

(Green County) Maribel Lobato  
Co-owner of the Veracruz Mexican Market in Monroe, WI

**Monroe, WI** - Nestled in the center of this quaint, rural Wisconsin community is Maribel Lobato and her husband, Santos Tinoco's Veracruz Mexican Market. Although a grocery store, their business does more than facilitate access to culturally relevant foods among local Latinxs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, their market transformed into a community health hub. Recognizing their business's unique position as a trusted community messenger, Maribel and Santos partnered with the Green County Public Health Department, SSM Health Monroe Clinic and Hospital, and the Wisconsin Community Health Empowerment Fund to connect customers to necessary local health and social services. In April 2022, Maribel Lobato sat down with C3 and the Wisconsin Community Health Empowerment Fund over zoom for the attached interview to discuss the role her family's Veracruz Market has played during the pandemic and beyond.

**Tell us what it has been like to live during the Covid-19 pandemic.**

There was a lot of fear. I was afraid that my children and family would get sick. As a grocery store owner, I still had to work. My children could not come to my job, and we were terrified of what might happen if one of us got sick.

At first, there was a lot of hesitancy towards leaving our home. However, we realized we needed to get out eventually because isolation drastically reduced our quality of life. We could not keep living with this fear of getting COVID-19 governing our lives. When we did leave home eventually, we always wore masks, used hand sanitizer, and followed the guidance of our local health system to prevent illness. As someone who works in a grocery store, we made sure to disinfect everything: even when we got home, we would immediately change and wash our clothes. Then, when the vaccines came out, we all got vaccinated immediately.

I thank God that no one in my family, my husband's family, or family friends has died due to COVID-19. Still, I, unfortunately, have lost friends and clients to this pandemic. When I learned of their deaths due to COVID-19, it caused panic: these people I cared about and had frequent contact with were gone and also likely visited my store while infected with COVID-19. What got me through this period and still helps me is my belief and trust in God and my prayers that God will protect my family and care for those currently battling this virus.

**You mentioned that you got the vaccine. Please share your decision-making process with us.**

When the vaccination process began in my community, the local public health department (Green County Public Health), local clinic (SSM Health Monroe Clinic and Hospital), and trusted organizations partnered to provide COVID-19 vaccines and education – available in Spanish and English at a local park. My clients and I had many questions about the vaccine - such as possible side effects or if it worked - and their community presence helped us access their expertise and educational brochures. We felt safer and knew the vaccine would help us all.

**You mentioned that some of your friends and customers died due to COVID-19. How do you feel about that?**

Sad, terrible, frustrated.

Unfortunately, some of these people who died did not believe in the vaccine and did not try to get vaccinated. I always tell my clients that they should trust the vaccine and take that step to improve their health. I remind them that maybe it cannot wholly eradicate COVID-19 because no one knows everything, but at this moment, it helps us. It makes me feel so, so sad after I find out that another community member passed away due to COVID-19. I still wonder if I could have done more than what I may have already done for that person, and I always pray for them, but I also run my business. I have to work 12-hour days, six days a week, and I also have my family to care for. However, I feel called to help others and improve my community in the small amount of time I have to give back.

**What has been your community's experience through this pandemic, and how has this experience been in your personal/professional life?**

My community has faced many difficulties, but the most prominent was economic hardships. At the pandemic's beginning, many people lost their jobs, were worried about paying rent and having enough money to feed their families, and feared leaving their homes. I often delivered necessities to community members from my store or left my home to bring people the food and medicine they needed. At this moment, I was so afraid to leave my house, but I called upon my courage and knew that if God was with me, I would be okay and could help those in need. Sometimes I would talk to people, and they would cry, wondering when all of this would end. The people who would go to the doctor when sick were often just told to isolate themselves in their homes, as it was all they could do at the time.

Throughout the pandemic, I also heavily relied on my Catholic community. We would hold regular calls where I tried to keep my community in mind and assist other families. We would bring food or medicine to families who were struggling. Sometimes, it would get very tough because there were people we could not help anymore. When someone was extremely sick and could barely even breathe, there was no more that we could do to help them. It brought on a lot of fear and panic throughout the community. All we could do was try to fight the pandemic and support those fighting the illness. Thankfully, the majority of the community has made it through. When the vaccine came out, I always invited people to attend the clinics: reminding them that the vaccine was here and staff who speak Spanish were available. They can help inform your decision to get vaccinated. Choosing not to get vaccinated is ultimately your decision. Still, it does not hurt to stop by a clinic and ask your questions. They can help you answer them and make an informed decision to protect you and your family. Almost everyone who ended up coming to a vaccine clinic here, even those who were not confident in the COVID-19 vaccine and just stopped by to learn more or because a friend was getting vaccinated, left vaccinated.

In our community, the majority of people got vaccinated. However, there are still a lot of people who need boosters. Many people want boosters but cannot get them because they cannot drive to

a clinic, get time off of work, or navigate the vaccination system or clinic directions. However, the available information in Spanish about COVID-19 vaccines on flyers, the health department's website, and the clinic website has convinced some people.

**Are there additional challenges that members of the Latinx community have had to overcome throughout the pandemic that members of the Anglo community may not have had to consider?**

There are people in our community who are immigrants from Central America who never had the opportunity to learn how to read and write in Spanish or English. I convey COVID-19 vaccine options to them, or they take pictures of vaccine flyers we post in Spanish to share with other community members who can assist them in interpreting the poster. Large signage with lots of bright colors captures community members' attention – especially those who cannot read or write. These posters have been one of our strategies to improve COVID-19 vaccine confidence in our community.

Additionally, I explain that you do not need identification to receive a COVID-19 vaccine and that a Spanish-speaking staff member will guide them through the process.

**How can we better reach community members who cannot read or write in English or Spanish?**

It would be helpful if one day a week or month, there were someone who speaks Spanish in the Veracruz Mexican Market to explain the vaccination process and answer questions in this space where Latinxs frequent.

**Your business has played an important role in promoting COVID-19 vaccines – how do you convince members of your community to get the COVID-19 vaccine?**

I tell my clients that, as a supermarket owner, I have come in contact with people who had COVID-19 without knowing. Still, since I have been vaccinated, I have not had even the slightest illness from these exposures. The vaccine has helped my family and me. We all need to take advantage of this opportunity that we have living in the U.S. to easily get vaccinated against COVID-19 for free, where you do not have to wait for hours in line, or miss even a day of work. This is the case in some of our countries of origin, but here we even get paid to get these vaccines. I often ask my clients, "how long does your family have to wait in line to get vaccinated in your country? How far did they have to travel just to get to the vaccination site?"

When people continue to have doubts about the vaccine, such as if it will get them sick or harm them, I always share my personal experience about how easy the vaccination process was and that I did not get sick after getting vaccinated. Then, I always explain that everyone's bodies are different and respond differently to the vaccine. Still, a vaccine will help prevent severe illness or death for everyone. All the people I convinced to vaccinate came back and said that nothing bad happened.

**How can other companies get involved in promoting COVID-19 vaccines?**

First and foremost, businesses must help their workers. They need to give them a break and say: "we are offering vaccines, and we encourage you to get vaccinated." Right now, some people in my community cannot get off work to get vaccinated or must miss work (at a time when they may be living paycheck to paycheck) to get the vaccine. Businesses should bring vaccines to their employees. Additionally, in large companies, vaccines must happen multiple times to reach workers across different shifts.

### **What are the ways the community has supported itself during the pandemic?**

People have essentially formed their own "social safety net" where those with savings and jobs supported community members who lost their jobs and could not afford to pay their rent, car payment, or other debts. Even today, people continue battling to live their day-to-day lives. There are still some who are having difficulties. I work with St. Vincent de Paul and its program that assists families who are struggling by identifying and connecting community members who could benefit from this assistance to that resource. I also work with Family Promise and other community leaders to connect those in need with resources – especially families with children. These community organizations help me dispense necessities to families in need. When families have trouble paying rent, I also help people fill out an application in English with St. Vincente de Paul for housing support.

It may sound like I am doing a lot, but I am just an intermediary. We all work together as a community and as a team to help those who need assistance. When I first arrived in Green County, many kind people helped and welcomed me, and I want to open doors for others to pay their kindness forward. People introduced me to my community and church. They taught me English and how to navigate a new space. Now, I ask that the people I help today pay it forward tomorrow. As a religious person, I do not do this for fame or to boast, but I help people because I care and also as a humble servant of God.

### **Has there been any increase in health problems, other than the coronavirus, in the community due to the pandemic? What concerns? How has the community responded to these?**

Yes! There was a concerning jump in depression, anxiety, and illness. Many people had health issues outside of COVID-19 but were too afraid to go to the doctor's office because of COVID-19. Additionally, widespread fear of financial insecurity plagued the community, and many of us forgot how to be excited and have the energy to give to our children. The isolation contributed to the heightened depression and anxiety I have witnessed since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

At first, there was so much panic, but the community has improved with time; we work and fight every day but are frustrated. People now work more than they used to and do not have as much time to rest or be present with their families. When the pandemic began, they lost hours, stayed home for almost two years, and were very isolated. Now families are trying to make up for that.

### **What is your favorite part of living in your city/county?**

I have found many opportunities in my community by working here and believing in myself. I am lucky to have many people around me who have helped me grow. I have become a person who continues fighting and working for my community. This neighborhood is the place where my kids were born, it is where they grew up, and it is our home. We have lived in this area for the majority of our lives, and this county has welcomed us. My roots are here, and we are so content and happy. I thank God daily for the opportunity to live in Green County and contribute to my thriving community.

I am also excited because I am currently studying for my U.S. citizenship exam at the end of May! This country and community have given me so much, and I am thankful for everything.

**Is there more you want to add? Any other experience you wish to share with us?**

Thank you to everyone who came to Monroe to provide more information about the COVID-19 pandemic vaccine and vaccinate our community. It improved trust in the vaccine in our community. We must continue moving forward, cheering ourselves on, and encouraging vaccinations. I was so surprised that I never got sick despite the number of people I had contact with who had COVID-19 without knowing it. Still, some of my friends who never left their homes were getting seriously sick with COVID-19. I thank God and am beyond grateful that my family and I are doing well and can continue working every day.

We must be prepared to work hard and believe in ourselves and our communities. This virus will not just die out, and we need to thank God and our community that we are alive. The best we can do is to try to be happy, spread happiness, and be grateful for all that we do have in this moment and for our community.