

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Jan Arnold

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

Date: July 23, 2020

Location: Plainfield, Indiana

Abstract: Jan Arnold is a senior Plainfield resident. She was on a trip to New Zealand when the pandemic struck, and she talks about her experiences there, as well as her experience when she returned to the United States. She also talks about historical aspects of the pandemic.

JS: This is Jeannine Spurgin. Today is July 23, 2020, and I'm doing an oral history with Jan Arnold. Jan is a senior Plainfield resident, and would like to tell us about her experiences during the pandemic. You'd said that you'd wanted to speak about being out of the country - were you out when the pandemic started?

JA: Yes. We were in New Zealand. We flew there on March 1st, and it was known that there was a virus in China, I mean, it wasn't like we didn't know that it existed, but at that time, it seemed like it was staying in China. And, we had every reason to think that it wasn't a consideration in New Zealand, or really, the U.S. In fact, I remember, the day before we left, one of my relatives said, "Well, are you going to be wearing a mask on the plane?" And I said, "Oh, no!" You know! There's no reason to do that! And, you know, we didn't. We were there until approximately March 15th, when they started getting concerned in New Zealand, and that's when they closed their country to new visitors. So, we were exempted because we'd been there for two weeks. It was actually kind of a positive because it reduced the crowds, pretty much right away. But we started to hear from... we went to a, they called it a home-stay, it's like a very, very small bed and breakfast, and the person in charge was saying, "I just lost all my future reservations. You guys are the last ones." And then the next night, it was kind of the same thing. It was a small hotel, and they said, "We have no idea what's going to happen to our future, economically, because we're losing all of our business." So, we felt very concerned for them, but it was also, nothing was changing yet. They didn't have any restrictions, you could do everything that you had always done. It was very nice! My husband and I, and another couple were traveling together, and we kicked it around a couple times, "Well, should we leave early?" Because we had received messages, people had sent us emails, "Are you planning to end your trip early?" But, no, we're not planning to leave our trip early! And we weren't really listening to any news, you know. We were traveling, we weren't watching things or reading the paper that much, or anything like that. And so we weren't picking up on some of the developments. We did start getting more and more messages from our relatives, and higher levels of concern. One stepdaughter was really expressing a lot of fear, and wanted us to hurry up and get home. I don't know if she was worried for us or her. But, the other thing that was really weird was people started telling us about this no toilet paper situation. I was looking at Facebook and somebody had posted this empty shelf, no toilet paper, and all of this kind of stuff. It was just sort of surreal to me! It just didn't seem possible. The other thing is, I'm a very skeptical media consumer. I don't typically watch news on TV. I get it from a county newspaper from Johnson County, and NPR on the radio. And that's about it. The people that I'm around that consume the

most media on regular networks seem to be, you know, very hyper, you know, everything is a crisis, and I just don't want to live my life that way. And so, that's kind of how I'm interpreting this, these people lost their perspective because they were over-consuming...and the news gets pushed to their smartphones, and so forth. You can set your phone so it will tell you all the bad news that has happened in the last 15 minutes! The 18th of March, we arrived in Nelson, New Zealand. That country is only about 600,000 citizens, and it's about the size of the state of California. It's broken into two islands, it's an island nation, with basically just a ferry, in between the two islands. You have to land from international flights in Auckland, which is on the north island, and then we had immediately flown to the south island and stayed there the whole time. So, we arrived in Nelson, which was getting farther north, on the 18th, and then on the 19th, we had a normal day. Then, the next morning, our friend got a call from his daughter, saying that, I guess she'd been monitoring the Secretary of State's website or something, and there was a message there that said any Americans traveling anywhere has to come home or risk not being allowed to come home for the foreseeable future. I mean, that was a rather dramatic statement, but then my husband looked it up, and yeah, it really said that! So, we just swallowed hard and said, "Ok, plans are changing." And we drove to the local airport in Nelson, and they just couldn't help us at all, they knew nothing. We ended up just using their waiting area to make our phone calls. Our flight was on United, which was locally served by Air New Zealand. We ended up just being on hold for a half hour, and then re-booking, and we were able to re-book for March 22nd, this was on March 20th, so we had basically three days to get there. We had a rental car, we had ferry tickets. We found out we couldn't redo our ferry tickets; we were thinking we'd just rush the ferry and get that all done, and get to the north island really quick, but that wasn't going to happen. They could not re-book the ferry. So we just said, "Well, we'll have to drive hard and we'll make it." And started driving hard. The flight was scheduled for 11:00 pm on the 22nd, and that whole day was just rain, rain, rain, which we hadn't had at all before that. So, it was kind of dreary, not to mention we didn't want to leave, we were worried, and we didn't know what was going to happen. All of the sudden the best rainbow that I had ever seen in all my life came out, and it was like "Ok! There is something good here!" I mean, it really was the best rainbow I'd ever seen.

JS: Did you get a picture?

JA: I did get a picture, but it does not capture it at all. But anyway, we arrived at the airport about 4:30, and it was like, I don't know it just kept reminding me of scenes from movies where foreigners are trying to get home, I mean, Americans are trying to get home, you know when the world was falling apart.

JS: Like the Fall of Saigon?

JA: Yeah, tons of people, lots of noise, and they wouldn't let you in the parking lot without a ticket. The person that was standing at the parking lot was wearing a mask, and we hadn't seen any masks, yet. You know, it was really a whole different level of drama. So, we ended up thinking we'd just return the vehicle and come back; maybe it would be settled down a little bit. We returned our rental car, and that was fine. We did manage to work our way to the doors of the airport, but it was absolutely teeming with people and everyone was very intense. We got in line. We didn't get to check in until about 7:30. We were still standing; we couldn't eat. We ended up taking turns going and buying food, and trying to eat standing up with our luggage next to us. My son had said, "You guys need to wear masks on the airplane." But first of all,

there was no shopping to do, we were just intent on getting there. Second of all, we weren't sure that was really necessary. But then I started seeing so many people with masks on. When it was my turn to go roving around the airport, I went into a little convenience store and asked if they had any masks. The guy said, "I have three masks." So, I bought three masks. I'd never worn one before, and I didn't even know which way to wear it. So, it was really awkward, and kind of an unpleasant experience. The flight left late, it was extremely crowded, and we flew through the night. The staff was wonderful, but you could tell they were not very mindful about sanitizing at all. We did not have any sanitizer or hand wipes or anything like that, they just weren't there. So, we got to L.A., and the terminal was practically empty. If you've ever flown there, that is unheard of. I mean, there was one place to eat open, and we ate there. Then we had to catch a flight returning to the Phoenix Airport; we had been spending January and February in the Phoenix area, and that's where our friends live in the winter, and that's where our car was. So we finally got back to Phoenix, and then we started to see what the U.S. was like. It was like night and day. When we left on March 1, it was normal life. When we came back on March 22, we went for groceries the next day, and there was zero toilet paper, there were minimal meats (?), everything else was pretty normal. We just didn't know what this meant, what was coming, what was around the corner. We saw that. We went to the post office to pick up our mail that had been on hold and saw big X's on the floor about how to social distance; we'd never seen that before. You know, everything was new and strange. Then we went to the place that we'd been eating at quite a bit while we were there, a little locally-owned Italian restaurant. It was closed to everything but carryout. We saw some people that had set up their own card tables and wine bottles, and their carryout pizza right there in the strip mall. We thought, "Ok, we'll figure out how to live around this strange time." So, we ended up staying a few days, and then wanted to head back home. We drive there and drive back frequently. Everything was so different - the places we were accustomed to...the Starbucks was closed. We were like, "Oh goodness! We weren't planning on that!" We did bring our own lunches because we figured there would be difficulty getting that sort of thing. We ended up, most of the time, having to eat in our car, in some dumpy parking lot. I mean, there was sort of nowhere to go, or maybe we weren't in the right mood to figure it out, but we just ate sandwiches and fruit sitting in the car in some kind of mall or by the side of the road. When we got to our hotel, they said there wouldn't be any breakfast. What? It just hadn't registered with me that restaurants were going to be closed, and their breakfast would be closed, as well. So, we were just dumbfounded and we ended up having to go out and buy milk and cereal, and eating in our room for breakfast, and we already figured we'd probably have to eat dinner...we used these grocery shelf microwave meals as emergency food...we don't prefer to eat them! But we had our minds made up that that was what we're going to be eating for dinner for the trip home, and that's what we did. We sat in the different hotel breakfast areas...and everybody let us do that. I kept waiting for someone to tell us, "No, you're not allowed! Go to your room!" But they didn't, so we ate those things, and bleh! Finally, the real kicker was when we were in Missouri, and they had no coffee. We're like, "No! No coffee!" We had such a routine in our heads about we would always have two cups of coffee in the room, and then we'd go to breakfast, and blah, blah, blah. Well, in the other states, we were able to get coffee, but in Missouri, they were starting to take it more seriously, so, no coffee. The other thing that was weird was, well, when we got to Kansas, it was maybe a Thursday or something, they were getting ready to go to Level 4 on Monday, so they knew it was coming, but it was still everything was business as usual. You could sit down in restaurants, no precautions, no nothing. But we still ate our microwave meals and stayed away from that. But the other weird thing was...I keep a trip journal, that's why I have such a detailed memory of this...is that, I think it was a rest area in

Kansas, and they were requiring you to choose your toilet paper from the dispenser before you went in the stall. Because they didn't have enough, or thought they weren't going to have enough, or something. We had left home at the end of December, and I typically keep a pretty good supply of toilet paper, but when I'm getting ready to go on a long trip, I don't stock up for things like that...it wasn't on my mind! So, we're thinking, "Wow, we're going to get home and there won't be any toilet paper!" So, we were on the lookout for it, and we bought six rolls or so. One of the things that was interesting was that the traffic was very light. There were actually stretches where my husband, who really does not enjoy driving through cities or busier parts of the interstate, was like, "Man, if it could be like this everytime, I would love it!" It was one of those very double-edged sword kinds of things. Anyway, we got home, and people were trying to give us advice. The strangest one was that two different people told me that I had to sanitize my food when I brought it home from the grocery. Somebody sent me a Youtube video about that, and I was just trying to think my way through how that would be, why would that be a risk? I did it once, but then I decided to start using sanitizing spray on my counters after every trip to the grocery. So, I kept changing my behavior. But the very first thing I did was try to modify my face-touching. Oh, my gosh! I do that so much, and when I started hearing about the virus, I was like, "Oh, my goodness, I'm really going to have to change that behavior." And I don't know how much I've improved, but I've certainly been more mindful of it. Anyway, that's basically the story.

JS: When you got back into Hendricks County, did you notice anything different than...

JA: It was, let's see, I wrote something about going to our neighborhood Walmart on the west end of Plainfield, I think I said it was pretty normal looking. It wasn't like we came to Hendricks County and the problem was gone, but it wasn't quite as drastic. (Reading from her journal) "Everything looked fine at the house. We ate our lunch in the parking lot of the Indiana Welcome Center, which is over by Terre Haute. Went to Walmart and picked up some basic groceries." So, I guess, everything was normal there at that time. We didn't have any masks, so we weren't wearing masks. We weren't able to get any hand sanitizer. We did end up for several weeks we had Meijer shipping doing our groceries for us mostly because we're in an older age group and we just didn't understand or know what the risks were. I saw the shopper using hand sanitizer, and I was like, "Oh, where did you get that?" I mean it was so precious at that time! So, slowly, but surely, those things resolved themselves. Obviously, things have opened back up and we're all keeping our fingers crossed and trying to do everything we can to keep as safe as we can.

JS: As an older person, have you gotten worried about the resurgence again?

JA: I go back and forth, maybe even within a day. I have taken some risks and, so far so good. I just keep trying to minimize my risks. We've gone out to eat. We actually went to Bloomington, Illinois, stayed in a hotel, and ate in a restaurant. We're behind Indiana in terms of reopening, but it was still - you had to eat outside, which is not a problem, it was great weather. We've done things like that. We finally got together with all of our grandkids in their different groupings, you know, three families are involved. Depending on what their comfort level was, some of them we were more affectionate with, others we kept our distance. We have littler kids who don't quite get the (inaudible). So, it's just what their parents have taught them.

JS: Do you know anyone who has gotten sick?

JA: I do not. And for the longest time, I didn't even know anybody who knew of anybody who had gotten sick. And I counted...I know three people who knew somebody who had died. Other than that, I really haven't heard much about people who have gotten sick at all. I have some relatives that were in the healthcare system, and I've heard upsetting stories about that. But, it sort of ebbs and flows. I hear kind of scary things from them, and then I hear things like, "Oh, we were so bored. There's nothing going on. Nobody's sick right now." One time, I heard yes people are still coming in with it, but they're not as sick as they were in the beginning. And like I said, that's how I get my news. I mean I'd rather hear it from the people that are nearby, rather than somebody from another state who has a whole different life view than I do.

JS: How do you think Hendricks County, Plainfield, are doing mask-wise, mitigating circumstances, social distancing...how do you think we're doing in this area?

JA: Pretty good. I felt like people are respectful and concerned. Every once in a while, I've gone somewhere where...I can't name names or anything...we started going to Speedway gas station to get coffee in the morning because they have such a nice, little system how they were keeping you safe. We've just been selective about where we go. We go out for coffee routinely, and then everything was shut, so the gas station is always open, so we'll just get our coffee and sit in our car at Hummel Park...now that the restrooms are open! But, you know, I've felt pretty good about Hendricks County, and Plainfield and so forth, I think the most difficult thing about Plainfield is the lack of news. There is no publication. We used to live in Johnson County; they have a daily paper, *The Daily Journal*, and we got used to having that. So, we just kept it up. I always have to extrapolate what they're talking about versus what's going on in Plainfield. I suppose I could join the Facebook group, I know there's something like that, but I figure it would be just people mouthing off.

JS: It kind of is!

JA: But, it's not information that can be trusted. I do go on the Town of Plainfield's website and kind of look to see if there are any news releases or anything, but it doesn't seem like there are. I read the ICON religiously, whenever it comes. That's it, right now.

JS: Knowing what you know now, what do you think individuals, communities and governments should keep in mind for the future?

JA: These very unexpected things can happen. I have lived long enough that I already knew that, but it still surprised me how different this experience has been. The other thing is that I had read at least one book on the 1918 flu epidemic just a year ago. So, when they first started shutting everything down, and sending everyone home, and stopping all the large gatherings, I was a big fan, because I felt they were learning from some of the foolishness of 1918; 1918 people were having parades, sending people off to war, you know... it just seemed like for not very good reasons. I saw this, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, this'll do it." Well, it hasn't really, and it's really been harmful to people in terms of their economic well being. And I'm very mindful of that. I don't work anymore, but I know people that do, and I actually only have one relative whose work was truly harmed. Her company left Indiana and she lost her job. But she did land a new one, thank goodness. But everybody else that I am close to, is either retired, or they work in something that is basically essential. I have some relatives that have been working from

home for months and months and months, but they're getting a paycheck. So, we can't shut down things enough to do away with the virus completely and still keep the economy going. And the isolation is probably harmful to people, and I don't think we know yet how that's going to turn out. I feel like there's an awful lot of fear and anger, and people turning inward, and staying to themselves more. I don't know.

JS: I guess it's just a real balancing act.

JA: It must be. And you know, I'm getting accustomed to doing things that I never thought I would get accustomed to doing. At first, I could go about doing some of these modified behaviors, and I'd think, "Yeah, I can do it, but yuck! It's so awful!" But now I find myself being a little more normal about it. I guess we're kind of taking more pleasure in everyday things than we previously did. We're noticing the birds in our backyard more, we're cooking more, and like I said, going to the park and drinking our coffee. And now people are there and you can watch young families and cute kids, and it's really enjoyable.

JS: Well, do you have anything else you want to...

JA: Oh, I do have one more thing! I forgot to tell you this. We found out, basically, as we were boarding our plane, that we were on the last plane out.

JS: Oh, my goodness!

JA: Yeah! And when we booked it, it was the only one we could get; we weren't even sure if we'd be able to drive that far, that quickly. But, it was so mind boggling to think like, "What would have happened?"

JS: I guess you would have been stuck in New Zealand?

JA: Yes, we would have been stuck in New Zealand. And we love New Zealand; the people are wonderful, and the country is beautiful. But we just didn't know what we would have been allowed to do. Would we be able to re-rent a car? Would we be able to rent a house? As outside people... I mean, they were being very strict with their own returning citizens. Returning citizens were required to self-isolate for 14 days. So, I just have no idea what they would have done with us. But, it worked out, and now it's a story.

JS: And now it's a story that will go through history! Everyone's going to hear it now!