

Transcript – Karina Wang, Class of 2021

Narrator: Karina Wang

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

Interview Date: June 10, 2020

Interview Time: 10 am

Location: Zoom

Length: 36:21

Amanda Knox: Good morning. This is Amanda Knox. I am the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. It is 10am on Wednesday, June 10, and I am here today with another interviewee who came to us, who we solicited really to talk specifically about COVID and who is a member of the class of 2021. And you can introduce yourself to our listeners now.

Karina Wang: Hi, I'm Karina Wang. As you said, I'm a member of the class of 2021. I am studying biology on the biotechnology and physiology track. And I am a student worker in the library, which is how I got connected to this opportunity.

AK: Perfect. So, thank you for being here today. We have a lot of really, the world has a lot going on. We have a lot to talk about. But I'd kind of like to start from the beginning if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit about where you're [1:00] from and why you decided to go to Brown?

KW: Yeah, I'm from Ottawa, Canada. So my brother is an American citizen, and he was looking at a lot of different American schools. So I went on all the college tours and the college road trips with him and got a sense of how the American university system works versus at home. And I found a major difference was class sizes and student engagement. And my parents were willing to support the opportunity to go to school in the U.S. and they really value education. So I'm fortunate to be able to come here to pursue an undergrad degree and have more opportunities for engagement, which I wouldn't have had at home.

AK: So what made you decide, of all the universities you looked at, why Brown?

KW: Brown definitely stood out to me, just based off the campus and then kind of its reputation for having [2:00] that open learning style and opportunity to define your own path and choose what you want to do. So I found that, you know, seeing so many schools, going on college road trips, everything kind of blends together at some point. But Brown always stood out in that opportunity and flexibility in and out of the classroom.

AK: So you are, you'll be, you just finished your junior year now, right?

KW: Yeah.

AK: Do you have any kind of snapshot memories of your time at Brown? Do you remember your, the first time you came to campus as a student?

KW: Yeah, I'm also a member of the Women's rugby team. So a lot of my memories are based on that because it's kind of my first introduction to the school. We come a few weeks early for a preseason. So I was on campus for two weeks with the upperclassmen on my team and fellow first years. So we were on campus. It was just athletes. There were no other students until kind of pre-college program started. [3:00] So I was really fortunate to have the opportunity to kind of get a lay of the land before classes and everything hectic starts. I remember my first day of classes just being so lost. I was following Google Maps everywhere, but fellow students who knew their way around were really helpful in that place. But it's crazy to think how much I've learned about campus and the Providence area just being here for a few years.

AK: Do you have any really high points or low points of your time at Brown that you wouldn't mind sharing?

KW: Yeah. I would say the first few weeks of school are definitely difficult. I remember one huge kind of barrier that I thought was like the end of the world was not getting placed into a first year seminar. I really wanted these three seminars and I shopped them, I'd been going and continuously but the waitlist was so long that I didn't get into any of those three. But then I happened to shop another class like a week into [4:00] shopping period and I thought I was so

behind and it ended up being a really great opportunity. It was a different first year seminar that I hadn't initially considered, and I ended up working in the professor's lab of that class the summer after my first year. So it really goes to show that there's so many opportunities, even if it's something you don't think you're initially interested in. That's kind of the beauty of Brown is through exploring different fields, you're able to find new interests and different opportunities. So engaging with that Professor, and then other professors that I've been able to kind of keep in contact with after classes has also been a huge highlight of my time at Brown. I took the Intro to Nutrition course, which is a pretty large lecture style course. But just through like an email and office hours with Professor Mary Flynn, I was able to start teaching cooking and nutrition classes at the Miriam Hospital, which is two fields that I'm really interested in and it's been a lot of fun to kind of get engaged in the Providence community. And then through another seminar I took [5:00] with Dr. Sarah Fox who is an alumni and then also a practicing gynecologist, I was able to design my own course with her and fellow peers from that class, which was a super unique opportunity. So we basically like created our own syllabus and then took the class the next semester. And we planned like lecture series and different ways in which we can engage our small group class with the greater Brown community. So just that kind of flexibility, designing your own path is definitely represented. It's a stereotype of Brown but it's very true.

AK: That sounds amazing, like so much fun. Can you tell me a little bit about the work that you were, were, past tense, prior to COVID doing with Miriam hospital?

KW: Yeah. So Dr. Mary Flynn, who teaches the intro nutrition class and then also some seminars, she runs a program called Food [6:00] as Medicine and her basic research point and kind of career points are promoting a plant based diet with omega three fatty acids through olive oil use. So we kind of prescribe this diet program through teaching different recipes that she has to both cancer patient groups and low income groups. And all of her recipes are like under \$2 a serving and they're really simple to make. So our job is basically to just do a live demo of the recipes and then talk about how each ingredient we're putting in is beneficial to your health and how to have cost effective but healthy ways to prep meals. And I love cooking so that's been a really fun way to exercise that and feel like I can contribute some of the skills I've developed on

my own to people who have less experience or contribute to knowledge I've gained through my nutrition courses.

AK: So I imagine that a lot of the work you've been doing in the [7:00] community has changed dramatically since the pandemic came to us. Could you tell me a little bit about the first time you heard about COVID-19 and Coronavirus? And what you were kind of thinking and feeling or maybe even predicting in that moment?

KW: Yeah, I think one of the big moments I remember was when the pandemic kind of peaked in Italy, I had classmates who were studying abroad there, and kind of the turmoil of getting sent home and then I had friends who had planned spring breaks to go visit those people. So everyone was kind of shuffling around, like checking in on the friends coming home, rescheduling spring break, that kind of thing. So that's when kind of it became less of a very distant thing across the world and something that people I knew personally were being affected by. But then, kind of the first time [8:00] it came into effect on campus, I would say is one of my friends classes, their exam got switched to an online format, just to kind of test it out and see how it was going. And we thought, everyone kind of thought that was really strange to do that out of the blue. But I guess kind of, the professor had been in communication with administration that they should have a backup plan. So they were kind of testing out that online learning format before we actually went online. And then the week that everything got announced, and we all kind of shifted to online learning. I remember I had a bio chem exam on Thursday. So I was like, I can't think about this right now. Like this is too much to consider. I'm just going to study and then if school gets moved online I'll deal with it when I do, I'm not going to prepare myself. So like the Wednesday morning of that week, I think on the Friday it was, or on the Thursday it was announced the Wednesday morning, I had practice with my rugby team [9:00] at six in the morning. We had everything planning out for the season, talking about the season ahead. And then by like noon of that same day, the whole spring sports season had been canceled from the NCAA. And then like the morning of my bio chem exam, the whole announcement got made that school was going to be online and we were like, are we still running this exam today? What do we do? It was a super chaotic day. But after I got my exam out of the way, it kind of turned into helping friends move because I was staying in Providence this whole time. So I didn't have

that rush of having to get myself organized. And then also trying to see people and make the most of our last few moments on campus.

AK: Tell me a little bit about that – the last time you're kind of getting together with your friends. What was that like? What were people kind of talking about?

KW: Yeah, it was definitely interesting because most of this happened before we had a case on campus or even, there were only a few in Rhode Island, [10:00] so there wasn't that feeling of risk when getting together with people. So you know, going and hanging out on the main green for the last time, walking around together. It wasn't, it didn't feel different in terms of like our physical space. We were hugging, saying bye to each other, which seems so foreign right now. But it was definitely kind of sad and reflecting on the things that would have come in the semester, but then also it was kind of hopeful that for our senior year we would feel that it's more special because we had so much time away from campus, which is kind of a silver lining to the whole situation. But to be determined how much time we'll be on campus next year.

AK: Have you still been doing the work, or some work with Miriam hospital during this time?

KW: I think all volunteer opportunities at hospitals for, [11:00] at least March, April, May, June area, were restricted. I'll likely restart volunteering at Miriam in July, but not until then. Just because it's such an involved process, it wasn't like I was volunteering in like a health care with PPE [personal protective equipment] situation, it was more like a community engagement program. So it's definitely kind of one of the last things to come back.

AK: But you have during this time been working with the Free Clinic. Can you tell me a little bit about what the Free Clinic does and the work that you've been doing there?

KW: Yeah, so I previously volunteered at the Free Clinic inside the clinic doing check in and checkout and that kind of thing. Mostly because I really support the mission of the Free Clinic which is to support uninsured and low income Rhode Islanders get comprehensive health care. They have in house dental. Different specialties come in on different days of the week. [12:00]

And it's really like an amazing place to be and to witness physicians who contribute their time to volunteer and help members of their community. So they set up a testing, an outdoor testing site about a month ago, I'd say. And their goal was to, the same goal was carried over to support uninsured and low income Rhode Islanders who wouldn't have access to free testing otherwise. So that's a great way to have direct engagement with the community. And, you know, inside the clinic I mostly do like administrative work, whereas at the testing site I feel like I have more of like an active medical role, which is cool, because I want to go into medicine. So getting that experience, getting training in infection control, putting on all the PPE and the different layers has been a learning experience and something really interesting and career related.

AK: What are some things that you might have [13:00] learned or seen by engaging the community this way, maybe about COVID or just about the local community?

KW: Yeah, I think kind of a shocking thing that happened a few weeks ago was the day of one of my shifts. I was watching the governor's kind of press release and she was talking about how over the weekend, we only had about like 2%, 3% positive testing rates that use various testing sites. And then later that day, I went in for my shift and the coordinator was talking about how every single case we'd had the day before came back positive, and their testing rate is about like 35% positive. So I think that was a really stark and representative of like healthcare inequality in Providence and in the area. You read stats and you see that kind of thing, but like, witnessing that stark of a contrast [14:00] was really shocking and showed me how important the work at the Free Clinic is and motivated me to keep going.

But it's definitely been different than I expected at the Free Clinic. Since it is by appointment only we get a lot of walk up people wanting to get tested, but maybe not having the communication or the technology to be able to set up an appointment online. So really helping people guide them through that process. And then also just the various language barriers. A lot of the community speaks Spanish so when I was talking, or working in the intake area, trying to confirm like birth dates and that kind of thing was difficult, but motivates me to improve my Spanish speaking skills.

AK: Did any of the patients share with you anxieties or concerns about what a positive diagnosis would mean for them and their families? [15:00]

KW: One specific situation I can recall was a woman saying how we were giving her a note that until her results came back negative that she shouldn't be going into her workplace. It was kind of like a doctor's note that you would have. And she was saying how she wasn't sure if her employer would even accept this note because when she became symptomatic they still wanted her to come into work. And I think it was in either retail or like a food service job. So I was really shocked to hear something like that, that members of the community are prioritizing employees coming in versus public health and safety. So that was definitely an example where you like to think that most people have best intentions for public health, but it's not always the case when it's practical. And then other people have you know, mentioned that one of their family [16:00] members is already infected. So you can kind of predict what the testing results are going to be based on that. So it's interesting to, you don't want to have a bias when you're, you know, testing someone when they come in and they're like, "Yeah, three of my family members are positive so I'm pretty sure it's going to be positive," but it's definitely interesting to hear how interconnected different communities are affected in different ways.

AK: Gee, I'm not quite sure where to go from there. I don't know, personally, how, how did you start preparing for this? Did you think that we were going to be in this moment for as long as we have been? Were you – what, what kind of preparations if any, were you kind of making going into this?

KW: Yeah, in terms of [17:00] summer plans, I was luckily kind of already had a flexible plan in place, whereas a lot of people, based on their career choices like this summer before their senior year is so critical with internships and getting a job after college. My plan kind of all along was to study for the MCAT all summer, which is a bit painful of a process but kind of part of the whole thing. So I had flexibility and I was only going to be doing part time work or volunteering on the side. But kind of a major decision I had to make was whether I was going to stay in Providence throughout online schooling in the summer, or I was going to go home. And normally I could kind of push that decision to the end because I had the flexibility of studying.

But because of the border closing it's basically, I go home for the summer and don't know when it's going to reopen, or I stay here as long as I have a lease and housing. So my lease for my last apartment ended in June and I wanted to be able [18:00] to get back into the country or stay in the country until then, so I could move my things. So I decided to stay in Providence throughout the online schooling and now throughout the summer, which allowed me to have a position at the Free Clinic. I'm glad I stayed. And that was kind of an extra consideration that border closing, which not everyone has, but I'm fortunate to not have that. A lot of international students faced a lot of struggles with time zone changes and flight restrictions and travel restrictions. So I had a bit more flexibility but also kind of an added consideration.

AK: Are you hearing from your family members or friends in Canada, that they're having a very different experience than what you're having here in the U.S., or does it sound similar?

KW: Yeah, my brother's in upstate New York. So it's been interesting to hear how Rhode Island versus New York at the state level differs. [19:00] But then at home, definitely since all my friends who are at universities across Canada kind of all came home, I've seen kind of what they've been up to. And gatherings of large sizes aren't necessarily frowned upon. People aren't wearing masks in public. But the rate of infection is so much lower that it's not really a consideration, whereas here it would seem like you're being irresponsible, you're being reckless, but at home, since there isn't that rate of infection at the same as it is here, then the risk isn't the same and people kind of seem less affected by the pandemic in that way where maybe their work has transitioned to online but socially, it's a lot less different than it is here.

AK: What are some things, again, kind of comparison, that you've noticed in your surroundings in Providence [20:00] that are, are very different from what they were before? And do you think that there are changes that are going to stick with us even after COVID is no longer a threat?

KW: Yeah, I think even throughout the last few months with the pandemic, mask wearing and public responsibility, I feel like has increased and knowledge of infection control, hand washing, that kind of thing has improved. You know, at the beginning when it was suggested that you

wear a mask, nobody was wearing a mask outside, whereas now you'll go everywhere with a mask and I appreciate that people in Providence are really taking that to heart.

I think long standing impacts, I was thinking about within the library since I work there like having different wipe down stations and places where people can maintain sanitary practice whereas that wasn't even [21:00] a consideration before. You kind of just sit down, you put all your stuff out, you put your dirty phone on the table and then you head off. But now kind of being responsible for your own safety and the safety of others is a change that's going to happen but not necessarily a bad one I think.

AK: I'm shifting gears a little bit if I may, it almost seems within the last two weeks to me anyway, that talks COVID have kind of disappeared as protests surrounding the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis have popped up across the country. And George Floyd's funeral was yesterday and so racial inequality and racial justice have been a huge point of conversation completely shifting everybody's focus. How has that [22''00] impacted you, either personally or professionally, or as you continue to engage with the local community?

KW: Yeah, I definitely think, you know, I've had conversations with friends where they've also mentioned the same like, it's, it seems like the pandemic isn't even happening anymore when our focus is so shifted. And I felt like I definitely had a biased view, since I'm still going to a testing site and kind of seeing it firsthand. It's still relevant to me. But it also at the same time, you know, focusing your attention on different things. I think just with my studying for the MCAT I'm so distracted by the current events because you know, everything that you do seems so, I don't want to say meaningless, but in contrast to some of the struggles and the, the things that people go through, you know, you reconsider everything you do, and things that you take for granted. So, like last night, I was like, oh, I should, [23:00] you know, wind down, maybe watch some Netflix? And then I thought like, why would I just watch some Netflix for fun when I could be educating myself and taking this time to do something responsible. So it's definitely shifted the way I think about every day. And seeing that from a healthcare perspective, seeing like physicians and different medical schools and things back these protests and say that it's important despite the pandemic is really helpful and kind of like gauging how I can be engaged, how I can be involved. That's to say, last Friday, the protests in Providence, I went with a few of

my friends, but I thought I have a higher risk of being like an asymptomatic carrier. So I definitely kept my distance. But there were a large group of healthcare workers and medical students there, you know, saying like, doctors support this, racism is a pandemic. So seeing that these two events can kind of [24:00] go hand in hand and people involved in different areas can be involved has been supportive to how I kind of try and focus my energy on different things. I'm seeing others doing the same.

AK: Can you tell me a little bit more about that protest and what your experience was? The things, the people, the signs that you saw? Any anything like that?

KW: Yeah, it was definitely it made you feel a bit anxious observing the violence that has happened at other protests and is still ongoing. So going there with a few friends, you definitely take precautions, try and keep your distance, but we gathered all in Kennedy Plaza and then walked up to the statehouse. And I found it really interesting to see so many people in Providence. I always think it's really remarkable how quiet the downtown area of Providence is [25:00] during the day and I, but seeing so many people there rallying for one cause was really cool. And it was just so many different members of different age groups and different communities coming together with really unique signs and different ways to express their support for the Black community and trying to make change. Then at the statehouse, there were various speakers where everyone was able to gather on the lawn. And I always kind of appreciate the setup of the Rhode Island State House for different protests. It's like a really lovely lawn and there were people on the outskirts picnicking, I saw people with paint easels setup, like painting the scene, whereas people more focused in the center, doing chants and different things. So you could kind of stagger your engagement if you had a really strong feeling and didn't – say you don't live with elderly parents, you're not involved in health care, then people with less risk I feel like we're willing to be chanting and be [26:00] kind of in the thick of it whereas people who wanted to be involved but maybe couldn't, or felt the risk was greater for them, were able to be on the outskirts which was really nice. And it was interesting to see like the National Guard fully suited up lining the streets. I've never been in such close proximity to things like that, but I never felt like my safety was in danger because of either the pandemic because I was able to keep my distance from people or from police, but that's also a privileged view that I can have.

AK: Thank you so much for getting that in the record for us. As you kind of look ahead to the next few months, as you kind of gear up for whatever the fall semester may bring, are you preparing for anything now as you're looking forward or, or what are you expecting out of the next few months if I, if you don't mind me [27:00] asking you to just totally throw a dart at the wall here?

KW: Yeah, I think, one kind of academic consideration is choosing courses for my last year. I had a bunch of courses that I've always wanted to take and kind of been pushing off until the last year, but thinking which ones would be better suited online and which ones in person. So I'm kind of waiting until that July 15 announcement, if that ever comes, as to what our semester is going to look like, is a major consideration. For example, there's a famous public speaking class that a lot of students take and thinking about doing that over Zoom, kind of, I feel like defeats the purpose of the class. Or I shopped a ballet class last semester and wasn't able to take it, but would love to take it in the future. And I feel like I would benefit most from the course if it were in person. So different courses have different needs in that way. [28:00] Luckily, a lot of students with their thesis for senior year, the research that they're doing for that is being put on hold because they're not able to be in physical labs. Through my independent research project, I'm doing injury epidemiology, which is all three databases on the computer. So luckily, I'm able to continue that. And that won't put as much of a hold on it. But definitely a concern that a lot of students have is if they'll be able to do the research or get it done in time that they intended to.

AK: So, as we kind of wind up here, I have a few more grand questions that I throw out to all of my interviewees. If somebody were to listen to your interview tomorrow, what is one thing you want them to know? And if they are listening to this interview 50 years from now what is one thing you want that person to know?

KW: I have to think about that. I think when I was going into, [29:00] when I heard about this opportunity, I was thinking about how I'm excited for, 50 years from now, for myself to listen to this. So I would hope 50 years from now, if I reflected on this myself, I would be able to capture kind of the emotions I'm feeling now and how my goals right now are to become a more responsible citizen, both through contributing to the pandemic, and also the movement for racial

justice. So I would hope that I can reflect 50 years from now thinking like, wow, that was just the start of something that she was trying to do and a movement she was trying to continue and affirm like actions I'm taking into the future. And then tomorrow, if somebody were to watch this tomorrow, I guess since there is so much turmoil. I would hope that listening to my experiences and maybe if they share [30:00] some of the same, it might be comforting to hear that people are all figuring things out as they go.

AK: So finally, is there, I just want to leave some open space for you to share anything that you were maybe hoping to get into the historical record today that I didn't ask you about.

KW: I think another major event that recently happened, which might be relevant for someone watching is Brown just reinstated the men's track and field team. So as a member of the athletic community, that was something that came up, for sure. So I would hope that 50 years from now we're looking back and they're still going strong. But I'm interested to see how that transitions and if other sports teams are able to transition back or there's a reshuffling to satisfy Title IX legislation. So that's another thing that's pretty shifting [31:00] at the moment.

AK: Absolutely. And I'm so glad you brought that up because I've been getting email after email and it's just absolutely fascinating me. I guess to no longer wind this up, if you don't mind talking about that a little bit more. That initial communication that came out from the President that this decision was being made to transition many varsity level sports teams to club teams, if I'm using the right vocabulary here, as a member of the athletic community, what, what kind of message did that send to you? And what do you kind of think about those decisions?

KW: Yeah, I remember the only ever mention I'd ever heard of that was when the email came out itself. And being a member of the women's rugby team, which is the newest varsity sports team, aside from now sailing, and a team that a lot of people in the US don't know what rugby is and doesn't get a huge amount of appreciation, but we're still a strong team. I got a bunch of texts before I'd [32:00] even read the email saying like, "is women's rugby still a sport?" Like, "are they club now?" And I was so confused what was happening. But then I read the email and was completely shocked that there had been no mention of this transition prior to hearing about

it. And I think I was mostly shocked because I'm a member of the Student Athlete Advisory Committee and we hadn't been informed whatsoever on what this was going to look like and what was happening. They mentioned in their email that the decision was made based on external consulting. And I do remember last year being part of SAAC – Student Athlete Advisory Committee – that we had spoken with this specific consulting group and they'd come and interviewed us about different resources and things we had concerns about within the athletic department. So I kind of felt like I had some involvement in the process yet had no idea where that was going, which was interesting to reflect on. [33:00] But having those people text me saying like, "is women's rugby still a thing," it made me realize like how any team really could have been cut if men's track and field which has so many athletes of such a diverse background was no longer a varsity sport. It's really any team could have been in that position. So it makes you have both sympathy and empathy for those that had their college experience dramatically changed so quickly and without warning.

AK: Do you have, do you agree with the decisions that were made for some of the other sports teams, reducing them to club sports? Or could you talk a little bit more about kind of the impetus behind the decision because even I who had gotten the email, I can't really make heads or tails of it.

KW: Yeah, I would say the only justification I can see for the decision is the, [34:00] not the lack of resources overall, but our physical spaces are sometimes limited. So say in the athletic training room, women's rugby actually shares a lot of resources with the teams that were cut. So I can see how our team will directly, not benefit, but have a different experience based on this decision. So say in the weight room, we'd be in the weight room at the same time as four other teams, and you're waiting for a lifting rack and you're waiting for this different things. And then that makes you have to split up your lifting times with your team. So now that there are fewer teams overall, you're able to be in the weight room all at the same time as your team which might be an advantage, but also the flexibility, it wasn't something that was like dire and like the worst part about Brown athletics in my opinion. And then also, athletic training staff was one of the other limitations that we brought up in the SAAC meeting and then it also was brought up with [35:00] the decision making. So that's one thing that I can see will be a direct impact of the decision. But

those teams were a lot of the teams that are no longer varsity practice off campus and weren't using a lot of the same facilities. So I felt like I didn't have a lot of interaction with those teams to begin with. So it'll be interesting to see if an impact in different facilities is felt.

AK: Well, thank you again, so much for bringing that up and commenting on that because indeed, that that is something happening in Brown's history right now, but I will be more careful about recording in future oral histories. Is there anything else that I definitely didn't think of that we should talk about before we officially close here today?

KW: I think terms of Brown history that's what I can think of at the moment. There's just stuff much happening in the world right now that it's hard to pinpoint on a few things. But I think we're able to capture a lot of what is taking up minds and mental space with a lot of people right now.

AK: Well, thank you again so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

KW: Thank you for having me.

--END--