

Oral History Transcript

Rachel: Hi, all right. My name is Rachel Burner.

Wyatt: I am Wyatt Arnold.

R: And I am recording this interview. Do I have your consent to record this interview on my phone?

W: Yes. And do I have your consent to report this interview on your phone?

R: Yeah. All right. So what is your full name and your major?

W: My name is Graham Wyatt Arnold, so I go by Wyatt, and I am majoring in history at Butler.

R: My name is Rachel Burner, and I am a senior at Butler. I'm majoring in history and anthropology with a minor in museum studies.

W: How old were you when the pandemic started?

R: I was a junior in high school, so, 17.

W: Okay, I was 19 or 20, so I would have been a sophomore. Depending on how the date falls that spring, I would have been 19 or 20.

R: So during quarantine, I was living with my parents at my house, obviously, because I was still in high school. I remember turning 18 at my house with my parents, and they did one of those little lawn sign things in the front yard, but we couldn't celebrate or anything. Yeah, I was living with my parents and my brother and our two dogs in our house, and life was pretty normal in that stance, home life, I would say.

R: Was your quarantine situation good or bad?

W: Ah, it varied, but it was mostly fine. For the first half of the quarantine, I was living with my mother, so that would have been from like the summer, end of spring, summer, to around winter. And then I started living with my dad in that winter, spring area, probably around February or March. And I was living in St Louis, if you know, the Ledoux, University City, Clayton area, that's about where I was. My parents are divorced, so they keep separate houses. And my brother already had a house by this point, and he was living there.

W: Did your area push to support local businesses during this time?

R: Yeah! So I live outside of Chicago, in a relatively large suburb, and I did notice, specifically in my community, in my neighborhood, there was a large push to encourage people, especially children. There is an elementary school that is down the block from my house, and when the kids first went back to school in 2021, people stood outside and rang bells for them as they walked to school. There was also, I don't know if your area did this... but there were bell ringing sessions at 10am on Thursdays to support healthcare workers, which was nice, but they were at work, so obviously no one could hear them. But there were a lot of community building measures that were put in place to promote encouragement, but didn't necessarily impact a ton of people.

W: Okay, there wasn't a whole lot of community building in my area, but we did have some issues with local businesses. Though, I think it was less prominent than other areas, but anything that was a chain or franchise restaurant was fine, and any of the smaller businesses that did switch to take out a delivery were good. There was an article that was released, I think it was that following spring or so, that was talking about all the restaurants that closed, and it was only 30 or so at the time. So my guess is the total number of restaurants that did close was around 30 to 40, but those were all the ones that closed permanently, either due to the chefs dying...which was tragic.

R: Oh my gosh!

W: Yeah...it was tragic and chefs died, or just they couldn't keep it open anymore. Yeah. I only recognize one of the names, but most of the places that were hit were bars. So there were only a few places that were not bars. I think it was over 70% that were bars.

R: That's crazy. And I totally forgot that I started working in customer service, food service during this time. I started a job at a candy store in August 2020, so I was pretty exposed to how small businesses were running and operating as the world started to open back up and as the economy started to take an upward turn. So it's interesting that you say that. Now, I'm thinking about how every Sunday, my parents would order dinner from a different restaurant nearby, so we would be supporting local businesses while also not cooking. And a lot of restaurants in our area did either meal prep, take home meal prep kits, or take home dinners; larger, platter style meals that you could take home for your family. And yeah, I mis that. Actually, that was nice. I think my area did a really good job of trying to support local businesses and making sure that they still had customers and income in some way.

W: Did many of the businesses close during that time?

R: Not a ton. A lot closed after, when rent started to spike in the area and many places couldn't afford to keep their doors open because there was this sudden influx of people wanting to go out, wanting to go out to the restaurants, wanting to go out to the bars that were in the area. And now rent prices are exorbitant in that area, so a lot of places have closed because of that.

W: Okay, yeah, we didn't have- we only had the 30 or so that closed for us. But I didn't eat out a whole lot during this time, so I was not up to date on a lot of the things that were happening in the restaurant service worker sphere, because my family is very favorable to cooking at home, to the point that 'going out' is sort of a treat and we only do it once every few months, at most.

R: Ohh yeah. Mine are the same. We really got into making bread and making pasta. I don't know if you guys got into baking things.

W: We did not. My dad got into making biltong, though.

R: Biltong?

W: Biltong is a South African dried meat.

R: Interesting, interesting. That's cool!

R: What was schooling like for you during the pandemic, starting in 2020?

W: Messy. So first, we got sent home by Butler, and we show up at home around...Oh, I think it was March, March or April, something like that is when everyone finally got sent home. And I-I started working at UPS in the summer. So I was working at UPS until winter, and then I switched to Target sometime in February. So I was for the duration of fall, going to work at UPS, and I was also taking courses that I was going to transfer over to Butler, a local college. I was taking a much lighter course load because I was working and I didn't want to do the remote learning that was being done at the time, because I thought It was going to be easier. But after experiencing Butler's [remote learning], which...they did a good job, admittedly They did a really good job of switching from all in person to all online in that course of a month or so, because they had done the preparation. But this institution, I had two online courses, and I'm sitting here the entire time going, I hate this. There's no one talking. This is a very awkward time to be in class, because no one wants to talk. The teacher just stares at us awkwardly when he asks a question, and it's the same two people talking, and I'm one of them!

W: But that was kind of my schooling experience. What was yours?

R: Well, like I said, I was still in high school when it was all online classes, so I do think there was more of a structure than college classes, because there is more structure in high school than college, I have realized. But it was pretty good. They implemented a block schedule so we only had three to four classes a day, and they were for 90 minutes instead of 50. When the pandemic first started, and we made our little social bubbles of people that we thought we could hang out with and be safe with; I was hanging out with girls from school, and we would do classes together, and we would just set up our computers next to each other and be on Zoom together. It was pretty fun, actually! Of course, we were being safe and we were testing each other and, like,

making sure that everyone was doing fine. But when no one had plans, or we had a boring class, we would go over to each other's houses and do the Zoom there, so that was really fun. Yeah, I mean high school wasn't as impacted- obviously, I didn't get the traditional high school experience that I would have if COVID-19 hadn't happened. I didn't experience any senior year football games. I didn't experience senior year prom or homecoming. I never really experienced driving my friends to school or tailgating... It was sad, but we did make the best of it. I feel. R: Let's do the last question so we can wrap this up. Wyatt, what were some of the hardest things for you during the pandemic? And even though it was hard, what have you taken away from the experience?

W: For me, the hardest part was probably the fact that I was cooped up with my family most of the time. Since I couldn't really go out during this time, it was pretty much work, school and family; and at some point, you kind of get tired of being around the same people all the time. Most of my friends have either moved, or whatever, by this point, so while we stayed in contact through discord or text or something else, it was a little disappointing that I wasn't able to see them every few weeks or so. But it also made sense, because everyone's isolating and social distancing and masking, and no one wants to get sick. But even though we spent most of that time cooped up, I think the one part I liked about it, though, was that it was quiet, which is probably a strange thing. I live next to a relatively busy street, so I'm constantly hearing cars go by, and every few hours, I'll probably hear a siren go by. And... I didn't realize it until the pandemic lifted, that I hadn't really heard sirens in a while, because usually, if they didn't go by during the day, they would come by at around, like 9 - 10pm, and it's always a fire truck or an ambulance that's going somewhere to help people. And I was sitting there really confused, like, why is there an ambulance/ fire truck? Why is there a siren going off? No one should be doing anything. And it was interesting that nobody was doing anything... because I didn't realize how busy and noisy everything was before that. I also wasn't expected to talk to people, which I kind of liked, and everyone was sort of minding their own business. It was a different expectation of social interaction and standards for what you were expected to do. And I think... I like that too.

W: What about you? What were some of the hard parts?

R: Some of the hardest parts of the pandemic were definitely, as a service worker during that time, enforcing the government policies and regulations that the CDC put out, even though people were very against it. I'm thinking specifically of masking. Like I said, I worked in a small business, and it was mainly staffed by younger women and high school girls. We were extremely busy. At the height of the masking craze, the anti masking craze, I should say more specifically, a man came into the store. I asked him to put a mask on, please... and he then threatened me with a knife at his belt for asking him to put a mask on. Yeah. That was a really harrowing experience in that I realized people can only think for themselves, about themselves, and it's extremely hard to get people to think about others. And I've seen that continue on through the 2020s to the upcoming election. There's this seemingly division between people, where if you don't have your own best interest at heart, you're viewed as strange or bad, essentially. And I think that's bizarre. Honestly, it's quite polarizing. And I do think recently, we have been more polarized as people,

because we have been missing this year and a half of social, political, emotional, economic interactions, in all honesty. But, one good part of the pandemic, I will say, was that everyone got outside more, which I really liked. And I really got outside more. I took my dogs out on walks, I went for walks, I went for bike rides. I got my friends to hang out outside, because they were more comfortable hanging out in the open air. And I do think that's something people have held on to, is staying outside, hanging out outside, being outside, as a whole, and I do really appreciate that.

R: Do you have anything else you would like to add before we close out this project? W: No,

I think I covered everything I could think of. Do you have anything you want to add? R: No,

I'm all good. Thank you so much for listening!

W: Thank you!

Reflection

Overall, I think this was a cool assignment. Because I also study anthropology, it is fun to engage in the interview process and talk to each other candidly about our experiences. I will admit, Wyatt started the bulk of the project. He formulated many good introduction questions, and pre-typed out his transcript. In turn, I added a few more 'deep' questions, such as commenting on the economic or socio-political atmosphere at this time, especially in our own communities. Those questions did not end up being asked. In addition to writing and revising new questions, I recorded the interview and guided it, as well as edited the transcript above.

I really like the idea of contributing to an oral history. At first, I was hesitant to talk about my COVID experiences. One reason is I was extremely lucky to have a great home life and support system during this time. But another was the fact that I don't want to talk about COVID. I despise when someone refers to that period as "those unprecedented times." Those two statements are directly at odds with each other. It is because people like myself don't want to think or recollect the tragedy of the time, and as a result put up a mental block or refuse to broach the subject. In turn, as we have studied in class and seen through outside interactions, people forget and lose connection to the past pandemics and epidemics that were much, much worse, such as the Black Plague. It is important we participate in these oral histories because it prevents future generations from forgetting and contributes to the larger understanding of human reaction to disease.