

Matthew Gunderson COVID-19 Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Meagan Ginnaty-Moore

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Meagan Ginnaty-Moore: When do you first remember hearing about COVID-19 and what did you think about how it might affect you?

Matthew Gunderson: So, I remember it was really back in like December when kind of like the early panic started to set in I know in among a lot of people. And me being a president of one of the largest clubs on campus that has events for three hundred people, I knew that if it did come to America, those events would be basically deleted instantly. So, our last major event – because we would have had an event in April, but of it happening, you know, the lockdown and stuff starting in March, we had our last big event in February and I kind of pulled everyone aside saying “hey, this could be our last event.” But no one wanted to admit it and at that time it felt very unlikely but then by the time we hit March, everything kind of collapsed. So, I guess that kind of answers it.

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

MG: That [long pause with a puff of air] – I don’t know, just something along the lines of that this is probably the first time in my – your life, talking to my past self, that you’re actually going to be living in what will eventually be considered history in that I think it’s a lot of importance behind adjusting to the idea that – of not thinking that it’s not going to happen to me. I have definitely put aside a lot of things to make sure that I don’t get sick and, obviously, there’s a lot of states intentionally done that, but it’s hard to kind of grasp that idea that, you know, it’s going to happen to you, which is what a lot of people have sort of been thinking about it in general too.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. So, what have been the biggest changes you’ve had to deal with?

MG: At the time where the lockdowns and things started happening, I was – so I was a senior working on my very final semester. So, there is kind of like three major things I guess that kind of happened that I had to rapidly adjust to. The first one was I was taking my capstone class. So, I was a double major in Psychology and Business Administration. My business director, program director, let me use my Psychology capstone as my business capstone, so it was kind of like my last major class. And so for Psychology we had to do a research experiment where we get people into the psychology lab and we have experimental-control group, run tests, collect the data, and then analyze the data. Of course, with the change to the online delivery, an experiment was not

going to be possible anymore and it was both difficult for my professor to rapidly change the course because it's meant to be like apply everything you learn, very hands off for the professor. And then he had to change the content of the class from "hey you're doing your own experiment" to "okay, now we're doing a hypothetical, you know, survey online type thing." And so that was like a radical change that was directly result of it. The next thing was I was working part-time for Stout's [University of Wisconsin-Stout] new upcoming Esports program. And so, once all this happened, I had to shift from going into an office in the Merle Price Commons everyday to working from home, which was an interesting change for both me and many other people, obviously. And one of the major things is, similar to traditional sports, Esports prospective athletes have to try out for the team. And so, we had to do all of our try outs and recruitment online which made it more difficult, and we spent over a year setting up – getting all of the things in place to have an in-person try out because it would just be like an exciting thing for the campus. And so, while we weren't able to do that, we were still able to complete the try outs online. It was just not as exciting as it could have been but it still was, you know, able to take place with everyone being safe and that's kind of what mattered about it. The third thing then was me being president of PONG, [People's Organization of Network Gaming] which is the big LAN [Local Area Network] party organization. And so, we actually had a miniature event on the weekend of March sixth to March eighth I believe. And that was, we didn't know it at the time, but then exactly one week later, was the beginning of online delivery and the Stay-At-Home order in Wisconsin. So, we kind of like – I want to say that we saw it coming but I don't think we really did because I feel like a lot of us were kind of saying "give it a month and then we can have the final party" because then that was the end of my time as president of the org [organization] which had ran for two years and they kind of just like slapped everyone in the face. And so, those were three kind of just like major shifts that I had to deal with just as a student and then obviously there were a lot of other, you know, smaller things like wearing masks, you know, not going to the gym, and like a lot of just things like that too.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. All of those sound like some pretty big changes to adjust to pretty quickly. Are you surprised by anything about how people have responded or about how life has changed?

MG: How political do you want me to get [laughter]?

MGM: You can get as political as you want. This is all about what your experience has been.

MG: Okay. So I guess the thing that surprises me the most is how much people are protesting or were – it's a little bit shifted now because states have reopened now and what not. Like in May especially, like how many protests erupted over a lockdown being a violation of like civil rights. And so, I thought it was just very hypocritical, or kind of silly, to protesting it saying it's a violation of, you know, freedom and what not, to do something like this despite it being a very serious pandemic and of course, now that states have reopened a bit, we can see that the United States was not ready to reopen yet. And so, like that's I guess what's kind of throwing me off a little – I guess it didn't really surprise me that much but, you know, it's definitely kind of a disappointing thing to see. I guess kind of the capstone that is just the surprising factor is how America doesn't want to take it very seriously.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. Especially in America, we're very eager to get back to normal, even if it comes at the expense of safety. So, what are you doing to remain connected to friends and loved ones?

MG: So, I'm back home with my parents because, I mean, you can't really find a job right now [laughter]. But I'm waiting to start my master's degree at a different institution and the way I'm able – I'm still able to stay connected through social media and so I've started to get a little bit more active on Facebook and, you know, things like Skype and using like the – kind of like a social media platform, a lot of people who play video games use Discord. So like, I'm able to keep in touch with both the Esports program that I worked for as well as all the former people that I was in with PONG because now they've kind of have me on as like in advisory role which has been really nice. And then I've also been able to be in touch with the master's program people that I'd be joining with through things like Zoom and things like that. So it's really nice that there's a lot of ways to really stay connected still, which it just kind of shows that handling a pandemic in like the information age is probably significantly easier than the limitations that they had in like – even like the AIDS epidemic or like the SARS – not SARS, like the Spanish Flu and all that. So like, I guess that's a really good advantage but it doesn't necessarily make it completely easy.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. I mean, we do – we're very lucky to have things like this to be able to talk to each other but it's not the same as if we were talking face-to-face. So, what kinds of things have you done to stay healthy or to protect your mental health?

MG: So some of the things I've done is I started I wear a mask everywhere I go, which is kind of a really big important thing to me and then I just basically check my temperature every day. I, you know, try to stay healthy. I used to work out a lot and so that's been kind of a big change for me in that I can't just go to a gym and I don't really have gym in my garage either, so I kind of just do whatever I can to stay healthy and I can't run because I tore my hip flexor when I went to Basic [Basic Training] and so – oh actually, that was a year after Basic, never mind. And so I'm just trying to do like whatever I can and so I just do, basically a little cardio each day and then I try to avoid going to places unless I absolutely need to. And then I have like vegetable shakes and different things. And so I'm trying to stay as healthy and fit as I can, while also trying to limit my exposure to people and then I try to do a really good job around where like people in my family go to because both my parents are around the age of sixty, so they are a lot high risk. So it's just important for me to keep track of those types of things.

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MGM: Yeah, absolutely. So what has been challenging about learning or keeping in touch online.

MG: I guess the – like keeping in touch with other people or keeping in touch with like what's going on in like the world?

MGM: More with like other people.

MG: Okay, I can't say that I've had any significant challenges with staying in touch with people. One thing that can kind of be challenging – so even though I'm not a student anymore because of me graduating, I've been keeping up with our Esports program because I just was such – played a huge role in developing it. So I've been keeping in touch with them, but sometimes it's challenging just because of the nature of everything being remote for a lot of people, it's hard to know if someone's like distracted or in the middle of like a Zoom or Teams Meeting. And so some of that's kind of weird in that it's almost natural now that you instant message someone and it's not uncommon that they get back to you hours later because everyone's busy but we don't know what's going on. You can't just walk into – I can't just walk into his office and be like “hey, you know, what about this this,” anymore. Because of just the nature of working from home and what not.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. What has worked well with staying in touch with people or learning online?

MG: I think one thing that has actually worked really well is that a lot more people have adjusted to a more technologically-focused things. So like, for instance, my parents are using like Zoom and a lot of instant messaging things that they've never used before because they have to rely on it now. And so, with instant messaging and platforms like Teams and Discord and Skype and Slack and whatever else, you know. It makes it where everyone is kind of adjusted to it and then it makes getting a hold of each other a lot easier because then everyone just knows how to use it and so I, you know, it's not like the moment the pandemic ends you're either going to stop using it or forget how to use it. So I think ultimately that part is going to be beneficial just because everyone knows how to get a hold of people much more quickly than they did before.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. It'll be interesting to see what the role of technology is going to be after the pandemic is done. Have there been any silver linings for you in the crisis?

MG: [Long pause] Silver linings are tricky. I don't – I don't know. I feel like, I feel like there could have been a silver lining. I feel like crises – I'm going for Social Psychology, which is like studying how people react individually and as groups. And so, one big thing in Social Psychology is there is like a – everyone kind of knows this concept because they show it in like movies and what not, of you know, like the common enemy theme where people unite in the presence of a common enemy. So, like in World War Two, democracy and communism united because of the Nazis and things like that. So, I always thought from the start, it's like “okay, we're going to come together because of Coronavirus being this massive threat that we need to like all work together to solve this problem. And then, it kind of threw me off that that never actually happened. And that, you know, each respective ideology within the nation and within the world kind of had their own reasons for where it came from and how it can be combatted. So you know, have instances of saying “we should sacrifice our grandparents” and you also have instances saying you know, “losing one life from this pandemic is too many.” And so that's kind

of like a reverse silver lining and I guess that's kind of me in a more like disappointed way saying, "I don't think there is one [laughter]."

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MGM: Yeah, it's – it's very interesting to see how polarizing.

MG: Mmhm.

MGM: Everything has been. And yeah, the situation is pretty bleak but yeah, definitely. What have you done to stay busy? Have you taken up any new hobbies or gone back to stuff you haven't had time for?

MG: Yeah, so I try to do a little bit of everything. I'm back home with my parents for the first time in like four years, so they're obviously really excited for me to be here. So, we started watching like the Marvel movies together, which takes up a lot of time. And they're fun so it just gives me something to do. I'm also doing some work from home things, like helping with the Esports program. Just because I have experience with Esports, I joined – got hired by a Esports league on – it's purely online work that I get paid a little a tiny bit for. And it's kind of just like finding – just finding things to do. As far as hobbies go, my favorite hobby is photography, but that requires going to a lot of places, usually a lot of public places, so I've had to kind of put that on the shelf a little bit that I hope to get back to once – I don't want to say once things get back to normal, but once things kind of settle down a little bit because I think it's going to be a long time before we get back to normal. But then I tried – I probably haven't read a book in like two years, so I kind of got back into that a little bit. Again, to so – mainly trying to find ways that I can keep myself busy without potentially endangering myself or other people, which means avoiding public places typically [laughter], but sometimes that's just how it has to be.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. And all those things sound like great ways to keep yourself entertained and take up some time. What are some of the things that worry you about how people are responding or about what the – the effects might be?

MG: I guess one of the things that worries me the most is how people think that taking up a protective measure by like closing businesses and things like that is a threat to American democracy [laughter] and how that some people almost see it as oppression. And then I think that because of the way they feel about that that when places reopened, I feel like a lot of people just because they can finally go out and then a lot of people then contacted Coronavirus. Like and there were a lot of – prior to a lot of the lockdowns, there were people who held, I think they're called [air quotes] "Coronavirus Parties." And there was like a big instance in like California or something like – California or Florida, one of the two, – where a huge group of young adults had this party to like protest how, you know, "haha there's a pandemic, but we're not going to get it." And then like every single person who went to one of these parties got Coronavirus and it's just kind of like, come on people [laughter]. So.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. It can be frustrating to see people not taking it seriously but is there anything that you're hopeful about?

MG: Yeah, I think there's reason to be optimistic and that we can – you know, so we thought that we had a solid basis of people of people saying “hey, Ebola was really bad but we blocked it or cut it off by doing these certain things. And then I remember there was like a TED [Technology, Entertainment, and Design] Talk, I think, where they say that “hey, you know we can use the lessons we learned from Ebola to prevent the next pandemic.” And then if you watch them, you're just like “oh my god” because it's like the exact same things that we didn't do. And I feel like while that didn't work, this significantly and invariably affected far more people. And so I think there's some reason for hope that some actual lasting change can come out of something this big, especially if – I mean like the numbers are still climbing, especially in places like the United States, Brazil, and even China got, is getting another wave right now. And so there's reason to be optimistic for it, but there's also reasons to be kind of skeptical about the optimism with how quickly the United States reopened and everything. But I think there's definitely going to be something there, it's just us I guess hoping that we finally decide to do something about it. It's just hard to do something like that while it's still going on.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. It is hard to stay hopeful but there are good signs, you know. New Zealand was able to go like three weeks, testing forty thousand people with none – none of the tests coming back positive. There are reasons to be hopeful. What do you think will change after the pandemic is over if anything?

MG: I think there will be a lot of change. I don't know if it's – if we're able to kind of see what that will be yet. One phrase that I use – I'm really big into economics and one big thing with economics that I kind of talk to people about is whenever you make a claim about, you know, X presidents' policy is led to Y result and things like that and I always say it's too early to tell. And I think with Coronavirus as well, it's way too early to tell. We don't even know when it's going to end yet but like we're scrambling to find a vaccine but having a vaccine doesn't mean it's going to end because what if the vaccine can only support a million people and there's ten million cases in the world and what if some people react poorly to the vaccine? What if it – there's way too much uncertainty with it, which I guess is another good word to kind of throw into the mix. I feel like at a minimum, I would hope that hospitals – there would be some type of bill that would provide like a minimum requirement of N95 masks or something for hospitals but I also am kind of worried that as – let's say, then there's, let's say COVID-19 pandemic kind of subsides a year from now, I think that as time goes on, the like sticking to this “hey this was really bad, we should prepare for something like this again.” Over time, I think we'll lax on it because it'll be further, more distant in our memory. Kind of like – I'm a history nerd – so kind of like the build up between World War One and World War Two. They set up all these things to prevent another war from happening and they kind of slacked on it, let a guy with a funny mustache get away with thing after thing again, and then boom, a whole new war starts. And that could be what leads to the next pandemic.

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MGM: Yeah, absolutely. What kinds of technology are you using to communicate with others and stay busy or entertained?

MG: For the most part, I just use – so I have a pretty nice computer and so I kind of just use that for all my work. And then like I said, that Discord platform. That’s how all of our – the Stout Esports program keeps in touch with each other and so we’ve been utilizing that pretty heavily. Like this week, we had the STEAM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math] camps at UW-Stout, which are like the science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics for like middle schoolers and high schools – middle schoolers and high schoolers – kind of joined for activities and what not. So we had a lot of kids joining us because video gaming is just a popular thing among teenagers and young adults, and really everyone I guess, but. And then we also use it for the Esports league I work for and then using Teams a lot as well for the kind of back end of the Esports program. And then those are kind of just the main ways I stay connected with people because pretty much, pretty much everyone has some type of social media or online presence now, so it has been really easy to kind of be in touch everyone as needed.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. Things like Facebook and Twitter has definitely prepared us well for being able to talk to each other when we’re far apart but things like Zoom and Teams and stuff have definitely improved that. What items or services have you had a harder time purchasing or obtaining?

MG: Probably the most annoying – or not annoying, but the thing most like biggest change I guess in services is going to the gym. I feel like going – working out and what not has become such a huge trend, especially with people focused on weight loss or even just living a longer/healthier life. And so my gym clothes in March but I already basically the moment I started hearing about the pandemic – or when they – because they declared it a pandemic I believe in January and around that time, I was like “yeah, I should stop going to the gym because it's only a matter of time until it gets here.” And that’s been the most frustrating part because at home, I mean, I have one pair of dumbbells and a medicine ball and at the gym I have squat racks, barbells, machines, and all these things. So that’s been probably the most challenging like direct difference but there’s tons of things everywhere so like you can’t go out to eat, you can’t do most like indoor recreation, but I would say the gyms definitely been the most challenging like one directly for myself.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. It does kind of suck not being able to go to a gym and work out, but yeah. My sister used to workout a lot but then she had to stop so she started using a lot of online gyms and stuff. So how does news coverage you see differ from what you’ve personally seen or experienced?

MG: Sorry, could you say that again?

MGM: Yeah, sorry. What items or services have you had a harder time purchasing or obtaining?

MG: Items or services?

MGM: Oh, sorry. I just asked you that question [laughter].

MG: Yeah.

MGM: How does news coverage you see differ from what you've personally seen or experienced?

MG: I don't know if there's – I feel like in some ways, at least for Coronavirus, has actually been pretty decent. Like I haven't really experienced – like I've never seen a protest of it in person or things like that. And I've been to a lot of stores that say you can only be allowed inside if you have a mask and usually the news stories you kind of see are like the more extreme incidents of a – there's a place in Wisconsin, it was like a daycare or something, that banned all masks inside their building saying that the only people who wore a mask was going to – was about to rob you or something like that. And so, obviously that's not a very common thing, so I kind of see that media likes to focus on things like that because that's what gets the attention of people. And so I feel like, in general, there has been a pretty good consistency on things like that because I feel like, for the most part, it's been things like that or did Coronavirus come from a Chinese lab? Or this another impeachment scam? Or is there a second wave coming and things like that. And so I feel like the coverage of what's been going on has been fairly accurate or it's like “there are x number of cases in Wisconsin” or “why new cases after the bars reopen” or things like that. And so I don't feel like there's much of a mismatch just between – it's just really focus on there's a huge like polarizing diversity on opinions which kind of distracts you from a lot of different things I guess.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. It has been interesting to see news coverage on the pandemic. What are the things you miss most about campus and the Menomonie community?

MG: Things I miss most probably is just being able to do things with people. As much as the LAN parties were a good time to play video games and what not, people don't really come to them to play video games, because you can do that in your own dorm or your own apartment in your own peace and quiet and you can listen to music or whatever. People go to them for the social aspect of them. And like the reason I ran for president of that organization in the first place is because of how much I loved being at them and I would spend less than a quarter of each event actually at my computer because I would try to be like that interactive president who walked around and talking to people and the fact that I missed my or wasn't able to have my last LAN because of the Coronavirus, is in some ways, a little bit devastating because of how much I enjoyed doing them and it being my last one and we had like a really good theme and everything planned for it but then I'm kind of like “well, I'm missing out on a LAN and missing out on walking for my graduation but there are other people who have like legitimately suffered from Coronavirus, so I'm not going to complain too much about it. But it's really just yeah, the social aspect of – I liked going to class and kind of – because I had in my psychology classes, I was basically with the same group of people for like my entire time in the psychology program. And so it was always fun kind of talking to them. And the biggest problem with the lockdown and everything is how abruptly it ended. I believe the lockdown, or the change to online delivery and



canceling of all events for Stout, happened the Friday before Spring Break and so we went from in-person class to in-person events to everything being gone in like a matter of a day. Because then from that time until the end of the semester then it was all online. And so we had like a little online event to make up for it but it wasn't even close to like how fun and interactive the in-person events are in the MSC.

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MGM: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, especially when it's your last semester. Like you want to be able to see everybody and say hi and all that stuff. And when it just abruptly ends like that, it can be a little jarring, disappointing. But if you were granted a wish for twenty-four hours, with no chance for infection, how would you spend it?

MG: If it was just me, I would probably go to a lot of places that would probably be empty and take some really awesome photos [laughter]. If it were collectively, I would be like let's go back in time and have a twenty-four-hour LAN because just being – like I didn't get to say goodbye to so many people which was just so hard about it. And I was like a recipient of the Samuel Wood Leadership Award [Samuel E. Wood Medallion Award] and so our leadership ceremony was all online too so it just – and I never got to walk for graduation, so it didn't even feel like I graduated. And so [laughter], like that would probably – if no one had it, I would probably say “hey, let's actually have our graduation and maybe have a LAN after or something.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. That also sounds like a lot of fun. I play video games a lot so that sounds cool. So, what else would you like to share about your experiences during this epidemic?

MG: I don't know. I just feel like my – like what I tell people is like someone will be like “hey, because of the stupid pandemic I couldn't go do arbitrary thing.” And it's kind of like what I always tell people that sometimes you really just need to shift perspectives. And that there is probably someone who is suffering from this a lot worse than me and there's probably someone a lot worse than the person I'm talking to. In that taking that perspective shift, it's like there's genuine – there's a big difference, and probably a fine line, between genuine suffering and inconvenience. And I feel like a lot of the people protesting are protesting because of how much of an inconvenience it has. If they were protesting because their family was dying, they would definitely not be protesting to reopen the country. And that kind of just shows the schism that exists between both ideologies and also the perspectives of different people on basically the same thing of how we're either taking the side of “but the economy” or “but human life.” And it's like a really weird thing, like weird place for us to be.

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MGM: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I know for me when those reopen protests were happening, I always enjoyed looking at the signs because they were all things that weren't really essential. Like, I want my golf season back. Well, you can already go golfing and be socially distant, what you really want is to go drink at the club house. But yeah, I do like how you phrased that like put a little perspective into it. Think about the bigger picture. But yeah, I just want to thank you for your time today and for talking to me and sharing your story. It's been a huge help.

MG: Yeah, I very much enjoyed being able to share it, so.

MGM: Great, thank you so much. Have a good day and stay safe.

MG: Yeah, you too, thank you.

MGM: Thanks, bye.

MG: Bye.

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END