

COMMUNITY ARCHIVE: COVID-19 EXPERIENCES ORAL HISTORIES

Jessica Gregory Interview

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Virtual Meeting

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Jessica Gregory Interview

SARA LAW: This interview is of Jessica Gregory, a friend of the interviewer, about the effects of COVID on their ability to work and their family life. This interview is conducted by Sara Law and will go into detail about Jessica Gregory's 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 most advantageous would be to have the interview to have 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 interview will be preserved if so desired, understanding that there will be a time constraint on how long the institution will honor that. [00:01:01] There is also an option to house the audio and transcript only.

I wanted to ask you, for my first question, are you affiliated with Wayne State University at all?

JESSICA GREGORY: I am not.

SARA LAW: Alright, and where do you live?

JESSICA GREGORY: I live in Nashville, Tennessee.

SARA LAW: You live in Nashville. How would you describe your life before COVID started?

JESSICA GREGORY: That's weird, just because I never really thought about my life, like, what it would have been like. Pre-COVID it was busy with work. We were very busy. I work in hospitality. Nashville's a very booming city, so I was working different events, working a lot of things like that. I guess I was involved a lot. [00:02:00] I was going to a lot of functions with my church group. I was seeing my family more. But you don't really think about how COVID, affected your life until after COVID. So it's hard to really think about what my life was like pre-COVID, but I guess it was busy. But it was fine. It was fun.

SARA LAW: Is there anything you liked doing before COVID hit?

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JESSICA GREGORY: Like something that COVID affected?

SARA LAW: Yeah.

JESSICA GREGORY: Okay. Yeah, it's funny because back then I would've thought, Oh, this is kind of like—sometimes I'd be like, I don't really want to do this. But some of my church group stuff we would—young adult—we would go out and do things. We'd go out into the community, go do happy hour, stuff like that. And we had to, obviously, stop doing all that for a while. So that was kind of a bummer. Which now that I think about it, it's like, man, I blew off a lot of those things occasionally. Because I'd think, I'm too tired, or, I'm too busy. But now I really miss it. [00:03:02]

SARA LAW: When did you first hear about COVID?

JESSICA GREGORY: I want to say it was probably January? I remember hearing some stories about an issue. I didn't really know it was COVID, but I remember hearing stories about something going on in China. And I was like, Well that's all the way over there. I didn't really think much of it. But probably like January or February, something like that.

SARA LAW: And do you remember the first case in Nashville?

JESSICA GREGORY: Yes, very well. (laughs) Actually, I remember it was—I don't remember when the case was announced specifically, but it was, like, the second week of March. It had been said that someone down in one of the buildings downtown had received COVID, or was tested positive, and I remember thinking, What does this mean? [00:04:05] That's when all the questions of, What is COVID? What's going on? And we were all having to— at work, especially, we were getting emails constantly. Like, okay, how does this affect us? What happens with that? So I remember thinking, Oh my gosh. Because at that point it had already come to America out west, so we're like, Oh gosh, this is now—it's real, This is really happening.

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SARA LAW: I know you said your work was emailing and trying to figure out everything with COVID. How long until that email chain started did you actually do anything about COVID?

JESSICA GREGORY: Again, it was way back in March so I would say—I remember it was March thirteenth when the decision was made to start working from home. [00:05:04] I was still working downtown at the moment. We were getting ready for a large event that had actually been cancelled that week. And that's when it was decided the city's going to go on a shut down for a while and we need to start doing that. And that's when it really started—from here on we're going to start working—most of the office is going to start working from home. Unfortunately, where I was working, I was still going in a couple of times a week because we had just had the tornadoes, so our job was doing a lot of tornado relief—t-shirt orders to help fund—like, give back to the community. So I was going in a little bit to help fulfill those. But yeah, it was probably within a day that people—that our office decided we have to shut down for a while. Or we have to go home and work for a while, I should say.

SARA LAW: Can you explain the tornadoes a little bit? [00:05:59]

JESSICA GREGORY: Yes. So unfortunately, back early March—I want to say it was the first week—there was a major tornado that ran through northeast Nashville. It went up north of the downtown area, through an area called Germantown, and then it jumped over to East Nashville and it really damaged a lot of homes; it caused a lot of damage to a lot of amazing historic buildings, like music venues—all of that. So what was really hard was that all these people had lost their homes, people had lost their business, and then a week later COVID hit and so people had to shut down. So not only did Nashville businesses and families get affected and lose or go, like, furlough or get unemployment from COVID, but a lot of them had also already been affected by the tornadoes. They had already been affected by their businesses being destroyed that way. [00:06:58] So my company and other places—other groups—were getting together to try and find ways to bring some money and fundraising in to help a lot of these families and businesses.

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SARA LAW: What were your initial reactions to the stay-at-home orders?

JESSICA GREGORY: I was a little confused because the job I do is—I work face-to-face with visitors—so it was like, What does this mean for me? Honestly, a lot of us were just like, It's just going to be a couple of weeks. The city just wants to try and stop this before it gets out of hand. We were like, Oh, it's just going to be like the rest of March, maybe April. But, obviously, it wasn't. It went into the summer. So my first reaction was like, It's going to be okay. I was very surprisingly positive about it all. I was not overreacting. I wasn't freaking out. I was trying to stay positive for other people and stuff like that. [00:07:58] But yeah, I did not know what was going to happen. I did not see it getting as bad as it did, honestly, which is maybe a little naïve. But that's what happens, I guess.

SARA LAW:

So I know you said that with the stay at home orders, you guys said it was just going to be a couple weeks?

JESSICA GREGORY: Most likely, probably—my boss and stuff—they said probably a month. But a lot of us were probably—because we do a lot of front-facing—we didn't think, maybe, visitors were going to come. But I thought, I'm definitely going to have to go back in the office at some point because it's really hard for me to do my job from home. But we did, we made it work. But I think a lot of people—because at that time we only had one or two cases—right when it started it really wasn't spreading as fast, I guess, as it eventually did. [00:09:02] So I wasn't thinking it was going to last as long as it did, honestly. Probably a month, I would say.

SARA LAW: So I take it the orders did affect your job in some cases? Since it was face-to-face?

JESSICA GREGORY: Like the closing the cities and stuff?

SARA LAW: Yeah.

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JESSICA GREGORY: Yes. So obviously, businesses had to shut down. And since I'm in tourism/hospitality, a lot of the attractions had to shut down. And Nashville is very big on music, obviously, so our bars, our honky-tonks, music venues all shut down. Basically, my job turned from being helping visitors in Nashville to be coming home—we were able to get our computers and our phones linked up to our office computer and our office phones—so I was answering phone calls and basically helping people cancel their trips. [00:10:00] Basically, because a lot of people—at that time people were getting ready to come for CMA (Country Music Awards) Fest, all of those things—Fourth of July—so people were calling back in April for those events. So it definitely affected my job. I was partially furloughed. I was lucky enough I never got fully furloughed from my company. I was working—basically, instead of working full time, I was working part time. At lesser hours and stuff, so even less than twenty hours a week. So yeah, I was definitely was affected.

SARA LAW: And—

JESSICA GREGORY: Not as bad as other people. I know a lot of people who are still furloughed at this time, or who have been laid off.

SARA LAW: So as for you, it didn't fully affect you as far as the shut down? [00:10:56]

JESSICA GREGORY: Not fully, no. I mean, my job switched. I didn't get furloughed. I didn't lose my job. We didn't shut down. It just—my role had changed a little bit.

SARA LAW: And how—with the shutdown, how long was it until you went back to full-time hours?

JESSICA GREGORY: I went back to full time in mid-July, I believe. So probably about three and a half months, I would say. But at the same time there were some other people in my position that were still furloughed. They could only bring back a couple of us at a time.

SARA LAW: And I know with coming back, as far as full time, did that coincide with the second phase of reopening? [00:11:58]

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JESSICA GREGORY: Yeah, it did. It's kind of hard because our phases have changed a lot. Phase two then is not the same as what phase two is now. But it did. We were allowed to come back. Offices were allowed to start reopening at a small percentage. So we were rotating who could come in. So it did. Um-hm.

SARA LAW: And are you actually back in the offices now? Or are you still at home?

JESSICA GREGORY: I am fully back in the office. I go in—our office still does, like, percentage of fifty-fifty, I believe. Some people still choose to work from home. But my area—we do still come in five days a week.

SARA LAW: And how is your work dealing with having COVID in the city and keeping everyone safe? [00:13:00]

JESSICA GREGORY: Yeah, so because I work with, not for, the city—we have a relationship with the city—it's very important that we make sure that people coming understand where Nashville is and that, at the end of the day, people visiting—we want to keep safe. So we do our part. We let everyone—we constantly keep our websites updated. We tell people calling, or we tell people when they visit us, which phase we're in. We tell them what that means, like business-wise. We tell them we do have a mask mandate, which is required everywhere you go. So yeah, we're doing—we try to do our part for sure.

SARA LAW: And is that the same case as far as being inside the building? Are you guys distanced?

JESSICA GREGORY: Oh yeah, we—it's very important for us to make sure we are following those rules. [00:14:04] We have to wear a mask. Because the city requires it, we can't even go out—technically, if you're outside, if you can't keep a distance, you have to wear a mask. It's required public places, indoor and outdoor. So we wear masks all the time in our office, unless you're at your desk. You're welcome to take it off then. We take our temperature. The bathrooms have the little door foot thing. We wipe down constantly. We're allowed to eat in

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the breakroom, but you're also allowed to eat at your desk. I like to eat at my desk, or I go outside to get some fresh air. But yeah, it's very important that we do what the city wants, especially since we kind of also represent the city. So yeah, I would say we're doing a very good job at that. And the building is, too—the building that we're in—they do a really good job. [00:14:59]

SARA LAW: How have you felt being out in the world, basically, as a person who is essentially an essential worker working in your environment now verses when COVID first started out? And you guys were still in the building necessarily.

JESSICA GREGORY: It's actually funny because now the joke is how masks are so common. Like, we walk out the door you're like, Oh, I forgot my mask, it's like, Oh my gosh, I forgot my phone. Like, a mask is now the equivalent, in my opinion, to always having your phone. You always have your mask. It's become very normal. Like honestly, I go to the grocery store, I go to church, I go to visit my grandmother outside her house. So it's adjusting, obviously. But compared to when COVID first started you would have thought it was, like, a zombie apocalypse. [00:16:03] (laughs) Grocery stores were empty. Wearing a mask—I did not go in a grocery store for, like, a month when COVID first came because I was like, Oh my God, what's it going to look like? What am I going to do? Are people going to judge me if I don't have my mask on or are people going to judge me if I do have my mask on? So it's been a big adjustment, but now it's just the norm. I feel comfortable going outside. Because I don't trust that, if I go outside, I trust that everyone else is doing their part, too. So I don't feel too uncomfortable. As long as I do what I'm supposed to do—wear my mask, keep my distance, wash my hands. Stuff like that, I feel fine.

SARA LAW: And are there any times in your job that you're working directly with the public?

JESSICA GREGORY: Yes. Sometimes I do have to do face to face with the public. Visitors, stuff like that. [00:16:58] Where I do that we have those Plexiglas barriers so we have the arrows and

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all the distancing stuff like that. So I definitely still have to like interact with people physically, yeah.

SARA LAW: Do you ever have to ask anyone to put their masks on?

JESSICA GREGORY: Yes! Since they are required in all buildings, pretty much. I do it politely. I'm just like, Hey, do you have a mask that you can wear? And then they'll say, Oh yeah, I forgot. And then I'll say, It's all good, just put it on. Sometimes they'll be like, Oh, I have a medical issue. And I'm like, That's okay. Just keep your distance. You know, stuff like that. But, yeah, I've had to ask a couple times, but people are pretty nice about it.

SARA LAW: I'm wrapping up at this point, but I have one last question to ask you. What is the first thing you want to do when this is over?

JESSICA GREGORY: I want to see my friends in Memphis. (laughing) I want to go visit people that I haven't been able to see in a long time because of all this. [00:18:03] And I want to travel. I think that's the big one. I think everybody wants to travel at this point. But, yeah.

SARA LAW: Well, thank you Jessica, for—

JESSICA GREGORY: Yeah.

SARA LAW: —doing this interview.

JESSICA GREGORY: Yeah, of course! You're welcome. It was fun.

SARA LAW: (laughing) I'm glad you liked it. But I think that concludes it for today.

JESSICA GREGORY: Awesome.

SARA LAW: And thanks again.

JESSICA GREGORY: Yeah, of course. You're welcome. [00:18:32]

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End of interview