

COMMUNITY ARCHIVE: COVID-19 EXPERIENCES ORAL HISTORIES

Amanda Broome Interview

October 10, 2020

Virtual Meeting, Martinsville, Virginia

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Amanda Broome Interview

SARA LAW: This interview on October 10, 2020, via Zoom, is of Amanda Broome, a friend of the interviewer, about the effects of COVID on their ability to work, and their family life. The interview will go into detail about their job and personal life, both before and after the shelter in place order was issued.

This interview will be housed at the Reuther Library which is part of Wayne State University. The object that will be housed will consist of a video and audio recording, and the transcripts of the interview. While it would be wonderful to have the interview with no restrictions, ultimately it is up to the interviewee. This interview will be available to the public, so restrictions are understandable. The anonymity of the interviewee will be preserved if so desired, understanding that there will be a time constraint on how long the institution will honor that. There is also an option to house the audio and transcript only. [00:01:00]

So, Amanda, my first question for you is, are you affiliated with Wayne State University at all?

AMANDA BROOME: I am not affiliated with them.

SARA LAW: Alright, and where do you live?

AMANDA BROOME: I live in Martinsville, Virginia.

SARA LAW: And where exactly is Martinsville in Virginia?

AMANDA BROOME: It is a tiny town just north of the North Carolina border, kind of central in the state. So if you follow the North Carolina and Virginia line, and hit the center of the state, and go up just a teeny tiny bit, there I am.

SARA LAW: (laughs) Okay, and what do you do in Virginia? What's your job?

AMANDA BROOME: I am a public relations manager for Patrick Henry Community College.

SARA LAW: Working at a university, how has COVID affected your work?

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AMANDA BROOME: It's been kind of a roller coaster, honestly, because at the very beginning it was—it had a very big impact on my work. [00:01:59] I do the communications for the college, so a lot of what needed to be communicated was coming through me, through my office. And that was rapid-fire communication down at the beginning in March and we were in that ramping up stage as we're watching what's happening. And then as we realize it's actually going to impact us, and how we communicated to the students, and what we're going to do about spring break, and how we get that word out, and yadda, yadda, yadda. So at the very beginning it was pretty hectic. There was a lot of emergency communications meetings with the president, and that kind of thing. And that rollercoaster continued for a couple of months because we wound up making a lot of changes. We extended spring break a little bit. We extended it by a week, so that we could give time to the faculty to completely redo their courses, so that they would all be online.

So before spring break everything was hunky dory. Then spring break got extended. And then after spring break we moved, I think, 50 percent of our classes to remote learning. [00:03:05] And that is a big deal for us because as a community college we have a lot of hands-on learning. A lot of what we call CTE, which is Career Technical Education, and that kind of thing is, like, commercial truck driving licenses, motor sports, nursing—that kind of thing. Actually, nursing isn't technically a CTE, but they're all hands-on. Forty percent of our classes are some kind of hands-on learning. And we were able to, in a week, flip and transition to probably about 70 percent online.

But things continued getting worse and worse. And, because of Liberty University—which is a really large, I think it's private, Christian university about two hours north of us—they decided not really to follow any restrictions. [00:04:04] And the governor of Virginia at the time is a Democrat, and so he doesn't really agree with Liberty University. Like, there's a little bit of political tension there. And, when Liberty University decided to do its own thing, the governor decided to put his foot down and say we're not going to allow that. And he shut down all colleges and universities in Virginia and said that you have to go 100 percent remote. So then

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we had to figure out how to make those welding classes online and things like that. Which was just (laughs) mind-blowing. But our faculty were champions, and they were able to do that. And when that happened, we decided to move our—well, it kind of happened in more of a stair step than that, because we were increasingly moving things online. [00:05:00] I think we were about 90 percent online when the governor made that mandate.

But we were also, I forget exactly the timeline, but we moved staff off campus kind of in an incremental way, as well. Where we were working about 50 percent on campus, 50 percent off campus. It was really at the discretion of your supervisor and based on what your office environment was like. Like, if you were in a shared office space or if you were in your own office, if you had a high-touch student—like if you were an advisor that really needed to meet students, or you worked in the library and you kind of had to be there to greet students—that’s your job. Verses me, where I worked essentially online—I really just need a computer to do my work—I could work more remotely. So it was really up to the supervisor, up to the position. [00:06:01]

But then when the governor made that mandate, we changed everything, and we were 100 percent remote. I think I’m telling you right. Let me scale back and remember this. It is so complicated, because we did so many different things. I think—I can tell you for certain that we closed the campus on Thursday and Friday—I think it was from March until July, the end of July—so those two days were for deep cleaning to kind of let the virus die off if it was on campus. And then Monday people were coming into the office, somewhat. Mostly remote though. [00:06:57] For the most part it was just—if you were necessary to be on campus, then you would be on campus Monday through Wednesday. And that was mostly May through the end of July.

And one of the most awesome things my president did is she was looking out for the mental health and the just general health of her staff and faculty. So she just mandated our hours are now nine to three. And she just—I don’t even know if it’s legal (laughs), like, I don’t know how she worked that out with HR [human resources]—but, I think it was about May to July, we

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worked from nine to three. Which was awesome. And then we were fully remote Thursday and Friday, and only the people who needed to be on campus could come on campus Monday through Wednesday. [00:08:00] Which was awesome for me because I wound up getting to go home to my parents, which are about three hours west of me. I could just work from there for about two—two and a half weeks—something like that. I was able to do that which was just amazing. (whispers)

And then everything got kind of ripped off in August, and my president decided that we were full time again. So eight to five and the campus was only going to be closed on Friday for deep cleaning. But we were working from home, so we were full forty hours a week. And everybody, everybody comes back on to campus. There was no difference for anyone, even though all I need is a computer to do my work, I'm required to be on campus. Even if you're in an office environment where that's shared—doesn't matter, you still have to be on campus. And, I'm kind of venting right now because I'm a little mad at this, because none of my other colleagues of mine around the state are doing this. [00:09:03] Everybody is remote, if you can be remote. Well, everyone in a position like mine.

And, to make it all the worse, if you have a reason to be at home, like, if your kids are not in school and you really need to be there to watch them, then you can talk to HR about it, but you have to take a pay cut. And—I know! And, I talked to my colleagues around the state and I'm like, Are any of your universities doing this? And they're like, No! That is not required. So I have no idea why our crazy HR is doing that. But the only people who get exceptions is if your doctor—actually I don't even know if it's an exception for the pay cut—but people that have a doctor's note that says that they can't be on campus, they can work remotely. [00:10:00] But they may also take a pay cut, I'm not sure about that.

SARA LAW: So, with the pay cut and with everything that's going on at your school, are they following guidelines like they should be?

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AMANDA BROOME: It depends on what you call guideline. We are really strict about the PPE (personal protective equipment). So all the students and all the staff have to wear masks when they're walking around in the hall or when they're communicating with people. And we've been really good about that, honestly. I think we're coming up to about halfway through the semester now—I don't really remember when halfway is—but we've been in for several weeks and we've had very few instances where students are not wearing masks. We've had basically no confrontations. We've just—everyone's been super good about wearing a mask or a face shield. [00:10:59] We have a fabric—fab lab—a fabrication center that has 3D [three-dimensional] printers and laser cutters and all that jazz, and since probably May we have been—every piece of equipment that can work on it has been working on making face shields. We had a local manufacturer donate us a four-hundred pound thing of plastic, and we have been using that to make face shields. At the beginning we were sending all that PPE to local health care centers for a while, so we're starting to use that for ourselves and for our faculty and staff. We've got face shields, so that they can stand up in class and not have to wear a mask. They can just wear a face shield and teach. So that's pretty much what we've been doing, is we have increased cleaning, we're still off campus on Fridays so that it can be deep cleaned, and so that you know any virus can die off. [00:12:07] And then, if you have like an office where you're seeing students frequently, we've made barriers, little Plexiglas shields, for those advisors and people like that. So as far as that goes, yes, we are following guidelines.

But we are pretty much 100 percent on campus which is—I have not seen many people doing that—which is kind of weird. But we're also a small town. We're also very rural so, you know, it's a little bit different here than in a city. But one thing we have been doing that's different than other years is about 80 percent of our classes are online right now. Like, we've moved as many as possible online, while still being able to give students that really need hands-on, hands-on opportunity. [00:13:05]

And a lot of the ways that we've been doing that is through hybrid classes. So students will come like once a week, and then other times, you know, we've got a class that normally meets

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on Monday-Wednesday, they'll split it into two groups and, if it's a class of twenty-four people, twelve people will come on Monday and twelve people will come on Wednesday. And the Monday classes will just watch the video on Wednesday, and the Wednesday classes will just watch the video of class on Monday. So we're splitting it like that, so that we've basically got 50 percent of our student population on campus right now.

SARA LAW: So scaling back toward the beginning of COVID, do you remember the first case in your state, or when they announced the first case in your state? [00:13:59]

AMANDA BROOME: I couldn't tell you where it was, but I definitely remember at the very beginning watching very closely, like every day, checking the news and seeing, you know, it getting here and there, and here and there, and finally it was in Virginia. And then, you know, several are in Virginia. And then it's spreading in Virginia. (laughing) And then, like, yeah. So I couldn't tell you where it was. I would say it was probably in Northern Virginia, or the Tidewater-Hampton Roads area, because those are the two hotspots that were here. But yeah, I mean, I kind of—I remember the general time and I remember, you know, this feeling of watching it, and watching it spread and grow, and just being, like, woah! It's coming! And talking to my friends it was really interesting, thinking back on it, because she—I have a friend who's got really bad anxiety—and she was so scared during that time. [00:14:59] She's like, What if it comes to Martinsville? And now it's come into Martinsville and it was no big deal. Like, life is pretty normal. But back then, when it's, like, slowly creeping closer and closer to our little rural safe bubble, it was terrifying. It was, like, Oh my goodness, it's coming! It's—you know, that first time it came to the U.S., and the first time it came to Virginia, and then it's, like, (makes repetitive sounds) creeping in.

SARA LAW: What was your life before the COVID actually came into Virginia, or into your area?

AMANDA BROOME: Like, right before? Like, the time where you're watching the news? Or what do you mean?

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SARA LAW: Oh, just before it ever hit. So how was your life before the shelter in place orders, before everyone was wearing masks? That kind of thing.

AMANDA BROOME: Yeah, honestly there's not a whole bunch of difference for me. [00:16:00] Partly because I am doing grad school right now, so a lot of my free time that I might have been out and about doing things, I'm sitting doing grad school, which would be the same even if there was no COVID. So it wasn't a whole lot different for me. I think, besides that there—I am an extrovert—and so before COVID I would love to hang out with people. I would have game nights with my friends, I'd go to church, I'd—you know, back when I had a boyfriend, I'd be travelling all over the state with him. But so many things changed around my life around the same time as COVID that it was kind of hard to tell what was COVID, and what wasn't. Like, I no longer have a boyfriend and that happened around the same time as COVID. And then I have grad school now, which happened kind of around the same time as COVID. [00:16:57] So all these things kind of put me back at home and kind of got me sitting still, and was that because of those things? Or was it because of COVID? It's kind of hard to tell.

You know, one thing that's super different for me, though, has been church. Because I was trying to get super involved. I had a ladies group that I had started. I had a Bible study that I was going to on Thursdays. I was doing the kids ministry. And it was honestly—I'll just be honest with you, it was awful. I had way overextended myself. I was so tired. And it was just, it was too much. But then all of a sudden COVID happened, and it shut it down. And I no longer have to teach kids every Sunday. I no longer have to, you know, go to a Bible study that's thirty minutes away every Thursday night. (laughs) And I no longer have to drag people to my ladies Bible study that was not going very well. [00:18:00] It was very taxing. And I feel like I was not doing what I should have been doing. Like, just trying to force things to happen, and yeah, COVID said, Sit down, take a break. And it's been a wonderful breather. Just like, (sighs) nothing to do. It's wonderful. (laughs)

SARA LAW: So do you think COVID basically gave you time to stop and reflect?

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AMANDA BROOME: Yeah! Yeah, it gave me—yeah? Reflecting is kind of a choice, but it definitely gave me a time to stop and breath, which is wonderful. And it gave me a time to stop and focus on something else. So I'm not running around doing—I'm not being tempted to go out and play with my friends, and go for coffee, and all that jazz. I can sit down and do my work and there's no other temptation, there's no other, you know, pulling of me away from that. [00:18:59] I can just sit down and do grad school. So, it's been—it's been honestly wonderful because I'm not overextended with things that I don't enjoy, and I've got tons of space to do grad school work with my time. So it's been—I hate to say that I'm happy for COVID, but in that regard it's been nice. (laughs)

SARA LAW: What is the biggest change that you've found through COVID and the stay-at-home orders and everything that's happened to you so far?

AMANDA BROOME: Honestly, the biggest change has been social interactions. It has been really, really rough. I have always been a person who likes to sit on the fence, and see both sides of every coin, and give everybody, you know, the benefit of the doubt because everybody has different perspectives. But, with COVID, it has been pushing me. Like it has been awful. You never know how people think about masks. [00:19:58] Like, you can approach someone and they could be very anti-mask and be, Don't make me wear a mask, and I hate masks, and it's the government telling me what to do, and blah blah blah, and I've got claustrophobia, I don't wear a mask, it's a medical condition. And I'm like, (whispers) Oh my gosh. And then you've got people who are like, If you're not wearing a mask, then you're telling me that my life does not matter. And, you know, it's so hard because you don't know what type of person you're approaching. No matter, like, even if they're close friends. You have no idea what it is that they feel when you first approach them. And if you're wearing a mask is going to turn them off, or if not wearing a mask is going to, you know, make them hate you and it's just—it's been awful. I hate it.

And, you know, there's just so much tension and so much social, like, turmoil in the world. [00:21:59] Like not just—there's all this racial turmoil, sure. But there's also this personal

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tension between everybody, no matter what race they are. Whether you're going to wear a mask or not. Whether you believe in COVID or not. And like, and you've got to step carefully about what you say. Because, you know, the other day I was talking to a professor, you know, he was talking about that he has a face shield and all that and I'm like, Yeah, masks just make me feel a little bit safer, and I could tell that I had said something wrong, because apparently he doesn't believe in COVID. And so he's, like, you know, Safer—and I forget exactly the words that he used—but it was just like he ridiculed me because I thought that I needed to feel safe about this virus that he doesn't really believe exists. And, I shouldn't say it like that. He believes it exists, he just doesn't think it's a big deal. [00:21:59] So, yeah, and you never know what's going to tick somebody off.

And I've got friends on the other side that, if I told them all the social interactions that I have on a regular basis, they probably would never want to hang out with me again. Because they think that going to the store is dangerous and people need to not do that. And I've got one friend that, she's like, I really don't understand why anyone goes to the restaurants. Why would you do that? There's Postmates and Uber Eats, and you never have to go to a restaurant. And I'm like, I didn't want to tell her that I had just gone to a restaurant the day before. And I'm like, Oh no, I'm a terrible person! (laughs) So there's this horrible balance between friends.

The worst, though, is in my church. [00:22:55] Because I'm a Christian, and I believe in compassion, and I believe in not having judgement against people, right? Like, it's God that judges and we're supposed to show mercy and kindness. And I see my non-Christian friends, they are terrified of this virus and it's usually the non-Christians who are very into wearing masks, and very terrified of going out, and very careful. And then it's my Christian friends, typically, that could care less. They don't want to wear a mask. And I—honestly it just feels like they are undermining the gospel and they are holding to their rights more than other people's, you know—what's the word I'm looking for? They're clinging to their rights over other people's—

SARA LAW: Needs?

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AMANDA BROOME: —yeah, I don't want to say comfortability, but, you know, they have a perspective that having a mask on is going to save their lives and if you declare that you're not going to wear a mask because of your political rights, what you're really declaring to that person is, I don't care about your life. And, as a Christian, what that says about us is just awful. Like, I don't care what you think about politics, you need to care about the person in front of you. And, if that person believes their life is on the line, and that you are transgressing on their, you know, their health, their right to remain healthy, then you have no leg to stand on as a Christian to witness to them.

And I have a friend that she (sighs) wants to minister to people by going into the restaurants and, like, chatting with them and buying coffee locally and buying things locally. [00:25:00] Which is a great ministry, right now that is a super good idea. But she hates masks! She has this awful, horrible mask that she wears because she's mandated to, and it's basically like this clear strip of plastic that sits about an inch away from her nose and it does nothing. Like, that's not going to save anybody's life. If she has COVID, she's infecting everybody. And it's just—it's enough to say that she has something on her face so that she doesn't get kicked out. And she goes and tries to minister to people with this mask on! And I'm like, You, you're failing! Like, That's not going to work! Like, You're going in there and saying, Hey? How's your day? And all they're hearing is, I hate you enough to kill you right now. Like, that is what my non-Christian friends are hearing. And I'm like, Ah! So anyway, that is a really longwinded rant about—I don't even remember what your question was. But that is my longwinded rant about the difficulties of COVID. [00:26:02]

(Both laugh)

SARA LAW: What is your biggest take away from all of this?

AMANDA BROOME: Um-hm

SARA LAW: From COVID, from masks, from the mandates, and everything else?

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AMANDA BROOME: Well, I guess takeaways—things that I can learn for myself—are that I need to learn how to have grace with people that I disagree with, you know? And the people that I feel like—I mean, you just heard me rant. Like, it gets me so emotional, and I need to learn how to love and have grace to those people that I feel like are doing wrong. You know? That are undermining our ministry and our faith and—for their own political rights. Like, somehow I need to have grace for those people that I feel like are maligning the name of Christ. [00:27:01] And that's hard you know? That's really hard to learn how to have grace and love for those people. Like I don't necessarily disagree with them. I think that a lot of the fear and the anxiety and a lot of the PPE mandates are a little overboard. Like, I agree. But I see other people's—I just, I see other people's lives and other people's mental health and that type of thing as much more important than my rights and, you know, whether or not the virus is as big a deal as it is. Like, I don't care. If wearing a mask is going to enable us to have a much easier conversation together, and make you feel at ease and benefit you, then I'm going to do that.

But the takeaway is just to have grace and love for those people that I have a hard time understanding, and it's been hard. [00:28:05] I have not figured it out yet. And I guess another takeaway is just to, well—I guess wash your hands more is a big one. (laughs) But also to take everything in stride because I think history is going to show so much about this. Like, we ran through this, you know. You you've heard that example used of building the plane while you're flying it. Like, that's exactly what we've been doing with COVID. All of the scientists are trying to give mandates, and guidelines, and explanations for something that they don't know! They've never seen this virus before and in March everyone is trying to explain to the, you know, the public like, This is what's going on, when they have no idea what's going on. [00:28:59] They're just now trying to figure them out themselves, and so what we have to do as a society is—we've got to, we've got to weigh things, we've got to actually do our own research, we've got to use a little common sense, use a little wisdom, use a little discretion.

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And it's super easy in this day and age to just read the headlines and just to take what they tell us and, you know, just leave it at that and it's not a big deal—usually, right? But with COVID I've seen the need for doing a little bit more due diligence and being a little bit of taking things in stride, right? Because we realize that what is coming down from the top—I don't want to say is unreliable, it's just, they're giving us what they know as they know it, and that changes as they know more things. [00:29:59] And I think that's not only true of COVID. I think COVID just really puts it in bas relief of—you know, this is a really big example and an instance of this, whereas other things, you know—especially like with the race riots—they just tell you that one narrative. But there's always two sides to every coin and there's always something that got missed, right? When you have the media framing things and politicians trying to spin it in their way, and I think what we need to learn from COVID, as a society, is we are—we have to be engaged in this and we have to do our due diligence. We have to put in some common sense. We have to put in some discretion when we hear things coming down from the top, you know? Whether that's politics, or whether that's politicians, or media telling us things, we've got to weigh that and to understand that there's always a bigger picture. [00:31:02]

SARA LAW: And, thank you for doing this, I have one last question for you and that is, What would you like to do once COVID is over?

AMANDA BROOME: That's a really good question because, honestly, I'm a little bit of a hypocrite and I don't do as much social distancing as I probably should. (laughs) So I've kind of been doing everything that I shouldn't. Like, I go to restaurants, I hang out with friends—so there's not a whole lot that I haven't done. Obviously, I haven't gone to a movie theater because that's not an option. And I haven't gone travelling because why would I go travelling right now? I mean, other than going to my parents which is across state lines. [00:31:59] So, I guess—I guess travelling would be the answer? I don't know—my family and I usually go on a big vacation every other year, and it just so happened that this was our off year. That we went on our vacation last year, so if that had hit differently than I would have been really sad to have missed my vacation year. But if we don't get the vaccine in time and we're

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not able to go on our vacation next year, I will be devastated. So I guess that is the answer, is vacationing.

SARA LAW: Well, Amanda, thank you for doing this today. And—

AMANDA BROOME: This has been fun! It's almost like therapy, getting it all off my chest.

(both laugh)

SARA LAW: —I'm glad you enjoyed it.

AMANDA BROOME: (laughs)

SARA LAW: Thank you again for doing this.

AMANDA BROOME: Yeah, gladly.

SARA LAW: I'm going to go ahead and stop it here. [00:32:56]

End of interview