

Transcript – Soyoon Kim, Class of 2019

Narrator: Soyoon Kim

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

Interview Date: May 13, 2020

Interview Time: 10:00 am

Location: Zoom

Length: 30:42

Amanda Knox: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Pembroke Center's Assistant Archivist. It is Wednesday, May 13, 2020. It is 10 o'clock in the morning and I am here recording another COVID-19 specific oral history with one of Brown's class of 2019 alums who can introduce herself to our listeners now.

Soyoan Kim: Hi, I'm Soyoan Kim. I'm an alumna from the class of 2019. I'm currently a Program Coordinator with the Global Brown Center for International Students at Brown University. While at Brown I concentrated in sociology and education studies and I'm excited to be sitting with Amanda today.

AK: Thank you so much. So I would imagine in the work that you're doing COVID-19 has really impacted the work that you've been doing with students [1:00] and maybe a lot in your personal life as well. So I'd kind of like to start from the beginning. If you remember the first time you started hearing about COVID-19 and Coronavirus, and what you were thinking in those moments.

SK: Right. I first heard about COVID-19 back in, I believe, like, January, February, February, from my family in Korea. I guess they were, I guess they were more attuned to sort of the local like domestic governmental response and were like telling my sister and I about it. At the time, my sister was a student at the Rhode Island School of Design. And since we were both in Providence and so far away from home, they were they were trying to keep us abreast of what was going on at home and sort of worried about the potential, I guess the, the pandemic [2:00] reaching our shores as well. So that's when I heard about it personally.

At work, I believe the earliest memory that I have related to COVID is that we were, our office was charged with hosting sort of a panel of, like an expert panel for students and

community members on basically COVID sort of like, FAQs and questions. I believe this was in late, either like late February or early May. Yeah, it wasn't highly, the event itself wasn't highly attended by students. But we had a great representation of Brown staff members who were able to speak to sort of the early, the early information about the disease. [3:00] We had panelists include, including Dr. Adam Pelant, I believe the chief of like clinical, clinical side of Health Services at Brown. We had representation from Counseling and Psychological Services, the graduate school. And I believe from, I could be, I could be mistaken, but from the medical school as well. And a lot of other student teams and other staff members were in attendance. And at that time, I remember a lot of like the health profession, our health care professional colleagues were sort of, you know, encouraging, like reminding us that this wasn't as, as not as bad as the flu and that we shouldn't be too worried. [4:00] Most of which was, has been, you know, most of this information has, has been updated since. But at the time, I guess the impression that we were left with after that session was perhaps a false sense of relief. You know, I guess because there were early stirrings on campus about, a rumor spreading on campus about like a potential community member having the virus but Brown not disclosing this information to the greater community. Yeah, and other and other such, such fears.

AK: What, if I may interrupt here, what were you from, from this panel and getting kind of that a sense of security in that moment, were you thinking otherwise because of, were you getting information from your family [5:00] in Korea that was contradicting what professionals were saying here in the United States?

SK: I, not so much contradictory per se, but I guess the, I did feel like a slight discrepancy in sort of the, the magnitude or of the, of the crisis or sort of the perception on campus versus with my parents and sort of the, I guess very hands on and like heavy handed approach that Korea was taking. But even, not initially even, but I guess more into the months of March and April, but like late February, March, April. So it wasn't necessarily contradictory, or not so like blatantly [6:00] contradictory, but I noticed, like yea, discrepancies in how different institutions like Korea's government versus on campus reactions at Brown, how things were being taken.

AK: Were you concerned? Did you have a moment where you thought this is going to come to the United States and I should start preparing? Or were you, I guess I'm kind of trying to compare where you were getting stories from people who were closer to the virus at one point, I'm trying to gauge if you were more on kind of a United States timeline, I guess of where we were kind of prolonging our response to the situation or were you personally starting to prepare?

SK: I, no. I wasn't personally starting to prepare because I hadn't really, I guess I hadn't really registered the immediacy of the crisis. [7:00] Like it wasn't affecting, it wasn't affecting, like me personally. And yeah, I definitely see sort of the misguidedness there on my part. And sorry, I wanted to backtrack to –

AK: Yeah, absolutely.

SK: That original, the impetus for why we were gathering the panel of experts in the first place. We were responding to a, a possible request from the Deputy Provost, Shankar Prasad, about the potential in gathering students to, like specifically students from Mainland China, to discuss the outbreak in [8:00] Wuhan specifically.

AK: Interesting. So even in that panel it wasn't really a global approach at that point?

SK: No, I, I yeah. I guess it was more sort of outreach for those impacted students and families impacted by the Coronavirus in a very local, in a localized view.

AK: Interesting. So then, as we were drawing closer to Brown transitioning to completely online virtual learning, how was your work and the work of the Center starting to change as it, specifically as students, international students were having to decide whether or not to go home and then, and then find ways back home if they decided to do that?

SK: Sorry, Amanda. I'm sorry. Could you repeat maybe the question [9:00] one more time?

AK: Absolutely. No problem. How, how was your work starting to change on campus as it was becoming clearer that Brown was going to transition into online learning?

SK: Right. Our, well, for my work specifically, a lot of our bigger programs had to be canceled and shifted to digital models. And besides those programmatic off, like shifting those programmatic offerings, a lot of our work shifted to transitioning students off campus, supporting them in that process, whether that be through like one on one advising. Or for, for me, I was able to participate in a couple of phone banks. Live phone banks with parents, guardians students, related to [10:00] Brown's COVID 19 response.

AK: What was that like?

SK: It was, I, the phone bank itself, I myself didn't field so many calls. But the atmosphere in, in our office was definitely, it was, it was heavy, I think would be the best word to describe it. And definitely confusion, confusing to students. And we were having to, I guess, manage a lot of complex emotions with students who are in various stages of, of letting the new information sink in and deal with the realities of potentially having to fly back home [11:00] or make arrangements to stay on campus.

AK: What was it like helping students transition either home to another country or elsewhere off campus?

SK: It was complicated because there were, while there were this, there was this petition process in place for students to petition to stay on campus, it was still like while we were on the ground advising in the last days of being able to work on campus before spring break and whatnot. It was still quite challenging to advise students on filling out this petition process because even though we can use the blanket term "international student," I guess students have a wide range [12:00] of documentation status and immigration status that complicates their situation. So we had students who filled out the petition and, or, and decided to retract it later because they decided it would be best to go back home instead. And there were students who were more, I guess, reluctant initially to fill out the petition because they were worried about like, what

number, like the number of students that the university would, the, the number that the university would be able to receive. And students were worried about the living arrangements because I believe, or the understanding from students was that Residential Life would move students into a single dormitory or like a single unit, and they were worried about the possible spread and [13:00] the dangers of living in such a compact, compact living arrangement, which has since been addressed. But those initial I guess, assuaging those initial fears without having all the answers was pretty difficult.

AK: Can you speak to what, what they've done with housing students on campus?

SK: Sure. I believe there are, I can't speak to the number but they're like students are pretty spread out around campus with access to, I believe students are mostly in like suites or like dormitories with a functioning sink, bathroom, like single use bathroom, and whatnot. And let me see if I have – so that, that's, that's what [14:00] campus looks, the campus living arrangements looks like to my understanding. And we email, by the program director I work with and I emailed individually the, I'm so sorry, the 300 some international students who are, who are currently on campus or whom we knew to be on campus. Yeah, and so we were able to get in touch with them in early April, just to check in and we found out that some students had since left and were self [15:00] quarantining in their home countries and were seeking some like academic support and accommodations related to their recent transition. Yeah, it's a bit of a tangent, but that's what I know about the current campus situation.

AK: Interesting. Do you have a feel for whether more students decided to go home or decided to stay on campus?

SK: In terms of ratio I think, for me, personally, I thought there would be, there would be less students on campus. But I think Brown was able to accommodate more than I had expected. I'm not sure about official numbers. In terms of international students, I think most students I believe, are, are home or in a, or living [16:00] off campus, but still in Providence.

AK: So, how has your work changed? And kind of what have you been doing now that we have gone completely online and virtual for I think at least two months now, if not a little bit more, what is your, have you been able to work and if so, what is that work looking like under these new circumstances?

SK: Right. So work under these new circumstances has shifted a lot to digital programming and student engagement through social media, and virtual sort of Zoom, Zoom meetings and gatherings. The nature of my work is really, it's really anchored on interfacing with students in person and by managing events [17:00] and bringing people together physically. And so it's definitely been a challenge to do that in a digital realm across time zones and different living arrangements. So that piece has been definitely a difficult, a difficult transition to contend with. But I think we found some success that we wouldn't otherwise be able, or some opportunity that we wouldn't have been otherwise able to pursue had we not transitioned to this remote learning and distance learning model. For example, originally we were, we plan an end of year celebration with our graduating international students, both undergraduates and graduates, graduate students and this year since we can't host it in person we [18:00] were able to transition the student speaker and student speech element to having like multiple speeches, shorter, longer, without a time, without a specific time constraint, without people having to be in the same place at the same time. So sort of being able to like untether celebrating student success and student experiences and stories from a specific time and location was pretty exciting even though it was difficult to encourage students to like nominate themselves and others to be speakers at this event.

Another way that we were able to, or we're currently trying to celebrate students from a distance is compiling a sort of international student yearbook of sorts for, where students can input [19:00] their photos and a short message of their time at Brown. That project is still very much in the works, but –

AK: That sounds so cool. That's brilliant. It makes, that makes perfect sense.

SK: Yeah. And we were also trying to advocate or sorry, we were also trying to encourage students to submit like short video clips of like a, you know, a congratulatory messages for the class of 2020, but that hasn't taken off as well as the yearbook submissions, so we'll see. Yeah.

AK: Recently, President Paxson sent out an email saying that decisions about what would happen with the fall semester are going to come out in July. Would you be potentially involved, if campus were to reopen, would it fall upon you to help students in other countries get back [20:00] to campus? And if so what kind of challenges do you think you're going to face in that process?

SK: So, for me, actually, my tenure as Program Coordinator at the Global Brown Center is ending at the end of this fiscal year on June 30. It's actually, my role as part of a new, a newer initiative from the Division of Campus Life called the Campus Life Fellowship. So my previous supervisor, Christina Brunel, who used to be the program director in, in the Global Brown Center, she applied for the Campus Life Fellowship to be granted in this International Student Affairs Office. And to, to briefly, to deviate a little bit and to talk about my case specifically –

AK: Yes, please do.

SK: Thank you. I, I was supposed to start [21:00] working last June, like at the end of, early July of last year, but my work authorization card and employment authorization documents arrived, or were belated in their arrival so I couldn't start working until early August or mid, mid-August actually was when all that paperwork came through. So I thought, initially, I thought that I would be able to extend my work through the end of July, because that's the sort of work, the end of work authorization dates stated on my EAD card. However, I, like a couple weeks ago, I heard from HR that my time at Brown would be, would be ending at the end of this fiscal year. And I believe that was part of the initial [22:00] sort of, the right word for this isn't contract, but for, or like the initial documentation states that's when my time would be elapsing. So that's me.

So I won't necessarily be able to be directly involved in when this decision comes out. However, I believe my colleagues in the Global Brown Center and the greater Global Brown team and in the Office of International Students and Scholar Services will be very busy working

with different consulates and offices to, to help and support students looking to come back to campus depending on which model of opening that they decide on.

AK: Yes. [23:00] Do you mind, you don't have to answer this, but do you have plans for employment going forward? Or do you think that the current or current events going to impact going forward for you and employment?

SK: No, I, I'd love to answer this. Currently, my plan is I, I'm, in terms of employment, I won't be employed in the next couple of months. I'll be transitioning to move out of my current apartment and move back to Korea to stay with my family there.

AK: How wonderful.

SK: Yeah, and so, and I was planning to, and I'm still planning to research and apply to some graduate programs in the States during my time in Korea. So that's the plan for now, but [24:00] we can't say that it won't change.

AK: Exactly.

SK: Yeah, it's something that we've been having to be accustomed to at his point. Yeah, that's where, that's where I'm, that's, that's where I've landed.

AK: Yeah. And, and I don't mean to pry I just, I think in in this moment, it's really valuable to get kind of into the record employment challenges as well as something that's consistently been coming up in our interviews, as you mentioned, is the complexity of immigration status and paperwork for so many of our students and employees, which is a challenging hurdle anyway, but with the government, in a lot of ways working skeleton crew kind of, and paperwork moving even slower than it once was, it adds a whole new aspect to people's lives that we have to figure out.

But I don't want to take up too much of your time today so I have [25:00] one more, a couple more questions for you. First, if somebody were to listen to this interview tomorrow, what



is one thing you would want them to know? And if they were to listen to this interview 50 years from now, what is something you would want that person to know?

SK: So if someone were to listen to this interview tomorrow, I would want them to know that while, while this situation, these weird times, these strange times, these, you know, very compressed, compressed times, pressing times have been difficult, I would want them to know that I don't know. I, I myself, Soyoon Kim, [26:00] feel very lucky and privileged and so grateful for the support, the network of support that I have, at Brown, in my physical vicinity with my housemates, with my partner, and with family back home. So that's what I want them to know if I were to, if they were to listen to this interview tomorrow.

In 50 years, I think I'd want them to know the same thing. Maybe, in addition, in addition, I'd want them you know, I want this listener 50 years from now to know that I don't know, like there were so many moments of resilience and care that went into making it through [27:00] this this kind of crisis. And I don't know, that's, like those moments were, are definitely the buoys that have been able to lift my spirits in this moment. Yeah, and that, you know, I can't imagine having to go through this alone and that, yeah, I want listeners knowing that in future crisis like crisis, crises that I think that sense of togetherness will, will prevail because, yeah, because that kind of hope is important.

AK: Yes, absolutely. Finally, I would like to leave some open space here for anything else would like to share that you were hoping to get [28:00] into your interview that I didn't ask you about – anything that you would like to get into the historical record before we close.

SK: Sure. I guess something to know, would be that, and this is something that I'm still developing my thoughts around, but having, I guess my perspective having been a student at Brown, and having transitioned into a Student Affairs, Campus Life role with such immediacy, right, right after graduating is that I, I, while I do recognize the real and persistent frustrations that students, excuse me, have when it comes to [29:00] campus communications and policies and, and action, and especially in moments of inaction, perceived inaction. I really want students to remember the, the ongoing work and conversations and like, like honoring the process of campus administrators and staff members in student support. Yeah, it's like I, unfailingly every

day that I've been working with my colleagues there's, there isn't a day that goes by without me noting that the level of care and compassion and desire to, to support our students is it, [30:00] oh my gosh, I'm losing my train of thought. The desire to be that, to be of support to students is, it is ever present and ever true in the work that we do.

AK: Perfect. Well, thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate you donating this interview to the Pembroke Center Oral History Project.

SK: Thank you, Amanda. Thank you for having me and I look forward to hearing more and staying engaged with the center's work.

--END--