

Transcript – Heidi Sasseville, staff

Narrator: Heidi Sasseville

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

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Location: Zoom

Length: 25:11

Amanda Knox: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Pembroke Center's Assistant Archivist. It is Tuesday, May 5, 2020, and it is 11am, and I am here today recording another COVID-19 oral history with Heidi. Heidi, if you could please introduce yourself to our listeners.

Heidi Sasseville: My name is Heidi Sasseville and I work at the Brown University Bookstore. I've been there for about 30 years unofficially, only about 20 officially. Born and bred in Rhode Island. I got a bachelor's degree in business management from Johnson and Wales. I'm a single mom and I live here in Providence, Rhode Island.

AK: Wonderful. So you had reached out to us with your interest in the oral history project. Could you tell me how you heard about what we were doing and why you wanted to share your story [1:00] with me today?

HS: I saw something in the Today at Brown information and it sounded kind of interesting. I didn't get a chance to read it before I reached out and then I did go back and read one of the bios when you sent me the format you were seeking. And it just sounds like it'd be kind of cool to be part of this new history that we're creating. I think people should kind of remember this because this is kind of scary and kind of different. Nobody thought they'd ever live through a pandemic, much less all the rules and the changing of what's going on. As far as today, it's safe to go out. No, it's not safe to go out. Yes, you can go out but you have to have this and this. And now they're talking about reopening slowly and how they're going to do it. So it's like every day it's changing and it's kind of scary and kind of cool at the same time to be like okay, this is history. Let's do this [2:00] so that people remember for the future that we survived this and hopefully they can change it, god forbid it happens again.

AK: Absolutely. So I'd like to start kind of at the beginning. Do you remember how you first heard about Coronavirus and Corona, COVID-19, how you heard about it and kind of what you were thinking in that moment?

HS: I heard bits and pieces over the news about a virus that had started in China, and how people were panicking about the spread and then all of a sudden it became one of these things that it was spreading all over the place and people were kind of panicking. And then businesses just started shutting down and we couldn't do this, we couldn't go here. [3:00] The next thing I knew I was out of work, because I wasn't considered an essential employee. I went in on a Sunday and by Monday, I was told, "Oh, we can't work anymore because we're in the middle of a world pandemic." We weren't told exactly where it started from. I had heard rumors about there was a potential case on the campus and it was later confirmed that there had been at least one campus case but that it was contained and anybody who had been in contact with it had been cared for and that they did everything to, you know, keep it to one case. And then we were being told, you know, you have to wear masks and testing was being limited and it just kind of escalated from there. It was kind of scary how it all happened. Then all of a sudden, our students are being told you have like three days to pack your belongings and get home before the restrictions are placed, especially for international studies. [4:00] So it kind of just hit, like, boom, all of a sudden, everything just stopped and it was really scary.

AK: Can you share with me a little bit about your normal day to day work at the bookstore? Because we kind of in our interviews, try to show a parallel like a before and after kind of thing. Like what was your normal day to day? And then were those, were your methods kind of starting to change as it was looking like the university was going to close? Or was it so sudden that you really didn't have a chance to change any of what you were doing in your day to day?

HS: I mean, my normal work week was Sundays through Thursdays, and I was one of the opening people at the bookstore. So I'd have to be in during the week by 7:15 to help open drawers and get the store ready to open for 7:30. So I was going in like normal. [5:00] Opening drawers, getting registers set up, no extra precautions other than we started doing some extra cleaning of counters and things like that. Not that we weren't doing it, but all of a sudden it was

like uptake in sanitizing some of our hard surfaces and things like that. But it was still kind of business as usual. Then all of a sudden it was like, okay. As soon as they started announcing that the students are being told they had to leave campus, like I said, I went in on a Sunday, just before they started really sending the students home. I went in on a Sunday and by Monday I was like, all right, not, everybody is no longer working until further notice. And I was done working only some of our management team has been working in the store doing mail order or other things. We never even got to inventory or anything like that. They just basically said, “We’re done.” I’m still waiting to find out when I might be returning to work. [6:00] My other job, which is the theater has also shut down.

AK: What do you do at the theater?

HS: I’m a volunteer usher but I also have a small paid gig as a ladies room attendant at Providence Performing Arts Center, and our sister theater is the Vet’s where I’m just a volunteer. Their seasons are done at both theaters. We were holding out hope that we were going to get to at least do our last two performances at PPAC but we just got notification today, last night, that season is done for both theaters. And they’re trying to figure out how they’re going to do the 2021 season as far as safety, how they’re going to restructure the season, especially since some of the shows didn’t completely cancel, they just postponed them and they’ll be added into the season for the 2021. So it’s kind of like, okay, everything just kind of came to a grinding halt. [7:00]

AK: And what was happening, were you working at the theater leading up to this? Were there kind of other precautions happening there as well?

HS: Yeah, we had had shows. We were in between, yeah, we were in between shows. We were getting ready, I think to start a week long run of something after finishing a weekend run of I don’t even remember what the show was. And all of a sudden, it’s like, all right, well this show canceled, this show, may or may not go. And all of a sudden, we’re getting messages from the house managers at both theaters like, “Okay, we have no shows until further notice.” So I was like, okay, I’m stuck in my apartment here in Providence, doing whatever I can to not go insane.

AK: Right, right. So as a single mom, how many children do you have? If you don't mind me asking?

HS: I have an adult son who's 26.

AK: Okay, so you didn't have to worry about decisions surrounding going to school and things like that.

HS: No, no. I don't have to worry about him being taught or anything [8:00] like that. He's kind of out and about because they consider him sort of an essential worker because he's self-employed and he does all kinds of odd jobs. So because he has a truck and can do hauling away of things and whatnot I guess he's sort of an essential employee and he's been out working, trying to keep money going for himself.

AK: So have you, I don't know why I keep bringing up precautions, but having a son who is working and then coming back home, are there weird things that you're doing in your apartment to, to keep safe?

HS: Well, he doesn't live with me. He lives, he had been living with my dad. He's in Pawtucket, but unfortunately my dad is in a nursing home. So my son is still at my dad's house. So I'm not really, because I don't see my son all that often except when he pops into borrow me to do some things with him that [9:00] he can't do, or at least let me know he's still alive kind of thing. So not really. I mean, I'm hoping that my son is not being an idiot and not using precautions himself especially in the line of work he's doing. He is a smoker so he has put himself at risk especially, you know, doing what he's doing poking around in garbage and out in yards and whatever but knock wood, so far, so good.

AK: Right. So then, as someone you, you're living alone then?

HS: It's myself, my boyfriend who also works with me at the bookstore and at the theater.

AK: Oh, cool. Okay. So what are you, what are you doing to, to stay entertained or active? Or as you like as you put it, just to not go crazy right now? What kinds of things are you trying to do within the limits that we have set for us?

HS: A lot of walking. [10:00] We're participating in the Brown Wellness Program that, so they just had a steps challenge that ended yesterday. So I was the captain of a team for some of my coworkers at the bookstore. So we did the work, the virtual step challenge that Brown had out there. So got a lot of walking in and some reading. We have some cards and some other small games that we had in the apartment. We still managed to go, neither of us drive so we take a bus once a week and go food shopping still, because obviously we still have to eat.

AK: Yeah.

HS: But yeah, mostly a lot of walking.

AK: How has public transportation been right now? Have you seen a change in that?

HS: Ridership is way down. Everybody is required to wear masks and some of the drivers is charging, some drivers are ignoring the fact that you know, we have the Brown IDs which allow us to ride the bus for free, [11:00] and we've not refused to show our ID, but they're not – some of the drivers are like, "Just get on in the back." Some drivers don't care which door you use. But it's like personal with drivers, but masks everywhere, they've lifted up the front seats which are typically for handicapped people. This way, if somebody comes on in a wheelchair or one of the personal scooters, the chairs are ready to just be bolted in. I had one passenger the other day while we were on the bus, ask if he had to get out of his chair because he had on one bus, but one bus he didn't. So I guess the drivers are using their own discretion as how they're handling certain things. It's really weird. So I guess it's not like your typical bus ride where everybody has to pay. Busses are sort of running on schedule, but they're stopping because they're running virtually empty so they're [12:00] actually running ahead of schedule in some instances where before it was like unreliable at best.

AK: Yeah.

HS: Now they're stopping, they claim that they're getting sanitized, but can we prove it? I couldn't say yes or no. I have seen some drivers with their own personal like spray bottles and stuff wiping down. Or we had one instance where a guy who was, before they started instituting masks for everybody, coughing up a storm and the driver just casually like with the spray bottle. Several of us definitely said a silent thank you because the guy was just like hacking all over everybody and no regard for personal space or anything. So yeah, the drivers are kind of using their own personal discretion as to what they want to do for safety reasons for themselves and their passengers. But ridership is way down, because I'm on a popular run, which is usually standing room only at some of the peak times. There's like three people on some of these buses. [13:00]

AK: What is your perception of the precautions that people are taking around you? You mentioned this, this person on the bus, and when you go out for walks, are you noticing people take more precautions to keep distance or do any of the social distancing requirements that we have? Or have you found that to be more of a challenge when you go out in public?

HS: A lot of people that go out walking or jogging because I live right near Hope High School, so everything is pretty much, you know, sidewalks. Obviously, if somebody's on the sidewalk a runner or a walker will either step back into a driveway or step out onto the street or you know, kind of step back and give somebody distance to pass. Again, it's use your discretion. Some people are just side to side, but people are a lot more friendlier, [14:00] a lot more respectful of space. Moms with little kids that are riding bikes on the sidewalk, I've noticed mom's telling kids, "You have to give people their space." A lot of people wearing masks, but a lot of people not wearing masks. People wearing gloves. I would notice people in cars, their own personal cars, wearing their masks while they're driving. I'm not sure why you would want one in your car because they're the most annoying thing in the world. I only put mine on when absolutely necessary. And it's not because I'm trying to break rules, not because I'm trying to ask for anything, I just don't like things near my face. But you know it is what it is. If I have to put it on I put it on. I had some woman who I'm pretty sure is a customer at the bookstore walking down

Thayer Street the other day yelling at people, “Where’s your mask? Where’s your mask? You trying to kill people?” Like oh my god lady. So I show her I had [15:00] a mask and I put it on just before I got into the building that I was going to. But she yelled at me, she yelled at somebody else. And I’m just like, oh my god, is this what we’ve come to?

AK: Yeah, that’s, that’s something that has definitely come up in my own personal conversations is either people feeling the need to police others, or the fear that you are yourself going to be policed if you go out without your mask. I’ve definitely, my partner and I have gone out walking without our masks, knowing we’re going to be on side streets, very easy to get around people, but still have the underlying fear that someone’s going to call us out on it. So it is, but then at the same time, I’ve also noticed there’s a lot more respect on the whole of the people who, who we’re engaging with.

So if I could go back a little bit to grocery shopping because that is something that is obviously necessary and that I have found to be a huge challenge. Where are you going grocery shopping and what is that experience like [16:00] for you?

HS: Okay, so I’m pretty sure you’re aware that before all of this happened, pretty much a lot of places, it’s required no more plastic bags, both Rhode Island and Mass. Well, now you can’t take your own personal shopping bags in. We’re on a bus because we used to go with my boyfriend’s aunt, she would take us once a week. Well, because she’s one of the at risk population, she has opted to keep herself safe, and we don’t blame her, so we take a bus. And well, we’ve had to kind of get a little bit creative. I have a backpack with our reusable bags in it because we’re not allowed to use those reusable bags for the safety of the workers. And I respect that, but by the same token, we still got to figure out how we’re going to get our groceries home, because we can’t keep calling a Lyft. So we shop as much as we can manage for a bus because we don’t have one of those like wheeled cars [17:00] because it just, they’re too hard to maneuver and you still can’t get a lot in those either. We try to plan it so that we can get a bus two ways instead of bus and a Lyft. Although we’ve also done a bus one way and a Lyft back. We hide the bags in the back pack. And so far so good, they haven’t stopped the backpack going in. But in the supermarkets, it’s arrows. We go to Market Basket because we can take the one, the number one bus all the way in and then wait and catch it back and get front door and back both ways. And

it's one way in one way out. And some days you can just walk right in, some days you have to wait and it's like so many in, as soon as they see people going out they let a few more people in. And you're literally up one aisle, oh the arrow's coming down so you can only come down this aisle, you have to go back up. So you're going up and down aisles. It's great if you're doing a walking challenge because you get a lot of steps in. Some people are really nice. [18:00] Some people are breaking the rules and some people have called people out, "Oh, you're going the wrong way." Some people are just like, the blinders on don't care, not going to like police. People are pretty friendly, people joke about it. "Oh," you're almost policing yourself, "Oh, I'm going the wrong way," and then you turn yourself around. It's been interesting. Certain things are getting harder to find, chicken being one of them. Where we are, the last couple of times we went there's been no chicken. Some things are still limiting, like toilet paper. There's still no like Clorox wipes or hand sanitizer. Other than that, it's sort of normal. But it is getting scary to go in there and see things that not, mainly that don't belong on a shelf, like toilet paper is in this aisle when it's normally supposed to be in this aisle because they're just trying to fill shelves [19:00] to make it look like there's stuff on the shelves. But I haven't seen any like, riots over, "oh my god, they have toilet paper" and everybody's like hoarding into the aisles or anything like that. I haven't seen any abnormal behavior. I have seen a few people early on like, they'll go in, they'll see, "Oh my God, I have to wait." And they turn around and walk out empty handed or whatever. I'm like all right, well, I guess you didn't need that gallon of milk that desperately. But it is a little scary to think that you know certain things are getting harder to come by like milk, chicken, certain things you can still get a lot of. I don't know if it's just the timing that we're going that they haven't gotten deliveries or if it really is you can't get certain things because there's just limited supplies and stuff is starting to slowly dwindle as this pandemic stretches out. [20:00]

AK: What has been the biggest challenge for you in in this period of time, this era?

HS: Not having anything to do. I'm, I got used to getting up at 5:15 in the morning, getting breakfast, getting dressed and heading out to the store. And now it's like, alright, I have no concept of days, no concept of time or date. And not, you know, not seeing people. We had a Zoom conference for one of our guys who retired and it was like, oh my god, I see my coworkers! That's what they look like. You know, I don't always have successful Zoom. I've



tried reaching out to a couple of my friends but everybody's like, oh, yeah, we'll try to stay in touch and yeah, not successful. I ended up, I started doing some stuff with the Red Cross. I got so desperate I played bingo the other night and I won a tote bag. [21:00] That's how bored I am.

AK: Congratulations!

HS: Thank you. So, I'm trying to find, find ways to get creative. And we've gone to Mystic Aquarium virtually, the St. Louis aquarium virtually, I've been to the Louvre in Paris virtually. So.

AK: It was a good time to take a vacation right?

HS: Yeah, exactly. I traveled the world.

AK: You'll be a world traveler by the time this is over.

HS: Yeah, I'll be, I'll definitely, I'll be a world traveler. I wish I could do it for real, but unfortunately, even in reality, I didn't have the money to do that kind of traveling. But it's cool. I mean, at least I'm getting to learn some stuff. Yeah, that finding things to do and just make the days go by with something interesting. More so than seeing the same neighborhood over and over and over. I feel like I'm stuck in a bad movie that's never ending and it's not Groundhog Day. [22:00]

AK: What is something, what is one change that you're hoping to see, when we come to the other side of this pandemic? What is something that you're hoping is different?

HS: The friendliness of the people. I mean, I, working as a cashier in the bookstore, yes, there are a lot of friendly people, but customer service is one of those industries where you take the good with the bad. But I'd like to see the friendliness continue. You know, it doesn't take anything to be courteous or friendly and, you know, treat your fellow people as people and not you know, just some object that's there. Kindness goes a long way and it's nice to see people

saying hello, where before they would just walk by like you didn't exist. I'd like to see that continue. And maybe a little more caring. People actually, [23:00] genuinely caring about people, not just faking it.

AK: If someone were to listen to this interview tomorrow, what is one thing you would want them to know? And if they are listening to this interview 50 years from now, what is something you would want that listener to know?

HS: That we are all survivors. Things do get tough, but if you really believe you can do it – they survived the Holocaust. They survived the Spanish flu. We'll get through this. It might be difficult now, but we've made it this far. We'll get through this.

AK: So [24:00] that, that kind of does it for my questions. Before we wind up today, is there anything else that you would like to get into the historical record?

HS: Not that I can think of no. Other than, you know, I survived the blizzard of '78. Then up until then, that was the only major disaster that I had ever witnessed. Other than some, you know, maybe tropical storms and things like that. Completely different disasters between a pandemic and a blizzard. But if you can stay positive, you can survive anything. You just need a great support system, true communication, and don't give in to the fear. Don't give in to the hype. Just one day at a time. [25:00]

AK: Well thank you so much for your time today and for volunteering to share your story with me. I really appreciate it.

HS: My pleasure.

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