

## **Transcript of Interview with James Morrell by Jerrika Morrell**

**Interviewee:** James W. Morrell

**Interviewer:** Jerrika V. Morrell

**Date:** 11/29/2020

**Location (Interviewee):** Goose Creek, South Carolina

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**Transcriber:** Jerrika V. Morrell

**Abstract:** James Wayne Morrell moved to Goose Creek, South Carolina with his family in September of 1989. He was stationed there with the United States Navy and has lived there since then working as a machinist, a firefighter, EMT, and a sales associate with Walmart. Working as a full-time firefighter/EMT, James worked part-time with Walmart since October 2001 when the Supercenter Walmart opened in Goose Creek, South Carolina. Since the opening, he started as a cart pusher, then a sales associate in Lawn and Garden, Hardware, and Sporting Goods, and eventually worked in every department as needed. He is currently a sales associate in Sporting Goods and now full-time since August 2017 when he retired from the Goose Creek City Fire Department. In this interview, James reflects on his time spent before and during COVID-19 while working at Walmart.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 0:01**

[setting phone down] My name is Jerrika [Victoria] Morrell, and I am interviewing my father James [Wayne] Morrell for the Food Is Life Collection in the JOTPY [Journal of the Plague Year] Archive for History four [hundred] eighty-five. I know my father very well, I know his experiences very well, but we're going to do a brief introduction with him and let you guys get to know him and his experiences of what it's been like through COVID [Corona Virus D nineteen]. So, dad, tell me briefly about your history with Walmart.

**James W. Morrell 0:35**

I started at my store, which was- had just opened; It was a brand new store in October of two thousand. And I've worked in just about every part of the store that there is.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 0:47**

So, what department are you currently working in?

**James W. Morrell 0:50**

I currently work between two departments because of some restructuring that's happening right now. So, I spend most of my time in sporting goods and hardware.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 1:00**

Okay, so describe what a typical workday looked like for you prior to COVID-19.

**James W. Morrell 1:08**

You would just- you could go into any entrance of the store; you would go to a time clock and clock in and report to the department that you were assigned to and go to work for that day, whether it's running a cash register, or stocking freight or mixing paint. You- that's just what you did.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 1:30**

So, prior to COVID-19, do you believe Walmart was more reactive or proactive to disaster situations or events?

**James W. Morrell 1:42**

I think normal things like hurricanes, and stuff like that, they were proactive, just because those things have been around much longer. COVID became a very reactive thing because we didn't know that much about it-

**Jerrika V. Morrell 2:00**

Mhm.

**James W. Morrell 2:00**

-and we're still learning.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 2:01**

Right.

**James W. Morrell 2:02**

So, we kind of have to go with the flow on that one.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 2:05**

I think most companies can say that, really.

**James W. Morrell 2:08**

Yes.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 2:10**

So, what were your work-like relationships like prior to COVID? Did you take breaks with them regularly? Did you carry on long conversations?

**James W. Morrell 2:19**

Before COVID? Oh, yeah. Everybody would go back to the break room and, you know, you talk about what's happening, current news events, things happening in the area, very cordial conversations before COVID.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 2:36**

So, at the beginning of COVID, what were your first thoughts or reactions to the announcement of the pandemic?

**James W. Morrell 2:44**

A lot of- lot of us didn't take it very seriously. We just thought that it was another kind of the flu.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 2:50**

Right.

**James W. Morrell 2:51**

And then as they started reporting the number of deaths, and being a firefighter EMT- normal flu, you didn't die from those symptoms like you do from COVID. COVID had a whole different type of symptoms and older people were dying from that faster.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 3:20**

So, how did you feel being a- an essential worker during the pandemic, knowing that, you know, there's a lot of people, and especially older people, that were passing away from it?

**James W. Morrell 3:38**

It was um-I mean, I'm sixty [years old]. So, you know, as you're hearing the news reports, and you're hearing the ages of people that are getting it, it was kind of scary because you're going in every day and you're exposed to the public every day.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 3:57**

Right. So, what was it like, during the frenzy? Because I know that it was nationwide, and I also believe worldwide, that you know, toilet paper was selling out hand sanitizer, and there was a lot of foot traffic coming into the store. So, what was that like working for you during that?

**James W. Morrell 4:17**

I always practiced what they were saying, you know, wash your hands. I kept little bottles of hand sanitizer on me all the time. I wore my mask all the time, which it was really a pain because I wear glasses and [laughs] they would fog up [laughs] and you just kind of worked with it and did what you could do to protect yourself.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 4:38**

Right, that's all you can do.

**James W. Morrell 4:40**

It was scary.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 4:41**

Right. So, I know during the pandemic, a lot of people are probably not in their-working in their usual departments. Were you ever sent to another department or grocery or anything like that to work?

**James W. Morrell 4:57**

As people started to call out and the workforce shrank-

**Jerrika V. Morrell 5:02**

Mhm.

**James W. Morrell 5:03**

-we did have to migrate over to the grocery department quite a bit because when people were shopping less, so when they came in, they bought more.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 5:16**

Gotcha.

**James W. Morrell 5:17**

So, you'd go there one day, and you would just put out a pallet of canned fruits and vegetables. You'd go over there another day, and they'd got in six pallets of paper towels, toilet paper, you know, bleach and stuff like that. And they, you know, two or three people that worked over there couldn't get it put on the shelf fast enough.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 5:40**

Wow.

**James W. Morrell 5:40**

So, we would have to go there and give them a hand.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 5:43**

I'm sure they [customers] were probably picking things off the pallets.

**James W. Morrell 5:46**

Sometimes toilet paper never made it to the shelf-

**Jerrika V. Morrell 5:49**

Oh, my goodness.

**James W. Morrell 5:51**

-until they put limits on stuff.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 5:53**

Oh, that's right! So, tell me a little bit about that.

**James W. Morrell 5:58**

In the beginning, there was no limits. So, you could see somebody pushing a shopping cart with five ginormous packs of toilet paper and they would be pulling another cart full, you know, of household cleaning items.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 6:12**

Oh, wow.

**James W. Morrell 6:14**

Yes. Or they would bring the whole family in, and they would go up front with five shopping carts of stuff.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 6:19**

I didn't know that.

**James W. Morrell 6:20**

Yes.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 6:21**

So is that why they started putting limits on everything?

**James W. Morrell 6:23**

That's why they putting limits on everything. Two packages of toilet paper, two packages of paper towel, two jugs of bleach. Now, if all we had was the one gallons, you could get two, if we had the two and a half gallon ones, you could get two. Everything was two.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 6:42**

So it was to ensure that everybody could [thud] be safe and healthy and nobody hoard everything while other people are suffering?

**James W. Morrell 6:49**

Yes. And they- they closed the store from being open twenty-four hours a day to seven [am] to ten [pm]. Now, in the beginning, they were opening up one hour early for seniors, so the seniors that- wouldn't be so exposed to more people.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 7:11**

Oh, okay. So, do you think that they were more reactive or proactive in ensuring safety measures for the pandemic?

**James W. Morrell 7:20**

I think it was because it was something we're learning from it became reactive because from the beginning until now, our policies and procedures have changed almost monthly.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 7:33**

Right. Did you believe that Walmart did well in protecting both the customer and employee?

**James W. Morrell 7:45**

Probably-if I had to say, they probably did a little better job with the employees, ourself because we had things we had to do that if you didn't do it, you could get written up for it. But they didn't always enforce the customers wearing a mask because it was never a mandatory in this state, which governors did in other states.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 8:11**

So, that being said, what do you think were some of their best safety practices?

**James W. Morrell 8:19**

Like now, on all the outlying areas, we have one gallon jugs of pump hand sanitizer.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 8:26**

Okay.

**James W. Morrell 8:28**

They've installed the wipe- the wipes that you can wipe off the buggy with when you come in the store. There's also the kind of hand sanitizer at the entrances, that when you put your hand underneath it, you don't even have to touch it, it just automatically gives you a squirt. [rubs hands together] And then they- they do a really good job on sanitizing the shopping carts with a sprayer that has a special chemical in it that kills the COVID.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 8:56**

And they can just spray multiple carts at one time?

**James W. Morrell 8:59**

An entire row.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 9:00**

Oh, that's really efficient!

**James W. Morrell 9:01**

Its- they wear it like a backpack like you use in your garden-

**Jerrika V. Morrell 9:05**

Okay.

**James W. Morrell 9:06**

-and it sprays it out in a very, very fine mist, and they walk down through there and wave it like a wand and they can do rows of them at a time.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 9:15**

That's smart. Actually, I haven't seen that at any other grocery store. So, what do you think are some of their worst safety practices?

**James W. Morrell 9:26**

Not making the customer wear the mask. They said that we weren't the police, and we couldn't enforce it, even though it was highly suggested by our mayor and- as a proclamation and then the governor said that we really needed to wear the mask but never made it mandatory.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 9:50**

So- well, obviously you don't get to work from home because you were told you are an essential worker [laughs]. And now you're working, what seems like- you're working harder than ever. So, has there ever been another point in time in your 20 years of Walmart that this experience can compare to?

**James W. Morrell 10:10**

Comparing at the peak of the COVID thing, when they wanted people to stay home and they were closing schools, people were shopping less but buying more. And that happens when-here in the Charleston [South Carolina] area, when we think that we're going to have a close landfall of a hurricane, those situations are pretty similar.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 10:40**

I'm guessing that's in relation to- because I guess maybe not everybody might know, but we usually run out of a lot of things when there's a panic that starts to ensue, and everyone seems to buy essentials and...

**James W. Morrell 10:54**

Well, the items that they buy for these two situations are very different. You- you don't have people buying five cases of toilet paper for a hurricane [laughter]-

**Jerrika V. Morrell 11:05**

Right!

**James W. Morrell 11:06**

-but they prepare more with canned foods, canned type meats, and, you know, stuff that won't perish if you lose power.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 11:18**

Right.

**James W. Morrell 11:19**

Perishables.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 11:20**

Right.

**James W. Morrell 11:21**

So, they buy things that are like that. [readjusts in chair] That was not the case [chair squeaks] for the COVID. I don't know why I thought we were going to run out of toilet paper.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 11:31**

I'm not sure either, but-

**James W. Morrell 11:33**

It was quite amusing.

**Jerrika V. Morrell 11:34**

I'm sure science will come out later and tell us [laughs]. So, how does the- the pandemic and safety measures-has it changed anything with your work relationships and your coworkers? Do you still have long conversations in the break room? Do you take lunches with them?

**James W. Morrell 11:51**

Conversations are similar because you're on break and you're having a snack or something to drink. One of the things that they did is they took half of the chairs out of our break room so there's only half of the people in there now so...

**Jerrika V. Morrell 12:09**

Well, that being said, do you miss anything regarding your everyday work life, if anything?

**James W. Morrell 12:17**

With the customers or...?

**Jerrika V. Morrell 12:20**

Just in general. Is there anything that you miss about it that's changed since COVID?

**James W. Morrell 12:26**



Customer and coworker-wise, I miss seeing people's smiles. You know, we- that's, that's you know- our facial expressions are how we communicate a lot.

**Jerrika V. Morrell** 12:40

Mhm. Everyone smiles in the same language.

**James W. Morrell** 12:43

Right.

**Jerrika V. Morrell** 12:44

Right.

**James W. Morrell** 12:45

You know, you stick your tongue out at somebody [laughs] now they don't see it.

**Jerrika V. Morrell** 12:48

[Laughs] So, if there's anything that you could tell your shoppers, what would it be?

**James W. Morrell** 12:57

I would really like to see people where they get behind wearing the mask thing. But you know, there's some people that just think that that infringes on their rights. And, you know, now they have clear face shields that people can wear. I don't know if they work any better, or any worse than the mask, but at least wear something.

**Jerrika V. Morrell** 13:20

So, if there's anything that you could tell your essential grocery store workers across the globe, what would it be?

**James W. Morrell** 13:29

Whether they hear it or not from other customers or management, I tell the people that I work with a lot that I appreciate them, especially the people that haven't got the COVID and they haven't called out and they're there every day. You can see how tired some people are. Because-

**Jerrika V. Morrell** 13:49

I can imagine.

**James W. Morrell** 13:50

-as the workforce got smaller, those of us that were there every day are working more hours and you can start to see this wear on them, so I like for them to know I appreciate them.

**Jerrika V. Morrell** 14:02

I'm sure they appreciate you too dad.

**James W. Morrell** 14:04

I like for them to know.

**Jerrika V. Morrell** 14:05

[laughs] Well, I think that wraps it up for our interview. Dad, I appreciate you doing this with me.

**James W. Morrell** 14:11

You're welcome.

**Jerrika V. Morrell** 14:12

And we'll talk again soon!

**James W. Morrell** 14:13

Okay [phone vibrates].