

Nicole Fitzgerald COVID-19 Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Meagan Ginnaty-Moore

May 26, 2020

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Meagan Ginnaty-Moore: Okay. So, when do you first hearing about COVID-19 and what did you think about how it might affect you?

Nicole Fitzgerald: Ooh.

MG: What might you say to your past self?

NF: So I first heard about it right before Spring Break because my one professor from sociology, he explained that his family had a immunodeficiency and he was going to be switching that last week before break to online because he wanted to spend time with his family. So that was kind of the first time that I heard that, yeah this is actually a serious problem and it's going to probably affect all of us too because in his email it was basically stating "I don't know if it's going to be this bad, but if it is, I want to keep my family and my students safe, so please respect that." And that was kind of the big "wow, this can be a really life-changing event." And then what was the second part of that question?

MG: What might you say to your past self now that you are experiencing all this?

NF: I wish that I would've gone out and hung out with friends more and hung out with friends more my first semester of this last year because, as a senior, it's really disheartening to know that I didn't get to do a lot of things I still wanted to. Like my friends and I have an annual Cancun day that we go out and we get food, and we just hang out with each other, and we do that normally second semester. And that was our big thing, goodbye kind of thing. And we never got to do that, so I wish I would have. I also wish that we would have as a school kind of come together more, beforehand and they would have prepped something so even if we didn't get to participate for graduation, they could have done something with the students as a like, last hoorah kind of thing. But it's really hard to predict that, so I can't be mad [laughter].

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MG: [Laughter] Yeah, it would have been nice to have something, especially for graduating a class to have like one last big hoorah. What have been the biggest changes you have had to deal with?

NF: Well, I don't like online learning. There's nothing that's wrong with it per se, but for me, I don't feel as I'm getting the right education and it's not as strong, especially with Stout [University of Wisconsin-Stout] being a polytechnic university. I like to have that hands-on learning. I like to be in the classroom. When I was younger, like a Freshman, I remember having

to transfer out of online courses and realize that I would do much better in a classroom, even if it meant 8:00 AMs. So I prefer doing that and when it kind of this event, take over, I had to switch online and it's been very difficult creating my own schedule based off of an online platform.

MG: Mhm, yeah. Yeah, a lot of people have been having that issue, I have that issue too [laughter].

NF: [Laughter] Yeah.

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MG: Are you surprised by anything about how people have responded or about how life has changed?

NF: As a general public or as a full standpoint?

MG: [Short pause] Just anything that you're surprised about, like how you're – where you are, how your community is responding to it, how you've been responding to it. Just anything you're surprised by.

NF: Yeah. One: I'm kind of surprised by how everybody is with change, even though again, I'm not best with online platforms. There are lots of people like me and we're actually doing really well and striving. It's really great to see how we can kind of work through it and create a secondary plan, like a contingency plan per se, independently and as a community. The university has also been overwhelmingly supportive and understanding trying to get us seniors involved in graduation through an online platform and if that didn't work, they're offering us to come to others [?]. So, it's literally sweet of them to do that. From an organizational standpoint, it makes me really happy to see that people are also becoming more comfortable with online platforms especially with use of like Zoom, webinars, this. So, it's really great that they're able to do that and become more comfortable with using them because we had our last retreat for SHRM [Society for Human Resource Management], our Society for Human Resource Management, and it went really well. And that was over a four-hour meeting [laughter]. So, we've done really well with that and it's really great to see an overwhelming support. And if it does happen to be that like classes ever have to go online like this again, I don't think organizations will suffer as bad as we thought in the beginning.

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MG: Mhm. Everybody seems really accommodating, which is super helpful in a time like this. What are you doing to remain connected to friends and loved ones?

NF: Ooh. Well, I facetime frequently [laughter]. My friends and I had a group Zoom call and we did that for graduation to cheer each other on as our names got played and then we also did it just to hang out and have a girls' night. So, I guess using those online platforms and connecting is really important.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. What kind of things have you done to stay healthy or to protect your mental health?

NF: Yeah, so I go on walks frequently; once a day, minimum of three miles [laughter].

MG: [Unclear].

NF: So I can clear my head. I just recently moved and I'm starting a job like on June first, so I guess that keeps me preoccupied. [Jazz hands] I got a cat [laughter], therapy cat. I guess that's great [laughter].

MG: Ooh.

NF: Animal support is really great and loving and so I'm very happy with everything. I guess its kind of slowly – my life took a turn but it's not for the worst.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. What has been challenging about learning or keeping in touch online and what has worked well?

NF: I'm not a big fan of when professors use Zoom or different platforms. I like when they use the same one on CONNECT [Campus engagement platform] – not CONNECT, Canvas [Learning Management System], the Canvas classroom. I really like that one because it's just right on there and you don't have to go searching for it. I also like, again, having just one standard platform for all professors because it's been quite difficult with that. But yeah, it's just been difficult getting used to the platform and creating your own schedule. I mean, I have to create a manual planner and I've gotten through it but I know a lot of my friends, especially as seniors, it was really hard to keep going without taking that credit or no credit because they're like "why does it matter?" And for me, that saddens me because an education is supposed to be something that really benefits you and helps you to like get to the next stage in life.

MG: Yeah.

NF: And I noticed that with a lot of people because they were all like becoming discouraged due to the online platform. So, yeah that's I guess a negative.

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MG: Yeah, it [unclear]. A lot of people I've talked to, like what is the point in all of this, but it sounds like you had a good plan going in. Have there been any silver linings for you in the crisis?

NF: I guess so. So the one major thing for me is my goal was to hit Scholar Athlete [Graduating athletes with a cumulative GPA of 3.50 and above] because I was at like a 3.4 something and I was so close, I think it was like a 3.46 and I really wanted to hit a 3.5 and I used that as my like motivation and because everything was closed, I couldn't work, I couldn't do anything. I was

able to focus on my education [laughter] and I got Scholar Athlete [arm cheering]. So, I guess that's positive [laughter]. So, thank you.

00:08:45.000

MG: Congratulations.

NF: Thank you [head nod].

MG: What have you done to stay busy? Have you taken up any new hobbies or gone back to things you haven't had time for?

NF: Well, I started diamond painting, which is where you take these little beads and you place them and that's really therapeutic. I started playing Animal Crossing, so I've been playing video games I guess. I started communicating more with friends which is really good because as much as I loved living in a house with my girls, it also – you know when you're tired, you've had a long day, you like to just sit in your room normally or sit in the communal area and do your homework, but now it's like we're talking more than ever and that's really positive. I think it really built a foundation for me of what I want in my life because I was able to kind of create my next steps and that's creating little goals so I can have a true succession plan and hopefully feel good completing them.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. What are some of the things you worry about how people are responding or about what the effects might be? Are there any things that you are hopeful about?

NF: So for me, I took over a position with Target as an Executive Team Lead in Minnesota and the numbers are rising here, so that freaks me out because I start on the first and I'm going to be working with people on floor for my whole day and that's an eight hour plus shift. So, I'm worried about that and I'm worried about people not wearing protection because we wear masks for the protection of others, not yourself. So, it's like, I wish I see more people care about that. And I also – it hurts me knowing that everything is starting to open, and people are just rushing into the bars and like going to hang out with people when if not, maybe not you that you could be affecting but somebody that's older and could really get sick. And it just – I don't know, it rubs me the wrong way. I know people have different feelings about it and I respect all opinions, but for me personally, it just worries me of how bad it could get because I know they're saying there could be another peak because of everything opening again. And I really just, I – a life is a life. And it shouldn't be like "oh, that's just a number, it's not so bad." That's a number because that's a family member and it might not affect you, but it affects someone else. So, yeah, it's just discouraging.

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MG: Yeah, it is. I mean, I work at a gas station so like I completely relate. It can be really scary. What do you think will change after the pandemic is over if anything?

NF: Well, I know for a fact retail will not be the same. And I'm not just saying that because it's my major, I'm saying that because a lot of places are going bankrupt and won't come back again

because they're not getting bought out. And then I think our economy is not going to do so hot. I think that a lot of people are not going to focus on their emotional or mental health and that's really important and that they should. I think that people should try and look at it with a positive light. There's always a silver lining, maybe bad now but it will get better and we're in it together as they always say. And like we are a Blue Devil [University mascot] family. There's always support systems around. And not being afraid of technology. I think that's going to be a huge thing where people are going to start focusing on that and using the platforms more educationally and in other aspects. A lot of work environments aren't actually going to go back. Like for example, my boyfriend who works for the Marshfield Clinic, they're even asking through surveys with their tech team if people want to work from home, if they want to work there, and how they're going to start [?] creating a plan based off of that because they need a setup [?] to work the same wherever they are. So.

MG: Mmhm.

NF: It can come at a cost; I mean it's a positive to work from home so I see that happening too.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. [Unclear] thinking about being work from home permanently. What kinds of technology are you using to communicate with others and stay busy and entertained?

NF: Well, my video game consoles, my computer, my iPhone, and that's about it. We plugged the computer into the TV when we're doing Zoom calls so I can see everybody big and like we can do that as a family, but that's about it.

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MG: Nice. What items or services have you had a harder time purchasing or obtaining?

NF: Ooh [long pause], I guess cleaning products obviously are number one [cat meowing]. I'm really glad that I already had those prepared before the move as well as toilet paper. I had to send some to my parents [laughter]. Yeah, so they're in Milwaukee, so I'm hoping they can find that more regularly now. I guess certain foods too because people go out and buy the non-perishable and that's a problem – I mean now it's hard to find like rice and beans. I'm a vegetarian so it's very difficult [fist shaking] to find my lentils [laughter] but it's okay, we're getting through.

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MG: [Laughter]. How does news coverage you see differ from what you've personally seen or experienced?

NF: Globally, it aligns more with how I feel, nationally, it does not. I think it's very – without getting political, I just don't really appreciate how things are going on and it hurts to see it. And what I see personally, I see everything between the lines. You've got people that support the cause completely and that respect others and are like "I'm going to keep my distance from you, at least until I feel comfortable." And then you've got others that don't even consider this real, that think it's a hoax. And then again, there's all these people dying that may have had impact on the world or may not have in like the grand scheme of things. They could have just been a

person like myself or they could have been a celebrity but I feel – until it's somebody that's related to them, they aren't as impacted as they should be. So, I guess it's really both ends of the scale.

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MG: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. What are things you miss most about campus and the [?] Menomonie [Menomonie, Wisconsin] community?

NF: I miss the way back on campus and seeing everybody and saying “hi.” It sounds so dumb but just walking around and seeing friends, faculty, and staff wave at you, it means so much and not having that really stinks. I also really miss being able to walk around the community and just go shopping at the boutique, get coffee at the Cat Café or Marions, and just like support their economy there. And it really also is disheartening to think that too, how like, because graduation was canceled and because all of these big events where they make a lot of money for all of these like boutiques and other places like Lucette's [Lucette Brewing Company], they [?] don't get that money and now hotels. And now I feel really bad. Yeah, I miss everything about it. There's just this Stout positive vibe and everybody is there to just learn and grow. It may be professionally or emotionally and it's just hard to not be around it.

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MG: Yeah, it is, especially in the springtime. There's just a vibe about campus that we're missing right now. If you were granted a wish for twenty-four hours, with no chance for infection, how would you spend it?

NF: You know, I would assume most people that are seniors would say that they would get to graduate but walking the stage doesn't mean much in the grand scheme of things. There's so many other things that are way worse like some people can't get married right now, there's other things that I'm thinking about than walking the stage. Yeah, it stinks but it's not the end of the world and it's going to be okay. It doesn't discredit my work, it doesn't discredit my colleagues, or my friends – it's just different. I guess my wish then based off of that would be that everything would just disappear. That this COVID would go away and that people would be healthy. That they would find a like vaccine and that people would stop dying because again, a life is a life and it just hurts me so much to know that there's multiple families that have had to have this.

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MG: Mhm. Yeah, absolutely. I think a lot of people would want that too. What else would you like to share about your experiences during this epidemic?

NF: I guess that some professors are a lot more keen to change than others. And a lot of them have a drive to keep the student successes as priority and will make accommodations or figure something out, may that be changing the timeline of when things are due or not having a set class time because everybody's days are different now. Whereas others are very set in their ways and very “this is my class time, you need to be here for that” even if students now have to work because they're at home or it's just a completely different life. So, I think if this does continue in the future or ever happens again, that it should be a one-size-fits-all, this is how you're going to run classes, so students don't get as confused. As a senior, it wasn't as bad because you go

through these trials and tribulations between every year to realize how you can get the perfect grade and how you can communicate, but my heart also goes out to those Freshmen that would've been confused not knowing what to do or just gave up because they're like "this isn't worth my time." And not only is that a loss of Stout's money, but that's a loss of money for Student Life. So I really think that it's important for them to create a smooth transition, create this whole platform and have a really strong Backyard Bash [introduction to student organizations event], if they do have that in like an online platform or in-person, they just really need to recreate Stout life so that these Freshmen aren't as scared.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. That'd be great for like morale because like a big part of college is like having – knowing that you can do it and having a strong community is a great way to do that. So, one last question. Can you recommend anyone else from the Stout community who we should approach for an interview?

NF: Ooh. I'm sure you've already [unclear] [sharing] the name of candidates], maybe?

Commented [WD1]: 21:06

MG: I have not heard anything about [candidate name]. Could you spell that name for me though?

NF: So it'll be [candidate name] and then [spells candidate name].

MG: [Clarifying candidate spelling].

NF: [Clarifying candidate spelling].

MG: All right.

NF: Yeah, she would be awesome. She works with Her Campus [affiliate student organization] and a couple other things too so I'm sure she's got an opinion [laughter].

MG: And she [unclear] campus?

NF: Hm?

MG: What does she do?

NF: Oh, she works for Her Campus.

MG: Oh, Her Campus. Okay. All right, thank you so much.

NF: No, thank you.

MG: Yeah, your interview was super helpful.

NF: Ohh, I'm glad it meant something. I just felt if they needed somebody to talk to, I'm always here so, thanks for considering [laughter] me.

MG: Absolutely, it's been great, especially to hear from a student perspective.

NF: Aww, thank you.

MG: Have a good day, stay safe and healthy.

NF: Aww, you too, thank you so much and have a great day.

MG: Thanks, you too. Bye.

NF: Bye [waving].

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END