

Sophie Gelhar COVID-19 Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Meagan Ginnaty-Moore

June 18, 2020

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

Sophie Gelhar: The first time I remember hearing about it – I think it was right at the start of the new year. It was more of something I heard happening in China. I didn't think, I guess there was a part of me that thought it might affect me at some point, but I guess I didn't really see it as being real. I thought it was maybe – I thought it of as kind of being like the Swine Flu, honestly, where it was something that we would all be concerned about, and it wouldn't really touch me.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. Based on everything that's happened, what might you say to your past self?

SG: [Laughter] Be a lot more concerned. This – I mean, [sigh] it's a lot of, [short pause] you know [laughter]. What I would say? Just don't, you know, be more aware of things because you think, you know, that they can't touch you. There's kind of this idea that, you know, "oh, well it won't affect me, it won't touch me." And this became real, and I guess I would say don't shut this one out [?], this is serious, I guess.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. What have been the biggest changes that you've had to deal with?

SG: Well, I was actually on an internship. I was in Washington D.C. for this fall semester. And I am actually currently back in Green Bay [Green Bay, Wisconsin] because I – I mean, I'm still technically actually on my internship because they sent me home with a government – oh, it was for NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration], I should probably clarify where I was interning. They sent me home with a government issued laptop and everything and so it cut – in a way it cut my internship short, and it sent me, I was looking at getting it extended in the summer anyway and that ended up happening, so I would be in D.C. right now if it hadn't been for this.

MG: Yeah, definitely. That is a pretty big change, but congratulations on getting your internship extended. That's awesome.

SG: Thank you, thank you. Yeah, no I mean it – my circumstances, the way that everything happened, I was in a better position than most people when this hit, so I have comfort in that.

00:03:38.000

MG: Mhmm, definitely. Are you surprised by anything about how people have responded or even how life has changed?

SG: Well, I mean based on how everything is now because at first there was a coming together sort of a – there was a realization of the concerns and everything like that and I mean if we're talking about right now, people are getting, you know, people are getting slapped across the face for wearing masks. It's – that is the part that has been a complete shock to me is that, you know, we went from being united in a lot of ways. And obviously if you add the, you know, the Black Lives Matter thing to it that is another element of – that is something else completely that once was thrown into the mix just, you know. But it shocked me – it shocked me how united we became and now it's shocking me how divided we're becoming, I guess.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. I mean, nobody could have predicted everything that is going on, so it's definitely surprising.

SG: Oh, yeah.

MG: What are you doing to remain connected to friends and loved ones?

SG: Well, I was kind of – I come from a large family- and being sent back home was a good way to keep socially connected to everybody. Obviously because now I'm in, I mean I'm in a house with the rest of them, but I do have a couple of siblings that are out in the world, you know, and everything like that. My brother is in Ohio and my sister is in Madison and we communicate regularly. I actually have, I have a couple of people I kind of talked with on and off before this. And now just every once in a while, one of us will send a message to each other saying "are you okay? How's everything going? Are you, you know, hanging in there?" It's really – It's changed my perspective on socializing with people because, you know, I've always kind of been a social person but this – I go out of my way to socialize with people because I'm a lot more aware of the people in my life.

00:06:28.000

MG: Yeah, definitely. It's good that you're able to do that.

SG: Absolutely.

MG: What kinds of things have you done to stay healthy or to protect your mental health?

SG: [Laughter] I've been taking my parent's dog on a walk regularly with my dog, Penny, as kind of as a way to get out of the house and to exercise a little bit. The mental health thing has been a bit more difficult. I'm somebody who – I've had counselors on pretty much a regular basis. And now it's kind of one of those situations, it's a different situation and I mean, given the fact that I'm not usually home. I haven't really had a, you know, a mental health counselor. They do have a – some chat groups. There's a particular group I joined, I think it's called like Clans [?] or something like that where it's a bunch of groups because I have – I struggle with anxiety

and depression. And this has kind of exacerbated that. Just kind of like support groups online. I've been seeking those out. Yeah, they recently opened the gym near me and they opened up the pool and I've been doing that regularly and everything. It's been – I laugh because if you had asked me that probably a month ago, I probably wouldn't have an answer because I was not coping well physically or mentally, so.

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MG: Yeah, well I'm glad that you have found a good coping system now. What has been challenging about learning or keeping in touch online? Has anything worked well?

SG: Well, there is an element of – because that's – you know before this I wasn't always the most social person. I wasn't the type of person that would go out and socialize all that much. I have noticed ever since this happened, there's been – it's different, you know, I guess I never realized how much the casual conversation I would have with people everywhere kind of meant to me. I mean obviously, you've got the aspect of you try to chat with people online, you try to Skype with them, and stuff with the internet gets weird and they break up. It doesn't feel as – it's like mentally you know that something is not the same, so it doesn't scratch the right – the same itch socially that you think it would. Texting is just – I'm kind of, I'm somebody, I rely on – I'm aware of people's emotions when I'm talking with them. And obviously, text is completely emotionless [laugh] so that's – it's different. I guess it's taught me that I really value in person socialization a lot more than I kind of was aware of before this.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. I mean, not being able to be around people has definitely made me realize how many little mini conversations I have during the day. So yeah, it can [unclear]. You notice it's gone; you notice it.

SG: [Laughter] Yeah.

MG: Have there been any silver linings for you during the crisis?

SG: It has been a time for reflection, I guess. Yeah, if we're going to talk about a silver lining in all of this, it has – talking about the socialization thing, it's made me realize how much I value that and how much I need – I'm a much more social person than I thought. I'm pretty introverted but I didn't realize how much I miss that. So, I've been doing a lot of reflecting and personal inventorying and all that and self-discovery type stuff mostly because what else is there to do? And I've come to a lot of realizations about aspects of myself I've been kind of taking personal inventory and everything I guess, and I have there were things that I wanted to do before – the type of stuff where it's like “oh yeah, no. At some point, I should do this.” And you always have that ability to do it but you just kind of put it off and now that – I always wanted to go exploring because Stout [University of Wisconsin-Stout], UW-Stout, is right near Minneapolis [Minneapolis, Minnesota] and I always wanted to go exploring through Minneapolis and I was always like “oh, next weekend” or “yeah, we'll do that” and then suddenly that's kind of taken away from me. And it's like once I have that ability to – I've been making a lot of plans and I have a lot of things that I want to try because it's – I didn't realize how much – how weird it would be to like “oh, I literally can't do that.” Because that was one of the big things I did when

I was in D.C. is I went and visited the Smithsonian's a lot and having that taken away, I mean, because I realized how much I liked kind of that exploring. So, I guess the one thing is I've – it's made me think a lot of about myself and things that I want to do and who I want to be, and I have a lot of plans for when everything opens back up.

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MG: That's great. I'm – it's good that you are able to take the time to think about that stuff. 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?

SG: [Laughter] I've been doing a lot of reading. I have a lot of [unclear] type of books that I haven't been reading. Like I said, the gym near me recently opened and I've been swimming pretty consistently, that's something to keep me busy. It's a lot of different things that I always kind of partially did. I have a computer that I built that I've been going through a lot more and tweaking it and adding new components to it and everything. So, I guess I haven't really picked up any new hobbies so much as kind of developed appreciations for all of the projects that I kind of had half done and I'm actually beginning to complete them. Luckily for me, I do have my job as well that I'm currently doing. So that, obviously, it's online and there are technical issues but that being able to do my job has kept me busy too.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. So, what are some of the things that worry you about how people are responding or what the effects might be? Oh, I'm sorry, I already asked that question.

SG: [Small laughter].

MG: No, I'm sorry, I didn't. Sorry, brain fart [laughter].

SG: Yeah, I was – [unclear] I think it's close to another, but it is different.

MG: Yeah, sorry.

SG: No worries.

MG: What are some of the things that worry you about how people are responding [unclear] the effects might be?

SG: Well, I mean, the area that I've been in – the area that I came from in D.C., has been hit hard and they are very much in the midst of it, but coming here – it's interesting. It's almost like I escaped D.C. right around the time that things got bad, and I've been in an area in Green Bay – we've kind of been touched by it but nothing really close to me. Recently, just today even, my sister works at a restaurant, and we just found out that one of her coworkers tested positive and the restaurant – I wouldn't know about this if she hadn't told me – the restaurant is not ordering tests for everybody. And it's one of those things, it's – I feel like there's kind of this – and I get because we're all tired, we're all very tired of being locked away. And I get it but I'm afraid that, like I said, especially in this area where it didn't hit very hard, so a lot of people have this idea

that “was it ever even really real” or it didn’t really become that real for them. I, unfortunately, have family in Oregon that hit hard, like I said, and I still have people who work in D.C. who – I mean it’s just been – I’m afraid, afraid that things are going to get bad here. And one of the things and one of the reasons we went into quarantine, that wasn’t so much to prevent people from getting sick but to flatten that curve. I fear that, I don’t know what the hospital [unclear] – hospitals around here are prepared, but you can only take so many patients. I’m afraid this is going to lead to another outbreak and then it’s just going to get bad again, so.

00:18:07.000

MG: Definitely, it can be really scary when things like that happen, especially to family members.

SG: Exactly.

MG: But is there anything that you’re hopeful about?

SG: I am hopeful that – I hope that this – a while ago I was a bit more hopeful because there was kind of this, people were kind of beginning to believe a bit – there’s been kind of a rash of science denialism and medical denialism lately. And I felt like this kind of got people kind of stop and listen to the experts and maybe take these things more seriously. Unfortunately, it seems like we’re kind of having a back tracking of that, but I do hope that this does help people realizing – and it’s kind of like the anti-vaccine epidemic, kind of help people realize, especially since there has been places hit pretty hard that this is something that is serious and to not reject the evidence and medical stuff so much. I’m hopeful for that. I’m hopeful that we’ll learn to be more mindful of sanitation and everything like that so that if anything like this were to come back and, unfortunately, in some point in history, there will be something like this when it comes up. I’m hopeful that things will be enacted in such a way that if it does happen again, if something like this happens again, we’ll be better at containing it. I don’t have complete faith that we’ll be completely the best at it, I hope that we’ll be better at containing it at least.

MG: Yeah, absolutely. Hopefully for the next pandemic, we’ll be able to respond to it a little better.

SG: Hopefully we’ll have time before that’ll be far into the future.

MG: [Laughter] Oh yeah, hopefully it happens way, way, way, way, way into the future [laughter].

SG: [Laughter].

MG: You never know.

SG: Yeah, yeah. Who would have guessed this one for it [?]?

00:20:51.000

MG: Yeah, yeah. But what do you think will change after the pandemic is over if anything?

SG: Hold on one second, I'm getting something saying they need to refresh my screen. Hold on one second [34 second pause]. Are you still there? Hello?

MG: Hi, sorry.

SG: Oh, great. Sorry about that, technical issue. Once again, kind of a – one of the quirks of socializing during this.

MG: Yeah.

SG: Could you ask that question again?

00:22:05.000

MG: Yeah, of course, no problem. What do you think will change after the pandemic is over if anything?

SG: Okay, I think the way that – I think we're going to sanitize things a bit better. I think we're going to focus on how clean everything is. Because I mean, one of the big outbreak points in my area was a meat packing plant. I think people are going to be a bit more focused on keeping things cleaner and a little bit more mindful of it because in a lot of ways, these extra precautions really don't, aren't that much effort. And I think especially after all of this, we'll kind of all be frightened, we'll just kind of be doing it to make ourselves feel better and then it'll just kind of become, it'll kind of become natural. I think that's kind of one of the things I could see coming out of this. I can't really guess about anything else. I think just keeping things cleaner is the one thing that I see happening.

00:23:38.000

MG: I think people will be a lot more conscientious of hygiening and sanitizing and all that stuff too.

SG: Absolutely.

MG: So, what kind of technology are you using to communicate with others, to stay busy, or to keep yourself entertained?

SG: I've been using – well, for my work, I've been using Microsoft Teams. I've been doing a lot of texting. I've been doing some Skype. Zoom, not so much. Yeah, just a lot of texting, messaging apps, different chat websites, and everything like that.

00:24:31.000

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

SG: Well, and things have become better. There was a while there where getting your hands on hand sanitizer was – there was a couple of points where there was a rush. There was a while where soup was difficult to get your hands on. Ramen was difficult to get your hands on. Just a

lot of – canned soup – just a lot of those non-perishables. They had to start – I remember when those signs first went up in the grocery store saying “limit four per shopping trip” or something like that because people were just coming in and just buying the lot. Things have become better now. Now, they’re keeping up with demand, especially when it comes to hand sanitizer, a lot of companies really stepped up and there’s hand sanitizer everywhere. But yeah, that was one of the big ones for a while there, it was very difficult to get hand sanitizer.

00:26:04.000

MG: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I know me and my roommates have had a hard time getting that stuff too.

SG: Right [laughter].

MG: So, how does news coverage you see differ from what you’ve seen or personally experienced?

SG: Well, it’s one of those things where a lot of news stories now, ones that seem to not necessarily – I mean obviously this is a big enough thing where it does impact everything. Pretty much all the news coverage I’ve seen, any sort of story always incorporates how COVID is affecting to some degree. And it’s interesting. I know at some point in the future, that’ll be a good way kind of denoting what time period that article was written in. But everything, the simplest thing, the simplest article, something about somebody’s pet or something like that – there is for major news stories there’s usually something that denotes how COVID-19 affected this and how much of an impact it has had on this. And it’s, everything has been touched by that I guess, so every news story – any news story worth anything usually has some commentary on how COVID-19 affects whatever they are talking about.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. It seems like you can’t really look at the news without seeing something –

SG: Yeah, you really can’t [laughter].

MG: – about COVID. Yeah, I mean even with things that seem completely unrelated, it’s there.

SG: Absolutely, yeah.

MG: So, what are the things you miss most about campus and the Menomonie [Menomonie, Wisconsin] community?

SG: I miss because – as I mentioned before, I’m an introverted person, so I wasn’t always the most social but I miss even just kind of walking around seeing people interacting; sitting in a common area and seeing people walk by and kind of living their lives and all that. I guess I didn’t realize how much I kind of observe people and everything around me. But I do – I miss that kind of community and then sometimes I would see someone I know and have a chat with them. I miss that community a lot and that’s kind of one of those things I fear about going back to school is I’m afraid it’s not going to be the same. At the very least for the fall, it’s going to be

different. Like I already have one class move online and I'm afraid things aren't going to be as easy and as sociable and as – it's not going to be the same is what I fear.

MG: Yeah, definitely. It isn't going to be the same. It will definitely be an experience in the fall to be back on campus.

SG: I look forward to when we reach that new normal type of thing, where everybody is – it'll be different, but we'll be comfortable again. I just don't know how long that'll take.

00:30:08.000

MG: Yeah, definitely. So, if you were granted a wish for twenty-four hours, with no chance for infection, how would you spend it?

SG: When you say wish, do you mean how would I spend a day or do I get to like [short pause] – yeah, could you clarify that a little bit? Like because my first thought is do I make it – can I make it go away even for twenty-four hours or are we talking just what – if I had the ability to be immune for twenty-four hours?

MG: Just if you were able to immune for twenty-four hours and like all the people you might come in contact with, they wouldn't get infected that day. Like what would you do with that day?

SG: I would go swimming in a public pool, I would go to a national park – a couple national parks – I would go to a bar [laughter] – I'm over twenty-one so I'm allowed to say that. I would go to public places where I could see people. If I really booked it, I could make it back to D.C. and hit up some of the Smithsonian's' [laughter]. But yeah, I would just go out and enjoy things.

00:31:52.000

MG: Yeah, definitely. I agree, especially with the Smithsonian part.

SG: Oh.

MG: Some of my favorite museums are in the Smithsonian.

SG: Oh [laughter].

MG: So, I get it [laughter].

SG: Yeah.

00:32:06.000

MG: Yeah, so what else would you like to share about your experiences during this epidemic?

SG: I mean it's been – I guess the one experience that has been – it's an experience where it's like “did it have to happen now?” And I lost a – I lost a grandparent. My grandfather died – not of COVID but of liver cancer a couple, probably like a month ago. He'd been kind of sick before

this and I guess I didn't kind of realize until it just kind of hit him pretty fast. And this is the first of my grandparents that I've lost. I wasn't particularly close to him or that side of the family but just kind of seeing how it impacted plans because I mean this is the first parent my dad has lost, and he was close to his father. In any other circumstance, when things started getting bad, my dad would have hopped on a plane, and he would've gone there, and he would have been. And I might have joined him if I had the ability to and he hasn't been able to do that. He was able to Skype in for my grandfather's Last Rights, so he was able to talk to my grandfather before he passed away but it's one of those – it's a situation where my father is planning on leaving this weekend. He's going to drive with my brother to Oregon to kind of reconnect with his brothers and to kind of put the house in order and everything. Unfortunately, there's been a spike so he might not be able to do that but it has – I've seen the – and it's not to say by any means that I mean a lot of people have experienced this grave loss of somebody during everything that's happened and they haven't been able to put them to rest. I mean, they had a limit on many people could show up at funerals and it made sense but it was absolutely just horrible but it had to be that way because that's something – I didn't realize how much – how important I thought that was until that stopped being something that people were able to do. But that particular experience of losing my grandfather it impacted a lot of my self-reflection during all of this. But it was just – I mean, like I said, it's been a while since there was major loss in my family, so I can't really recall how we dealt with it then the last time, but I know it was nothing like this. This has – this changed the mourning process a lot and I guess, yeah I guess if there's something I can say – and I know this is something that's in a lot of people's minds anyway, but as soon as you're able to, go be with your – the people in your family and the people that you love and let them know that you care. But yeah, just something.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. I'm very sorry for your loss and it's really hard when you can't say goodbye the way that you want to or need to.

SG: Right.

MG: But hopefully, one day soon, you'll be able to go and say your proper goodbyes.

SG: Yeah, they are already making plans. Luckily, my grandfather was the type of guy where he – he made a lot of plans. He had a lot of things set up. He knew how things wanted [?] to be so he – as far as memorial service that goes, it'll be what he wants. That's the comforting part of it. He was mentally there at the end, and he knew what he wanted, so that helps.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. So last question. Can you recommend anyone else from the Stout community who we should approach for an interview?

SG: [Unclear] I have somebody who I have actually been in kind of contact with. Her name is [shares potential candidate name]. She – I'm actually looking to become roommates with her once this is all done. We're kind of – she's one of the friends I've come in contact with. She's had a very interesting experience, especially since it's kind of tied into the Black Lives Matter

movement in a lot of ways. So, if she – I don't know if she would be willing to talk but if she was, I'm sure it'd be very interesting to listen to.

MG: Yeah, definitely. Could you spell her name for me please?

SG: [Spells potential candidate name].

MG: Okay, great. Thank you so much.

SG: Yeah, absolutely.

MG: Yeah. Your time and your interview has been super helpful, so I really appreciate it.

SG: Well, I appreciate – once I heard about this project, I thought it was really cool opportunity because this is – I mean, this is something that's going to be archived, obviously. And it's – I'll be interested to see – what kind of – is there going to be like a website that's put up or are these chats just going to go into storage or something, I guess.

MG: Yeah, so like once all the interviews are collected, they'll be compiled, and transcripts will be made, and they'll all be in the Stout Archives. So, you can like go to their website and search for these interviews.

SG: Okay, I will – I'll be looking forward to seeing that because I'm sure there's – I mean, we all kind of experience this in a different way, so I'll be interested to see that.

MG: Yeah, absolutely. But, again, thank you for your time and for talking with me today. I really appreciate it.

SG: Thank you for inviting me. I appreciate it.

MG: Stay safe, have a good day.

SG: Yeah, you too. Bye.

MG: Bye.

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END