

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Zaki Siddiqui

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

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Abstract: Zaki is 12 years old and is a student at Plainfield Middle School. Besides being Muslim-American, he is also a leukemia survivor, and is at high risk for getting infected. He tells us what that was like, and how he fared the epidemic.

JS: This is Jeannine Spurgin, and today is Saturday, January 2, 2021. I'm speaking to Zaki Siddiqui, who is a seventh grader at Plainfield Middle School, and we're going to him about his experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Welcome, Zaki. I always ask everyone, when you first heard about the COVID-19 virus, how did you feel about it, what did you think?

ZS: Well, at first we didn't really quite think about it. Because it wasn't really a big deal at the time when we first heard about it in, like, December. And then when it came to the U.S., my aunt was also here, and she was going to Washington, where the first case was. And we were joking, and saying, "Don't get it!" She didn't get it, but at that point, that's when we started realizing that it was kind of serious. And then, soon later, we got into quarantine.

JS: So, what were you most concerned about when you first heard about it, when you actually realized, "Ooo, this might be serious," what were you most concerned about?

ZS: One, about us getting it. And we didn't really know much about it at the time, not much was being said about what it was and all that. And people were still getting confused about the name. So, that was kind of the scary thing, that we didn't know about it at the time, and we didn't know what it was, what it could do and all that.

JS: It's been almost a year now, since this has all started. How have you changed the way you feel about it now, since we're knee-deep in, we've got the vaccine now. Do you feel encouraged; do you feel hopeful?

ZS: A bit. I feel a bit hopeful, but then my dad actually sent us an article a couple weeks ago, saying that the Moderna/Pfizer vaccine, kids under 16 cannot have it. So, I was getting kind of hopeful then, because there was a *New York Times* article that you could put, like, your age, if you were vulnerable to it or not, and it would tell you how many people you were behind, and when you would possibly get it. That kind of got me hopeful, because me and my dad are at risk. I could have gotten it with my dad in, maybe, February or March, while the rest of my family would have gotten it, maybe, in the summer. And then he sent us that article, and I was like, "Oh, shoot. I'm probably not going to be able to get it, like, at that time; it was going to take a lot longer to get it for myself.

JS: Let's talk about your "at-risk." You were diagnosed with leukemia when you were younger,

and you've been in remission for eight years?

ZS: Yeah.

JS: So, have you been taking extra precautions? How have you dealt with the fact that you are at-risk?

ZS: Well, we're always wearing masks, unless we're at home. My parents don't really let me hang out with my friends as much. So, I'm not really going out much. And whenever I would get home from school, my mom would immediately make me take off the clothes I wore to school, change into new one, throw the old ones in the dirty basket and take a shower before I started doing anything.

JS: Are you still doing that?

ZS: Yeah.

JS: I've talked to a lot of people and they said the same thing, but they gradually stopped doing that as the pandemic wore on.

ZS: It's gradually started to...I still take off the clothes I wore to school, it's just not as much taking the shower immediately. Because I usually take a shower when I'm done with my homework. And we're Muslim, so we have to pray something called Maghrib at sunset, so I usually do it then, and like maybe like a half-hour, to an hour before I go to bed.

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

ZS: Yeah, I do. So, I heard about it later, but my uncle on my dad's side, my dad's younger brother, he's been living in Japan for a bit, and he got COVID-19 when it first started...it was around when it first started, like in April or March. Yeah, we were taking our dog out for a walk; the day after we got her, we took her for a walk in the morning, he called his brother, and that's when we heard the news about it. And then there was one more, it was my aunt - my mom's brother's wife. She got COVID because she's a doctor and she's working with the COVID patients, both of them are, my uncle and aunt, so she got it and she had to quarantine. I talk to my cousins everyday, ever since COVID-19 started - they live in Florida - so, I've been talking to them every day and they told me about it.

JS: And has everyone recovered and everything is alright?

ZS: Yeah, she recovered. This was in June or July, so she's good now and back to work.

JS: So, are you going back to school then, on Monday?

ZS: I'm pretty sure I am. My parents are still a bit undecided, but the odds are, yes.

JS: So you haven't done any of the remote learning, huh? You've been hanging in there and going to school.

ZS: Well, after Thanksgiving break, my brother, Safaa, went to school. He was supposed to be staying home, but he had labs for high school, but my parents kept me home from school from Thanksgiving break except for the last week of school, because I had to be there. I'm the team captain of one of the robotics teams at the middle school, so I had to be there for the filming, because we can't compete at the actual competition. So, the last three days of school, I was at school, but from Thanksgiving break to those days, I was on e-learning, getting on Google Meet, (inaudible) them online.

JS: So, gosh, your parents must be super worried, huh?

ZS: Yeah.

JS: But they're going to let you go back on Monday! How do you feel about that?

ZS: I'm kind of happy. I'm kind of mad, though, because on Thursday, we did a run-through of our new semester classes, and I do a thing called "tech squad" which is basically where we help everyone with tech around the school, and it's a period class. I was in 6th period tech squad, and I didn't know that my best friend was going to be in seventh period social studies, and I was the only one in tech squad in sixth period, which you can't really do much about that because you also have to help classes in the Idea Lab when they're in there, and (inaudible) can't do that. So, I got moved to seventh period, and then I see that my best friend is in social studies, and I haven't been in classes with any of my friends at all because of COVID, I haven't been able to sit with them at lunch. So, I got pretty sad about that. But, I might be able to sit with them at lunch this year because I was in the cafeteria extension, which is the smallest area, with only two classes. But now I'm in the bigger cafeteria, so if some of my friends are in the cafeteria, I can sit with them, but I have to stay in the cafeteria, I can't go to the gym or extension.

JS: Well, I hope it works out for you! Now, when I started doing this, it was last year and it was not too long after the lockdown; remember we were all locked down for a month or so? I asked everyone, what did you do during the lockdown? So, if you even remember, what did you do during the lockdown?

ZS: Well, basically, we started online school on March 16, and it was pretty easy. I mean, I would get done in two hours and I would have the rest of the day to myself. So, I mean, we kind of just sat around, and either did board games, we started watching more movies together. We had more family time at that point. And then we got a dog a month after lockdown started, so then basically after we got done with our homework, she was basically what we were doing. She's a Siberian Husky, and she's a puppy, so she's always wanting to play, as well. At first when we went back to school, it was weird for her because she had grown up in this perfect life where we were always there with her, and we were always home, and we could play with her whenever we wanted. But now, we're not home for half the day.

JS: Poor thing, she must be devastated!

ZS: She's adapted to it. She's a husky, so she likes the cold weather, and she stays more active and runs around a lot when we're gone.

JS: What have been some of the biggest challenges? I guess, for you, the biggest challenge is to just stay safe, right?

ZS: Also, another challenge was, like I said before, I'm not getting to see any of my friends because we didn't have class and I couldn't sit with them at lunch. And then, my parents don't let me hang out with them or, like, do anything like that. So that's probably one of the biggest things.

JS: How about employment? Do you know anyone that has been affected by the virus, anyone lost their jobs, anything like that?

ZS: Not that I can think of. My mom works at the high school, so she was doing online, and my dad's a professor, and he was already doing online classes, so it was nothing different for him. He's also writing a book for his work, so he can do all that at home. So, I don't know anybody that got unemployed.

JS: That's good. You're the youngest person I've spoken to. Does it seem like your relationship with your friends, besides the fact that you don't see them... or have people changed a little bit during this? I mean, do you feel like there's a shifting of relationships with people, at all?

ZS: Yes, kind of. I mean, I can't really say much about it, because I can't really talk to them much, but yeah, it kind of seems, because of it, they've kind of gotten more serious about things. And in my friend group, I was the only one that really knew anything about, like, politics, I was the only one who watched news and stuff. So, now, they've started to do it, and they've kind of told me while we're on voice chat on video games and stuff.

JS: What's your news source?

ZS: My mom puts on NPR in the morning. So, that's basically what I listen to, and then sometimes my grandpa will put on CNN or MSNBC.

JS: Since you're so in touch with that, I can ask you, how do you feel the government has responded to the pandemic?

ZS: Well, my family and I don't really think they did that great of a job. Because we kind of feel like we could have been under more mask mandates and all that.

JS: What about here in Plainfield? Do you think Plainfield's handled it well...the people around you...?

ZS: Yeah, I think they handled it pretty well at first. Especially at the schools- we were barely getting any cases, and then it was after Halloween, that's when our (inaudible) at the school started going up because the high-schoolers were having Halloween parties, so they started getting COVID, and then they had younger siblings at the middle school, and they started getting COVID, and that's kind of where the spike began. I think they did pretty well at first, because there were barely any cases at the schools, no cases at the elementary schools at first, and then we started getting a bunch of cases.

JS: I actually thought that they would not go back to school after that.

ZS: Yeah, that's what my parents were saying as well, and my teachers were like, "We honestly don't know because of the spike that's going on...we don't know if we're coming back or not." My mom works there as well, and she didn't know either.

JS: You seem to be really informed. Do you think the media is keeping everyone informed enough, or over-informed...how do you feel it's being handled?

ZS: The media?

JS: Yes. Do you feel like they're informing you well enough?

ZS: I think they could inform a bit more, like try to give a bit more information, but they can only give what they have.

JS: That's true. One more question! Thinking about the people that are listening to this in the future, what do you think they should keep in mind if something like this happens again? What's the most important takeaway you got from this?

ZS: To actually take something like this seriously, and not to think of it as a joke, like lots of people have been doing. Because it can get extremely serious and make a bunch of people's lives, like, miserable and bad.

JS: So, pay attention and take it seriously.

ZS: Yeah.

JS: Well, Zaki, thank you so much! This has been a great interview, and I'm really appreciative of you talking to me and giving me your insight!