

COMMUNITY ARCHIVE: COVID-19 EXPERIENCES ORAL HISTORIES

Kelli Smith Interview

November 10, 2020

Virtual Meeting, Summerville, South Carolina

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Kelli Smith Interview

ROBYN PIERCE: My name is Robyn Pierce working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is November 10th, 2020. This interview is of Kelli Smith about the effects of COVID on her ability to work. The interview will go into detail about her job as a service level management team lead, both before and after the shelter in place was in order. Kelli lives in Summerville, SC [South Carolina] and works in an IT [information technology] department. This interview is being recorded remotely and will be housed at the Reuther Library which is part of Wayne State University.

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ROBYN PIERCE: So the first question I ask is always, Do you have an affiliation with Wayne State University?

KELLI SMITH: I do not.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay. So let's start with a baseline and establish what was your life like before the stay-at-home order happened.

KELLI SMITH: My husband and I both work remotely from home prior to the stay-at-home order.

ROBYN PIERCE: And then so—

KELLI SMITH: We had been—that had been going on for about two years.

ROBYN PIERCE: —Okay. And my timeline is probably going to be different than your timeline being that we're in different states now, but my, Michigan's first confirmed case was the

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tenth of March and it was by the fourteenth of March that our area shut down. So what did your timeline look like?

KELLI SMITH: Our first confirmed case in South Carolina was right around the seventh. [00:02:00] What's interesting for us—had a test been available, our child may have been patient zero in our state.

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh, yeah?

KELLI SMITH: She was seen at the ER (emergency room) and was negative for flu and strep after a cruise.

ROBYN PIERCE: Wow.

KELLI SMITH: We arrived back from our cruise on March second.

ROBYN PIERCE: And how's she doing now? Is she recovered from that?

KELLI SMITH: Never had any issues that—

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh good.

KELLI SMITH: —She ran a fever for about three days, had a mild cough for a couple of days, and that was it.

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, I'm glad she's okay. So then, once the shutdown happened, let's start with any changes that happened at work for you.

KELLI SMITH: At work there wasn't really a whole lot of change other than our teammates struggling to adjust to working from home. So there was a lot of helping others get used to the environment.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, I bet you were the expert in that area for a few of them. [00:03:00]

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KELLI SMITH: (laughs) Yes, as well as our son being part of the organization and actually being responsible for issuing laptops to people working at home.

ROBYN PIERCE: Nice! That's pretty important work right there.

KELLI SMITH: Right?

ROBYN PIERCE: So in our state, in Michigan, the schools closed like the end of the March—the tenth of March, the beginning of the eleventh of March. It was very quickly that our school systems shut down. How soon did yours?

KELLI SMITH: I believe the last day that Cameron attended school was March thirteenth, or right around there.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay. And then what did it look like? What did the school provide you to do with her, or ask you to do with her, when she came off of school?

KELLI SMITH: Well, Cameron is a special needs child. So she was receiving physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy all through the school district while attending preschool. [00:04:05] These are special needs preschool kids. We got three videos from her teacher, and we had two Zoom sessions with her speech therapist, and a packet of activities with a calendar for the month of things to do with her.

ROBYN PIERCE: So that was for the first section—like the first, maybe, month of time off—or was that whole last of the year for you guys?

KELLI SMITH: That was the whole last of the year for us.

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh.

KELLI SMITH: A month and a half, plus. It was about seven weeks worth of school.

ROBYN PIERCE: So comparing that to what you're experiencing now, as far as school with her, how is that, how's the difference?

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KELLI SMITH: Our schools are currently utilizing a hybrid idea. [00:04:59] Essentially, they open and close based on virus activity in our area. If we're in low, we go full time face to face. If we're in medium we go—most kids go K [kindergarten] through five are going half days. Cameron transitioned to a new school during all of this and started kindergarten. So because she's in a self-contained kindergarten classroom that only has six students total, two of whom are virtual, Cameron is actually authorized to go to school five days a week, full days. Even though we are only in hybrid mode right now.

ROBYN PIERCE: Is she getting those therapy sessions that she needs now?

KELLI SMITH: She is and we actually had an in person IEP [individual education plan] meeting on Friday.

ROBYN PIERCE: Nice. And so, to put a little context to that in case someone's watching that doesn't understand that, an IEP is when they evaluate your student to see what needs that they need and what needs they can meet, correct? [00:06:06]

KELLI SMITH: It's an individual education plan and it basically spells out what our goals are for Cameron and what services she receives and why she qualifies for those services. So this year we actually, as soon as we got back to face to face school—which our first two weeks were fully virtual—and virtual schooling for Cameron, we found out very quickly leads to regression in behavior. Sitting at the kitchen table being supervised hand over hand for every activity is not her cup of tea. So when we transitioned back face to face we had already met with her team and said, look, we need to come up with a plan for what we're going to do if we have to go back virtual. [00:06:57] So part of our IEP planning was that, but a majority of the IEP plan really dealt with getting Cameron evaluated for an educational autism diagnosis. And then making sure that the services she was receiving were appropriate for that diagnosis.

ROBYN PIERCE: And that will follow her through grade school? Or do you have an opportunity to update and reevaluate throughout her time?

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KELLI SMITH: We update that every year.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay.

KELLI SMITH: It's a federal requirement that it be certified annually with her team. And so there will be adjustments made along that path.

ROBYN PIERCE: So then, between the time that she left school last March and the time that we're at now—you had seven weeks of school and summertime and you had to work at home—like, what did your day look like at that point?

KELLI SMITH: So the first two weeks there were no services of any kind. [00:07:59] We are extremely blessed we have a nanny who is a nursing student at a local hospital. And she picks up weekend shifts normally. She was able to come and help us with Cameron. So we paid for her to be there with us full time, while we got through the initial stages of shut down. And then they started evaluating what services could be put back in place. And our ABA [applied behavioral analysis] provider, ABA is a behavioral therapy for kids on the spectrum, typically. And our company determined that they were going to be able to provide one therapist to one family throughout the shutdown. Unfortunately, our therapist that we had been working with for the last six months decided that, because her dad is high risk, it was not safe for her. [00:09:06] So my husband and I was working while she was with her nanny for the first few weeks. And then we had a therapist start. And the therapist that they brought in to replace our therapist that decided not to come back was scheduled every day from eight until two. The first day she didn't show up. Called in sick. The second day she was there, but late. And the third day she wasn't there, again. So I called the therapy company and said don't send her to us again. This was on a Wednesday. The Thursday and Friday our ther—our nanny came and covered for us. So we were able to do our jobs. And the following week a brand-new therapist started. Because in the midst of all— (*Interviewee loses internet connection*) [00:09:58]

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ROBYN PIERCE: Oh, I might have lost you. You are frozen. Oh, she's back. You're back. (*connection resumes*)

KELLI SMITH: Where did I lose you at?

ROBYN PIERCE: They sent you another nanny.

KELLI SMITH: Nope, a new therapist.

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh, that's right. So your nanny came to help cover because you were in between the two new therapists. That's where we were.

KELLI SMITH: So new therapist started because an ABA—another ABA company had gone out of business and so they were able to hire additional therapists from that pool, who had just lost their jobs.

ROBYN PIERCE: Such a crazy time.

KELLI SMITH: (sighs) It was insane. New therapist was absolutely amazing with Cameron. [00:11:02]

ROBYN PIERCE: Good.

KELLI SMITH: And she was working eight to two every day. And then our nanny would come from two until five. Expensive? Yes. But, honestly, it probably helped Cameron more than anything.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: Because she got a ton of one-on-one attention from her therapist throughout. Unfortunately, she had eleven absences during that time. From the time she started in April until we switched as school started, so the—

ROBYN PIERCE: End of August?

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KELLI SMITH: —second week, well, it was right after Labor Day.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay.

KELLI SMITH: So eleven absences during that time.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's a lot.

KELLI SMITH: Yes. [00:12:00]

ROBYN PIERCE: It's interesting—

KELLI SMITH: And every time that happened it was a scramble to find whether or not our nanny was available, because we didn't know if she was going to be at the hospital, or not. And, you know, flex our work schedules around those.

ROBYN PIERCE: —yeah. It's interesting to me how every different layer works together and if one person calls in it just ripple effects everyone else's life right now.

KELLI SMITH: Right.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: Yeah, very much so. And we're not use to that.

ROBYN PIERCE: No, no. So with this school year, now that she's back going to school and you got her in kindergarten, is it a lot easier to manage?

KELLI SMITH: Yes and no. She came down with a cold for Halloween.

ROBYN PIERCE: Of course. [00:13:00]

KELLI SMITH: A runny nose and the runny nose caused a cough and so we kept her home the Monday after Halloween, and Tuesday of course was election day, so that wasn't—it was virtual

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school anyway, we've decided we don't close school we do it virtual now. (both talking at once)

ROBYN PIERCE: There goes the snow day.

KELLI SMITH: So but Wednesday morning she was obviously feeling just fine, she had been. And she was her perfectly normal self Monday afternoon, Tuesday, so Wednesday morning I took her and had a COVID test done. So that she could return to school without any fears for anybody's safety.

ROBYN PIERCE: So is that the protocol for school is that they have to get a COVID test if they meet certain symptom criteria?

KELLI SMITH: Yes. And our symptom criteria are a fever, a cough, or an excessively runny nose, and digestive symptoms. [00:14:04] They either have to quarantine at home for fourteen days or they have to get a COVID test.

ROBYN PIERCE: And so you'll keep her home until you get the negative test? Or do you also have to quarantine at the same time?

KELLI SMITH: We had rapid testing available.

ROBYN PIERCE: Nice.

KELLI SMITH: So we walked in Wednesday morning last week at 8:00 am and we walked at eight thirty with a negative COVID test in hand, then went straight to school.

ROBYN PIERCE: Very good. So how is she doing?

KELLI SMITH: She has made progress in certain things her verbal communication skills have definitely increased at home. We're getting three word sentences pretty regularly now at this point. Where, you know, two word commands were the standards last year. [00:14:59:] You

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know, when this all started, it was two words. And now it's Read book please, Eat bites please, things like that. So she's got great manners.

ROBYN PIERCE: She's so cute.

KELLI SMITH: And her favorite thing is, whenever anybody sneezes, coughs, or blows their nose, she says, God bless you.

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh, that's so sweet.

KELLI SMITH: (laughs) And she likes hugs, so she will say, Hugs please, and she will say—and she likes to be chased so, and likes to chase people, so Run is one of her favorites. Run, please Mommy.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's awesome.

KELLI SMITH: Yeah.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's really cool. So does she seem to like going to school?

KELLI SMITH: She thrives in the school environment for sure. She's very happy in school.

ROBYN PIERCE: And are they wearing masks?

KELLI SMITH: Her teachers are—it was written into her IEP last week that she would be exempt from mask wearing. Both at school and on the bus. [00:16:01]

ROBYN PIERCE: So is it also true for other children her age? Because here, if you're under a certain age, you don't have to wear one, but over a certain age you do. So is hers an exception or is that the age group?

KELLI SMITH: It is an exception.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay.

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KELLI SMITH: Anybody attending school is expected to wear a mask.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay.

KELLI SMITH: They have mask breaks, but there are no Plexiglas dividers at this point and, again, most kids are only going half days. So.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. They get to play outside?

KELLI SMITH: No.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: The other classes do not, again, our class has an exception, they are allowed to use the playground.

ROBYN PIERCE: So the school that she's going to is just normal school with a special education program, it's not a special education school.

KELLI SMITH: Yes, she's in a standard public school with what they call a pre-developmental kindergarten class.

ROBYN PIERCE: Really cool.

KELLI SMITH: Where they're working on developmental skills to be ready to go into regular classes. [00:17:00]

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: And she's doing really well with the program, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's good. Yeah, not being able to go outside to play was one of the reasons why we decided to keep the kids home for now.

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KELLI SMITH: Yeah, we just got that authorization last week. To be able to go out on the playground.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's awesome. And so she's been back at school the whole time, right? So this is her first week being able to go out for play?

KELLI SMITH: She had back to school the fourteenth of September, and they were authorized to use the playground last week.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's a lot of—I feel bad for the children—I mean a lot of people say that they don't notice as much, the kids don't complain, but I still feel bad for them.

KELLI SMITH: Honestly, she was just so happy to be back at school it didn't bother her a bit.

ROBYN PIERCE: I hear a lot of that, too. But with the single—you know you have no siblings—it's different. I mean I hope—I'm keeping my kids home—so I hope that's different. [00:17:56]

KELLI SMITH: It is different, I mean, she is an only child for all intents and purposes, because our son is twenty.

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, her brother is so much older.

KELLI SMITH: So she doesn't—she doesn't have that playmate thing.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: She does have friends who are also we have some other friends who—they're her age—and one of them is on the spectrum. We'll get together with them on occasion but it's not like that every day, run around and play. So she needs that interaction and actually they started doing small group summer camp, for ABA. So Tuesdays and Thursdays she was at summer camp with her peers.

ROBYN PIERCE: Even this last summer?

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KELLI SMITH: Um-hm.

ROBYN PIERCE: Nice.

KELLI SMITH: Yup. They reduced the size drastically and all of the therapists wore masks. [00:18:58] And it was one-on-one as far as there was one therapist to one child. There was no rotation of therapists. So they tried to keep it as minimal as possible.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: But, yeah.

ROBYN PIERCE: A lot of kids need that routine.

KELLI SMITH: Well and going from eight until four Tuesdays and Thursdays—and they started that, gosh, they didn't start that up until the middle of June—but it was—she needed it. And her, her social skills grew because of it, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh, that's good.

KELLI SMITH: Yeah, the work juggling act trying to maintain everything that was going on and have her in the house, it was, it was a lot.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: And the nice thing about summer camp was it if her therapist called in sick, she could still go to summer camp.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. That's nice too.

KELLI SMITH: Which we were dealing with those issues, too. [00:20:00]

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ROBYN PIERCE: I think that everybody's dealing with a lot of things and have a lot of things on their plates without having a child on the spectrum. So it's nice that you have things in place and people that you can depend on to help alleviate some of that stress.

KELLI SMITH: Yeah. We have the right resources. Now, when the kids went back to school—I think it was maybe two weeks after the kids started school—we had mom breakfast.

ROBYN PIERCE: Nice.

KELLI SMITH: And we have a special needs mom group from a couple of different elementary schools in the area. And our kids were all at one point or another in pre-school together, so we all know each other, we all know the same teachers, the same therapists.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's cool.

KELLI SMITH: So yeah, we did that and then, it's been about a month ago now, one of our therapists that we had had for three years—who became part of our mom village, part of our crew, and a very good friend of ours—was killed in an automobile accident. [00:21:05]

ROBYN PIERCE: That's tragic.

KELLI SMITH: It was. And her husband and her mother-in-law were also killed in the wreck. And they left behind three daughters. And we have all had a really hard time with this one.

ROBYN PIERCE: I bet. Especially now when you can't—

KELLI SMITH: It's brought our group a lot closer.

ROBYN PIERCE: —you can't have huge groups together and you can't be as social as you want to be.

KELLI SMITH: South Carolina is much different than Michigan, though. There was a big funeral.

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh.

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KELLI SMITH: At their church, with their pastor, and there was actually two separate rooms to allow for spacing.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's awesome.

KELLI SMITH: Everybody wore masks but, yeah, there was a big funeral.

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, that's good.

KELLI SMITH: And by big I mean I think the procession line was probably twenty minutes long. [00:22:05]

ROBYN PIERCE: Very nice. That's very nice.

KELLI SMITH: But, I mean, the majority of the school district knew her. And knew her husband and their church and their, I mean, they were well known in the community.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: And her mother-in-law was a teacher for thirty years for the same school district, so.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, that's a big loss for the community.

KELLI SMITH: It was, and the whole community was rocked by it. So it's, it's been interesting how that's affected everybody, on top of everything else.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. Yeah, we're still not having, not that I've heard, funerals in Michigan. Very, very limited people.

KELLI SMITH: I attended a wedding there in August.

ROBYN PIERCE: In Michigan?

KELLI SMITH: Um-hm.

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ROBYN PIERCE: How weird was that?

KELLI SMITH: Extremely. There were thirty-six people in a Catholic church. [00:23:00]

ROBYN PIERCE: Tell me. You guys have to wear masks?

KELLI SMITH: Yes.

ROBYN PIERCE: And then like did you have to do the—

KELLI SMITH: Yes, there were masks.

ROBYN PIERCE: —the distance, too?

KELLI SMITH: Everybody just kind of stayed spread out because, I mean, thirty-six people in a huge Catholic church—

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: —wasn't really much of a load.

ROBYN PIERCE: Did they have a reception?

KELLI SMITH: What I found—they did.

ROBYN PIERCE: Wow.

KELLI SMITH: (laughs) Which was the funny part because then there really wasn't spacing and we all—they—it was all family. So everybody got up on stage and took a picture together.

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, if you know and trust where your people are from then, I mean.

KELLI SMITH: But we flew in. It was all strange. It was just very odd. It was interesting. It was ok, just weird. [00:24:03]

ROBYN PIERCE: So, can you guys in South Carolina are you guys going to restaurants and stuff?

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KELLI SMITH: Yes. And our—

ROBYN PIERCE: Just going into restaurants?

KELLI SMITH: —yeah, and the occupancy is actually back to full. They're at full occupancy.

ROBYN PIERCE: Do you have to wear masks?

KELLI SMITH: It's at the restaurant's discretion. I know. It's so weird, isn't' it?

ROBYN PIERCE: It's very weird. I didn't realize how often or how much I liked to go out to eat until I just decided I can't deal with it anymore. It's the order that recently came out in Michigan was that you need to give your name and phone number when you come to a restaurant.

KELLI SMITH: I heard that. My mom was here when that order came out from Michigan.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, we haven't gone since then and I'm like—I was out of town last weekend and I wanted something to eat and I'm like, I'll just go to a drive thru. [0025:01] I don't want anything nice.

KELLI SMITH: Don't want to deal with that.

ROBYN PIERCE: No.

KELLI SMITH: I wonder how many people are giving fake phone numbers.

ROBYN PIERCE: I've heard a lot of fake phone numbers are going around. But I haven't heard if there's any ramifications for that so—it's going to happen.

KELLI SMITH: But how, I mean, how to you force somebody to do that?

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, I don't know that it's necessarily—

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KELLI SMITH: In a restaurant where they don't have the ability to keep your information secure.

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, it's more about tracking cases, from what I understand. So if someone comes up that maybe works there they can call everybody that had been there in the last however many days and tell them that they may have been exposed. So.

KELLI SMITH: I understand that. However.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yup.

KELLI SMITH: How do you keep my information secure. Because—

ROBYN PIERCE: I know. [00:25:59]

KELLI SMITH: —and how do you keep restaurant employees. Because you know people are yelling at them.

ROBYN PIERCE: I know. I feel terrible for anyone in the service industry out here right now because it's genuinely not their fault and they're just trying to stay open. And I'm sure there are people who don't understand that.

KELLI SMITH: Yeah.

ROBYN PIERCE: What about—

KELLI SMITH: I've noticed my tip sizes have increased through all of this.

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. So what about extracurricular. Like the zoos, have you gone to the museums, or art galleries, or anything?

KELLI SMITH: We haven't done any of that kind of stuff. We did go down to Beaufort and just walked around on the waterfront.

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ROBYN PIERCE: Oh, that's nice.

KELLI SMITH: We've been to Charleston and been out on the boat, the harbor, and things like that but nowhere really in public other than to sit down and eat, and we usually choose from the same few restaurants for that.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: Just because they're quick and convenient and close. [00:26:59]

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: I mean, Cameron didn't actually leave the house until June.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah?

KELLI SMITH: So, not once. Other than to go outside and play. The first time she went out was in June, and that was essentially because we were buying a house and we knew we were moving into our house that we bought during all this.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: And we knew she was going to—because it wasn't challenging enough. Let's buy a new house and move. So. (laughing)

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. That's how it works.

KELLI SMITH: Yeah. But we needed more space, and now I have an office.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. That's really nice. So when everything is, I mean God willing, when everything is done, and we are able to go back to something that looks more like what we used to know, what are you excited about doing?

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KELLI SMITH: Travel. Get me on my cruise ship. I have a cruise scheduled for April and I want on that boat.

ROBYN PIERCE: Where are you going?

KELLI SMITH: It's just a little short five day down to the Caribbean—it's Royal Caribbean's private island—it's not even a big deal.

ROBYN PIERCE: No big deal.

KELLI SMITH: No, it's not.

ROBYN PIERCE: Hush

KELLI SMITH: But, but we have a junior suite aft facing room on that cruise that I booked because of the cruise that got cancelled this past April. And I really want that aft facing room.

ROBYN PIERCE: I bet.

KELLI SMITH: Like, I can't even imagine how cool that's going to be and I didn't—that's extra money. But I didn't have to fork out any extra money.

ROBYN PIERCE: Nice.

KELLI SMITH: Yeah.

ROBYN PIERCE: Like a revenge cruise for the cruise you missed in last April. [00:29:00]

KELLI SMITH: Pretty much. So our last one was autism on the seas We decided we didn't need autism on the seas, but the staff would on Royal Caribbean is good enough that Cameron won't have any issues with them.

ROBYN PIERCE: Good.

KELLI SMITH: So we just went for it.

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ROBYN PIERCE: Very cool. That's cool that there's things like that available. I didn't realize that.

KELLI SMITH: Oh yeah, there's all kinds of great stuff. Lots of travel agents know about it. But I personally—unless you have a child who struggles with aggression or self-harm and even some self-harm behaviors, you don't necessarily need that level of service.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: It depends on what you're looking for. So, for us kids club, with some well qualified kids club staff, is going to be plenty.

ROBYN PIERCE: Perfect.

KELLI SMITH: So.

ROBYN PIERCE: That sounds fun. [00:30:00]

KELLI SMITH: Because Cameron can talk, and she is a sassy little monster. She'll do just fine.

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, I really hope you get to go on that cruise.

KELLI SMITH: Me too. Because I need it.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: And I don't want any more cruise vouchers, because I got enough of those right now.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

KELLI SMITH: That's the third cancelled cruise this year.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. Some day.

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KELLI SMITH: Someday, I'll get back on a cruise ship. Even if it means I have to get a vaccine to get on.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, we'll see.

KELLI SMITH: I think that's going to be the next thing.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, I think so too, we'll see. Well, thank you very much for your time. I'm going to turn the recording off.

KELLI SMITH: Yay.

[00:30:56]

End of Interview