

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Patricia Cummings

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

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Location: Plainfield, Indiana

Abstract: Pat Cummings is a senior resident of Plainfield, Indiana. She tells us how she fared during the pandemic, how some of her elderly friends fared, and shares some historical perspectives of the pandemic.

J: Today is Sept. 1, 2020. This is Jeannine Spurgin and I am interviewing Patricia Cummings, a local senior resident of Plainfield, Indiana, who is going to tell us about her experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Hello Pat!

P: Hello.

J: So, let's just go ahead and start out with a question. When you first heard about the virus, what were your thoughts about it?

P: Well, I really didn't know what to think. At the end of January, I'd gone to Seattle to visit my brother, and I'd not heard much about the virus. But my United flight to and from there had plenty of extra seats. So when I got home, concerned neighbors said, "Oh my goodness! You went to the beginning of the virus in the states!" And I really didn't know what to think until we started hearing it on TV more and more, and they started giving numbers.

J: So, what concerned you most when you first heard about it?

P: I think I got concerned as the time went along. I didn't get really scared, but then I thought, "Well, ok. I heeded the warnings, and totally appreciated Dr. Anthony Fauci, who is head of the National Center for Infectious Diseases, who appeared on TV quite a bit. I carried wipes, because the grocery store didn't always have wipes. Since then, they've gotten very, very good about this, and since then, I've seen this big machine, in one grocery store in Terre Haute, will put all the carts through this machine, it disinfects them, then they put them out for the customers. So that's a very interesting thing I've seen with it. But, I did wear a mask when they said to; I think I wore a mask from the beginning. I didn't know how scared to be. I didn't get frightened. I just used precaution. I haven't been scared through the whole thing, even though I am the elderly, my daughter keeps telling me! So, I've never been terribly scared that I won't go out of my house, and I've known four people who have survived it.

J: So, you did know four people who have all survived? How were their symptoms?

P: The first one, I know the wife of the man that had it; he had to be home for quite a while. And I'd say he's middle 50's. Another person is late 50's. I don't know how these people got it and all, but her symptoms were diarrhea and sleeping. She said she just wanted to sleep all the

time. But just recently I contacted her and she has said that she's beginning to eat some, and not sleep as much. Then the other two people were husband and wife. They disbelieved this. They really disbelieved this. They didn't think there was any problem. They really were not afraid at all. And they went on a fishing trip with other people and they contracted this. They weren't down too long. I don't know what they did; I'm not real close to them, I just know them, but they've all survived and so forth.

J: My mother-in-law and niece both had diarrhea, as well.

P: And they had the COVID?

J: Yes; they both had stomach issues. Nobody I know has had respiratory problems.

P: Right. And the thing is, they didn't really mention the stomach problems in the beginning.

J: Right. How has the COVID-19 affected you and your family's day-to-day activities?

P: I would go across the street to visit the children that are over there; there are three little children, 6, 4, and 2. And I will just stand at the fence and we'll talk; and the little boy is so affectionate, he has to climb up the fence so I can rub his back a little bit. He's just a doll baby! And a friend would come, and she would have a mask on and stand in the driveway, and I would stand on the stoop, and we'd talk, and she might bring me something and put it on the chair, or something like that. But I thought she was so fearful of getting it. But really, she was fearful I would get it, because I'm the elderly. But in the meantime, when things eased a little, I met my daughter. My daughter lives 125 miles from me and my son lives 300 miles from me. I have not seen him since December, but we talk a lot. But my daughter and I did meet halfway and ate lunch when things were beginning to open. And I've gone with friends to have lunch at a couple places, and that seems to have been ok. And I do have a grandson who is a teacher. We'll see how that works with his classes when they start. We'll see what happens. But I think I really feel badly, really, for those who are by themselves as I am. I don't feel bad for myself because I can get out and go, but the people who are really stranded at their house...because they have to be, not because of the COVID, and then family can't visit, and then also if they have someone in the hospital, they couldn't visit them. That was a big concern of mine, hoping that we had nobody in the hospital that was terminally ill, and that's another thing, because they couldn't even say goodbye to that person. So, those are the things that really have concerned me, I think.

J: Everybody seems to think that wearing a mask is a huge challenge. What kind of challenges do you think you have faced?

P: Well, the funny thing is, I put the mask in the car, I have the wipes in the car; I take off my regular glasses and put on my sunglasses; I get to the place; I change from my sunglasses to my regular glasses, because I don't like those glasses that change on their own; so in the meantime, I will get out of the car, I've got the mask, but forgot the wipe; I'm halfway in the place, I go back and get the wipe, and so forth. And those have been the challenges - that I've got these extra things to do before I go into this place! That was a big challenge. And then I decided to have the kitchen painted, and a few other small places in the house painted, and I had to have it washed down first. So we had to keep moving that date later and later forward, so

that they could come and wash it down and feel ok about it, and then the painter could come. But then I decided to fall down two steps because I wasn't looking, and injured my foot, not too badly, I think it's mostly tendons and nothing is broken; but now I have to go have that looked at. So the challenge there will be I may have to have my daughter over here for a day just to figure out what I'm going to do. I don't know. Like am I going to sleep downstairs or use the stairs? Just those kinds of things, you know?

J: What did you, your family and friends do for recreation during the lockdown?

P: Well, not much. Mine was, I had gotten two books from the library, so I read them. I'm an artist (I don't usually call myself that, but everyone thinks I am), so I did two pictures. And when my grandson saw one of them, he said he thought his wife would like a picture like that. So I said, "Ok, I'll do another one." So I've done two pictures and I've read; I've cleaned out a closet or two, and whatever, and set it out in the garage. Since I was teacher for so many years, I've got some books that I love and I have to figure out what to do with them. So just trying to do something every now and then to keep myself occupied and missing people, in a way. Things just aren't the same. I hope it's not the new normal that people talk about!

J: Right. Well, that was my next question. Now that things have started opening up a bit, are you able to do more for recreation? Are you able to get out more now? Or do you still kind of feel like you're locked down?

P: Well, I don't feel like I'm locked down because a neighbor and I walk a lot, and that's something we did do, you know, six feet apart, we walked. I really don't ride a bike or play tennis, or whatever, anymore, because I just don't. But I do walk. And because gardens have returned with this, I have put three plants in containers on the other side of the house, and I grew some things I wanted to grow, so I did do that. Gardens have always been important, of course, but they grew more important during this time. And I remember so well during WWII, we had two big gardens. Meeting with friends, I did take lunch to a friend's house and we sat on her patio, you know, six feet apart, and had lunch from a place from town that was doing carry-out. And that was good, just talking...talking to people and trying to get through it. I never had a dull day. I can keep busy, and being a little concerned about this foot, I thought, they're not going to put me in something I can't get around in. I suppose I've had a few days where I thought, "Am I ever going to see some of my family again?" But you know, I realize I will. And I realize that it will be fine. I'll tell you what, also, Turner Classic Movies and the Hallmark station on television have kept me entertained.

J: My mom loves the Hallmark Channel.

P: I do, too! And I don't understand why exactly we older people, older women, mainly, like that channel! Maybe we're reliving our youth?

J: Well, it's also wholesome, too, you know. Nothing that's going to bother you at all.

P: It is, that's true. I mean, I do have my music that I listen to, too. I want to say this, that music is on in my house all time. I'll have a Portland, Oregon station or jazz from Newark, NJ, or seventies and eighties hits from Adelaide, Australia, all the time.

J: How do you think the COVID-19 has affected our community?

P: Well, for one thing, we have done what they've said to do, the Center for Disease Control; I think we've pretty well done it. I don't see too many people that haven't. It seems like to me that it's 1950 at 8:00 in the evening, here in town. Because, there aren't many cars around. If you go down into the main part of town, US 40, not many people are around; shops are closed up at 7:00, not the grocery stores, the other shops. And it just seems like people are staying home and maybe they're finding more things to do with family, games, etc., and also cooking and gathering the children in to cook also. I do feel for the families that have to entertain children and find things for them to do. I know it has to be difficult, on the schooling and so forth. But, it's changed the community in that way. But I don't know how it's going to be when everything opens up.

J: I've noticed, too, that everything is less crowded, and it's so much more pleasant! And now that you say that it's like 1950, that's an interesting perspective, because I wasn't around then, so yeah.

P: Right, right. In 1955, I went through this town from my hometown in Connersville, Indiana, came through on US 40, because there was no I-70, and went to Indiana State University, in Terre Haute, Indiana. If you saw, when you were out in the country, away from town, if you could count five cars coming or going, besides yourself, that was traffic. It was so different. And people did stay home. They sat on their porches. Now, the new homes usually don't have big porches, but some do. But they sat on their porches, and at this time of the year, they would be breaking beans, as we did, and canning beans and canning tomatoes, beets, sauerkraut, etc. And that's what kept me busy as a child, until I was 16 and got a job. We were busy with the garden and helping can and busy doing those kinds of things. And this is just quiet...it's just very, very quiet. It's sort of like when we moved to this town in the seventies, it was quiet then. But, since then, it's not quiet anymore.

J: It certainly can't be considered quiet, now, no.

P: I don't know what this is going to do. It does remind me of the era of the 50's.

J: Have you seen people around change their opinions, day-to-day activities, or relationships in response to the pandemic? You know, everybody's got an opinion about what's going on. Have you seen any major changes in people's opinions as we've gone through the pandemic?

P: Well, last weekend I heard someone say, "Oh, I think it's political and once the presidential election is over, it will vanish." Well, I can't imagine something that's affected so many people vanishing just like that after the election. But everything is political in one way or the other. I've seen that. Plus, of course, I've got to watch between the virus and the presidential election because I've got a couple people flying flags for the president and I'm just glad I can't see it because it's behind all the trees. And then, ok, and then the person who is flying the flag for the president said that she would not wear a mask. So I'm figuring her husband would need her. Well then when Gov. Holcomb said we're all wearing masks, I've seen her since then, and she says, yes she wears a mask up to her nose. Then other opinions on this, I feel like young people, and I have my grandchildren who are between the ages of 24 and 34, some are very compliant; they're all compliant, but a couple are kind of fearful of this, so much so that I'm

supposed to go over for a celebration at the end of the month in Ohio, and I will have to wear a mask because my one granddaughter, I think she's fearful for the elderly - that's what my daughter tells me. So I've seen that happen. And then, though, we see people going to parties, beaches and parties at colleges right now, and they're not fearful. They're not doing what they should be doing. So those are opinions. When they won't wear the mask, that's an opinion, and two of the people who did get the COVID, whom I know, they didn't believe that there was anything to it, that it was all political. I don't know how people could think that when people are actually dying. Although, I've also heard from a nurse practitioner friend of mine, she had read, and this is interesting, that sometimes they would say this is a COVID death when maybe it wasn't. So they gotta go back and really check through that. I just heard that recently. And I've heard some people say, "Well, I'm kind of a C+. I wear a mask when I need to." That's a teacher friend of mine. I did go talk to her yesterday on her stoop and we were six feet apart, but we didn't wear masks, and I hadn't talked to her in a long, long time, and she had nobody around her that had the COVID. I'm a little bit more than a C+ because I don't go anywhere without a mask on. And one thing I've always done, even before the COVID, when I gas my car, I always get one of those wipes that they have there and wipe the gas handle. I've always done that. Maybe we'll have a cleaner society! I'm really telling you that most every place I've been, it's never been so clean. But one place that companies, stores, places, even our famous rec center, have never learned to clean, even though I talked and talked to them, is the back of the stall door in the restrooms. Back of the doors are so crummy sometimes. They open the door and clean what's there, and then they shut the door. But they never go in, shut the door, and clean the back of the door. But I think we'll have a much cleaner society, and at least they'll know how to wash their hands.

J: You're so right, though. Everything is cleaner, and like I said before, less crowded. It's almost like everything has improved from this pandemic!

P: I know! And once they let us out of our cages, it's gonna be back like it was! Maybe this will get some of the younger people than I am, a different way to be a family. And right with the children, you know, to take more time with their children. A lot of people do, but some people let their children go on their own way. Maybe this will change a few things. And this is left to be seen. We don't know what it's going to do, exactly.

J: I have heard that people are getting closer to family; they're digging in and rediscovering the stability of their family life.

P: Right. And maybe when we're able to gather together, there will be more reunions, more things like that, and so forth.

J: What have been your primary sources of news?

P: The television at 6:00, that and the national news that comes on after that. It's not CNN, it's not FOX; we no longer have a paper in our community; our paper comes like once a month.

J: The Hendricks County Icon?

P: The Icon, that's right. And it really doesn't have a lot of national news in it. And I don't take the Indianapolis paper, which I can see papers kind of winding down, which I'm sorry to say I did

like them very much. That's my basic bit of news. I don't get on Facebook, I don't get on the computer to find my news. I visited a person who has HLN on all the time. That's news and it's not news. But one thing I cannot abide is listening to the same news over and over again. I did start a little tally about when they started giving the numbers for Indiana, and for this county and then my home county and another county. And then after some time I just threw it away. I thought, "I can save this for posterity!" You know? 2020! But I thought, "Nah, I won't do this," because I wasn't keeping up well.

J: Do you think there are important issues that the media is covering or is not covering?

P: You know, I've been told that the media is really not good at covering all this stuff. I've had people tell me, "Oh, they are so biased." Well, it seems like when I watch the two I watch, it seems to be ok. I think they're covering the things they need to cover. Well, one thing I wish, is that all the policemen in the United States watch the news and maybe some of this stuff would not happen. I just don't understand this. But that's the reason we moved to this town. The academy out here had asked five people to move in to teach to the police; all of the state, and people who worked in law enforcement all over the state, would go through their schooling there. And I can't right now tell you what each one of these people taught, but we were brought in here because my husband was teaching the psychology of human behavior. And teaching what he did, and I know this has gotten off of this a little, but I know that since we're into this rioting because of police behavior, he would say that, "You know, I don't think they want to hear what I've got to say. They're all anxious to get a gun in their hand." But I'm sure that there were a lot that did listen. It seems like what I listen to, they're reporting what they need to report.

J: Do you know what network that is that you listen to? NBC, CBS, anything in particular?

P: Do you know which affiliate is channel 13?

J: That's NBC, I believe.

P: That's the one, basically, that I listen to. I don't mind the others, but this happens to be the one I've been listening to a lot.

J: Talking about police, how have municipal leaders and government officials in our community responded? Do you think they've responded well?

P: Oh, I think so. Because, you know, Indiana's governor, Eric Holcomb, has been on TV in the afternoon, or has been, I don't know if he is now because we're in a certain phase. But early on, when we were in phase one and two and three, he and a group of his constituents that are head of departments in Indiana, were on with him, and especially Dr. Box, I think it was, who is head of the health department - they were all so informative and so well-versed on what they knew, and would take questions from the media that were there. They took so many questions, they were on for a good hour, I think. They were quite informative. Indiana was closed, then gradually opened in stages, but I think that our state officials have really done well with what they've reported and done.

J: One thing I think is interesting is that Indiana was one of the first states that opened up, but we haven't had the really bad surge that a lot of other states have had. Do you have any

thoughts about that? Would you have any idea why that would be?

P: You know, the only thing I can think of is that we're in the Midwest, pretty well down-to-earth people; we don't have many beaches. We have a few in the north part, but the Midwest kind of had it together, or kept it together.

J: Yeah, somehow we've escaped the worst of it.

P: Right. And I do know, when you talk about that, we don't have as many people as New York City, we're not as congested as they are, and there's parts of L.A. and some of the southern places that have the beaches and all that, and the warmth, and maybe not social distance; I'm sure the Florida thing, the reason it got so encumbered with this is that with the beaches and people - I don't know if that's true or not, but they do have a lot of older people living there too. We don't mind being told to go in the house at 9:00 o'clock; you know, OK, that's fine. We can do that. We don't have to be out partying all the time.

J: Interestingly, though, there was a lot of pushback on the masks. You know, this is a Republican conservative area, so they didn't want to wear masks, but we still are not doing too badly!

P: That's true. And I think it's very unfortunate, although we don't like wearing the masks especially, I think it's a bit unfortunate that our president didn't really push that, if that's where they're getting this from. He let Dr. Fauci in there talking, then all of the sudden he didn't really want him around. So, I don't know, but you know that a person who's been in infectious diseases as long as he has certainly has learned a lot. And I just think that about the Midwest. And up the hill from me, there is a big, white house, and the last two owners have been from L.A., and so people are coming here. Of course, they came here for work, work was here; not that there isn't work out there, I don't mean that. But people do move into the Midwest and I don't know whether they like the lifestyle, maybe they'll move right out again, I don't know. But it's somewhat similar to possibly the Northeast, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont. I just feel that way about us.

J: Do you have any more topics you'd like to touch on?

P: I just want to say this: that the dictionaries will get fatter because of all those new words: index patient (you know, the first known case), and patient zero, and contact tracing, and community spread, and super-spreader, and social distancing, and self-quarantining. That's something I thought about. I do have something that I do here, continuing this tradition with my neighborhood. I make an apple pie, cut one piece out for me and give the remainder to a neighbor. So, I haven't made that COVID pie yet, but as soon as I get a chance to, I will do that.

J: I love apple pie!

P: And also, the sayings that "We will get through this" and "Nothing lasts forever" and "This will pass", things like that will be put in the history books for sure.

J: Knowing what you know now, what do you think that individuals, communities or governments

should keep in mind for the future?

P: Well, I really think that places of business and restaurants and so forth, should try to stay as clean as they're having to be now. That would be a good thing. Government, I don't know if China could have kept this within their country before it spread; it's difficult to do that because of people traveling. This corona is a type of virus that they were working on a vaccine before this came about; but there are many other types of viruses. I'm sure they're working all the time on different virus vaccines, but they really had to step up their plan on this one. I think our Indiana government has tried to do as much as they can with this.

J: Ok! Well, think we've come to the end. I just want to thank you so much for your participation.