elote, and other Guatemalan plates. Being the sole provider in her household, street vending allows Santiaga to have a source of income and the flexibility to care for her children, who are home indefinitely doing online learning. For Santiaga, street vending is the only option to financially survive the ongoing pandemic because none of the jobs for she has applied to in recent months have responded to her.

As a street vendor, Santiaga wakes up at 2:30 in the morning every day to prepare the food she is will sell and safely package every item. While vending on Georgia Avenue, Santiaga has experienced a mix of interactions with local police officers. At the beginning of her street vending venture, an officer approached her and instructed her to close the door on her cart as required by D.C. vending regulations. This officer did not give her a citation or antagonize her with the threat of arrest. Santiaga closed the door without any hesitation and made a mental note to keep her door closed. This interaction gave Santiaga a sense of security - officers were not out to harass her and understood she was merely trying to make an honest living. Santiaga’s second encounter with officers ended that sense of comfort. During her second encounter, a different police officer instructed Santiaga to leave her post and throw away the food she was selling. Santiaga pleaded with the officer and explained she did not want to cause any harm or trouble, she simply wanted to sell some food so she could make a couple bucks to take home for her family. The officer ignored Santiaga’s pleas and ordered her to leave immediately. This encounter occurred in the morning, and Santiaga only made twenty dollars for the entire day, an amount not sufficient to pay any of her bills or buy supplies to make up for her loss. After the incident, Santiaga’s sense of comfort immediately turned into fear and anger. Santiaga fears she will have another encounter with officers that will be more severe and traumatizing than the last, so now she delivers food plates to those she knows. However, Santiaga still battles with understanding why officers make enforcing street vending a priority when vendors are not bothering anyone and are just trying to make an honest, dignified living.

* 1. **Maria Vasquez**

Like many immigrants in the United States, Maria had a well-established life in her home country of El Salvador; she even owned a convenience store and sold pupusas and tamales for some years. Maria lived a simple and happy life until gang violence rampantly took over her town. After gangs targeted Maria because she was a business owner, she packed her bags and moved to the United States with her five children, searching for a better and safer life. While establishing her new life in Mount Pleasant, Maria became a street vendor because it was second nature to her since she sold food in her home country. Street vending was the ideal job for Maria as a single mother because she worked a part-time job to look after her children when they were out of school but still needed the additional income.

Posted in Mount Pleasant, Maria sells plates varying from pupusas and tamales to her new Italian-based pasta and lasagna menu. Additionally, she previously sold clothing articles, lotions, soaps, and other everyday things. In her thirteen years of vending, Maria is one of the few vendors who has not had a negative interaction with police officers. Maria believes this is because she takes cautionary measures to avoid drawing attention to herself officers when she is out vending. One prudent measure Maria takes when she goes out to sell her food is not to sell as much as possible, which means she only spends a few hours outside vending.

Additionally, since witnessing an increase of police interactions with street vendors, Maria began taking orders from people she knows and delivers them to their homes. Although not attempting to maximize her profits and make deliveries creates a financial hindrance, it does lower her chances of facing thousand-dollar fines and potential criminal charges that would jeopardize her status in the United States. One of Maria’s biggest fears is that having a citation or arrest for vending without a license will expose her to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Being exposed to ICE could lead to Maria and her family’s deportation. Even worse, ICE could detain or deport Maria alone, separating her from her children. Maria fears that if she does not take those steps, she will be subjected to the same or higher level of harassment from officers that other vendors have experienced, and fears the negative impact those incidents will have on her family.

As a street vendor, Maria fell in the excluded worker category during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant she would not have access to government resources, such as the COVID-19 relief stimulus check. Like many Americans, Maria desperately needed the extra assistance since the pandemic put her in financial uncertainty. However, Maria’s need was especially direr because she and her entire family were infected with COVID-19 earlier this year. With Maria as the provider, the family felt the absence of her income, and recovering from the horrible illness made the absence worse.

* 1. **Aloisa Diaz**

After immigrating from Venezuela over thirty years ago, Aloisa is a passionate D.C. community member who turned to street vending in recent years. Aloisa worked various jobs after arriving in the United States, ranging from working as a caregiver to a factory lineman. However, Aloisa fell victim to labor exploitation in her last job at a factory. This is a common-issue many immigrant workers face in the United States. Because of their tenuous immigration status, many workers fear speaking out. However, three years ago, Aloisa decided enough is enough. She could no longer tolerate the abysmal working conditions or continue to have her wages stolen from her.

When explaining why she became a street vendor, Aloisa noted she saw a growing interest in Latin food and felt confident she could meet the demand. Additionally, street vending offered Aloisa the opportunity to feel dignified and independent while making a living, something she never imagined would be possible for her. Furthermore, street vending gave her access to help those in need in her 14th Street community. Aloisa frequently gives free food to homeless people she comes across when vending or lowering her merchandise price when customers do not have enough. Aloisa believes that it is our duty as a community to take care of one another as community members when presented with the opportunity.

Like other vendors on 14th Street, Aloisa has experienced negative interactions with local police officers. Aloisa recalls these moments as abusive and humiliating. One day, an officer approached her to ask about her street vending license. When Aloisa informed the officer that she did not have one, the officer asked about her immigration status. This event sent chills down Aloisa’s spine because, although the fine she received along with a threat of arrest was not ideal, it is much more bearable than the possibility of facing deportation. Another day, when Aloisa was packing up for the day, an officer followed her home and threatened to arrest her for street vending. Aloisa continually sees the same officers approaching her to threaten her with tickets, arrest her, or throw her produce away. All of these events would scare off the average person from ever street vending again, but not Aloisa. Though the police encounters make Aloisa cautious about her surroundings, she refuses to let the officers’ intimidation tactics stop her from making a living. In her eyes, her only wrongdoing is not having a license. Even without a license, Aloisa follows the same safety procedures a licensed vendor is expected to follow because Aloisa acknowledges the importance of food safety and protecting her customers. Everyday Aloisa makes sure to safely prepare and transport her food, maintain a clean work station, and keep cleaning supplies for her customers, so they are also safe when eating.

* 1. **Mary Guzman Lopez**

Before making D.C. her home, Mary was a proud business owner in Oaxaca, Mexico. She loved what she did and loved the fact that she was her own boss. Unfortunately, with Mary being the sole provider for her elder mother and four young sisters, her business was not making enough to make ends meet. Mary decided to immigrate to the United States to earn more and adequately support her family. Mary hit the ground running when she moved to D.C. She quickly landed a full-time job and was able to send money back home. However, this changed when Mary became a mother. One day after picking up her two infant daughters from daycare, she noticed one showed signs of physical abuse. Fearing her daughters would be subjected to further abuse. Mary immediately quit her job to care for them and became a street vendor.

At the start of her street vending venture, Mary sold in front of her daughters’ school. She sold taquitos, fruit salad, elotes locos, tamales, and other Mexican dishes. This allowed Mary to be close to her daughters, and gave her access to loyal returning customers until the local international store owner gave her permission to sell in front of the store. After relocating, Mary began to have repeated encounters with police officers. Some interactions involved threats to throw away Mary’s produce with added threats about reporting her to ICE if she continued to vend. Other encounters involve officers just yelling and talking down to Mary to leave the area, which made Mary feel less than human because the officers refused to have a civil conversation with her. Mary has witnessed other vendors experience the same level of verbal attacks and even one encounter where an officer became physical towards a vendor, pushing the vendor to the ground.

One encounter that stood out the most to Mary and continues to haunt her was when Mary was vending with her daughters, an officer approached them and threatened to arrest Mary and separate her from her daughters. Now, Mary lives in fear whenever she leaves her home, even when she is not street vending. She fears the officer will see her and carry out his threat. Additionally, Mary’s daughters are scarred from the day the officer threatened to separate them; they now tense up and cry when they see an officer even if officers are across the street. Some days the kids ask Mary not to leave the house because they are scared the officer will follow through with his separation threat.

With the ongoing pandemic, Mary feels the pressure more than ever to go out and vend enough to make a living. Along with making sure she does not come across officers, Mary fears the possibility of contracting the COVID-19 every time she leaves the house and then passing it to her daughters, whom both suffer from asthma. Additionally, Mary noticed a decrease in sales because fewer people are out buying food and do not have enough to buy as frequently as they did—the decrease in sales places Mary in financial uncertainty like many others in D.C. Additionally, working as a street vendor makes Mary an excluded worker, meaning she is ineligible to receive unemployment benefits and COVID-19 relief. As of now, street vending is Mary’s only option to have a source of income, and she is hopeful that this pandemic will create change in the way street vending is enforced, and she can make her honest living without living in constant fear.

* 1. **Rasul El Amin**

Rasul, an indigenous D.C. native, is a street vendor on 14th street who advocates for D.C. street vendors, bringing attention to the mistreatment vendors face. Before street vending, Rasul worked a full-time job until he suffered a work-related injury that resulted in a disability. Rasul was let go from that job and unsuccessfully applied for worker’s compensation. As a result, Rasul could not afford the needed medical assistance independently. Realizing his bills were piling up and that finding a new job was becoming impossible, Rasul decided to become an entrepreneur through street vending. A certified graphic artist, Rasul used his skills to design t-shirts to sell and, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, he began selling masks.

Rasul’s experience with police officers has been negative during his time as a street vendor. Rasul is often stopped and questioned about his street vending license and told to leave the area or face arrest. Other times, officers have stared at Rasul without saying anything, hoping to provoke a negative reaction from him or other street vendors around him. Instead, Rasul packs up his merchandise for the day. With the current tension between police officers and minority communities, Rasul works in fear when street vending because he does not believe officers will spare his freedom or life over a street vending violation or other minor infractions. Additionally, after witnessing officers harass other street vendors, Rasul’s fears and discomfort with police officers are continuously supported. He recalls seeing officers yell at vendors for not having a street vending license and other officers becoming so frustrated with vendors that they escalate the situation by throwing the vendor’s food or becoming physical with the vendor. Nevertheless, Rasul overcomes his fears and discomfort every day because street vending is his only income source.

Like many street vendors in D.C., Rasul cannot afford an arrest or a criminal fine. For Rasul, getting arrested or fined for a street vending violation not only sets him back financially, but it may also result in him losing his housing situation. Rasul is currently living in public housing and under D.C. law, a housing provider can evict a tenant for their involvement in criminal activity regardless of whether the person is convicted at the end of the day. To lessen the possibility of being arrested, Rasul sticks to a strict 9 am – 3 pm vending schedule when he perceives there to be a lower police presence on 14th street.

Tired of the constant harassment he and other vendors have experienced, Rasul thought to himself, “what can I do to make this better?” and became an advocate for street vendors and street vending reform. He went around D.C. and asked vendors if they noticed increased police presence or increased police interactions. When vendors tell Rasul there is an increase of police presence or interactions, Rasul will visit the area and check with vendors that may have been affected to check-in to see how they are doing after the incident, and also to offer guidance on how to deescalate future police interactions. Additionally, Rasul works to maintain peace among vendors.

Like everyone across D.C., the pandemic has disrupted Rasul’s life and financial stability. For Rasul and other vendors, the financial impact is severe because working as street vendors they fall in the excluded workers category making them ineligible for unemployment benefits and COVID-19 stimulus checks. Because Rasul falls in the high-risk category for COVID-19, he has cut back on the number of days he vends and does advocacy work. Reducing the number of days Rasul vends has landed him in financial jeopardy. With the end of the pandemic nowhere in sight, he is looking for ways to return to his regular vending schedule while not putting himself and others at high risk. However, Rasul has used the pandemic as motivation to strengthen the street vending community by handing out cleaning supplies and masks to vendors and teaching them how to use contactless payment methods for their customers. Moreover, Rasul hopes this pandemic will change D.C.’s attitude towards street vending so that they can see street vendors are not causing any harm and should have a fair chance at earning a living.