

KistlerVicky_20201020

KIMBERLY KRATZ: And I'll just give it a few seconds so they can cut it at the beginning. (laughs) My name is Kimberly Kratz, and I'm here with Vicky Kistler from the Allentown Health Department to talk about her 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 in the reopening of the (video glitch; inaudible) preserve the 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 20th of 2020. Thank you so much for your willingness to join us today, to speak with us. To start, could you please state your full name, and then just spell it for me?

VICKY KISTLER: Sure. It's Vicky Kistler, V-I-C-K-Y
K-I-S-T-L-E-R.

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

VK: 1/13/61.

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 on Mental Illness at 1-800-950-NAMI, which is 6264, or e-mail at info@nami.org. Please be mindful that if you use the names of individuals other than yourself, you might be violating their privacy. Instead, please try to refer to individuals as "my friend" or "my coworker." For the consent portion, do you consent to this interview today?

VK: I do.

KK: Do you consent to having this interview being transcribed, digitized and made publicly [00:02:00] available online in searchable formats?

VK: I do.

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's digital archive?

VK: Sure.

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

VK: Sure.

KK: Do you understand that you will have 30 days after the electronic delivery of the transcript to review for your interview, identify any parts that you would like to delete, and/or withdraw your interview from the project?

VK: Sure. Okay.

KK: Do you understand that you are not receiving any monetary compensation for your time today, and you are not required to participate by your employer, Allentown Public Library, or Muhlenberg College?

VK: I do.

KK: Thank you. [00:03:00] This project has been approved by Muhlenberg College's institutional review board. You may contact Dr. Erika Iyengar, the current head of Muhlenberg's IRB committee, at erikaiyengar@muhlenberg.edu with any questions or concerns. So we got through that part. Without further ado, on to the interview part. So, first

of all, Vicky, if you wouldn't mind, just give me a brief synopsis of the goals of Allentown Health Department and your role there.

VK: The Allentown Health Department has a mission of protecting and promoting the public's health, and my role is that I am the health director for the city of Allentown.

KK: Okay, thank you. What were your impressions from the media coverage or your contacts before COVID-19 cases started to appear in the United States?

VK: The media before the COVID cases started? The media can be a powerful tool for public [00:04:00] health, and we often rely on the media to help us spread the word, things like food recalls or medication takebacks or warnings or alerts that need to go to our citizens. So the media can be a wonderful ally, but the media can also provide a slant at times that tends to either alarm or misinform. So we see the media very much as an ally but also as a very closely monitored ally to make sure that the information that is being released is accurate. For the most part, prior to COVID, we had a good deal of very good local media coverage, but we are always combating some of the myths that have had widespread popularity among folks and trying

to replace those myths with data [00:05:00] or research or fact.

KK: At what point did you come to a realization that things were going to be different?

VK: From the moment we started getting COVID cases, we knew that this was going to be very much uncharted, that we had folks at both ends of this spectrum, folks that took this virus very seriously and were very concerned, and folks that were very much convinced that this was an overreaction. Normally, we may have a little bit on one end of that spectrum, and the pendulum swings in one direction. But in this particular case, we pretty much had a divided group, and that really posed a challenge right out of the gate.

KK: Did you find that from outside of the health department or within the health department?

VK: All of our calls [00:06:00] to our constituents throughout the city really resulted in us having to, in the beginning, almost have a daily adjustment either of the script that we were using or of the plans that we had made. So I think that outside the health department, the clientele that we

were trying to reach really was a lot more complicated than what we thought.

KK: What have been some of your kind of personal thoughts or emotions that you've experienced in this earliest part of the quarantine and the COVID-19 pandemic?

VK: Some of my personal reactions in the very early part of this were -- it was very, very stressful. It was stressful, because we were dealing with a whole lot of unknowns, and although we had answers to some of the questions, the answers weren't easy to institute. In other words, [00:07:00] although we knew that everyone should be masked, there was a mask shortage. Although we knew that everyone should be isolating and staying home if they were ill, we saw that there was a resistance to doing that. Although we thought that there should be some penalties to violating some of those regulations, the edicts were written without enforcement components. So I just remember going through a series of, "Oh, my God. How are we possibly going to do this?" to, "This is extremely confusing, and if it's confusing to us, it's going to be very confusing to the general public."

KK: Sure. How did the stay-at-home order affect your daily routines?

VK: In the health department, we had to quickly mobilize everyone to be able to work from home. We had had a large chunk of our workforce already capable of working from home, but we needed every hand on deck. The cases started coming so quickly that we needed to empower [00:08:00] every one of our staff and even some outside of our own staff as translators and as support staff to mobilize as quickly as they could. So by everyone being at home, it posed a challenge to get correct information to everyone, proper equipment to everyone, and training to everyone that was consistent. But we were very fortunate. We utilized a platform that we had been trained in, an electronic platform we had been trained in prior to, and that helped, and the fact that we had trained for many years. This health department has been training for a widespread public health emergency, and that training paid off.

KK: That's great. Wow. Did anyone you work with personally - you don't have to name any names, obviously, but did any of your coworkers become infected with COVID-19?

VK: We work among the whole city workforce, and that's a very, very large group of people. Early on, [00:09:00] we had exposures, when people weren't really sure where and when and how to wear personal protective equipment, or the equipment wasn't as readily available, or people didn't have a stay-at-home order. So we certainly had people exposed, and I believe we had a very small number of actual cases. Thank heavens that resolved relatively quickly. But now, as time goes on, we're dealing with what every employer is dealing with, and that is someone who has a child in school who's being excluded, because they were exposed or a health care worker as a spouse or somebody who comes up with a symptom, and they don't know whether it's a sinus infection or whether it's actually COVID. So we're dealing in the workforce pretty much the way most businesses who are functioning right now are dealing in the workforce.

KK: What kinds of coping strategies are you able to use for yourself or your staff, some of your constituents, just to navigate all of this?

VK: [00:10:00] Well, I'll tell you that in the very beginning, it was outrageously stressful, and the long hours -- and

even though you were working from home, at times there were multiple cell phones ringing, as well as multiple e-mails coming in, and I just didn't know what to answer first or where to focus first. One of the things that we had to do early on is -- and it was a huge coping mechanism -- was to institute our public health emergency plan, where people have specific roles. So we divvied out those roles. Nursing home cases went to an individual. Community cases went to a team. Hospitalized patients went to certain interviewers. People in high-risk situations, where they had the potential to infect many, went to the more skilled. Once we established that system, it allowed the stress level to [00:11:00] drop a bit. I saw my stress level drop considerably when we asked for help and got other employees who never worked a day in public health but were bilingual, to become trained in how to help us translate to clients who needed it. We had a lot of help from the city's public information officer to handle press inquiries and to edit documents for me so that as quickly as I could type them, he could correct the typos, and we could get them out to the media. So I think the more that we were able to put a structure to this, the more my stress level reduced. And

then I'm fortunate that I have a strong family relationship. I have a wonderful husband -- and prayer. I did a lot of praying those days, and I haven't stopped, because we're not out of the woods yet.

KK: Is there something that really stands out for you since the start of COVID, maybe one particular day or [00:12:00] night, just something that just really jumps out that was sort of a wow kind of moment?

VK: Actually very early on, one of the very first cases that we had was an individual who got exposed at a conference before we really had widespread circulation here. And for some reason, that was one of the cases that I was assigned personally to do the case investigation. And I don't think I'll ever forget that individual, because they were truly terrified, and they were truly ill, very ill, but they were not ill enough to require hospitalization. And they were away from family, and they were away from friends, because they had to be isolated. And they were kind of locked up in this apartment, and they had a friend who was dropping groceries to the door and those kind of things. But it was very unnerving for them, and I realized very early on that my [00:13:00] daily calls as a contact tracer to them meant

the world that someone was checking in with them. But they also meant the world to me, because, slowly but surely, I was kind of being indoctrinated to all of the symptoms that this individual was experiencing, which all were normal and all were part of this virus syndrome. But it gave me an inside view as to how a person felt as they progressed through this virus. And in the end, I remember them saying very clearly, "I feel better. I'm off restriction, and I was able to walk around the block and be able to breathe." And I remember my saying to them, "This is my last day to check in with you," and they said, "I hope you don't mind if I check in with you every now and then to see how you're doing." And I thought that was so sweet, and they actually did once or twice check back in and say, "Are you hanging [00:14:00] in there?" But we just saw the symptomatology unfold, and I think that I needed to hear that panic and that concern so that I could be sensitive to the people that I'd call from there on in.

KK: Got you. What seemed normal to you a few weeks ago that seems kind of strange now?

VK: What seemed normal a few weeks ago that seems strange now? Well, a few weeks ago it was very normal to see groups of

people out all wearing masks. It seems very strange to me now that I keep seeing social-media posts and people out in public unmasked and that it's showing the mask fatigue. And it not only seems strange to me; it seems extremely alarming.

KK: That's understandable. [00:15:00] How do you think people are overall treating one another during the pandemic? What do you see?

VK: I think that that really covers the gamut. I see people doing more for others than I've ever seen before, but then I also see people having more disregard for others than I've ever seen before. So I'm not sure. (laughs) It seems like every time you hear a great story about someone who really went above and beyond, we then hear a story about someone who was assaulted, because they were wearing a mask or who was humiliated, because they were doing what they thought was best and safest for themselves or their family. So it's really an odd time for those of us in public health. It goes both ways.

KK: Understanding [00:16:00] that the numbers of those people who have become ill or died from COVID-19 have been far too

great, in your opinion, are there any silver linings to the pandemic?

VK: We've definitely had silver linings in public health. One of them is that the independent health departments and the state health department have formed a tighter relationship than they've had in the past. Communication is flowing much better. I mean, my God, the agencies that have come out of the woodwork to help feed our children and to help sustain our families, the people who've been incredibly creative and sewed masks until their fingers were going to fall off or helped our hospital partners with everything from food deliveries to mask-making to just moral support and prayers, I mean, we could not have seen more community come together than we have [00:17:00] in the initial stages of this. And some of those silver linings are that I don't think some employers or some agencies will ever be the same. We now are more mobile. We can work from home when we have to, and that allows families at times to be home with their children if they can't be in daycare or school, and not just out of work, period. We've seen adaptability. We've seen resilience. I think all of those things are silver linings.

KK: Based on your experience, what would you advise future generations if they were faced with a pandemic?

VK: What I would say to future generations is get it right from the beginning. And that's what we didn't do. If we had maintained our supplies and we had personal protective equipment available from the get-go, I truly believe we would not be in the situation that we were in right now. We'd still have virus circulating, but I don't think we'd be [00:18:00] at this particular stage. We waited far too long to take aggressive steps to protect the people we needed to protect, and as a result, we shut down for weeks, but we never totally masked for weeks. And in my opinion, we never really knocked it down far enough to get ahead of it.

KK: Is there anything else that you would want people to know or just anything that you can think of that maybe I didn't ask about that you thought maybe might be a question?

VK: I think that more than ever this taught us that timing is everything and that there were certain components to the timing of this that made it far more complicated. We learned that we were fortunate that it hit in mild weather for the most part, where [00:19:00] people could line up

outside for a test or people -- I mean, imagine if this was going on in an ice storm. We were fortunate that it happened at a time when our country wasn't preoccupied with something else. We weren't in the middle of a huge war on the ground here, or we weren't in the middle of a huge other disease outbreak. We'd pretty much been focusing on a pandemic. We saw what happens when you have a pandemic and wildfires and when you have a pandemic and floods and hurricanes, and that's affected big chunks of our country. But imagine in our entire country was facing something, and then this was added to the top of it. But it fell during a political time. I mean, all times are political, but this is probably one of the worst times to have a pandemic hit at the end of a presidency and at a time when the country was unsettled to begin with. So I think one of the biggest lessons we need to learn is that we have to be prepared all the time. We can't hope [00:20:00] that it's going to hit in a country several months before it hits us so that we have time to get ready. We have to be ready right from the get-go, and that means investing in that preparedness. And that's something that traditionally we haven't done before but I'm hoping we're going to do moving forward.

KK: Well, thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day. I know you're really busy, and obviously stressful times. But this is -- I feel is a really important project for Allentown, for the community, (video glitch; inaudible) for future generations to look back and see people from all walks of life and what it was like right here in Allentown. And it wouldn't be something that's -- you just read in a book and really don't have a sense. I think when you get a chance or the opportunity -- hopefully when they get a chance to listen to these recordings and watch the videos and see the people and really get a feel for what it might've been like, I think it gives them a much better sense than anything you would ever be able to [00:21:00] take from an article or from a single still photograph.

VK: I agree with you. I think it's a fantastic project, and it's so hard for me. And I keep saying it to my staff. I have a lot of younger staff people, but I just want to shake them and say, "Do you get that we are a part of a significant chunk of history right now and that we are in the midst of making that history?" And they kind of look at me like I'm a little on the nut side when I say it, but

it's just one of those things that you don't get that opportunity very often to say that this is something kids are going to learn about. This is going to be a *Jeopardy!* question. These are going to be things that are going to live on far, far beyond us. So I think it's very cool that there's a project capturing that.

KK: Great. Well, thank you. And, again, thanks so much.

VK: Thank you for letting me be a part of it.

KK: All right. I'm going to go ahead and stop our recording here.

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