

StoudtTom_20201023

KIMBERLY KRATZ: Hello. My name is Kimberly Kratz, and I'm here with Tom Stoudt from the Lehigh-Northampton Valley Airport Authority to talk about his experiences in Allentown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our goal is to collect oral histories of people's unique experiences during the COVID-19 quarantine and the reopening of the Allentown area and to preserve that information for future generations to access. Our project has funding from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium, and we're meeting on Zoom on October 23rd of 2020. Thank you very much for your willingness to speak with us today. To start, can you state your full name, please, and then spell it for me?

TOM STOUDT: Sure thing. It's Thomas Stoudt. The last name is spelled S-T-O-U-D-T.

KK: Thank you. And would you please share [00:01:00] your birthdate?

TS: Sure, November 6th.

KK: Thank you. This interview is expected to involve no more than minimal risks of answering questions about the past.

Some questions may make you uncomfortable. In recounting the past, there may be risks of emotional impact. There is no obligation to answer any question. If you have any concerns about your own mental health, please contact the National Alliance of Mental Illness at 1-800-950-NAMI, or 6264, or e-mail them at info@nami.org. Please be mindful that if you use names of individuals other than yourself that you might be violating their privacy, so instead please just try to refer to these individuals as "my coworker" or "my friend." Insofar as the consent portion, do you consent to this interview today?

TS: I do.

KK: Do you consent to having this interview being transcribed, digitized and made publicly available online in searchable formats?

TS: [00:02:00] Yes.

KK: Do you consent to having this interview be stored in the archives of Allentown Public Library, Muhlenberg College, and the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium digital archive?

TS: Yes.

KK: Do you consent to Allentown Public Library and/or Muhlenberg Public -- or, I'm sorry, Muhlenberg College and the researchers using your interview for educational purposes in other formats, including films, articles, websites, or presentations?

TS: Yes.

KK: Thank you. And do you understand that you'll have 30 days after the electronic delivery of the transcript to review for your interview to identify any parts that you would like to delete and/or withdraw your interview from the project?

TS: Yes.

KK: Thank you. And do you understand that you are not receiving any monetary compensation for your time today; you're not required to participate by your employer, Allentown Public Library, or Muhlenberg College?

TS: Yes.

KK: Thank you. This project has been approved by Muhlenberg College's [00:03:00] institutional review board, and you may contact Dr. Erika Iyengar, the current head of Muhlenberg's IRB committee, at erikaiyengar@muhlenberg.edu

with any questions or concerns. And so, without further ado, we have some actual questions for you. (laughs)

TS: Wonderful.

KK: So, first of all, by way of introduction a little bit, if you can just tell me a little bit about the responsibilities of the Airport Authority and what your role is there.

TS: Sure. So the Airport Authority, the Lehigh Northampton Airport Authority, is actually the oldest airport authority in the commonwealth, the oldest airport authority -- it was created back in 1946. But the Authority itself is responsible for the ownership and operation of three airports in the Lehigh Valley. Most people are very familiar with Lehigh Valley International Airport, or ABE. Queen City Airport is located in the city of Allentown, a business and general aviation airport, and also a general [00:04:00] service airport, Braden Airpark in Forks Township. So it's really the responsibility of the Authority to own and operate, maintain and improve and enhance those facilities. As the executive director, I am responsible and accountable for overall mission accomplishment set by our board of governors.

KK: Okay. So tell me a little bit about what your expectations were when you very first heard about the possibility of a pandemic that hadn't gotten yet to the U.S. What were your thoughts at that time?

TS: So the airport, as you can well imagine -- airports are highly regulated places, and sort of at the forefront of everything you do in aviation and at airports is safety. It's really the primary focus of everything, and we started -- in years past we've talked about H1N1 [00:05:00] and Ebola and other viruses, and certainly there's been information moving throughout aviation over the years about different contagions and how we need to respond to those. So we did have an eye turned towards this virus that we were hearing about in Wuhan Province and just sort of keeping it a little bit distant, certainly as we started to hear about this in January. But I would say it wasn't until late January when we started doing some staff briefings, memos, and a lot of discussion. So it was pretty early on that we started to really focus in on this as more and more information became available in preparation of what might be eventually coming and, sure enough, did.

KK: (inaudible) I don't know if you can [00:06:00] hear me, but we'll try to catch back in there. We had a little bump saying the connection's unstable here, so let me see if I can -- if there's anything I can do on my end. I don't know why it's unstable, but we'll try again. That'll be one thing interesting that they'll get to watch 100 years from now and say, "Wow, can you believe that nonsense?"
(laughs)

TS: "Is that the technology they were dealing with?"

KK: Exactly. Oh, my goodness. So getting back to just kind of preparation to -- so as I understand from what you were saying that you were looking at a few added memos and staff briefings and things to try to just catch people up on what might possibly be coming at you. Did you think it was going to get to the point of, "Wow, we need to shut things down," or some of the things that happened with the governors saying we've got to -- stay-at-home orders and all of that?

TS: It was hard to imagine [00:07:00] that we would end up in the situation we did. Even in January I envisioned that we might be taking some mitigation measures. There might be some protocols that we'd be putting in place as an airport

just to ensure the safety of travelers, make sure we're ensuring the safety of our staff, and maybe some other facilities enhancements. Coming out of 2019 was a real high point for the airport, in particular for Lehigh Valley International Airport. It was our 90th anniversary, and so we had just come off of a fantastic year, a growth year, and we were moving full steam ahead into 2020. We had just opened on the 12th of February, we had opened an Allegiant crew base, and it was their 18th base in the U.S., and we were thinking, boy, this is going to be a fantastic year, all steam ahead. And so this was [00:08:00] not expected. We certainly didn't think for a minute we'd be slamming the brakes on the way we did, and it was very quick, but it was dramatic, and I think the good thing for us is that we had been really paying attention and watching the information and listening to the information. So as this started to grow, as the information started to grow and we started to watch traffic decline long before there were any sort of restrictions put in place, we kind of saw very quickly what was coming. And so we were able to react, and we put a lot of measures in place quickly as this unfolded and became a reality.

KK: What kinds of coping strategies did you use for yourself, your staff, or even the passengers?

TS: [00:09:00] Kind of from the beginning, what the goal (audio cuts out; inaudible) keep it safe regardless of weather, regardless of other hazards, we're doing our part to make sure we can keep the air transportation system connecting here. And so, it was important for us to keep everyone safe. We were really working on keeping updated information, listening to CDC briefings and keeping Department of Health information flowing. So we knew the best and the latest information, which was very dynamic. As we know, it changed daily trying to make sure we had the latest information on what we could do to protect people. And so we were deploying a lot of [00:10:00] hand-washing signage all throughout the facility in the very beginning, hand-sanitizing stations throughout the facilities, reminding people to wash hands. I think one of the first things we started doing even before we got into the middle of March is we had stopped handshaking, so very typical in our line of work when we meet and greet people to shake hands and welcome one another, and we stopped doing that. And I remember getting a number of odd looks in the

beginning. Before this had really hit, people were, "Well, you've heard about this coronavirus that's" -- "Oh, right, right." So we started doing very small but subtle things. We'd be putting out directives to staff, just watching the sharing of common items and really starting to think about [00:11:00] all of the things we're touching. And of course the initial guidance was heavily focused on contact with surfaces and other common areas.

KK: So all of that being said and being open 24/7 and 365, was there actually any time that you were shut down at all?

TS: No. Yeah, we were open --

KK: I just --

TS: -- and operating continuously.

KK: I wasn't really sure if there was ever anything -- I never heard anything about any airports closing, but I just thought -- I had heard about passengers not being allowed from this country or that country, kinda anecdotally things you'd hear on the news and so forth. But I assumed that you stayed open, but I didn't really know the answer to that question. So, now, did you have any difficulty with getting any kind of supplies, hand sanitizers or any of that sort of thing in the beginning?

TS: Yes. So as we started it into the process, [00:12:00] we were looking for the latex or other gloves for some of our staff, our frontline workers, and just our soaps, paper towels, hand sanitizers. A lot of that material, we were fortunate that we do carry a small inventory of some of that material, but we did have some backorders and some delays in getting those products. And in a strange way, it was almost good that the traffic demand had subsided so significantly, because we weren't going through our normal volume of paper towels and toilet papers and some of those consumables that were starting to become backordered. Our supplies weren't being used at the same rate as we were used to, so we had some available for staff and for employees that we were able to kind of use for folks that [00:13:00] were working in the facilities as well.

KK: Got a little bit of balance there. (laughs)

TS: We did. We did.

KK: So were any of your staff or any of the people that came through -- anyone among your family or friends that you know of that became ill or perhaps passed away during this so far?

TS: None of our faculty or staff had succumbed from COVID. We do have some members of the staff who have family members that were lost to coronavirus and certainly families that were impacted by it. We had a few staff members who did contract the virus but did recover from it, as well as some additional stakeholders and tenants in our facilities who had contracted it, but, [00:14:00] again, no reported fatalities from coronavirus at this point.

KK: Well, that (audio feedback; inaudible), certainly. What were some of your own thoughts and emotions that you were going through some of this? I mean, you were running this whole airport authority, and what was going through your mind at that time?

TS: I joke with the staff now that I think I -- I felt like I should've gotten an honorary medical degree or something for all of the journals that I read. I was doing my best to review information on a daily basis, constantly looking at medical journals and scientific research data from all around the world, wherever the information was flowing, doing my best to go to the root of the information and not directly to the news necessarily and, I think, trying to really [00:15:00] digest what the information was saying.

And one of the things I think that I was able to learn early was that it seemed that this conversation about aerosol of the virus and this carrying in your -- not just your cough or sneeze but in your breath, in your exhale, seemed to be something that was coming from studies in hospitals in Wuhan. And by reading some of these early articles, we -- as the mask discussion started to come out, and there was mandates on wearing these and recommendations on wearing them, that became a really strong push for us to make sure we were doing our best to socially distance in our office areas where we have administrative teams, even in vehicles and wearing masks and riding alone and doing these things, and so [00:16:00] helping from that perspective, trying to get the information out. We wanted to be as transparent as possible. We wanted to be able to share the information as quickly as we had it, and yet letting people know it is very dynamic still and constantly changing, and what we tell you today may be different than what we're going to tell you next week. But as the information evolves, we wanted people to have that information and be able to convey it in an easy way. And so, we were using a lot of regular issuing of memos. We

were pushing massive e-mail blasts and memos out all the time. We had created an intranet site, an internal website, with a number of these documents and resources on our intranet pages. We have a number of break rooms for employees throughout the facilities with monitors in them, and we started cycling information through these [00:17:00] monitors so people on break would be seeing information, hearing information about what COVID information -- latest COVID information that we could provide. And that was really the biggest challenge for us was reaching multiple people across the campus on multiple buildings, in multiple shifts, in multiple departments and trying to get some consistency in the information and the latest information, because it was rapidly changing.

KK: Got you. So was there ever any particular incident or something that happened since -- from the very first time that you ever heard anything about the possibility of this pandemic until today in this whole thing, just one thing that just stands out in your mind, a particular day, a particular incident?

TS: Probably the first time I came to work with a face covering or [00:18:00] a mask. At that point in time, I didn't own

a mask. I didn't have a mask, and it was strange to think about putting a mask on and going to work with coworkers and peers. And we were still socially distancing, and at that point I think there was some recommendation about masks, and it wasn't a requirement just yet for businesses, at least in the commonwealth. And so, it was a strange sort of feeling to don protective equipment to walk into a commercial building, and so something that at this point in the pandemic we probably don't think as much about or it doesn't feel so awkward, but the very first time I did it -- and certainly doing it to -- as we started communicating about the [00:19:00] importance of protecting yourself and others. And I remember getting quite a few looks wearing a face covering for the first time.

KK: How do you think people overall have been treating one another? What sorts of things have you seen in that department?

TS: Well, stress has been a huge factor, I think, for a lot of the staff. As I mentioned, the airport doesn't close. We're open 24/7, and really what's occurred for most of us is our workload has increased, even though the passenger volume is down, because of all of these additional

protective measures, a number of other things that -- the business is still operating, and we still have passengers and planes coming and going. But the workload, for example, for our custodial staff certainly increased with additional cleaning [00:20:00] and disinfection protocols. Our maintenance staff, for example, took advantage in the lull in activity to get to do maintenance and preventive maintenance and repairs in areas that typically it's almost impossible to get to because of the activity level. So we had these opportunities that, I guess, truly do come once in a lifetime. And if you can think of it in that vein, we were trying to find the silver lining. Okay, so we have this lull in activity. What're the things that we could do right now in this quiet of travel? What're the things we can do? And so, our maintenance team and some of our capital projects really spooled up and became more active to try to take advantage of some of those efficiencies. So it really was, I think -- it was kind of a strange -- just a switch from -- [00:21:00] as I had mentioned, we were growing so significantly. In February, traffic was up 20 percent over February of 2019, and so we -- after just coming off a year with 15 percent growth. So we were

really moving, and hitting the brakes that hard -- and we instantly pushed most of the staff back to telecommuting, and so myself and a handful of some of our executive staff and some of our core team still had to report to the administrative offices, but by and large, the Airport Authority staff, our maintenance, our police, our fire department, our custodial team, parking-booth attendants, you name it, everyone still needs to be there, whether there's 10 passengers or 110 passengers on that flight. So it's really not a lot of people that can take advantage of telecommuting or working from home [00:22:00] when you're thinking about an airport. And so, by and large, there was a number of our administrative-level team that was working remotely all of the sudden, and so we had challenges with our computer servers and other network equipment because of that all-of-the-sudden dial-in of equipment into our servers. And that caused us to have to work through a project that we hadn't anticipated to upgrade some of our server and IT equipment. So, for as quiet as things got, they got really busy.

KK: (laughs) That's a good way to put it. Looking back and based on your experience, what would you advise future generations when they're faced with a pandemic?

TS: [00:23:00] I think in hindsight when we look back at some of the protective measures, I think one of the things that -- just in general, as humans, we're sort of averse to change, (laughter) putting it mildly. So this was probably one of the most profound changes that I think we've faced as a country since about 1918, since the Spanish flu. And the reason I say that is aviation in particular has seen its ups and downs. We've seen 9/11, and we've worked through that, and those were blips and certainly effects to the economy. Something like a pandemic, something like we are working our way through, is something that affects people at work, at home. It affects their work [00:24:00] and career, their personal lives. It might affect where they're living or how they're living. It affects people on so many different levels, and when you're shutting down the ability for people to socialize -- and today I'm talking to you across the wire through a computer, because if we were sitting in front of each other in a face-to-face conversation, we'd be wearing masks. Exactly, so what's so

terrible about that? Well, I always think of the human as a very old machine, and it's great to have this technology, but what we really crave is the face-to-face, the social interaction. And one of the things we talked about right out of the gate was social distancing and being apart from people, from family, from friends, [00:25:00] from all of your activities, going to the gym or the grocery store. It really changed the way we interacted, and I saw the impact of that in our staff. I saw that people were dealing with depression, anxiety. You saw a lot of that. We were basically working with some of our medical insurance and other providers -- working to provide some counseling, some free counseling to our staff. And I think that's the biggest toll. It's one of those things that, when we deal with certain crises, it's something that's visible in many cases, at least in our industry. We can see what the hazard is. We can recognize or be on the lookout for a particular issue or problem. Folks that work at airports are very good at inspecting things. We look for things, [00:26:00] because it's a safety culture. It's hard to look and find the virus. It's hard to look and inspect and see where that virus is at and do something about it. So

there's a powerlessness that people feel in that process, and you're stuck at home, and you're waiting. You're telecommuting, perhaps, and you're wondering when it's going to end. And I think part of it is -- and I don't know --

KK: We had a little bit of a blip there.

TS: Little bit of a blip. But I think my advice would be for people -- think about self-care. One of the things when you fly aboard a commercial airline and they give you that safety briefing, they always talk to you about putting your mask on before you help the person next to you with theirs. And I think this is no different. I can't be of any value [00:27:00] to the staff or to other people, our customers, if I'm not taking care of myself. And so I think it was very easy for me to forget that in the beginning. And you're pushing hard. You're working a lot of hours, and you're trying to keep people safe. There's a lot of stuff just coming at you from a lot of different directions, and you have to remember to take care of yourself, and then you can take care of everyone else. So it's going to be a challenge. Going through something like this is -- hopefully the next generation doesn't have to do this, but

I guess the thing is understand that you're going to hit speed bumps along the way, and you're probably going to hit walls. I think everybody I've dealt with along this way from a staff level at some point or another has hit a wall and [00:28:00] an emotional wall. And I think the way we've managed to get through this is by giving everybody room to recognize how difficult it is and being there to do it together, being there for each other. If somebody's a little bit down, we can kind of help them and give them some space or give them what they need, and I think it's just that supportive environment that really helps people get through. Again, we're humans. We're simple machines, in a sense, but we need that social interaction, and we need each other. And being so distanced and separated and virtual, we're missing that. And so, the best thing we can do is try to be empathetic and help each other.

KK: Sure. Thank you. I have two more questions. One is, what do you think it'll take for the travel industry to bounce back at this point?

TS: So that's a great question. The crystal [00:29:00] ball on that one is a little cloudy. (laughter) But what I would say is part of what we're experiencing with a low travel

demand right now is really not about the fact that air travel isn't safe. It's not that carriers aren't flying and connections are not -- and stage lengths aren't being flown. That's all in place. What's missing are the passengers and getting people back, and that's really more about, I think, public confidence in being able to travel and fly safely, not just get on the aircraft and be able to fly safely, but wherever they're going, their destination, whatever those trips typically are. And so I think when I think of air travel, there's really two primary segments of commercial air travel. There's the business travel, and there's leisure travel. And since most companies have really cut back and slashed costs, [00:30:00] you're not seeing business travel at this point. Leisure travel, however, is a different story, and we are seeing the leisure-travel market continuing to eke back up. And I think it goes back to the fact that people are social. People are getting to a place where it's difficult to continue for months on end of staying home and not going anywhere and doing anything. And I think there's been a number of pieces of research and information that's been published about air travel and the air quality aboard

aircraft and how well those aircraft -- air exchange occurs, how well the air is filtered and how much fresh air is being brought in every couple minutes versus in a commercial building, or restaurants. So when you think about spending time in that aircraft, the air quality is dramatically improved from what you might be experiencing just in your normal [00:31:00] activities at home. So, I think when people start to understand some of what is in place in terms of keeping people safe environmentally on the aircraft and in airports and understand that they can protect themselves to a large degree by wearing face coverings and by everyone complying with those -- and I think we've seen the airlines say, "Hey, we're going to make sure that that's required on our flights." I think that's slowly starting to help people regain confidence that they can fly, and they're talking to people who are doing it and flying and traveling safely. And I think that's going to continue to slowly bring things back until we see some medical intervention, a vaccine, some other medical treatment that no longer means that contracting this disease, there's a chance that this could be fatal for me; this is maybe no different than getting [00:32:00] a

cold or something. We face that all the time. I mean, the influenza's here every year, and people still fly and travel and have done that for many years. And I think it's understanding that medically there are options for treatment and some things that we can do, whether it's a vaccine or other things that are going to help people navigate through any potential illness.

KK: And the last question I had was just, is there anything else that you'd like people to know about this particular time in history?

TS: Wow. Yeah. It's a great question. I guess the only thing I would say is -- I had mentioned earlier that the airport, Lehigh Valley Airport, has been around for 90 years as of last year, 2019, 90 years. [00:33:00] And aviation was probably one of the first industries to be impacted by this virus, but it was also one of the reasons the virus jumped from continent to continent to continent. And so we as airport managers, as airline employees -- folks in that industry have a responsibility to ensure safety. And we do a lot of training in aviation to prepare for a number of different scenarios, and this is one that no one had a book on. And I think that, going forward, I believe you're

going to see additional protocols being asked of airports, airlines, aircraft manufacturers, perhaps. There's a number of new technologies, I think, that are being looked at in terms of some far UVC [00:34:00] lights and different bandwidths of UVC light and how some of those might be incorporated into future buildings and facilities. Who knows? Maybe the next generation won't think anything of those lights being on in some space that they're working in. But I think, really, that it is a matter of understanding information. It really does require that you take care of yourself. It requires that you take care of one another and in that order, as we talked about. I think overall we're a pretty resilient group. Certainly here in the Lehigh Valley we are a strong group of folks, and I know we're going to get through it. We're going to do that together. It's always good to [00:35:00] see people, even if it's virtually. It's great to see people and have conversations about it. I think that's the key with almost any of this is that we can talk about it, and we can share through it. And I don't know what next month or next year looks like, but we're taking it one day at a time, and based on that, I think that's -- we're doing the best we

can, and I think that's really going to be the key for us as a Lehigh Valley, as a country, is just continuing to support one another and know that we will get through it.

KK: Well, thank you. I appreciate your thoughtfulness on that answer, and thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to be a part of this project. I think it's exciting to be a part of and something that for history and posterity and people to be able to take a look at and see what it was really like. [00:36:00] I can envision this being something that, 10 years down the road, somebody pulls out and plays to a group of students or something like that to say, "Hey, here's what happened" --

TS: Right, right. Yeah, I mean --

KK: -- (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

TS: And for me, I just wonder, again, 10 years from now, this is behind us, and what do things look like? How have things evolved? How are things different? I'll be doing all the face-to-face stuff I can possibly do.

KK: (laughter) I have spoken to a number of my friends recently, and they've all kind of said that party that's coming in summer of 2022 is going to be quite the blowout.

TS: Going to be quite the blowout, exactly. So, I mean, I think everybody is there, and [00:37:00] I think that's what we have to continue to look forward to is keep thinking about the future. Frank Sinatra used to sing about, "Life is like the seasons," and there's a point in time where we hit winter. And we're in winter right now, metaphorically, not seasonally. But spring is coming. There will be a spring and a summer, and that's just cycle of things, and so we got to just keep that in mind that this is temporary. It's not come to stay. It's come to pass, and we'll be okay.

KK: Well, thanks so much. I appreciate it. So I'll sign off, and, again, thank you. You will be contacted once the -- everything's ready for you to be able to take a look at and give you your 30 days to look through the transcript and so forth. But, again, I [00:38:00] really appreciate you being a part of it. Thanks.

TS: Thank you. Appreciate the opportunity, so thank you.

KK: Take care.

TS: Have a great weekend.

KK: You, too.

TS: Thanks. Bye-bye.

KK: Bye.

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