

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Jessica Elston

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

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Abstract: Jessica Elston is the financial manager at Plainfield Library, a Plainfield School Corporation board member, and a resident of Plainfield. She also has four teenage children. She tells us, in addition to how her family fared the pandemic, how the school board responded, and what issues surrounded that response. She also talks about her children's school experiences, high school and college.

JS: Today is September 15, 2020. I'm sitting here with Jessica Elston, who is the financial manager at Plainfield Public Library. She's also a resident of Plainfield, a mother of teenagers, and a school board member. So, we're going to get her perspective about the COVID-19 pandemic here in 2020. Jessica, welcome. Let's just go ahead and start. When you first learned about the virus, what were your thoughts, what did you think was going to happen?

JE: When I first heard about it, I guess, across the ocean, I paid attention and listened to a degree, and then, of course, once things started becoming more widespread, you know, then you realize that it's something that definitely could impact us in ways that maybe we hadn't anticipated. I think there's some things that you can control, and some things you can't, so you just control the things you can, and know that the things you can't, you just do what you can to make a difference in your house or your area, but sometimes there's nothing you can do when it's out of your control.

JS: What issues have concerned you most?

JE: Personally, honestly, again there's only so much...we wash our hands, we do the things we're supposed to, but, ultimately, people can get it even when they're doing everything they're supposed to be doing, and we know that, so I guess, I don't want to say that it was something we were frantic about in our household, we were just diligent and did what we could. Of course, the worldwide impact is, you know, there is the concern of balancing the economic fall that a lot of families are facing versus making sure that we try to keep the spread from becoming too much to handle, and I think that's a no-win situation, because there's devastating impacts on both sides. Always try to think about what could be done, and sometimes, like I said, there's some things you can't control.

JS: First of all, has COVID-19 affected your job?

JE: No, other than when the library closed and I came in and worked when I needed to, to keep things going from a financial standpoint. And fortunately, for our family, our concern for our jobs was not a concern we had. My husband is a police officer, and of course, with the nature of my

job, we're very fortunate not to have that economic impact on our lives.

JS: As a board member, has the pandemic affected the school board at all?

JE: It's changed how we've had to have some conversations. And at one of our first board meetings, we had the president at the schools to conduct it, and then the rest of us came in as Zoom members. So just adjusting like a lot of community agencies and boards are having to do, that's been universal, but overall, we've just adapted and continue to do what we've been doing.

JS: Here's a question I like to ask everyone. What did you do during the lockdown for entertainment? I like to ask that because everybody has different answers.

JE: So, I'll be honest, I didn't mind it, because I enjoy being at home, and being with my family, and my kids. It wasn't the worst thing in the world for me. Just coming in and doing my work, making sure my work was caught up, coming in to do it when it needed to be done, and leaving when it was done and going back home. But when I was there, it was probably a little more TV watching, catching up on some things, and reading; being outside, fortunately it was a time where it was cold at first, but we got to go outside a little bit more and work on the yard and do some things. And so, I was one of those people who was not stir-crazy.

JS: How about your teenagers? What did they do during the lockdown?

JE: So, my oldest just graduated from college. Fortunately for him, he lived off-campus, so he was able to stay in his apartment and finish up the rest of the school year. Then, my other son is 18, and he had to come home, they closed the dorms. So he had to come home in March and it was a challenge for him. He did not like the online learning. He preferred to be at school, and he is a social creature, so it was hard for him. And then my two youngest are 15, and I think what happens is that you have a circle of friends, the ones you always hang out with. So we allowed them to do that just, you know, under some different circumstances, but it's almost like family and siblings at that point. So, it was challenging, and we did have some restrictions for them to not go and do things they normally did, but with their phones, they're just a message away! So, there was a lot of time on their phones.

JS: Have your college students gone back to school yet?

JE: No, well, yes. So, like I said, my oldest graduated, and unfortunately, this is a really cruddy time to be looking for employment. He's a software engineering major, which is a very strong degree, but a lot of companies are just trying to scale down now, and some of the demands aren't quite as high, so he's hoping to find something that will be a good fit for him. My other son is a sophomore at Trine, and he did go back, and they are doing in-class learning with masks, and everything else. And, it's not a huge campus, it's 2500 kids, but he has a fraternity there he's involved with, so that helps a lot from that standpoint. But he's a chemical engineering major, and that's a hard one to do online, so...

JS: Is he in the dorms?

JE: He's in the dorms, but he spends a lot of time at the fraternity house.

JS: What do they do at the dorms? Do they have to wear masks? How do they do that?

JE: So, the rules at Trine are that if you're in your dorm, you do not have to wear a mask. If you leave your dorm, even to go to a neighbor, you need to have masks on.

JS: Do you mean, in your dorm room?

JE: Yes, so if you go down the hall, you need to have a mask on.

JS: So, do they actually police that?

JE: You know, I think, I don't want to say that they police it, but I'm sure that if they notice it, yes they're going to say something. I do know there was some messages sent out that there were things on campus that they were concerned about and they sent a message out to students and parents again reminding kids how important this is. You know, I think obviously, these kids are entering a part of their lives, yes they're becoming adults, but we have to remember that these are still kids to a degree. And so, we have high expectations that they're going to do some of these things, but we also know that, you know...

JS: Do they have to take any tests, or did they have to do any COVID testing before they went back.

JE: No, they did not have to do any testing. They just had to affirm that they had no symptoms, that they'd not been in contact with anybody who had symptoms, and that. And Trine has not had any major issues or major cases. They did change their scheduling, so instead of having a Fall Break, and being out at Christmas, they're having no breaks. So they started school and there's no Fall Break, they will go straight up to Thanksgiving. So they'll end early, but just go straight to prevent kids from being able to go places and come back.

JS: So they get a longer Christmas break?

JE: Yeah, at this point, they'll have a longer Christmas break, and start back up, tentatively, in January.

JS: Let's talk about the community. How do you think the outbreak has affected our community, Plainfield. Do you think anything's changed a great deal?

JE: I think I've seen several things. First of all, I think it reminds us, and I know it sounds syrupy, but I do think Plainfield is a community that wants to help its residents. And we saw that through several outreaches from the town, helping deliver items to people who were at high risk, or who had trouble getting out to get the things they needed, whether it was food or medicine. We've seen more awareness of people as they go through their struggles with jobs, or whatever else it is, to make sure that we are providing as much food and support as we can. The schools were providing lunches at the time, even though school wasn't in session because they knew that a lot of families would have trouble since the kids were not able to eat at school. So, I think it just kind of stepped up the awareness of the needs of our community, and pushed a lot of things that were already happening to the forefront in terms of their importance. I think we'll see

a lot of those kinds of services probably continue in some form afterwards.

JS: You're pretty active in your church, aren't you? How about your church community?

JE: The church community is, I think it's the same thing. It was hard, again, balancing the importance of being able to gather and worship, and then versus the safety of gathering and worshipping. So I think a lot of churches in Plainfield, in noticing now they handled things were the more cautious side of things. Having Facebook services, as well as doing parking lot services, or providing options for people, you know, if you feel safe and we social distance, you can come in, but we will also still have a version you can watch online. So, I think again, churches have found a way to adapt and still support their members.

JS: There's lots of opinions about what's going on. Have you had an opinion and changed it over the course, or have you seen anyone else that had opinions and changed them over the course of this time?

JE: Yeah, in these situations, there's always extremes and some people who believe it's not a thing, and some people who believe...not that it's not serious, I'm not trying to say that it's not...but that maybe they kind of overreact in the other direction. I think when you have people in those camps, it's going to be pretty hard to convince them otherwise. So I think it's back to the stand that this is something we have to handle within our own home, and within our community, and in terms of a massive switch in opinion, I would say no. I mean it's something we have to consider in our everyday lives, and it's something that impacts people around us, and it's something that impacts people around us differently, and I think we have to remember that how it affects us in our home may not be how it affects people in their own homes. So, I think sometimes people build their opinions off their experiences, so I think just trying to be understanding of where everybody is coming from and how it affects them is maybe how some of their decisions lie, and just being aware of that when having conversations. But overall, I wouldn't say my opinion has shifted, but it is interesting how no matter what the situation is, how you see people, some come together, and some dig their heels in a little deeper.

JS: Right. It just occurred to me that you said your husband is a policeman here in Plainfield. Has he mentioned anything about issues regarding mask wearing? Does he get calls from people? Anything like that going on?

JE: The department will get calls sometimes, and you know, there's only so much...it's not a law that the officers can enforce. I mean, it's a mandate, but it's not something they can enforce. So, obviously having conversations and encouraging it, and exemplifying it by being sure that they're wearing masks, is what they're doing for the most part. And there's always situations, where, you know, there's unusual circumstances, but as a whole, it's not been something that has become a drain on the department from that standpoint, where people are complaining. Yeah, people will complain, but...

JS: Has COVID-19 changed your relationships with family, friends and community?

JE: Again, being able to spend some time during the lockdown was...at some point, we were all going a little nutty, but it did provide an opportunity for more time...you know, when I wasn't going to meetings and we were on some Zoom meetings with some of the other committees I serve on...you know... being able to be at home during those meetings actually, I kinda liked.

So, yeah, it was an unexpected outcome, but being able to spend that time with them was nice. And obviously, we couldn't communicate face-to-face with a lot of people, but Zoom and phones just allowed some of those conversations to continue, not obviously in the same way that they had, but I think about this happening before the iPhone came around...it would have been very different. It'd be interesting to think about how good and bad things might have developed.

JS: People would have been much more isolated. Do you know anyone who's gotten sick?

JE: My son was with some friends in Bloomington, and one of his friend's friends had tested positive, so they went on quarantine just as a precaution. He tested negative. He said he had some times there where he did feel some symptoms, so whether the test was right or wrong. So, technically, he was negative, but...

JS: It's so hard to tell. I know of many people who have tested positive, but simply didn't have any symptoms. And then people they were in close contact with also tested negative. It just doesn't make any sense.

JE: Yeah, there's some confusion. Maybe he had it and tested at a point where it hadn't, you know, built up in his system enough, because he was tested pretty early. Then, yeah, I know there are a lot of people that do test positive with no symptoms, so yeah, you have to do the testing, that's important. But I do think that sometimes, I don't want to say that it's inaccurate, but sometimes it's just not completely...

JS: Yeah, it's hard to tell. What have been your primary sources of news during this?

JE: Honestly, I try to read what I can, and I try to stay away from...I just want to glean the information I need; news to me has become so drama-driven and ratings-driven, with headlines and things...it just makes me want to shake my head sometimes. So, I try to read more neutral news sites, just to try to get the information without slant from either side.

JS: Where do you find that information?

JE: Well, NPR is usually pretty good. You know, I do see headlines on some of the other things, and sometimes I look at them to see what's being said, just so I can kind of get a feel for what's going on. But, honestly, watching the evening news at night, I used to, I just don't anymore.

JS: It's hard to watch it! It's depressing!

JE: Well, depressing, and frustrating, and it's just so much, so many of our struggles, I think stem from how the information is being relayed.

JS: How do you think municipal leaders and government officials in Plainfield have responded to the outbreak. Do you think they're doing a good job?

JE: Again, I do think so. Seeing the needs and the town providing services for the residents that came out due to the pandemic, local businesses that were struggling being helped by the town. We have Level Two here, that is a resource for entrepreneurs and new businesses, coming in and helping guide them in terms of here's what's available to you and providing some grant

money through the town to help the businesses during this. You can prepare for some things, but goodness, this is something you can't prepare for. So just helping businesses to know that the community supports them, helping the residents to know that the community supports them, and the schools helping the students...you know...whether it's food or education, I mean, there's so many things the schools provide resources for, as well, besides just in the classroom. Things were being done, but again, it just sped up some of the processes to be able to adapt to the fact that we had to do things differently.

JS: How about the schools? Since you're on the board, you're really in a position to tell us how the school responded.

JE: You know, the school's been challenged with so many things over the last few years, things that we didn't expect or prepare for, or could be prepared for. Years ago, we had the incident with Brian Kil, and we've had just things you've never been through before, you can't say, "Oh, this is how we did this last time" because this is the first time we've done so many different things. This is no different. Our school administrators are, I can't say enough about them, they are ahead of the curve in their planning and preparation, and when we knew that schools could potentially shut down, earlier this spring, administrators were letting teachers know, you know what, every day could be the last day we're in class, so just be ready to go virtual the next day, start having your lessons ready so that that transition can happen. Make sure the students have everything they need to be able to learn from home. And that began, like I said, early in the year. Just being prepared for things in a way that makes transitions easier, but then learning from them, even that transition we did back in March when the schools were closed, versus how we're handling it now, we've learned a lot from that. So, as much as we were prepared, we could have been at that point even more prepared. You do learn from it, perfect, and tweak it and make it better, and that's what our administrators always do.

JS: There were reports that there was a lot of disagreement from the teachers about whether to open the schools. In fact, there were some protests. Did the board discuss that?

JE: Again, we were fortunate, and I know I keep saying this, but we have a stellar group of teachers who are professional and know how to address concerns and discuss things in a way that is productive. And fortunately, as a whole, our teachers understand they have the same fears as any other human being would have in these circumstances, but they have all been above and beyond in preparing and being ready for what it would take in working with their students. I was able to spend the first day of school at Central Elementary, specifically with some kindergarteners, and watching the teachers work and adapt and, again, the first day of school, they're still learning how some things are going to work and figuring out how to make it better. Our students, really, you walk into a school, and I don't think you would instantly feel like there's something wrong. It's just how it works now and, fortunately, at the schools, we've had a total of 12 cases so far, with over 6300 students and staff members. And nobody has been diagnosed with COVID in that core group, so everything has been, for the most part from something that's probably happened outside the school. So, again, that just shows that the teachers and students are doing everything that they need to to make it a safe environment.

JS: They really are. I just go the email that everyone's out of quarantine and there's no cases right now, so that's amazing. So, I guess that was my next question. Have you heard anything about how the students are doing with masking and all that?

JE: They are doing well. You know, they understand. There's always going to be situations that, for whatever reasons, pop up, but the vast majority understands and complies, and does what they need to, because for a lot these students, they didn't enjoy the home-learning version, and so, for them to be able to stay in school, it's important what they do.

JS: You were talking about how e-learning back in the Spring didn't really go that well. I know that my daughter said that she didn't really feel like she learned much. Have you guys heard about any sort of backlash from those last couple months...were there any issues with grades, and you know...

JE: As a whole, it was a hard transition, again, trying to figure out exactly...do we allow the students...and you have to think, too, how that looks for an elementary student is much different than how it looks for a high school student. And so, learning and understanding the idea was that the curriculum was out there for students to do, ask if they have questions, learned from that standpoint that it's probably a little better to have teachers in front of students regularly to keep them more engaged. I will say, having seen some other school systems, that we were probably some of the more prepared of the school systems. And having the resources available to students who needed to be able to go home on their laptops and their devices, being able to have those opportunities. But I think you're going to find across the board, nobody's going to argue the fact that there was learning loss during that time period for every student in every school system, and that is a challenge that we want to make sure that we can make up for some of that lost time, which is even more of a reason to be sure that we've got kids in the classroom, and try to make sure it's as consistent as it can be to make up for some of that lost time. And then, being able to, if we need to go to that e-learning, do it in a way that's more productive.

JS: Is there a specific plan to make up for that?

JE: Yeah, the teachers know, and sometimes you know it's going to be a problem, but you don't know how much of a problem until you get those kids back in the classroom. And again, some students will have more loss than others, depending on how they were able to connect during the Spring.

JS: Especially with poorer areas, you know, like inner cities; they don't have laptops.

JE: Right, Plainfield, as a community, is so fortunate to have families that are able, not that it was easy, and I'm not going to suggest that it was...you know, my kids were all older, but you know, for parents to have to spend time with different levels of school, and that kind of thing, is very challenging. So having resources, having families that are there to be able to support their students and their kids does make a difference.

JS: One more question. Knowing what you know now, what do you think individuals, communities and governments need to keep in mind for the future?

JE: You know, I think planning is always the word, and being prepared. And I think we've always done that as a community and with the organizations I'm involved in. I think also you have to remember that you can plan for everything, but you have to be adaptable. So, if you have a plan being able to prepare for a pandemic... we thought we were very well prepared, and

we definitely were, but we have to remember that being flexible, continuing to learn what works and what doesn't, and being able to adjust to that, and being able to be willing to see how things impact from ways that maybe we hadn't thought of originally. The more you do that, the more quickly you can react, and the more effectively you can react. And I think as long as everybody is willing to do that and be supportive of each other, you can't prevent things like this, all you can do is work through them. I think the community and the organizations within the community have done that in ways that we never thought we would have to. From the library standpoint, serving our patrons. From the school standpoint, serving our students. And from the town standpoint, serving our community. Everybody has thought of things in ways that they've not had to before. As long as we continue to do that, we'll be able to adjust.

JS: Thank you, Jessica, for participating. I really appreciate it!

JE: Absolutely!