

Kyle Pearson COVID-19 Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Meagan Ginnaty-Moore

June 9, 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?

Kyle Pearson: Oh man. It must've been late January or early February and it was before the United States had any documented cases. And I was really hoping that, you know, "okay cool, we shut down our borders now and it doesn't get to the country, and it doesn't affect me at all." But that didn't happen.

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MG: Yeah. What might you say to your past self about based on everything that's going on?

KP: Sorry, I had - I almost had to sneeze.

MG: [Laughter] No problem.

KP: I was - I was kind of cavalier with it because I was really hoping that it wouldn't be a big deal. So, I probably would have given a little sense of what the future had to hold and that way the - the little bit of a learning curve and everything that I had to and pretty much ending the semester, you know, months early from my standpoint because all I do is programming and all of that ended.

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

KP: I don't know if I would say surprised is the word I would use. Even with, you know, the drastic differences we see in people. There's those that take Stay-At-Home very seriously and they're very protective of themselves and they wear gloves and masks if they do go out - and only going out when absolutely necessary. And then there's other people who have completely disregarded it whatsoever and have, you know, treat everyday like it's normal. So, even with both extremes, I wasn't super surprised given - given how different people are anyway.

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

KP: Communication with my supervisor. It went from, you know, - we used to share a wall - knocking on the wall and just literally talking to each other through the wall to now via Teams

[Microsoft Teams]. And it's not nearly as convenient, obviously. It doesn't happen nearly as often. So that would be the biggest change.

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

KP: Loved ones is tough. My closest relative is a cousin in Nashville. All of my family lives in the Southeast, so I haven't seen them in a long time. Talk to them when I can, but definitely not flying out any time soon either. Friends, we've had a lot of virtual game nights. Before this all started, we were - it was real big into a board game called Ticket to Ride. And -

MG: Oh yeah.

KP: Oh yes.

MG: Yes [laughter].

KP: That's available online so we can - we can play with each other online.

MG: [Long pause] Hello?

KP: Hi. Can you hear me?

00:04:51.000

MG: Oh - yes, I can hear you. Sorry. Yeah, that sounds like a lot of fun. I mean, I love Ticket to Ride. It's a really fun game. I didn't realize it was online though, so that's pretty cool. What kinds of things have you done to stay healthy or to protect your mental health?

KP: To stay physically healthy, I have noticed that my diet has been a whole lot better because I don't eat out nearly as much, so that's actually kind of been nice. Or at all - eating out at all for that matter. For mental health purposes, I do try to go outside when I can. I've really enjoyed going golfing at one of our near golf courses because, you know, I don't have to see anyone. I call into the course, and they can take payments over the phone, so that works out to. Just let them know when I'm there and they are like "cool, we got you" and I just go. Or walking up and down the Red Cedar is always nice.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. Spending a lot of time outside is good for mental health and physical health. What has been challenging about teaching or keeping in touch online? And what has worked well?

KP: [Long pause] Challenging is keeping up the quantity - the amount of communication that we had - that I had with my kids beforehand because I would see them in the office quite frequently or whenever we had programming going on. What I can maintain is the quality of the conversations. So, when we do finally get a chance to talk, it's not over email or text, it's - hopefully it's a face-to-face meeting via Zoom or Teams like this. And then -

MG: Yeah.

KP: And then if I schedule time for them - if I am able to take time out of their day to have them chat with me, I got permission to pay them for that since I took them away from something else that they could be doing. So, nice little plus for them because they lost lots of money.

MG: And these are like student employees?

KP: These are my student staff, yeah.

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MG: Okay. That's really nice that you were able to do that, especially now I'm sure a lot of them weren't able to go to summer jobs or whatever. Have there been any silver linings for you in the crisis?

KP: I've lost weight.

MG: That is always a silver lining [laughter].

KP: Yeah. Yeah, like I said, my diet is not bad. I do virtual workouts with some of my friends, and we take turns picking - or designing the workout for the day and then we get together on a Zoom call and just keep each other accountable.

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MG: That's awesome. It sounds like a lot of fun too. I don't know, I never like working out alone. 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?

KP: So, there is a - back when - well when I was still in college, one of the things I used to do all the time was stay very in touch with the sports world because if my earliest class doesn't start until eleven AM, obviously, I'm not much a morning person. You know, I would wake up at like ten and watch SportsCenter, almost every single day. So, I haven't started watching more TV, but I definitely get online and go to their website, read articles, watch videos, and stay in touch with that. It keeps me busy. My apartment is much cleaner than it's been in the past. That's kept me busy. What else am I doing? Oh my gosh. I got Disney+ [Disney Plus]. That's taking up a lot of my time. It's been nice rewatching Marvel movies, Star Wars movies, or old Disney movies that I just haven't seen in a long time.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. Those sound like a lot of fun and pretty productive too. What are some of the things that worry you about how people are responding or what the effects might be?

KP: One of the biggest things that worries me is getting back to [air quotes] "normal". I don't know if you've seen the return to - [clearing throat] excuse me. The return-to-work plan that the Chancellor [Chancellor Katherine P. Frank] released but it's very slow. You know, come back

for a couple days, still stay in working at home for a couple days. Coordinating with your co-workers so like I told you earlier, I share a wall with my supervisor. In the fall, we'll probably, you know, she'll go in, the next day, I'll go in so that it's not both of us in at the same time. It's just going to be - it'll be a slow process getting back to where I would like to be, which is, you know, where we were last December really.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. It would be nice to go back to how things used to be. Is there anything that you're hopeful about.

KP: I'm hopeful that we can for sure have in-person classes and it feels like we're trending in that direction according to the Chancellor's plan, however, a lot of her plan has to do with a cure being found. If that's the case, we'll go back to campus full time. Everyone will be allowed to go back and - if not all students are back on campus - if a significant portion is given the option to take classes online and there's significantly fewer people in Menomonie, that doesn't help me personally, because the biggest part of my job is programming. So, if there's no students to program for or significantly less students to program for, if I am upper administration, to me, it doesn't make sense to pay me, to have me in my position. So, I'm hopeful that there will be enough students on campus for me to have a job.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. I hope so too. What do you think will change after the pandemic is over if anything?

KP: I think online classes will be a little bit more regular. I remember in my undergrad [undergraduate] and grad [graduate] school, you know, every now and then like a teacher would be off to a conference or something and have to cancel classes for whatever reason. And I was always so excited about it. But now, you know, I imagine with everyone having to change their curriculum for online only. A professor can easily prerecord a lecture and say you still got to go to class, it'll be online this time, but you still got to tune in and pay attention and do whatever would normally be required for the class. I think that will be, in my opinion, beneficial.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. What kinds of technology are you using to stay busy or entertained?

KP: Computers, laptop. I was able to go in during Spring Break and take some stuff home. I brought a laptop home and an extra monitor, keyboard, mouse. So that I actually have two monitors set-up right now, just like I would normally at my office.

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

KP: The amount of purchasing I've done has gone down significantly. So, I can't think of something off the top of my head because really the only - other than my reoccurring bills of utility bills, or insurance, rent, that hasn't changed. But the only thing I'm really buying is

groceries and I don't drive very - almost ever. The amount - I've filled up my gas tank in my car once. So, I can't think of anything.

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MG: Well, that's great [laughter]. It's good that you haven't had any issues getting what you need. How does news coverage you see differ from what you've personally seen or experienced?

KP: I think that our small town of Menomonie, Wisconsin is not in nearly as bad of shape, in regards to COVID-19, as a lot of other higher dense - density populations.

MG: Yeah, I mean a lot less people in crowded spaces makes it harder for COVID to spread. So, we are lucky to be in this area.

KP: Yep. I follow Dunn County's statistics for the virus and the number of cases we have is significantly lower than average and - knock on wood - there hasn't been a reported death yet, which to me says that our Mayo Clinic we have in town, still has plenty of beds available to and resources available to adequately serve those who do get the virus.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. We are very lucky to have the Mayo Clinic and have it not be overwhelmed with patients right now. What are things you miss most about campus and the Menomonie community?

KP: I consider myself to be pretty social - my supervisor, I think, would mimic that. So, the biggest thing I miss is conversation that wasn't all work related. Most of my conversations with my supervisor is, right now, pretty work related, but, you know, typically first thing we do eight-thirty on a Monday morning was, you know, "hey how was your weekend?" And just catch up and actually enjoy each other's company and that's how it would be with, not just my supervisor, but everyone else who I would run into on a day-to-day basis.

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MG: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I think a lot of people are missing those like little interactions you would have day-to-day when you're just in an environment with people and now we have to schedule conversations and it feels like there's more of an agenda to it. If you were granted a wish for twenty-four hours, with no chance for infection, how would you spend it?

KP: I would spend a lot of time with my girlfriend. We would probably go down to [snapping fingers] the Dells [Wisconsin Dells]. I'm new to Wisconsin. I have never been to the Dells before, and I have been - I am very much a water person - I have been itching for water related activities. So, that's exactly where I would go. She's from La Crosse but - and she's there now but it's been a tease because I haven't seen her. But she hasn't been to the Dells in years, so that's - she's talked about wanting to go there too, if we could possibly.

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MG: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I hope you go as soon as you're able to. The Dells are a lot of fun. Yeah [laughter]. What else would you like to share about your experiences during this pandemic?

KP: So, I live by myself. I thought I was going to be like bored out of my mind a whole lot more than I thought was - a whole lot more than what actually ended up happening. I thought I was going to get in my own head more than I thought that actually happened. I thought that I was going - for all intents and purposes - go crazy, go stir crazy but that hasn't happened. I was - it's been a pleasant surprise.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. I'm glad you're not going stir crazy and that you're finding enough stuff to do to keep your mind from focusing on things that you don't want to be focusing on or whatever. So, last question. Can you recommend anybody from the Stout [University of Wisconsin-Stout] community who we should approach for an interview?

KP: I reached out to all of my student staff, I even offered to pay them if they do this with you all, so hopefully some of them get back to you.

MG: Yeah, definitely.

KP: And I'm also the advisor for the sport clubs on campus, so I reached out to all of those athletes. I haven't sent this out to any of my other co-workers, but I can certainly do that.

MG: Yeah, that would be super helpful, if you could that. They can just email the Archives and say that they want to do an interview. That'd be super helpful, thank you. [Short pause] All right, well thank you so much for your time today, I really appreciate it. Yeah, and just thank you. Your interview was a big help.

KP: Excellent, no problem.

MG: Have a good day.

KP: You too.

MG: Stay safe.

KP: Thank you, bye.

MG: Bye.

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END