

COMMUNITY ARCHIVE: COVID-19 EXPERIENCES ORAL HISTORIES

Sara Law Interview

September 17, 2020

Virtual Meeting, Memphis, Tennessee

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This oral history interview was recorded as part of the Southeast Michigan COVID-19 Oral Histories Project on September 17, 2020, via a virtual meeting, as part of a student practicum project for the Wayne State University School of Information Sciences archival administration graduate certificate program. The interview has been deposited at the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs and University Archives at Wayne State University. The interview may be used for research and educational purposes only.

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ROBYN PIERCE: [00:00:03] My name is Robyn Pierce and I am working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is September 17, 2020. This interview is of Sara Law and the effects of COVID on her ability to work. The interview will go into detail about her job as a book seller both before and after the shelter in place order was issued. Sara lives in Memphis, Tennessee and works at Barnes and Noble. This interview will be recorded remotely, and will be housed at the Reuther Library which is part of the Wayne State University.

The Reuther Library will keep administrative information about this oral history project, such as interview releases and deeds of gift, in its case file. Case files are in a locked, nonpublic area of [00:00:48] the building accessible only to the Reuther Library staff. In the event of a criminal investigation or legal discovery proceedings, the Reuther Library could be compelled to turn over holdings in case files that are otherwise closed to the public, including the [00:01:03] case files for this oral history report.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, first question is, do you have an affiliation with Wayne State University?

SARA LAW: I do. I am a student with Wayne State at the moment.

ROBYN PIERCE: Very cool. [00:01:19] And, we've established that you live in Memphis, Tennessee and that you work at Barnes and Noble. What would you describe your job description?

SARA LAW: Um, it's as a book seller. I sell books, I answer customer service questions. I shelve books, I let people buy books, and take their money. Well, the company takes their money. But—.

ROBYN PIERCE: Very cool.

SARA LAW: So, I just sell books the whole time.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, is that an accurate [00:01:49] description of what it was like to work before the stay-at-home order was put in place?

SARA LAW: Yeah, I know I just started back to work in the last couple weeks. But one thing I would do a lot every morning at least is shelve books. So we would shelve books in the morning and then we would go about our day. Answer phone calls, and help people find books, and things like that. [00:02:19] But now I know one difference is we don't shelve the books in the morning, we just kind of do it throughout the day instead of having people do it in the morning. I am not sure why exactly, but I know that's probably some protocol thing they have in place now.

ROBYN PIERCE: And then, when was the stay-at-home order issued in your area?

SARA LAW: The stay-at-home order was issued officially—I know it was a Tuesday. It was in March because it was right after my sister's wedding. So, she got married on the thirteenth and I think it was on the fifteenth, fifteenth to sixteenth. [00:03:05] I looked it up and I think it said the seventeenth, but I know my work shut down on the fifteenth. So, I say the fifteenth.

ROBYN PIERCE: And then, you were furloughed, I assume saying, because you said earlier you were just got back to work.

SARA LAW: Yeah, I was furloughed from the end of March until the beginning of September.

ROBYN PIERCE: Um, were you able to translate any of your work efforts to home life at all?

SARA LAW: No, because it's a really hands on job, so there's really nothing you could translate from home to there.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, how did that—like, how did the stay-at-home order look for you then? What did you do to fill your time?

SARA LAW: I finished school. I took classes. [00:04:05] I'm already in school so I just kept doing school. I did a lot of baking and cooking and sewing, so I filled my time. And I ended up playing computer games for a good bit. So it's just—yeah. I filled my time. Whether it was wisely, I don't know. But, I filled it.

ROBYN PIERCE: Sounds fun though.

SARA LAW: Yeah.

ROBYN PIERCE: And so you were just back to work, so how many months was that, six?

SARA LAW: It was April, May, June, July, August—yeah, five and a half-ish, six. Something like that.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay. Did you have any big plans at work or were anything, was there anything that was ready to change at work when the you shut down that you were not able to then experience? [00:05:06]

SARA LAW: No, I think everything from what I know went on as normal. They did put, because I was texting my friend that was still working, she said that they were going and putting up little screen protector things for the cashiers and they were putting things in place in order to keep

functioning. But I do know there were tons of people furloughed at different times though, so. I know that business was pretty down for a while, at least.

ROBYN PIERCE: So when you came back to work, besides the partitions by the cash registers, what other things were put in place to help keep you guys safe at work?

SARA LAW: We have temperature screenings when we get into, well, when we are in the break room, we get temperature screened. And then we have to wear masks at all times. And, sanitization is a big thing, so you are constantly wiping down different places that have been touched. [00:06:06] Doors, shelves, carts, whatever, computers. So, those are all wiped down and that is, I think about it as far as the safety procedures. And with the books, we put them on a cart and we don't touch them for at least 24 hours before we shelf them again. So, kind of hard to do with the—.

ROBYN PIERCE: So how does that, how do you feel about all of those changes, how does that affect you personally?

SARA LAW: I'm fine with the changes. Before the shelter in place orders even happened, while I was still working, at one point I even had people just hold up their books so I could scan the barcode while I checked them out at the counters. [00:06:58] And that's not as easy to do now with the screen in front of you, but—. So I do take their books, but I make sure to sanitize my hands every time that I, you know, check out people's books or whatever. But overall I think that they're doing the best that they can with what they have. Especially when you are working with books, and I know that I've seen different things with libraries, too, where they have a hard time trying to figure out the best practice for sanitizing their books and wiping everything

down and it's hard when especially when it's a store or library or something, it's really hard to kind of regulate everything.

ROBYN PIERCE: Is that—well I'll ask it, what's the hardest thing about the changes that have been put in place?

SARA LAW: I think the hardest thing about the changes is, at the moment, keeping my headset on when we talk to each other. [00:08:02] But no, I think one of the hardest things is actually trying to make sure you're sanitizing everything, especially if you have a line of people. I'll try to sanitize as fast as I can, or especially the credit card readers or things like that because people are touching them. But I think that's the hardest part, is making sure everything is wiped down while also doing your job.

ROBYN PIERCE: Were you able to get assistance for your furlough?

SARA LAW: I was. I ended up applying for unemployment at the end of March and then getting that, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's good

SARA LAW: Yeah, I had unemployment for a good few months which was nice, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: Do you think the changes in your work environment has affected your home life in any way?

SARA LAW: No. With my family, I live with three people who work outside of the home anyway. They are basically essential workers so it's not an issue. [00:09:07] We already had plans in place, so just taking your shoes off at the door. Which was something I wanted to implement

anyway, but just taking your shoes off at the door and making sure that we wash our hands and I take a shower as soon as I get home and throw my clothes in the laundry chute, or the laundry bin. I don't have a laundry chute. But, just putting those in the dirty clothes and making sure I'm clean before I really do anything else.

ROBYN PIERCE: Do you feel safe going to work, or would you rather not be working?

SARA LAW: It depends on the day, I think. I think it depends on what I'm doing or who I'm working with. And not the, not my coworkers necessarily, but the people I'm—that the customers that come in. [00:10:03] Sometimes I feel like I am not as clean or something as I could be on another day. And it sometimes it's people not wearing their masks correctly, they'll come in with it and then they'll keep it off their face while they're in there. And you'll try to tell them, and half the time they're like, Okay, they put it over their face, you walk away ,and they take it down or whatever. But it just depends on the day, I think.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

SARA LAW: For the most part I feel fairly clean.

ROBYN PIERCE: Is there anything there you have personally implemented at work that is being utilized as part of the protocol?

SARA LAW: Nope. They did all the protocols while I was gone, so no. There's nothing that I've implemented or anything.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, then back to the point where you were at home, what do you think was your biggest accomplishment during that time? [00:11:01]

SARA LAW: My biggest accomplishment, apart from not getting COVID, was I think, actually was finishing a dress I'd been sewing on since, I think I started it before March because I wanted to wear it at, on St Patrick's day and then I never got around to finishing it. I finally finished it in July. So, I think that was my biggest accomplishment. Again, not too much going on in my life with quarantine, so I think that was my biggest accomplishment.

ROBYN PIERCE: I think that's true for a lot of people,

SARA LAW: That and—Yeah, that and finishing my degree, actually getting the MLIS [master of library and information science]. So, I think those are my biggest accomplishments.

ROBYN PIERCE: Very cool. So, do you have—in Tennessee do you guys have a plan of coming out of the stay-at-home order?

SARA LAW: We are on our second phase at the moment. [00:12:02] So, with how that's working, we have limited hours and we're actually starting to increase the hours that we're working. Because right now Barnes and Noble closes at seven, and then next week its going to start closing at eight. So, I think they're starting to push it forward some more, but I personally don't think that they should be doing that, especially with the amount of cases that are still cropping up, especially in the south. And with school starting back in some places, you'll have more cases, which I don't think that we should be furthering the hours, but—. It's not up to me.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, assuming that grocery stores are open, what other places are open right now in phase two.

SARA LAW: We have, restaurants are open, some of them are still take-out, and some of them you can actually sit inside. [00:13:05] It really just depends on the restaurant and what they want to do. I think Starbucks just started opening where you can go in and get your order instead of going through the drive thru. I know—what was it—we went somewhere the other day, Huey’s—which is a popular Memphis restaurant. It was created in Memphis, so it’s a Memphis staple basically. And they, at least the one near where I live, they just have take-out. You can’t go inside. So you have to wait, and then they’ll come out and give you their food, or give you your food, so. I’m trying to think, I know most stores are open right now at limited hours and—trying to think. [00:13:55] There’s a few other churches are open, under their own ideas of how they can keep everyone safe. But I think most, almost everything is open at the moment except for—I think certain university libraries, they’re only having the people from the university, if you have an ID you can get in. But most places are open for the most part.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, with your recent graduation with your MLIS, are you able planning on looking for a job during this time frame or are you interested in waiting until after?

SARA LAW: I’ve been looking for jobs already, but at the same time it’s hard to actually find a job that’s going to say, Hey, yeah, totally come move with us. So I’m putting out applications but I’m not too worried as far as not getting a job right now. [00:14:58] Especially with the climate of everything at the moment.

ROBYN PIERCE: Right. I think that’s all the questions, except I would like to ask, what are you looking forward to doing when the stay-at-home order is lifted?

SARA LAW: I think what I'm looking forward to the most, when this is all over and done with, is being able to go to different states. I recently visited my family in Michigan, but that was for sad reasons and not fun, so it was more of an obligation kind of a thing. Not that my grandmother's an obligation. I loved her immensely. But it was a memorial service, so it was more of a go up there—we went for a few days, we made sure we were distanced, and we washed our hands and we did everything outside. But I think it's going to be being able to travel and not have to be as worried about getting sick. So. I think that's what I'm going to be most excited about.

[00:16:09]

ROBYN PIERCE: That sounds fun. Well, thank you for your time with this interview.

SARA LAW: Yeah, thank you.

End of interview