

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Chris Wilburn

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

Date: November 10, 2020

Location: Plainfield, Indiana

Abstract: Chris Wilburn is a Plainfield resident, and a high school history teacher at Plainfield High School. She talks about how she and her family fared during the pandemic, how Plainfield Schools dealt with the many issues related to the pandemic, and her perspective on how the students have weathered the crisis.

JS: Today is Tuesday, November 10, 2020. This is Jeannine Spurgin, and I'm interviewing Chris Wilburn, who is a high school history teacher here in Plainfield, and we're going to talk about her experiences as a teacher during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Welcome, Chris!

CW: Hi!

JS: When you first heard about the pandemic, what were your thoughts about it?

CW: Well, it was really interesting, when I first heard about it, I was actually teaching about the Spanish flu in class.

JS: Oh wow!

CW: And the pandemic, it happened to be perfectly coordinated. So, as part of my classroom activities when I teach about that, we also do an activity where they play a pandemic game, and they have to create their own viruses and see how they're going to spread. And so, that came out at the same time, and we had this huge conversation about is it going to stay in China, and how is it going to move across the world, and how would that look? How would we protect it from coming into the United States? So it actually lined up perfectly with that unit I was teaching. And we all said it's going to just be unleashed. Because they had had this discussion about how pandemics work, and how it could possibly travel across the world...in WWI, it was with soldiers, right? And here we have modern transportation, and so many people traveling around the world, and so it was a really interesting conversation. But the classes all decided, "Yeah, this is going to be much bigger than what people are predicting. So, we were making our predictions, which, they came true, and even impacted us much more than we would have guessed.

JS: Everyone I've spoken to has said, "Oh, I didn't really think it was a big deal, I didn't think it was really going to come into anything huge." This is the first time I've actually heard someone say, "Yeah..."

CW: Yeah, we all thought that it definitely had the potential to be a world pandemic. We were discussing pandemics, and we knew how easy it could get out of China. So, we were

discussing what the Chinese were doing, and if that was going to be effective. And so, most of us were not convinced...a couple students thought, "Oh, it'll stay there" ...but most of us were convinced that it was going to actually spread across the world. I don't think anyone could have predicted how much it would impact our lives and change how we live our everyday lives; we didn't really talk about it, too much. We talked more about the spread of it and the potential. Again, we were studying the Spanish Influenza and we had really had those discussions about how easily that would unleash on the world.

JS: I wonder if everybody had been studying that when it happened, maybe things would be a little bit different, huh?

CW: Yeah, because we were talking about people wearing masks, and you weren't allowed to spit on the sidewalk. You could get fined or put in jail in some places for that. And so it was really interesting. We didn't really have conversations about what the states did to mitigate it; I wish we would have discussed that a little more. Because we talked about what would happen if schools closed, but we didn't really talk about how people would go around and try and defend themselves as much as possible and make sure that they were safe and not coming into contact with it.

JS: Ok, so the schools closed down in March. What were your thoughts then? Did you think, "Well, this will be just a couple weeks, and we'll get back to business."

CW: No, I definitely did not. But again, I think that's because we were primed, since we had just been doing all that work on the 1918 pandemic; so for me, I was really concerned with the students. You're concerned with your students even if you get to see them every day; when you get to see them, you kind of know what's going on with each of them. And with the pandemic, I was really concerned with all of the students, not being able to see them, not being able to hear from some of them. I was really worried, because you can't tell if everyone is doing okay. And especially, emotionally, how people were doing. You have people who started losing jobs, people who started getting sick. I was just really worried about not being able to have that connection with the students.

JS: I know that most of the students did not like the e-learning that happened. How did you feel about it? I know that nobody was really ready for it. Did you feel like it went really badly at first?

CW: Well, I think you're really making the best of a bad situation. It was good in the fact that we continued to essentially have some sort of educational process, which, of course, didn't happen in the pandemic in WWI, kids just didn't get to go to school. And so, I was really thankful that we had the technology to connect, even though I didn't get to see all my students because some of them didn't really come on line to check in with me. I had virtual office hours every day, and people could come online and talk. Most of the kids didn't really want to talk about the assignments. I tried to make the assignments much easier and manageable for them. I had a lot of kids who were working during the day at the grocery store because adults weren't coming in, so they were calling a lot of the teenagers to come to work at different hours, so I had to make sure I adjusted to that. So, a lot of the kids on my office hour chat just wanted to talk about life. They just wanted to talk to another person who was outside of their household. So I think that e-learning was a pretty big adjustment. We weren't necessarily prepared. I mean, I'd never really made a video of myself until that point. So the first time trying to figure out all that

technology, while trying to figure how I make videos that are appealing and interesting to students, how long should they be? You know, you're trying to figure all of that out so that the kids have assignments that are manageable and they're still learning. So there was definitely a huge learning curve associated with that, as a teacher.

JS: You did e-learning again after October break for a week. I'm assuming that went a lot better than it did at the beginning?

CW: Oh, so much better. So much better. I mean we were kind of like, we knew what we were doing! So it was so much better. And then there were actual hours for the students, you know, it was like school. They had to come in and check in online, and that was really nice. Because it's a different situation when you don't have to worry about kids being pulled from the high school to go work in the community, which was really happening in the Spring, when things were really bad.

JS: How do you feel the schools handled the pandemic - the board, officials and all that. Do you think they responded well?

CW: Oh yeah. I mean, I think they did the right thing in the Spring. Of course, they were following the governor's orders. And this area had an outbreak, kind of like, before other areas of the state, so I think they were really wise and cautious. And then, of course, in the Fall when we opened up... I mean we have been incredibly fortunate to have been at school this long! I mean, all these other schools in the state are e-learning, or they're on hybrid schedules, all kinds of different plans. But we have been full classes, everybody in session every day. We have some kids who are remote learning, but we've been really fortunate, and the school district and school board have done a really smart job in trying to get people to come back to school so that parents can return to work, and we can return so somewhat of a normal life. I mean, it's really important for the kids to be here. And in-person learning is the best you have; there's no comparison to e-learning. You can try as hard as you can with e-learning, but in-person learning is so much better, they're going to learn so much more in-depth, so much more help they're going to receive. So, I am really happy that we have been able to do in-person learning as long as we have.

JS: Have you had any students that have come down with the virus?

CW: We don't know that information, as teachers. We just know if there is a case, and then we know that certain people are quarantined, because it's all private information for the students. So, we just know that certain kids are going to be quarantined, and they're going to be gone, and we need to work with those students, make sure they get the resources and help they need. For me, I livestream my classes, so I just have a Google Meet up all day long, and kids can come in and out all day long if they're remote learners, and so they just walk in and out all day long. And then, you know, they join class.

JS: So, are the students that are quarantined required to log on and keep participating in school?

CW: Well, for me, I put it out there, and then I allow them to log on if they want, if they feel like they can follow along in the things that I post online for work and activities. They don't have to

log in. But pretty much everybody in the upper-level classes, like dual-credit, they're all logging in because they need to get that information that oftentimes is too difficult to do on their own. And, in addition to that, I think that they feel like, "I know what's going on," you know, they can see other people who are still at school. It's nice for them to have that connection if they're gone.

JS: What about after you guys came back from the lockdown? You know, the students hadn't seen each other for months and months. Was there a different atmosphere in school when you guys came back?

CW: Oh, everybody was super happy! I mean, like, the kids were so happy to be back at school. And I was not prepared for that! You know, in high school, kids are like "Yeah, I'm in high school; I'm cool..." They were so happy; they were like, "I'm so happy we're in school; I'm so happy to see you!"

JS: I never would have guessed any of that either.

CW: They were like elementary/preschool kids! You know how elementary school kids are just so excited to go to school everyday? That's exactly how they were. Now, that has worn off as the months have progressed...

JS: That was my next question! How is it now?

CW: You know, the toy's no longer shiny, but it was a fantastic attitude at the beginning of the year; everybody was so happy, so happy.

JS: What about when you guys have convocations? Do you have any of those?

CW: No, very, very few and far between, and if they do, the kids are all spread out, it's not a big group, and they're all spread out. So, it's very rare for us to have any kind of convocation. They've really avoided all that kind of stuff, and they're smart about making sure they didn't do any of those things because they didn't really want to expose everyone.

JS: Have you had any problems with students not wanting to wear masks?

CW: No, the kids are really good. They know that they need to wear them, and they've been really good about it. I thought that that might be an issue, but turns out that it wasn't at all.

JS: Are there consequences for those that don't wear their mask?

CW: Yes, so if you're not wearing your mask...obviously you have to wear the mask to make sure everyone is safe, we don't want to spread anything...those students get in trouble, they're sent to the office. There's a procedure that you follow. Of course, you give the student the opportunity to correct themselves before any kind of consequence is given, but you know, if there are people who refuse to wear one, there are consequences for that. But, I haven't seen anybody have an issue with it because nobody wants to get in trouble for something so simple, and most people are really understanding with that issue. And if they don't want to wear a mask, they can always become a remote learner. The school has given them lots and lots of

options. So, I think also, part of the reason we haven't seen any issues with that, you know, the kids are really good about following through when things are asked of them, and they're very compliant.

JS: When the schools first opened back up, you know there was lots of controversy surrounding that. In fact there were teachers in the area that demonstrated against it. How did you feel about that?

CW: Oh, I didn't have any problems. You know, people are allowed to have whatever beliefs that they want, of course. I can appreciate people who are concerned or worried about coming back, and to be in a situation where they're exposed to a lot, because that's what happens when you're in school, regardless of COVID. You come into contact with people who have lots of germs, you know; it is what it is. For me, it wasn't an issue. I'm not in a situation where I have any kinds of health concerns, I'm pretty healthy, relatively. I don't have anything that I think would get me into a lot of trouble, so if I did catch it, I don't think I'm going to have a horrible problem. And for me, I kind of thought, you know, there's spreading so much through the country, it's probably just going to happen. I came to terms with the fact that I'm likely to come across it, you know, out at the grocery store, or out doing my errands, at the gas station. I didn't necessarily think it was guaranteed for me to get it if I came back to school, and if I did get it, it was necessarily going to be a really horrible situation. For me, the benefits outweighed the cost - the benefits of being able to instruct my students in person and to have a really much better learning outcome. I thought that was pretty important.

JS: I had heard that lots of teachers were just scared to death to come back to school, and that some even considered quitting. I'm assuming you may know some of those people. Do you know if they've changed their minds, since we've gone on with the school year?

CW: I think that the teachers who were really scared, you could understand...the pandemic, right? And there's a lot of anxiety about how the school is going to work, how we're going to ensure that not only are teachers safe, but the students are safe. And I think the district has done a really excellent job, you know. The high school has given us teachers some really great guidelines to ensure students' and faculty's safety, and we have been incredibly lucky in that fact that we haven't had an outbreak or too many kids e-learning, and like that. And we've been in session so long, I think that people who had a lot of those concerns are definitely not as scared, at least that's the situation I'm feeling. At the beginning of the school year, you had people who were very vigilant about certain things, and they were very regimented. And now they're not quite that way, they seemed to have relaxed a lot. And the people who had a lot of concerns, they're justified if they have someone at home who has a really serious condition... those people, for the most part, are still really concerned. Because it doesn't really matter if they catch it and are able to fight it off, if they get around other people and could spread it. One of things I did at the beginning of the school year, you know, because you're paranoid and worried...and I wasn't even as worried as other people...but one of the things I did was I would change my clothes as soon as I got home from school, and put them in a separate laundry basket. And I wouldn't take a bag home, I'd have it locked up at school, then I have one at home. I would leave everything and I would go and do my work at home. Because this year, rightly so, pretty much everything is electronic, so that we don't have to touch papers, of course you can transmit the virus that way. So, you don't have to worry about that when you have everything online. But I'm not changing my clothes anymore. That lasted for a couple weeks, and then I'm like, "Ok, I

think I'm overreacting a little," you know, that calmed down really quickly. But at first, you don't know what to expect. Like I said before, you have people who are kind of regimented and doing certain things, then as the school year went on, and things were going okay, and we aren't all getting sick, people realized that we still need to be vigilant and doing things that are keeping us safe, but for me, I didn't necessarily need to change clothes every time I got home.

JS: How about the national government? How do you think they handled it with respect to schools and education?

CW: I think it's been kind of confusing for a lot of people, because there's not been a national message. Whether it's been communities or states, the national government is not on the same page, so I think there's been a lot of confusion with that. I think we could have maybe had some better work on that. I do like the fact, though, that they left it up to states and local government, so I can kind of understand why there wasn't an overall message. Because it needs to be left up to the individual communities to decide what to do, because some communities don't have as much spread, they don't have to worry about it as much. I live in Indianapolis, and the spread is there is much more, and you have a lot more cases. Some of these communities don't see that and they should have a little more wiggle room. Not that they shouldn't be vigilant and make sure they're doing the things they need to, but I like the fact that they left it up to the locals. But I did feel there needed to be some kind of message overall about, like, we're all in this together, and these are the things we're going to try to do. I think they left it up in the air a little bit too much.

JS: Especially with schools.

CW: Yeah, and you know, it was kind of like, we haven't done this before and we're going to try and figure it out. Here are some steps that you may or may not follow. To me, that was just a little bit too much. I really did appreciate Governor Holcomb and all the meetings that he had. I put those on every day at 2:30, I think that's when they came on. I was watching those updates all the time. I think that was incredibly helpful and they had so much information on there for education. You know, they had an educational representative that would come on there often, or they would speak to that. So, you had a lot of that information given out in those meetings, which I really appreciated. I felt like that was a goldmine of information, at least for me.

JS: As you know, cases are surging. Deaths are going up. Do you know if the school would consider shutting down again?

CW: I think that the school and district would considerably weigh all their options and do what is pertinent at the time it's necessary. I don't think anything is off the table, if that makes sense. But I do think they are really trying hard here, which again, I appreciate, to try and make sure that the kids are in school as much as we can, because we know those are the best learning outcomes for the kids. We also know that social and emotional health are very much impacted by this, and kids very much benefit by being here. Parents benefit by the kids being here, because if they work a job, or work from home, it just makes things a lot easier for everyone. But as cases do increase, if community spread does get out of control, I don't know that the school will have a lot of options. So, we're all hoping that we do not have to go back to e-learning, because we know it's not as successful. We're keeping our fingers crossed.

JS: Knowing what you know now, what do you think individuals, communities and governments need to keep in mind for the future, you know, in case another pandemic pops up? How can we be more prepared?

CW: Pandemics are typically 100-year affairs, you know, from a historic perspective, so I know that. I would be horrified if another one came along. I don't think we have to worry about this happening again in our lifetime, but the one thing that's been really amazing is that in some areas how people have really come together and taken care of each other, in spite of the fact that they're separated. So really trying to advocate for people really staying interconnected, getting outside, and using the resources you have so you can video chat with your loved ones, so that we feel like we're not isolated. I think that people have felt isolated, and I'm sure that's negatively impacted the mental health of a lot of people. Government-wise, I think it's been very difficult. We had the CARES Act, and we've had a lot of things to help people, but we've kind of run out, right? So, it's like you have to have government to take action during these times of crisis. So, it'll be interesting to see what happens over the next couple of months. But, there are a lot of Americans who are hurting, and a lot of people are turning to their communities for help, because we're not necessarily going to get the federal response that everyone is looking for.

JS: Do teachers have access to grants or anything like that from the pandemic?

CW: We have access to grants for classrooms and things like that if you want to apply to them, but no pandemic funding. And the school has been great at supplying resources for us to clean our classrooms, and I'm sure they've gotten some kind of funding for that, because that's additional money that they're not used to spending. So I would guess that they've gotten some additional funding or grants to help mitigate those costs. But we're pretty much taken care of, they've done an awesome job with that. We've even had numerous parents who've stepped up and contacted us saying, "Let us know if you need anything for your classrooms." So, the community has been really wonderful in supporting the schools during this time, too.

JS: As a history teacher, as you know, someone is going to be listening to this some time in the future, say 50-100 years, trying to do some research about the pandemic of 2020. Do you have anything that you think they should know that they might not be being told 100 years from now? Information tends to change over time, and some information is not given and some is. Is there anything you can think of that you would like people a long time from now to know that they might not be hearing?

CW: I think the most interesting thing about the pandemic, from a historical perspective, is when we research these time periods, we tend to think of policy, and what the government did, and state and local laws, and how it spread. Spread is really fun to look at, and how the individual government responded. But we really leave out the story...we want to know about the cause, how did this start, how many people were infected, how many people died...but we leave out the story of how it changed people's lives. So, the big thing to remember in the future is the drastic changes to lifestyle that the pandemic caused. Like, it caused people to stay in their houses. And for a long time, people were even worried to go outside. You know, I talked to my neighbor from way across the fence. They would stay on their deck, I would stay on my deck, and we would sort of yell back and forth. And now, we feel more comfortable around each other outside. We still stand a few feet apart, but we're not standing on our decks. So, I think the

isolation, especially for people who are single or live by themselves, I think that would be incredibly hard during this time period. But people are locked up in their houses, and we don't have the normal lifestyle that we did before, where we said, "Oh, I'm going to go shopping, or I'm going to eat at a restaurant, or I'm going to go visit my mom," any of those things. Your entire normal life is kind of stripped from you, and I think that that is the hardest part of the pandemic. Even seeing people you love come down with it; you have people who have gotten sick and been in the hospital, and their families can't come in to visit them or say goodbye, especially if you're in a nursing home.

JS: That was one of the most tragic things.

CW: Yeah! I mean, it's just so very difficult what has happened to people's individual lives and how much they've been forced to change. I mean, I'm so happy we're in the time period we are, because thank goodness for Netflix! Because that's what everybody's been watching.

JS: They must have made a lot of money!

CW: Yes, exactly! And so it's like, all of the sudden, people have to stay inside and hunker down; almost like you're hunkering down for a storm...if the storm is lasting for a year.

JS: I think people are getting closer, too. Families are coming together and bonding more, because they have to.

CW: I mean you really appreciate the time you have with the people you have it with. It's very rare for me...my family is from southern Indiana...it's very rare that I ever get to see them, although I talk to them quite a bit. But, I went down and visited them a lot during the summer because I was quarantined and didn't go anywhere; and I knew during the school year, as I was exposed to more people, I knew I was not going to be willing to take that down. I have a 92-year-old grandfather. And so, I don't want to take anything down there that will get anyone sick, whether it be the flu or COVID, I don't want anything like that on my hands. So, I haven't seen my family in months, and it's been very difficult to not see them in person. So, it really makes you appreciate the time that you spend with them whether it be on the phone, or whatever. I know a lot of people are kind of desperate to see their families, and they've got a tough decision ahead of them here in two weeks, when it's Thanksgiving. We've been told to continue being vigilant, and to try and make sure that we don't see people we're not normally seeing so we don't spread it. But people are really missing their loved ones, and we haven't seen each other in months. So, it's going to be a very difficult decision for families to make as we go into Thanksgiving.

JS: In fact, there will probably be a spike after the holidays, I would assume.

CW: Oh, yeah. That's going to be hard, so I would say how much it impacted how people live their everyday lives, not laws, not causes, that is the most impactful part of a pandemic, and to study that is really important.

JS: That's a great perspective; thank you for bringing that dimension into it. I don't think a lot of people have talked a lot about that. That's all the questions I have. Do you have any nuggets of wisdom you'd like to impart before we end?

CW: No, I think those were all fantastic questions. It's just an interesting period that we're living through, and I think a lot of people realize it. I've told the students to remember this because their grandchildren will ask them, "What was it like to live through the pandemic of 2020?"

JS: That's why we're doing the oral histories! Because we would love to have had some oral histories from 1918, obviously.

CW: Yeah! That would have been fantastic.

JS: Thank you so much for participating! Your viewpoint is amazing! I love it.