

Transcript of Interview with Sara Akhtar by Catherine Baldyga

Interviewee: Sara Akhtar

Interviewer: Catherine Baldyga

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Transcriber: Angelica Gallegos

Abstract:

Interviewee discusses her life during the COVID-19 pandemic. She addresses life in Rhode Island, ending her senior year, attending college and family life.

Catherine Baldyga 0:00

Hello, my name is Catherine Baldyga, and I'm about to interview Sara Akhtar for the COVID-19 Oral History Project. Do you give consent to be interviewed for this project?

Sara Akhtar 0:10

Yes, I do.

Catherine Baldyga 0:11

Perfect. Now we can get started. People from all different parts of the world, and even different parts of the country have had different experiences with COVID-19. Where are you from? And what aspects of this place have shaped your experience of COVID-19?

Sara Akhtar 0:25

So, I'm from the state of Rhode Island, which is the smallest state in the United States. So, we were not experiencing the effects of COVID on the scale of states such as New York, for example. But it is a fairly liberal area. So once this virus started to spread, more and more, it is very- it was taken very seriously once lockdown began, and restrictions were put into place almost instantly.

Catherine Baldyga 0:49

How did you feel when schools and politicians first brought attention to the magnitude of COVID-19?

Sara Akhtar 0:55

I was surprised and almost taken aback as the virus started to spread so quickly, and I hadn't expected it to get so out of control. I remember vividly when things started to shut down, and schools and politicians are bringing attention to the virus in early March, and especially on March 13th. March 13th was the last day of school for me before spring break, and the last day in person that I had. And I remember that Disneyland was shutting down, colleges were all of a sudden switching to online classes, which at the time was a bit of a foreign concept, I feel like to all of us. And I remember feeling like we were on the advent of an apocalypse or something like.

Catherine Baldyga 1:34

In March, did you think the disease would only last a couple of weeks or have you always known the Coronavirus would not go away that quickly? What are your reasons for your answer?

Sara Akhtar 1:43

I feel that in my head, I knew that COVID would not go away that quickly due to the magnitude of the disease, and everything being shut down so quickly. But, I remember feeling very hopeful that we would be able to mitigate the spread soon enough, which did not happen. And I even remember on March 13, how I didn't believe we would switch to online learning after spring break, which was the talk of the day and especially like everything shutting down. And going into the senior room in high school, which was just a shared common space for seniors. And people were already writing HAPS on the whiteboard, which meant have a great summer.

Catherine Baldyga 2:23

What was your first reaction to people wearing masks in public?

Sara Akhtar 2:27

It was a little jarring. I do have to admit as at the time, I wasn't used to seeing people wear masks, and such big crowds of people wearing masks. But my dad is a doctor. He's a general physician and was working at the hospital when cases spiked in our state. So, the fact that we did have to wear a mask at all times in public was taken very seriously from the beginning in my family and was enforced.

Catherine Baldyga 2:54

How has the pandemic affected your life and those you know?

Sara Akhtar 2:58

I'm very thankful as my immediate family has been safe. No one contracted the virus. But it has definitely affected my life in many ways. One way it affected our family and my life was definitely everybody's connectivity and personal relationships, through quarantine my family and I spent a lot of time together. And I am thankful for that time, especially as I was leaving for college soon as I grew very close to them. And it almost feels like it was a blessing in disguise in that sense. And also, it definitely affected our life and making us more virtually connected to the world with online learning and events that took up majority of the spring. So that was kind of a drastic change for us. But it was interesting to see how everybody was getting accustomed to it and eventually got used to it more and more as time progressed.

Catherine Baldyga 3:48

What was your reaction to your senior year of high school being canceled?

Sara Akhtar 3:53

It was hard on one hand because it felt unfair to be upset about senior year being, quote unquote, canceled as there was so much more happening in the world. But on the other hand, it was really hard not to be upset as I remember having waited for this time for so long. And to have the chance to finally celebrate the ending of high school, but also feel that it was okay as my school and friends and family and I managed to find other ways to celebrate, that although weren't quite the same as in person, allowed us to have some sense of the fact and some celebration of the fact that we were graduating and moving on to the next part of our lives.

Catherine Baldyga 4:28

How has your opinion on the pandemic changed from the beginning to now?

Sara Akhtar 4:32

I think in the beginning I definitely didn't realize the sheer magnitude of it. And I remember going to New York in early March right before lockdown happened in many states and didn't really think much of it, and that it would be dealt with by our officials and would subside but seeing as there are currently 6 million cases in the United States alone. I definitely know now that the pandemic is not something to take lightly and it never should have been taken lightly and it is really reviled the shortcomings in our system, but also feel that it's really up to us now. As we realize over the past couple of months, that it's up to us now as a nation, to collectively work together to combat it.

Catherine Baldyga 5:14

What has the pandemic allowed you to learn about yourself?

Sara Akhtar 5:18

With quarantine I learned a lot about myself, and it gave me the time to explore new hobbies that I really wouldn't have had time to otherwise such as video editing, which was something that I'd been interested for a long time but didn't get much chance to do during school. Also made me realize in the future to cherish experiences more as life is so fleeting and can change in an instant.

Catherine Baldyga 5:42

In your opinion, how well did politicians, businesses and schools in your area handle the pandemic?

Sara Akhtar 5:48

I feel that they handled it pretty well. Governor Gina Rimando in our state was very quick to close down schools and public businesses, as soon as things started to escalate, and she reopened through a phased plan. And when she felt safe to do it, so I feel that it was handled pretty well. And cases have not been going up drastically since we have reopened. So, I feel it's been pretty good.

Catherine Baldyga 6:21

In what ways has the pandemic changed your view on cleanliness and public sanitation?

Sara Akhtar 6:27

Oh, I lost my- Okay. I've definitely grown much more aware of being in public spaces and being safe in public spaces. I feel that I'm constantly sanitizing my hands in public, wearing my mask. And I'm also kind of surprised at how quickly I've grown used to doing these things, especially since moving to Boston for college around the beginning of September.

Catherine Baldyga 6:49

How do you think society will change after the pandemic dies down?

Sara Akhtar 6:52

Um, I think it will definitely change a lot. And we will place a lot more emphasis on cleanliness and sanitation. And I hope that masks will be more normalized, and people will wear them in public spaces, especially if they're not feeling, especially if they're feeling sick. And virtual learning, I feel will be a lot more normalized as well. And I think it will also take a long time for most people to feel comfortable in large public spaces again, and it's going to take a lot of time to return to what we once were or anything like it.

Catherine Baldyga 7:30

Thank you so much for your time in completing this interview. It was so nice getting to know you and learning about your experiences with COVID-19.

Sara Akhtar 7:37

Thank you.