

Riley Kangas COVID-19 Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Meagan Ginnaty-Moore

June 3, 2020

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

Riley Kangas: It was probably over Winter Break. Around that time was the first time it was covered in the news. And really, initially, I didn't think it was going to impact us. Me personally, you hear about these pandemics all the time such as Ebola and it's just such a far away place that you don't think it would actually get so close to actually impact you but obviously as time went on, that reality became - that became more of reality as people in America, people within Wisconsin's community they started getting COVID. And sort of going on from there, that's where we got into a situation that we got ourselves into.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. What might you say to your past self based on everything that's happened?

RK: I would probably say change some of your assumptions. Going off the [?] sort previous thought of "oh, this isn't going to affect us just because it's such a faraway place." And what's the assumption that things can change very rapidly, and you really got to be on the fly. Be super flexible because you never know when something is going to change and yeah, that's basically it.

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

RK: Probably the biggest change has been the whole social thing. I graduated this semester - the semester that COVID had happened - and with COVID happening there was almost a loss of a [?] social aspect of college, especially during my final months of being in college. There wasn't really a lot of closure that I could have, and I know that's not really - yeah, that's a challenge or a change. Being in my last semester, I was in a capstone course and regularly the group that I was working, and we would go into the lab and try to work on our capstone project. The change that happened so suddenly over Spring Break made us really rapidly how we actually got our capstone project done. Additionally, I was in SSA [Stout Student Association], the Stout Student Association - student government - and this was the first time our organization has experienced working remotely because we used to have forty people - around thirty to forty people - each week meet in a meeting in addition to the other responsibilities we had in person, and in a very short amount of time, we had to move all that virtually.

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

RK: I was sort of surprised how some people didn't take this as seriously as they did. I mean, there would be times I would be walking around in public, and you couldn't even - you see people that weren't wearing masks and I thought that was something that was just very surprising to me about how people react to it. To see people not take it as seriously as it should have been, at times is disappointing because sometimes I think to myself that if people took this a little more seriously, we wouldn't be in the situation we are today. So that's probably the thing I've found most surprising is people, yeah.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. What are you doing to remain connected to friends and loved ones?

RK: A lot of video calling during the school year and stuff. We've [unclear] just talked with friends - had like a social hour, was on Teams [Microsoft Teams] or sometimes we did Snapchat. So, there was a lot of doing that. Our capstone group, we spent hours and hours working together virtually. I guess, one of the nice - one of the good things that came out of all this was sort of going home and spending some more quality time with my parents. My daddy, he still had to work where he was because he's an essential worker but my mom, she was working at home, so I was able to spend some more quality time with her.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. Now is a really good time to keep your family close. What kinds of things have you done to stay healthy or to protect your mental health?

RK: I think, with everything being virtual now, I think it was good for a time to just disconnect from it all because there would be days where I would probably spend eight hours on the computer doing various stuff from schoolwork, doing student government, doing my job, socializing - a lot of times it can get overwhelming so something I found that was helpful for myself was to just take a couple hours when I was overwhelmed or when I found myself being on the computer a lot was actually just disconnect, maybe go out and take a walk, listen to music or something that. Just tried to just disconnect from everything for a few hours.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. It's good to make sure that you have that time away from technology to just kind of regroup. What has been challenging about learning or keeping in touch online? Is there anything that worked well?

RK: So, challenges and things that worked well?

MG: Mhm.

RK: Probably the biggest challenge was how some instructors made the change over to virtual. I mean, I think we had - all students had to be a little understanding that there would be change in

curriculum, but just the way that Stout [University of Wisconsin-Stout] is, being a polytechnic university and all the labs that we have on campus, some of that - those learning experiences we would normally during a semester without COVID, or Pre-COVID, they would have been in-person and you would be digging into those labs. And I think some of the challenges was actually translating those experiences to a virtual environment. And I think it will be a challenge, even moving forward. Probably one of the benefits though was - let's see here. It's sort of hard to talk about a lot of benefits to it all because I really enjoyed being on campus and it was sort of hard to make that transition. But I feel with it all, there was sort of a support system with everybody being virtual and trying to get through this pandemic together, we were able to support each other.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. A lot of people had trouble going online but a lot of people were definitely understanding of the struggle that we all went through. Have there been any silver linings for you in the crisis?

RK: Not really [laughter]. Yeah, that's all I really have to say about that.

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MG: That's all right. I mean, it is a very difficult time. 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?

RK: Well during the semester, I stayed busy with my capstone project. I really found myself that if I really didn't have anything else to do, I would just start working on capstone again because I am a person that likes to stay busy. And I felt that would be the most productive use of my time. But beyond that there would be times where I, once again, would talk with friends on Discord or sort of just talk with them and socialize to help us get through each situation if there was an issue - an issue that we were experiencing we can just all work together to talk this through and let us get through this together. Since graduation, I just sort of [laughter] - I started a job this week so it was a lot of just moving and stuff like that and now that I'm working, that's a lot of what I've been doing during my free time during the day is working. But then at night it might just be trying to unwind by watching TV, once again, talking with those friends.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. Congratulations on the new job. That's awesome.

RK: Thank you.

MG: What are some of the things you worry about how people are responding or about what the effects might be? Is there anything that you're hopeful about?

RK: Well, something I'm worried about is, once again, the masks. [Short pause] People not like, once again, taking it seriously. But one thing I am hopeful about is that people will finally realize that health is very important and that there's simple ways that sickness can be prevented. And hopefully, when we come out of this, we'll be more aware about the importance of just simple things like handwashing, if you're sick, don't actually come into work or go to class or

something like that. That's really been talked about so much in even [unclear] of school or if its work. Even fear of a slight cough is something you really shouldn't be coming into work [?].

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MG: Yeah, definitely. It takes everybody to, you know, keep people safe and healthy. What do you think will change after the pandemic is over, if anything?

RK: I like to say that there would be a change, but I'm honestly not too sure if there will be. I mean, you can just look in the news right now and you can see that there is hundreds of people just going out to the beach, not socially distancing. And if people aren't doing that during the pandemic situation, I truly wonder how change is actually going to happen afterwards and how people are going to follow. I guess one change that could possibly happen is more people working from home as companies recognize that we don't need to have employees working in the office and I don't know if that's a good thing or nor, people have different opinions on that. I personally like to be working in the office as a separation from work and relaxation. I could see that being one change, possibly.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. It's hard to see if there actually will be change. Because we [?] see all these people saying that we want to go back to normal, but then does that mean that we won't think about how we got to here - to this point? What kinds of technology are you using to communicate with others and stay busy or entertained?

RK: A lot of the streaming services to stay entertained: Netflix, Hulu, HBO, the whole gamut, Amazon Prime. For social, the popular one was - what's it called? It's one I'm not using, but I can't think of a name right now, but it will come back to me. But a lot of what I have been using has been Discord, Snapchat, regular phone calling, and texting and things like that. Teams was one I used a lot during the semester, especially towards the end of the school year. But for the most part, those services.

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

RK: Well definitely at the beginning of the pandemic, it's been sort of better recently, was just the hand sanitizer, the sanitizing wipes. I know I was trying to find some sanitizing wipes knowing that I would move into this new apartment that I'm in and knowing that I would want to sanitize it, obviously. So that was sort of a hard thing to obtain. Besides that, nothing that I have personally purchased, I know I've walked around in stores and stuff like that, and some video games and stuff like that were, I guess, nonessential items. Basically, just electronics they were sort of in short supply in some of the brick-and-mortar stores but then if you went on Amazon and stuff like that - we've sort of been accustomed to two-day shipping, one-day shipping prior to COVID. And there would be times when I'd try to buy stuff for my apartment, I'd be waiting a week, two weeks, in order for it to be delivered.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. I'm sure, I mean, I've experienced it too where delivery times have gotten longer because more people are delivering, or the warehouses just have less people in them for whatever reason. How does news coverage you see differ from what you've personally seen or experienced?

RK: I've been lucky that COVID hasn't affected my immediate surrounding network of friends and family. The closest COVID ever got to myself was someone at my dad's work came down with COVID. So, sort of compared to the news it was like "COVID is all over the place and your family is going to get it, your friends are going to get it, you're going to get it." But I personally never really had someone I personally knew, come down with COVID, at least to my knowledge. That was sort of one of the biggest, big main differences from what I experienced.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. That can definitely change how you're viewing it if it's not affecting you immediately.

RK: And I think that might be why some people didn't take it as seriously as they should have. I feel like I took it pretty seriously. I only went for the essential needs, I always wore a mask, and regular hand washing. But because people don't actually see it affect them personally, they just aren't going to take it seriously. [Unclear] Affect the people in the surrounding network.

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

RK: I miss going out to eat [laughter]. Just because of how quickly things happened, I haven't had Log Jam in a long time, and I really liked going to Log Jam for dinner. Once again, the social aspect. Something that was really nice about being on campus was you can just run into someone in the MSC [Memorial Student Center] and then talk for an hour about something. That's something I really miss. Just overall interaction with faculty and your friends, and that's probably something I personally have missed the most.

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MG: Yeah, agreed. I've missed it too, especially in the spring when everybody is just out on the lawns, some hammocking, laying on a blanket reading or studying, or just hanging out. I mean, it's always my favorite part of the year when spring comes.

RK: Yeah.

MG: If you were granted a wish for twenty-four hours, with no chance for infection, how would you spend it?

RK: That would be a good question because there is so many stuff I want to do. I guess probably a wish would be something I was looking forward to really a lot this upcoming summer was to go to the Milwaukee Pride Fest. And currently they just have it postponed, but I have a feeling that they're just going to cancel it. So, if I guess I had one wish it would be to go the Milwaukee Pride Fest this summer.

MG: Yeah, definitely. Pride is very special for me too. I went for the first-time last summer, and I was really looking forward to going this summer again.

RK: Yeah.

MG: But.

RK Yeah, same here.

MG: It isn't safe, it isn't safe. You know?

RK: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, last summer was my first time too and I went with some people. That was probably one of the highlights of my summer. So naturally I was looking forward to it again this summer, but obviously it was taken away, at least temporarily if not, for a whole other year.

MG: Yeah, but thankfully Pride is something that, I feel like, people just carry inside them. You know? It's nice to be in a group of people that you know is your community but in times like this, you just have to remind yourself that like we can have pride in ourselves and in our community, at home. You know?

RK: Yup, very true.

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MG: What else would you like to share about your experiences during this epidemic?

RK: [Short pause] Let me think for a moment. [Short pause] I think at the end of the day, I was really proud on how the campus community came together with such rapid change. I think everyone was very understanding of the changes that had to happen at the end of the day, even though some of those changes were very hard. I know every student, including myself, have struggled throughout the semester to come out the end with something that was very rewarding, and I feel like if we can get through this together, we can get through anything together. And that's not just a campus thing, that's a nationwide thing, a whole community thing. Beyond that, once again, in my experience moving those - moving to online classes sort of online classes was difficult for me because of those lab-based classes. There were two classes in particular that was basically completely lab based, they changed overnight. I was really looking forward to doing some of those labs but because of COVID I wasn't able to do that. Other experiences, yeah, I think that should be about it.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. It's amazing how Stout and really everybody has been able to adapt to this huge change and disruption in our lives. Can - so, last question. Can you recommend anybody else from the Stout community we should approach for an interview?

RK: I would say [says potential candidate name] if he hasn't already. I feel like he would be a very good candidate.

MG: Can -

RK: There's so many good people.

MG: Yeah. Can you spell [says potential candidate name]?

RK: [Spells candidate name].

MG: [Spells candidate name].

RK: Mmhm, that's [says potential candidate name]. He's a student. Beyond that, I feel one person that would be valuable would be Sue Traxler. She's a CIO [Chief Information Officer] for the university. Her last name is spelled T, R, A, X.

MG: T, R, A, X

RK: L, E, R.

MG: L, E, R.

RK: And.

MG: [Unclear].

RK: Pardon?

MG: She's a what for campus?

RK: She's a Chief Information Officer and basically what she does is head all of IT on campus. So, with that happening and all the technology that was used during the semester, she'd be helpful for talking too.

MG: Yeah, definitely.

RK: Other than that, let me think to see if there's any more names that pop immediately into my head. [Long pause] I think those would be two pretty good people to talk to.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. Thank you so much for this interview, it's been super helpful. If you can think of anymore names, I mean the two you gave me were great and I appreciate them a lot, if you think of anybody else, feel free to email the Archives. But yeah, thank you for your interview, it was super helpful.

RK: Yeah, anytime. Thank you very much.

MG: Yeah, thank you.

RK: Okay.

MG: Have a good night.

RK: Have a good week.

MG: Yeah, you too.

RK: You too.

MG: Stay safe.

RK: Yeah, you as well.

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END