

Transcript of Interview with Brett Reinert by Anasitasia Vaitele

Interviewee: Brett Reinert

Interviewer: Anasitasia Vaitele

Date: 05/09/2022

Location (Interviewee): Springdale, Arkansas

Location (Interviewer): Kent, Washington

Abstract: Brett Reinert is from Springdale, Arkansas. He works at a toner company as a deliverer. He delivers copier toner for a small business in Northwest, Arkansas. Brett talks about his home state of Arkansas and how the state government reacts differently to the pandemic. Brett and his family take the pandemic very seriously and made sure that his two grandmothers are not exposed to it. Brett also talked about his observation of the changes around him as many restaurants in the state started to require a proof of vaccination to eat in. And the changes with the requirement of masks felt weird to him. Although there were changes, he has seen what the pandemic brought to his life and the people around him, he hopes that people will take the pandemic seriously if we experience another one in the future.

Anasitasia Vaitele 00:01

Okay, please state the date and time of the location of the interview.

Brett Reinert 00:06

So I am in Springdale, Arkansas. The current time is 4:18 pm on Tuesday, May 10.

Anasitasia Vaitele 00:15

Alrighty and what is your name and what are the primary things you do on a day-to-day basis? You know, for example, your job, extracurricular activities, etc.

Brett Reinert 00:28

My name is Brett Reinert. And the things I do on a day-to-day basis primarily is work. I deliver copier toner for a small business in Northwest, Arkansas, so that takes up most of my time. But on my free time, I usually read or play video games or work on school.

Anasitasia Vaitele 00:50

Awesome, what is it like to live in Arkansas?

Brett Reinert 00:55

So Arkansas is an interesting place. It's a beautiful state. But we've got a lot of people here who haven't really taken COVID seriously. I know for, we were kind of late starting with mask mandates. I don't think we even had a full-blown mandate, I think it was kind of left up to the communities to sort of decide if they wanted to do masks or not. But it's, it's been interesting. And you know, we've got a lot of

people, a lot of pandemic skeptics that live in the state of Arkansas. And so that kind of has influenced state government and how they approach COVID, so... And there's been kind of a bit of conflict, because you've got some communities within Arkansas that are very much focused on tackling the pandemic head on with masks and vaccines and social distancing. And then you've got other parts of the state, most of the state, where they don't wear masks. Most of the state, I think, isn't vaccinated relative to other states. I think I saw a news report the other day that said like 60% of the state was vaccinated, but you compare that to states like California, New York, where vaccines are much higher. So it's just it's, it's been interesting to say the least.

Anasitasia Vaitele 02:15

I see. So, when you first learned about COVID-19, what were your initial thoughts about it? I mean, have your thoughts changed since then?

Brett Reinert 02:28

Oh, absolutely. Whenever I first heard about COVID, it was in March of 2020, and I was in my second to last semester of my undergrad at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway. And, you know, I had kind of been hearing news reports about it kind of breaking out in China in late 2019. And I kind of thought it would be sort of like Ebola from a few years ago where like, we would maybe get like two or three cases here in the United States, but it wouldn't blow up real big. And I remember whenever it became kind of serious was whenever I got out of class one day, and I was in the hallway waiting to go to my next class, and the president of my university sent out an email saying that they were going to shut down the campus for a week before spring break. And that we may or may not return to campus after spring break. I think he said that more than likely we would not return to campus after spring break. And so I kind of thought, you know, oh, my God, this is this is kind of serious, you know, but I mean, I really didn't think much of it. I thought they were maybe being overcautious, which isn't a bad thing, but, you know, again, I was kind of thinking it was like Ebola, it would be kind of a small, isolated thing. And then looking back now, I mean, the pandemic has completely changed the world. I mean, it's changed day to day life. And I mean, we've experienced so much in the last two years related to COVID, and it's just to see how much COVID has changed society, you know, in terms of masks in terms of political discord. It's just, it's crazy to see, you know, looking back how I thought it wasn't going to be a big deal. And then now it's the biggest deal on the planet, you know, so it's been crazy.

Anasitasia Vaitele 04:21

Absolutely. Has COVID-19, has the outbreak affected how you associate, you know, and communicate with your community, with your friends and families? In what ways it has been affected to you?

Brett Reinert 04:34

Um, so it was kind of interesting the way it sort of impacted the way I communicated. So after they closed down campus and I kind of moved back home to Northwest Arkansas because Conway is down in Central Arkansas down by the capitol, Little Rock. So when I moved back up to Northwest Arkansas,

I would FaceTime my friends over Zoom that stayed in Conway, that lived in Conway to try and kind have maintained communication with them. In terms of talking with my family, my mom's a nurse who's been on the front lines dealing with COVID. So it was kind of, we kind of had to isolate ourselves in the house, when, you know, we were all living together. And, you know, I've got a couple of my, both of my grandmother's have health issues, so we kind of tried to stay away from them at the start of the pandemic, you know, for their sake and their health. But as the pandemic's kind of gone on, I think we've kind of gotten away from that, you know, I mean, we don't social distance and isolate ourselves as much within the family unit as we used to. And I mean, we go and we visit my grandmothers regularly. And, you know, I still keep in touch with my friends in Conway, and I FaceTime them and talk to them on the phone, but that is more to do with distance rather than COVID because I mean, obviously, I can't be down there in Conway anymore since I've graduated. But it's, it's, it was interesting to make that sort of adjustment, because whenever I hang out with my friends, I kind of want to do it face to face and you know, have that interaction and that, you know, camaraderie and things. I mean, it's, it's, you get a sense of it on Zoom, but you don't, it's not the same. So that was, that was kind of the sad thing about communication when it came to COVID. We kind of had to adjust the way we, the way in which we communicated to people, but it was, it was an adjustment.

Anasitasia Vaitele 06:29

I see. And what were the biggest challenges that you faced during the COVID-19 outbreak?

Brett Reinert 06:38

Um, I would say the biggest challenges that I face were kind of having to put my life on pause a little bit. Leading into the summer of 2020, I was going to go on a study abroad trip to England and Ireland, and I was really, really looking forward to that. And that kind of got canceled. And in 2020, in the spring, I had started talking to more people, making more friends, getting more involved in school, because I kind of regretted that, that I didn't do that in my first three years of college, I didn't really get involved like I should. And so of course, I picked spring 2020 to decide to do that and get involved. So it was, it was a struggle, kind of having to stop the communication and the making of new friends and things. And then just COVID has been a very, very lonely time for myself and a lot of people you know, you don't get to go out and talk to your friends and your family as much as you would have liked to. And, you know, with my job, it's been a struggle getting into customer locations to deliver toner, because a lot of them are closed with pandemic regulations. And so there's a lot of security and health checkpoints and things and you know, you got to wear your mask and a lot of places now require, medical offices require you to be vaccinated in Arkansas in order to enter. So that has been a kind of struggle and just dealing with, you know, the dramatic change in life, I think was, was the biggest struggle more than anything.

Anasitasia Vaitele 08:18

And then, how did people around you respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Brett Reinert 08:24

So on an individual level, like my friends and family took it very, very seriously, you know, with my mom being a nurse, you know, we were very much aware of the risks COVID placed upon the community. The serious strain that was put on medical professionals in dealing with COVID just because they're in Arkansas, particularly because you know, nobody really wore a mask or social distanced or anything. Everybody just kind of blew it off. So there was like a big surge of people in the hospital needing medical attention, so myself and my family took it very seriously, you know, wearing masks, social distancing. I stayed home a lot throughout 2020. And in fall of 2020, most of my classes were online. And even when they weren't online and we had to go in person, they had separated out the desks in the classroom, so you couldn't be very, very close to each other. So that was a good thing. But I would think on the state level, it was a very, very different response from that. On the state level, there were plenty of people who did not wear masks, who did not social distance. You know, Arkansas is a very, very rural conservative state. And a lot of people did not take it seriously and a lot of people died in Arkansas because they didn't take it seriously. So you know, there were numerous times where I would be walking around a store or restaurant and somebody would be in a fight with a customer service representative because, you know, the customer service representative asked them to put on a no-, or a mask over their nose or to put on a mask in general or social distance, and you know, it was a huge, huge fight about things. So it's the, it's interesting to see the different response between my family unit and the way the whole state responded. And my friends, they very much had the same attitude that I did, you know, this is a very serious thing, you know, we need to mask up and social distance. And actually my best friend, whenever the vaccine started rolling out, he actually quit his job and went to work at a pharmacy so he could give out vaccinations, because, you know, he was just so committed to taking the pandemic seriously and getting people vaccinated to get them to the point where we could kind of return to the normal way things were. So yeah, it was just interesting to see the big differences between myself and the rest of the community around me. But yeah.

Anasitasia Vaitele 11:07

Is there a specific pandemic related memory that stands out to you during COVID-19? If so, could you share it with me?

Brett Reinert 11:18

I've got a couple. I remember the first time, it wasn't long after I had moved back home, and I, like I said, I was still in the mindset, you know that this isn't going to be a big thing. And I remember we went, me and my parents went out to eat at a Mexican restaurant. And we got there, and they were requiring masks in order to enter. And I had never seen that before, you know, they had the sign on the door and everything, and so I had to put on a mask. And it was such a weird feeling, sitting there in a restaurant with a mask on because like, I had never worn a mask before because I mean, we didn't need to. And so it was just, it was a weird sensation sitting there, and like everybody else was wearing a mask. And it was kind of frightening. And it kind of brought me back to reality a little bit that maybe this is a bit more serious than I'm thinking it is. Because you know, I mean, with, you know, the flu, or

Ebola or whatever, you know, we didn't have to throw on masks, and we didn't have to social distance and everything. So I mean, it was, it was, it was a scary thing. And I also remember, before I moved back up to Northwest Arkansas, and whenever I was still at school, in my dorm room, they would give out free toilet paper. And I remember my mom, whenever we were kind of coordinating, moving me back up to Northwest Arkansas, her texting and saying, "Hey, see if you can get some of the free toilet paper that your dorms giving out because we can't find any in the store." And she sent me a picture of these empty shelves at Walmart. And she said, "We have been to all kinds of different stores, you know, we've been to Walmart and Walgreens and everywhere looking for toilet paper, and we can't find any. So you're gonna need to bring some of the cheap one ply toilet paper back up so we can have some toilet paper." So those are a couple of memories from early pandemic that are vividly in my mind and that I'm going to remember forever.

Anasitasia Vaitele 13:20

So, you know, knowing what you know now, what do you think that individuals or communities or even the government need to keep in mind for the future?

Brett Reinert 13:33

So, hindsight is 2020, no pun intended. So, you know, we know what COVID is now. I think if we had the knowledge now that we have prior to when things got really, really bad in 2020 I think, hopefully, I would think that the response from the government and the community would be different. But even still, with the knowledge that we have now in places like Arkansas, and across the south, there are plenty of places and states that don't take the pandemic seriously, state governments that don't take the pandemic seriously. So, I mean, maybe, maybe hindsight isn't 2020 and, you know, maybe it doesn't really matter, you know, knowing what we know now, if it would have changed anything in 2020. But I mean, I would hope that individuals and communities and governments would recognize this, because, you know, history does repeat itself. You know, we've, we saw the Spanish flu outbreak in you know, 1920 and 1919. And then there was, I think, another pandemic in like 1820 and you know 1720. So it's like every 100 years we have a major pandemic, so you know, you know, in the 2120 that there's the potential for something bad to happen. So I would hope that we would all look back and remember COVID as a way of kind of adjusting our behavior to kind of protect the community at large. And I mean, on a basic level, I think COVID has sort of made us all recognize, to keep our own health and public health in mind, you know, wash your hands, you know, if you're feeling sick, don't go to work or don't go to school. So I think COVID has allowed us to kind of really reflect on that and make sure that we hopefully, keep in mind our own health and the health of everybody around us. So I would hope people would recognize that from the pandemic.

Anasitasia Vaitele 15:50

So we have one more minute remaining. Do you have any last thoughts before we close this interview?

Brett Reinert 15:58

Um, I guess my last thought would be to anybody listening, take the pandemic, seriously. Think about the people around you. Think about your own health and your own family and your own friends because it's a very, very serious disease. It has caused countless deaths. I think I saw on the news the other day that we're about to pass the threshold of 1 million people dead from COVID-19. Like, that's a terrifying number. So I would hope that we can all kind of slow down and consider our fellow man for a minute to kind of get us back to a sense of normalcy. I don't think the world is ever going to be normal again after COVID but hopefully we can kind of get back to the way things were. So I would hope that whoever's listening would keep that in mind.

Anasitasia Vaitele 16:51

Thank you, Brett. Thank you for having this time to, for me to interview you.

Brett Reinert 16:57

Of course.