

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Lacy Ryan

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

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Abstract: Lacy Ryan is a Plainfield resident, and an art teacher in the Avon School district. She talks about the stress teachers are under, how students seem to be faring, Hendricks County schools' responses to the pandemic, and how she and her family fared during the pandemic.

JS: Today is Wednesday, January 13, 2021. This is Jeannine Spurgin, and I'm speaking to Lacy Ryan, an Art teacher at Avon High School. She's also a resident of Plainfield, and we're going to talk to her about her experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Hello, Lacy! When you first heard about the virus, what did you think?

LR: It was kind of interesting, just because we didn't really know what to expect and it was like, "this is kind of a big deal, but we're not sure it's a big deal." So, I guess me, personally, I was a little bit worried, but I'd say I didn't have any idea that it was going to be as impactful as it ended up being at this point.

JS: Did you think about your students?

LR: I think I just didn't know. You know, this concept of shutting down schools was fairly foreign to all of us.

JS: It's actually kind of hard to remember what it was like at first.

LR: A little bit, yeah. I guess I thought it was kind of like the flu; it was going to go around, but I had no idea that everything would shut down the way it did.

JS: Then, once you knew it was going to be bad, what most concerned you?

LR: I guess, just the fear of catching it, and how it was going to impact everyone personally and economically. Avon, we were the first school corporation to shut down in Indiana. We had the first positive case that we knew of, and so it just happened so quickly.

JS: Speaking of that, I don't think Avon has any plans of shutting down again at this point, right?

LR: I don't think we really have a plan to do anything. We're kind of trying to do the best we can and staying as much as we possibly can. You know, there are some soft thresholds where if we hit a point, or we don't have enough teachers to teach, then we'd have to shut down, but they're pretty adamant that if we can by any chance be at school, they want the kids and the teachers

in the building.

JS: It's like that at Plainfield, too. We just looked at the COVID map today, and it's gotten VERY red, so I was just kind of wondering if we're starting to make some contingency plans for a shutdown again. Everyone says, "No! We're never going to do it again," but I don't know. How has COVID-19 affected your job? Might take you a while to answer that one!

LR: That's a long story! I guess the short answer is, I've been teaching for quite some time now, I'm pretty comfortable in my job, and I feel like this is worse than being a first-year teacher. We can't plan for anything. We don't know if we're going to be virtual, or hybrid, or in-person. We try to plan for in-person, but we have kids on quarantine regularly, coming in and going out. So it's like we have to teach in-person, but we also have to be teaching virtually at the same time every single day. So, that's kind of the short answer. We don't know what to plan for. When this first happened, we went e-learning. I got lessons and plans together for e-learning, and you're kind of smooth sailing for a while, and then you're back in school. At the beginning of the school year, we were in full-person, so I had all my lessons ready to go. And then, it was very similar to the first time. We got not even one day notice - we're shutting down and going virtual. So all my plans that I had made...you know, my motto became "don't use pen," like in my lesson plans and everything, I was like, everything got erased. And then we were going hybrid, so everything got erased again. I was laughing at myself, and my motto became "don't use a pen." I started writing all my plans and lessons on post-its so I could just tear them off and throw them away when the time came.

JS: So, you're just kind of taking it day-by-day, then?

LR: Pretty much. I mean, we're doing the best we can with the lessons and trying to teach our students, but we really can't plan very far in advance now.

JS: As you are going along in the year, how do you feel like your students are doing in this? Do you think that they're faring okay, or do you think that there might be some problems in the future because of all of this?

LR: I think it's hard to say. I will say, I've noticed that there is definitely more anxiety and mental illness going on with the students; quantitatively, I see more of my kids struggling with mental illness right now. Having said that, I think because Avon and Hendricks County, in general, is doing everything it can to keep the kids in school as much as possible, academically, I feel like the kids are falling behind a little bit. But I feel like it's nothing compared to the schools that have been e-learning for months on end. I feel like we're doing pretty well comparatively. It makes a difference to be in the classroom.

JS: Yes, that's what everyone says. I know my daughter, she's a senior, and she hates e-learning, so yeah, she's pretty glad to be in class.

LR: From a personal standpoint, I want to be working from home, so I can feel safe, but, you know, for the good of the cause, this is the best way.

JS: Right. What about people that you know? Has the pandemic really affected the employment of people you know personally? Any stories there?

LR: Not really. I mean, when this first happened in March, a year ago, my husband was home for several weeks, more or less on furlough, and that was kind of nice in a certain way. But, my parents are retired, so it's not really affecting them too much. My sister is working from home. I know there are a lot of people that are having to get aid and assistance right now, but no one that I know directly at this moment. There's a lot of people working from home, and things have changed, but I don't have people near me that are necessarily struggling.

JS: How about your family's day-to-day activities? Has the pandemic affected those a great deal?

LR: Not terribly. It did at first, when everything got shut down. But, at this point, I'm definitely more stressed, I'm definitely more exhausted. You know, just because there's so much more work to do. I'm thankful that my daughter is going to school every day, so her day-to-day activities are pretty much the same. The extracurriculars that she does are outside of school, so those haven't really changed much, either. It's not huge groups of people...her piano is one-on-one with the teacher, so even that has been pretty consistent.

JS: I hadn't thought about those little things like piano lessons. Did you stop the piano lessons for a while when this first started?

LR: Yes, they were doing virtual lessons for quite some time. And then, as soon as the piano teacher could get them back in the studio, they mask up and hand sanitize, and take all the precautions, but they are back in person.

JS: What have been the biggest challenges you've faced personally?

LR: I think just not being able to visit family. My husband's family is in Ireland and we can't travel there. My dad is high-risk, he has compromised immunity, so I can't really see my parents right now. So, just not being able to visit either one of our families is a little hard.

JS: So, you haven't seen your parents at all since this started, or if you have, how did you do it?

LR: I saw my parents at Christmas. My husband was home for two weeks, and Bella and I were out of school for two weeks, and so we self-quarantined, and then I saw them that weekend before school started again. At that point, we had been just the three of us in our house for almost two whole weeks.

JS: Is that the last time you saw them?

LR: Yes.

JS: And how are they doing?

LR: They're doing pretty well. My mom is a social creature, so she's struggling a little bit. My dad's a bit of a hermit, so he's content.

JS: Yes, us introverts don't really mind this all that much! Are they pretty isolated?

LR: Yes, for the most part. My mom, her normal day-to-day routine is going out to lunch with her girlfriends, and running errands, and you know, she's just out and about, be it social or just taking care of business...she can't sit down. So, it's kind of putting her in a funny place.

JS: During those two months we were shut down, it was just so weird, and I love to ask everybody, what did you do during those two months you were stuck at your house? What kind of things did you do to entertain yourselves?

LR: Well, our family is just the three of us, and no one else in the family lives close to us. So, we're always in our own family bubble, so to speak. But we were doing board games. My daughter's science projects were full-on building assignments, so it was kind of fun. Our house was a disaster every day, but one of them was to build a birdhouse that had to be up high, so it was "who can build the tallest structure?" And she had this tower of boxes and stuff going almost all the way to the ceiling, and a rube goldberg machine, and stuff like that. So, a lot of it was actually like her working on projects, and that was super fun to watch. We do family games a lot, so that wasn't outside of our realm. But I was teaching virtually, and she was e-learning, so it was like, we were home, but we still plenty to do.

JS: You have the benefit of existing in two towns, Avon and Plainfield. Do you think there's a difference from the way Avon handled the pandemic with Plainfield?

LR: Definitely. I have teacher friends at both, obviously. So, seeing both and hearing people's stories... I have friends at Brownsburg as well...it's like no school is running the same way. No two schools are handling this the same way. I know at Plainfield, from the very beginning, they were told for the students that chose the virtual option, Plainfield teachers are teaching in-person and virtual all the time, whereas Avon teachers were told we would not be given virtual students with the regular kids. You would have a class of virtual students, or you would have an in-person class.

JS: Which do you think was better?

LR: I think ended up being a little bit of a moot point because we have so many kids quarantined that we are always teaching in-person and virtually. I think I preferred Avon's response to it, like you either get a class of virtual kids or not, but as it turns out, we just have to plan on having virtual and in-person kids at all times at this point. It's just the little nuances how different administrations are requiring you to set up your virtual lessons, and things like that. It's not major differences, but there's just little nuances from school to school.

JS: What about the communities themselves - Avon versus Plainfield. Is there any difference?

LR: I don't really know. I can say from a teacher point of view, I feel that Avon is struggling a little more. You know, I checked the school numbers and how many kids are quarantined, and I keep comparing like Plainfield vs. Brownsburg, Brownsburg vs. Avon; and our numbers are huge comparatively for kids that test positive and the number of kids we have quarantined at any given time. So, I think as a community, Avon seems to have higher numbers. I don't know if that's lack of reporting, or if our community is not being as safe as everybody else, I don't know!

JS: That is so interesting. I did not know that.

LR: But from the very beginning our numbers have been considerably higher than our neighbors'.

JS: Do you have any problem with people not wearing masks in Avon?

LR: Not that I've noticed, no. The kids are really good with it in school.

JS: Tell me about social distancing. Are you guys able to handle that okay at school?

LR: No, not at all. I mean, we do the best we can. Me, personally, I have a small classroom. When it's a full class...I had a class of 12 kids, and a class of 27 kids...so when it's full, they are shoulder to shoulder, and there's really not much I can do about it. It's a small classroom. Teachers have been asked to spread out the desks and tables as much as we possibly can. And in some classrooms, that means you can spread it out wall-to-wall; for me, I have supplies, you know the kids have to access supplies in different areas, so I can't move my desks from wall-to-wall. A lot of art classrooms have tables, so the kids are facing each other, so there's nothing else you can do. So, there really is no concept of social distancing.

JS: Do you know anyone who has gotten the virus?

LR: Yes.

JS: And how did they do?

LR: Not terrible. I mean, I think it was comparable to the flu - they didn't feel great, and they were kind of miserable for a few days, but they recovered well. The two people I know are in their 30s to 40s age range, so they bounced back pretty well. A few of my students have had it, and the one thing I get from them is shortness of breath after very low activity.

JS: What are your primary sources of news?

LR: A little bit the internet, and a little bit, like, I watch the news almost every night, but I'm keeping it kind of limited at this point. It's hard to take it all in, so I kind of try to limit myself to and half hour or less a day.

JS: Do you watch local news or national news?

LR: I watch CBS evening news.

JS: You know, a lot of people have said that. I didn't know so many people watched the network evening news. And that's your primary source, that's where you get most of your info?

LR: Most of it, yes.

JS: Do you think there are important issues that have or have not been covered by the media? Or if the media is doing a proper job in covering the pandemic?

LR: I guess I feel like they're probably doing a proper job, or the best they can. You know, I feel like this really is hitting so many people in so many different ways, covering the numbers, covering the amount of people who are going to food banks and things like that. Those are the big effects that are happening from COVID.

JS: How about government officials and municipal leaders in Hendricks County, how do you feel that they've responded?

LR: Everyone's doing the best they can. Honestly, I feel that this big push to keep the kids in classrooms at all costs, to a certain extent, is really costing us. Teachers are struggling, the stress level, the tears. We are barely keeping it together right now. But I also know the flipside of that is parents barely being able to keep together when their kids are at home e-learning. I feel like they can't win. I think the principals and superintendents are in the same position - someone's going to mad at them, no matter what. So, they really just have to choose their battles and think, in the big picture, what is the best decision?

JS: Barring the pandemic going away, what would make your job a little less stressful? Is there something administrators or municipal people can do to make it easier for teachers?

LR: I think our admin is very supportive of us at this point. We really have to focus on what is most important for us to teach our kids. We're getting rid of the extra stuff. Unfortunately, to me, some of that comes with you're really just focused on learning, as opposed to right now, I'm snapping around to like, you know what? I just want to make my class fun. I need the kids to learn something, I need them to learn how to draw, but I also need them to just relax and have some fun while they're here. I feel like everything is so stressful right now. I think, from the top down, not having so much focusing put on standardized testing right now, not having so much focus being put on school grades, and stuff like that - just let us do the best we can.

JS: Are they still stressing testing?

LR: I don't really know what's going on this year. I know the kids will take the test, but I don't know how it will affect the schools and school grades. I don't know what they'll do with the results at this point.

JS: Does the school administration have programs or any type of things to help the teachers with their stress levels and everything else going on, therapist, or something?

LR: I don't know exactly what's available, per say. I do know Avon is really good about taking care of the mental health of the kids. We have so many resources available to the kids. I don't necessarily know if the kids even know all of the resources that are available to them. But we counselors and a lot of different resources for them, and I'm sure, if a teacher really needed to use those resources, I'm absolutely positive they would open them up for teachers, as well. But at the same time, teachers, even though we're stressing and we have things going on, we're adults and at the point where we have coping mechanisms.

JS: I guess that's true, yeah.

LR: I think part of the focus is that the kids don't really have coping mechanisms yet, so really,

focusing on them is more important, I think.

JS: I've gotten the impression that there's a lot of pressure on teachers to produce the high grades, get those test grades up, and all that. Do you think that they're kind of lowering that pressure on you guys, reducing the heat?

LR: Definitely. I mean, I've been really happy with our principal and our administration at Avon. They've been trying to make sure that teachers streamline everything - it makes it easier for the teachers, it makes it easier for the students if the students know exactly where to go to get information. I feel like they've found a really nice balance of not micromanaging, but also streamlining everything, and allowing us to do the best you can with what you have, and being very supportive of that.

JS: I think I have just one more question. Knowing what you know now, and everything that's happened...you know, we're a year into this thing...if somebody is listening to this 50-100 years from now, what's your big takeaway? What do you think people should think about in the future, if they're faced with something like this?

LR: I think maybe just understanding that you have to do what you have to do for the good of the cause. And if that means social distancing and wearing masks, and being safe, and not just for yourself, but your friends and neighbor, everyone else, sometimes you have to make sacrifices for the good of the cause.

JS: You know, a lot of people answer that. I'm not sure why everybody doesn't think that! Ok, that's a great answer.

LR: I think right now, my nugget of wisdom would be just, I'm trying to do everything I can with my students, with myself - have fun, be fun, make fun. Even in the worst of times, find a way to bring happiness to yourself and others around you.

JS: Brilliant! I love that. That's all the questions I have. Thank you for participating in this!