

Interview with Talitha Brandel-Black

Interviewed by Megan Owens and Helen Jesse, IUPUI Public History Program

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Megan Owens: So I think that we are now recording. So, do we have your verbal consent to record this interview and to use it for scholarly purposes?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yes, you absolutely do.

Megan Owens: Awesome. Thank you. So just to start with a little bit of background information here. What's the date and time where you are?

Talitha Brandel-Black: It is 12:01 PM and it's the 11th of April.

Megan Owens: Okay. Awesome. And then what is your name and what is the- what are the primary things that you do on a day-to-day basis?

Talitha Brandel-Black: My name's Talitha Brandel-Black. I work at a Joanne Fabrics. I work in receiving. Actually, I am the person who pulls boxes off the trucks. I also do shelving, tasking. I'm a backup cut countering cashier, kind of whatever they want, whenever they tell me to do- basic retail.

Megan Owens: Makes sense. Where do you live and what's it like to live there?

Talitha Brandel-Black: I live in Mankato, Minnesota, that's about halfway across Minnesota at the very bottom of the state. It's- it's nice. I have only lived in this particular town for about seven months and it's kind of a change. I'm from a super rural part of the state. And Mankato is about 52 thousand people. And so it's kind of a big change. It's kinda nice to not have to drive two hours to get somewhere, but yeah, I- I like it.

Megan Owens: Okay. And then when you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Well, like way back in January, it was interesting partly because they were talking about it having a zoonotic origin. My dad's a veterinarian, and so I grew up hearing all sorts of things about like zoonotic diseases and whatnot. And my mom has medical training as well. And so they like, that sort of- that sort of thing. I'm not really science-y person myself, but that sort of thing is, it's interesting. And so it was like, oh, hey, that's kind of, that's kind of interesting. That's wow. There's a lot of people who are sick. Wow, there's a lot of people who are dying. Wow, that's spreading really fast and then like, everything went haywire. So

Megan Owens: That's interesting, though, about your parents and their experiences and stuff. Have your thoughts about the virus or anything like that changed since you initially heard about it?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah. I didn't think it was gonna be a big deal and I don't think anybody did.

Megan Owens: Yeah, I think that's the case for- for a lot of us. And then what issues have most concerned you about the COVID-19 pandemic?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Our government has been super garbage about handling this. It's, it's like as time goes on, it's becoming more and more obvious that they're really, really bungling this. And like I have never lived in a terribly high income bracket and the- like the potential for this really screwing up where I thought my life was going is kind of terrifying.

Megan Owens: Yeah, definitely. Do you have, like has the virus changed, like the life path that you're planning at this point?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Well, I was kinda hoping to reapply to graduate school this year. Don't know that I'm actually going to get around to that. The first time I applied, I- my Bachelors degree is in English and history. And the first time I applied, I'd like to do Medieval Studies. And the first time I applied to like, you know, five or six places, they all turned me down. And because I am- I don't have a high income, I don't- there won't be any assistance from my parents, and my husband and I, our entire income really goes living expenses. In order for me to go to graduate school, I have to go somewhere where they're going to give me enough money to go. So that rules out a lot of smaller universities, a lot of state funded universities, which is probably why I was turned down, but. Yeah, so I might- I might I might not have the time and energy this year to to do that.

Megan Owens: Yeah, that absolutely makes sense.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Especially because it would mean across probably a cross-country move. So yeah.

Megan Owens: Yeah. So then getting into more about like your employment situation and stuff like that. Has COVID-19 affected your job in any ways?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Well, I work at a Joanne and our like- 80% of our customer base is old ladies, like they're- they're the people who are- like these are all people who are definitely high risk. The first week they were talking about like they were first talking about like closing down the state. They hadn't issued a stay at home order yet, but our, like- the busy-ness dropped and then the stay at home order was issued and the busy-ness skyrocketed. It was none of our usual customer base. The median age of- the median age of people buying stuff dropped by like 30 years. Because we went from like dead to Black Friday busy. Every day. And

I was out for the first- I was out- I didn't go to work the firstâ€¦ gosh, I think was the first nine days of this- of our stay at home order because I had a chest cold and I was worried that- and it was presenting kinda weird. I didn't have a fever or anything, but I did have a cough. And I was like, you know what, I'm just going to stay home and that'll be okay. Fortunately, I have a boss who's been like a crazy good advocate for all of her employees over this. And she was like, okay, you're not feeling- you're feeling at all under the weather, please stay home, please. Like we got it, weâ€™re covered, weâ€™re good. Just stay home. Let me know how you're doing. Once I felt better, I waited- I did wait an extra two days before I went back to work. And it had- like the difference was really dramatic. It went, it had gone from dead to, in a week- it had gone from dead to crazy, crazy busy.

Helen Jesse: So I have a quick question. So you mentioned that the demographics of your customer base had changed. What were they, like, buying? Like what kind of things were they buying?

Talitha Brandel-Black: A lot of project materialâ€¦ and lots of stuff for kid projects. I think a lot of people were looking for ways to keep their kids busy, which is- is fair but still.

Megan Owens: And sort of tied in with that question, too- did you notice, like have people been maybe asking for materials for masks or anything like that?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Oh, absolutely. In the last- in the last week or so, they- that seems to be primarily what people are buying. I'm so tired of being asked if we have any elastic, because we donâ€™t. We didn't get anymore on our more recent truck. Weâ€™ because everywhere is out all over the place. And you may have seen on the news, Joanne started this free mask kit program for like- theyâ€™re like, weâ€™ll give a mask to people who are, who want- weâ€™ll give a kit for it, for people who want to make it. Only, our company told the press about that before they told the stores. They expected us to supply, like at- at the store level to supply supplies for that. Uh, we didn't have supplies. We- we don't have a large store. I think our storeâ€™s ten or 12 thousand square feet. It's a little store. Andâ€¦ it- the kits, we- while I was sick, they did put together some at our store. They were gone in a day.

Megan Owens: Wow.

Talitha Brandel-Black: And people are stillâ€¦ then who said your company has them and will give one to people every day? Yeah, but we don't have any. â€¦And more are not forthcoming.

Megan Owens: Have there been any like particularly negative reactions?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Oh, yeah. People have been incredibly upset. Just about every single one of my coworkersâ€¦ We do lot of commiserating. There are people who, you know, yell at us over the phone or come in and argue or call the store, essentially wanting us to be personal shoppers for them so they don't have to come in. And like one of my coworkers, like one of my co-workers said when we were talking about this in the back room, she's like, I really wanted to

tell this person that if it was not worth your life to come in and pick out your five things of embroidery floss, why is it worth mine? And I know a lot of our- a lot of our chain has- the employee base tends to skew a little bit older, too. Because you get, you know, older ladies who want to be working part-time and are, you know, quilters! So they get employee discount on the stuff you're already doing. I know that one of the stores not too far from here, the Faribault one, probably about an hour and a half drive from here. They moved to online order pick up only like a couple of weeks ago. But they're also out a store manager. They don't- they don't actually have a store manager right now. And their customer base is like 90% older, so they only have like four people to run their whole store right now.

Megan Owens: Has your particular store done anything, like I know a lot of places are doing like curbside pickup and stuff like that?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Oh, yeah, we do that, only our online order system is so overloaded because we're again, Black Friday levels of busy, every day. The system is not designed for that. And so we're getting a lot of things that don't- just don't show up in our system and people get mad about that. You get things that show up that they're ready and they're not, they haven't even come into our system yet. And we get people who have done our online order system before who are used to it being ready in a couple of hours. And it's now taking two or three days. And just because there's, you know, we'll show up in the morning and there's 100 orders in the system. Usually we'll have like four over the course of a day.

Megan Owens: You mentioned something earlier about your boss being a really great advocate. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah. She has been lobbying her bosses to close our doors for weeks. She got our hours shortened. The usual store hours are like 9AM to 9PM. She got them shortened to 9 to 7 almost a month ago already. And then she got them shortened to- again to 9 to 5 and then- now this week we're shortened to 10 to 5. So- and she's been she's been really pushing for better protection for her employees. And unfortunately, her hands are kind of tied because she's, you know, under the- she has to do what corporate tells her. But she has been super supportive through this whole thing. Like those nine days I was out cause I had a chest cold. She's like don't worry about it. You're going to be fine. You're not going to get in trouble for calling in nine days in a row. You're going to like, it'll be great. And she- she- she was offered by corporate to be able to keep her paycheck and work six hour days instead of her usual nine hour days, which she did take because our hours are so much shorter. But her- her boyfriend is high risk. And so she's super concerned that she's going to bring- because she works retail and she's there all the time that she's going to bring this home. So I know that's part of her advocacy, but she's been really super helpful throughout this whole thing. I sent her a text to tell her thank you, the other day. And she's like, yeah, she's like, you guys are like my family. I just want you to all be happy and safe. So yeah, I'm so glad I have the boss that I do in the middle of this whole mess. It would be so much worse if I had a boss who didn't care.

Megan Owens: Yeah, absolutely.

Helen Jesse: I have a quick question. Can you [unintelligible] Minnesota's stay at home order was issued?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Oh gosh. See, I put it on my calendar.

Helen Jesse: Just roughly.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Let's see. It was originally issued- it went into effect on St. Patrick's Day. So the 17th, it was only supposed to run through the 27th of March. No, that was that first week and a half there- that was the week I was sick and the stay at home order hadn't been issued, but all the restaurants were closed.

Helen Jesse: Okay.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Then the official stay at home order went into effect on the 27th, looks like on my calendar. And that was only supposed to run until yesterday, but it was extended on Thursday. Now it's going through the fourth of May.

Helen Jesse: And so that closes a lot of businesses, I assume?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Oh, yeah. Restaurants are pretty much- they've all moved to online only. A lot of them are doing order pickups, which is really nice. It gives- I think it gives a lot of people a sense of normalcy. I gave the lady at Cold Stone like a \$10 tip the other day because I really wanted ice cream and I felt bad for coming into her place. But yeah, I know a lot of small businesses are closed. You obviously can't get a haircut anywhere. Yeah, this is a college town, so there's a lot of like locally owned bars, and they're all closed. All the little businesses I like to visit down by the coffee shop I like are all closed, including my favorite used bookstore. But yeah, a lot of places are closed or have really severely limited hours. Even the restaurants like, even like restaurants that are doing online pickup orders have mostly shortened their hours. After about 8PM, there's pretty much nothing open.

Megan Owens: So then what kinds of concerns do you have about the effects of COVID-19 and the whole crisis situation on your employment and on the economy more broadly?

Talitha Brandel-Black: I'm- I'm- I'm going to guess a lot of people are going to lose their jobs, just straight up going to lose their jobs. Because like if we shut- like I think a lot of places, even big box chain stores, if they are- if they shut down for a length of time, are just going to end up folding. Places like GameStop, which has been sort of eking out its last legs for a while now. And I think that- I think that being forced to close the chain across the entire country is probably going to be its death knell. And I'm going to guess that's probably what corporate for my job is worried about too. And unfortunately, this particular area, there's not a lot of options. Again, I have- I have a bachelor's degree and I'm working minimum wage retail because I don't really have another option. Manufacturing is kind of my other option. And I did that, like I did that

seasonally in high school. And I don't wanna do it again. But I thinkâ€¦ I think a lot of the things that are not quite so critical to existing are going to change. I think, I think, I mean, I guess probably the whole model of retail is going to shift.

Megan Owens: Yeah, it'll be really interesting to see the effects.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I'm, I'm simultaneously like super curious and absolutely terrified, because I do a lot of history stuff myself andâ€¦ because it's super fascinating. And I think there's gonna be a lot of models and stuff thatâ€™re going to change.

Megan Owens: And then how has the pandemic affected the employment of people that you know, just people in town or friends, family.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Well, one of my really good friends is a assistant school librarian. So she's not really a para, but she served because it's a tiny, tiny little town in virtually the middle of nowhere. The school is a K-12, like it's a public school and it's a K through 12, which gives you an idea about how small the area, how small the town is. She's been putting in like 60 hour weeks trying to get things set up so that the kids can go to school. And it's a pretty low-income area. It's small. She's the one that kept track of which kids had internet access in their houses. And there were- she surprised school administrators by bringing the list that it was a lot of- it was a lot. And she, over the course of the last couple of weeks, has managed to get routers into most of those households from the school district. I think things are finally calming down a little bit for her because spring break was last week for that school. And soâ€¦ but yeah, she's serving basically as tech support for an entire school district and she's kind of their tech person for the entire school district. I haveâ€¦ I'm pretty introverted, so most of my friends are long distance ones. I know another really good friend of mine in Tennessee. Her job was just straight up closed for two weeks. They're supposed to go back on Tuesday. We'll see if that happens. Yeah, thereâ€™sâ€¦ but I'm still working. My husband is still working. He works manufacturing and they have government contracts. And so they're, they're viewed as essential, which is good. But he was only given an extra 40 hours of PTO to use for this, which can be revoked at any time. And he already used two days of it because a couple of the days I didn't feel well, heâ€™s like, you know what? We're just not going to risk it. I'm just going to stay home a couple days and see how that goes so. But, yeah, I know a lot of places are forcing people to use their PTO first before like employee benefits are kicking in, like before any benefits are kicking in. I'm supposed to be getting an extra \$2 an hour in hazard pay, but that didn't start until this pay period. This has been going on for already like a full pay period and a half. And it's not supposed to start until this pay period, which is ridiculous. And it's also preventing- because of the hazard pay, my- the raise that I was supposed to get, that was supposed to kick in this pay period as well, is going to be â€œup for review again,â€ after.

Megan Owens: After the pandemic?

Talitha Brandel-Black: After the pandemic, yes. So yeah, that, that seems to me like there's a pretty good chance they'll just forget that I was supposed to get a raise. Fortunately, my boss

again is super good and she's like got notes to herself everywhere. It's like, make sure Talitha gets a raise, like. I'm like, thank you. Again, I'm super glad I have the boss I do.

Megan Owens: Yeah, that's wonderful. I mean, obviously, in a situation like this, but. How has the COVID-19 situation affected you and your husband's day-to-day activities?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Well, like, we're both stay at home and play video games kind of people. And so when it was first start- talking about like, you know, hey maybe our- maybe our state's gonna be shut down. Maybe we're not gonna be able to go anywhere, we're both like pffff we never go anywhere anyway. But like emotionally speaking, it's felt a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. It's kind of- one of my friends suggested that it's the difference between isolation by choice and isolation not by choice. It certainly has made regular tasks like going to the grocery store, which is- I don't like doing that. I have sensory issues and Walmart is a nightmare. It's- it's just awful, but it's cheap and we don't have a lot of money. So Walmart and so like that has been, it's become a process rather than just an errand. And I haven't been able to concentrate on anything. And I'm like a super avid reader. I'm haven't been able to concentrate on my reading, which is really weird to me, but yeah.

Megan Owens: And has it affected how you communicate with friends and family, how you associate with people at all?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah. I've been calling my mom a lot more. My little sister who will go months- she's in college in Kentucky, and she'll go months without calling me or texting me or replying to me on anything, ever. It's just- it's just kind of how she is. She's just like that. She's called me like four times in the last two weeks. And talked to me for like hours, because she was- she's a YMCA lifeguard. She's been out of work for a month, and her school's shut down. And so she's just like, I'm at home. She's like, I'm not doing anything. The parks are closed. I can't go for a hike. And so I think she's calling me because she's bored. But yeah, and like, I know again, most of my friends are long distance but like, some of the ones that aren't, we've been like messaging each other a lot more. A lot more- and there's been a lot more like updates on day-to-day stuff in my friendships as well. Where before it was like- like with my one friend who's the school tech person. Usually, our conversations were centered pretty much solely around reading and writing, and now we're doing a lot of like talking about our jobs and what we're doing and our pets. And so it's become a lot more, not necessarily more personal, but more like I don't know almost like more mundane. But that's not really the right word connotation. I don't know. It's weird.

Megan Owens: It's interesting though. I mean, you know, I think a lot of us are experiencing something kind of like that. What have been some of the biggest challenges that you've faced during this COVID-19 situation?

Talitha Brandel-Black: I think for me personally, most of them have been, like most of my challenges have been like psychological, emotional ones. I have some pre-existing mental health issues which are not helped by like, like- high anxiety is not helped by panicky news. And

because I'm trying to stay on top of stuff so that I can be like, hey, boss, did you hear this? Do your bosses need to know about this? I think I've been reading the news a lot more, which isn't helping, just probably contributing to my lack of ability to concentrate on things. But like, laundry's not getting done and I put off doing dishes. Because I just don't have the energy for it. I'm working these like, I'm working pretty short shifts. My boss has been really good about that. People have pretty much been having four or six hour shifts, which is really nice because the alternative is like nine hour shifts. But the- like so we've been working these short little shifts. But they're- because we're so busy and so stressed, it's they feel a lot longer. And if you happen to be closing, your shift is pretty much guaranteed to be an hour longer than it's supposed to be, just because it takes so long to get stuff cleaned up.

Megan Owens: What kinds of things have you, your family, your friends been doing for recreation, to try and take your mind off of this kinds of stuff?

Talitha Brandel-Black: I've been playing a lot of Animal Crossing because it came out right before this whole thing like went down. And I actually really enjoy Animal Crossing games in general. And I had pre-ordered it, like I was going to get it like when they announced that they were doing Animal Crossing, I'm like I'm buying that game. So I'd pre-ordered it. So I got it on its release day. I've been playing a lot of Animal Crossing. I've rewatched most of Adventure Time, which is like- Adventure Time is one of my go-to feel good things. I'm a chronic rewatcher, I rewatch all my favorite stuff. But Adventure Time, it's bright and cheerful. And the music's good and it's fun. And the episodes are short. And when you can't concentrate, a 10-minute episode? You can concentrate on a story for that long, and then you can concentrate on the next story for that long and so on and so forth. And you can watch the whole season in one day that way. But my husband has also been playing a lot of Animal Crossing. I know that, like my mom who is an avid sewer, has- people who know her are like, hey, can you make us masks? And she's been making them as fast as she can give them away. I haven't- I know I see a lot of people who are like, oh, yeah, look at all these projects getting done around the house. I haven't even gotten my living room cleaned. I've thank you notes from my wedding that aren't done. I got married in October. They're not done. I was, I was thinking, oh, hey, I'm going to be home, it's- I'll have time to get those done. No. And it's not necessarily lack of time, it's just kind of a lack of- total lack of energy. I've been trying to read, but yeah, that's not really happening either. One of my friends suggested, though, that I go read old favorites, like go reread Harry Potter. Don't concentrate. Don't try and make your brain do something new. Just do something you're already familiar with, which is probably why I'm rewatching Adventure Time again.

Helen Jesse: Yeah, so I'm hearing that maybe your recreation habits have been changing a little bit to more familiar things, maybe?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yup. Absolutely.

Helen Jesse: That require less concentration. Yeah.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Absolutely.

Helen Jesse: And I've been hearing- I've been hearing that a lot of people have been finding a lot of comfort in the new Animal Crossing, so that, that makes total sense, so.

Talitha Brandel-Black: It's, it's soft and cheerful and you can invite other people over to your island and you can stand next to each other.

Helen Jesse: Yeah, there's a- there's a connection there that I think people are craving right now. So that's understandable.

Megan Owens: Yeah, my next question was actually going to be like, you know, do you think there's a particular appeal with this new kind of Animal Crossing, especially during this time with the pandemic and social distancing?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Oh, absolutely, because they've worked in now a better version of the pre-existing Animal Crossing model of visiting other people's towns. The, it's a lot easier now than it has been in the past with Animal Crossing games to like go trade fruit and items. And so you feel like you're progressing faster in the game. And since the game takes place in real time, progress can feel really slow. So, like, it's nice though. It's- the music is upbeat, the colors are soft, and the animals are adorable. And the whole thing, the whole experience of Animal Crossing is designed to be as positive as possible. And all the Animal Crossing games have been like that from the original game cube- like the Game Cube versions, like they've all designed to be slow, positive games. And I think there's a lot of people who are playing Animal Crossing for the first time, the first Animal Crossing game they've played and are finding a lot of comfort in the fact that it's basically a normality simulator.

Helen Jesse: Yeah, so for future researchers maybe listening to this, Animal Crossing, from what I understand, is like a simulation game where you build up your own town with sort of animal, animal villagers. And you also have the ability to invite people, other players, that you know in your life to your game and see your town. So there is this ability to visit your friends and their virtual worlds in real time, so. But yeah, I think that's, that's relevant to today's crisis.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yes. And you get to like, you know- as, as a young person, I'm 23 and with a economy that's like, clearly- it was falling apart already, and it's falling apart more now. The idea of owning a home is so far removed from what seems feasible right now, that like Animal Crossing adds- like it gives you that opportunity too. We live in a- like an 1800 square foot apartment. It has two bedrooms because they somehow shoehorned two bedrooms into our apartment. It's- they're tiny, a queen bed fills up two-thirds of the bedroom. And we would love to own a house someday, but right now it's not going to be anytime soon. And Animal Crossing kind of is like, oh, hey, here you get a house. It has rooms. You can decorate them how you want. You can change the walls. Where we live in an apartment, we can't change our walls. We're stuck with them. We can put things up on the walls, but can't change them.

Megan Owens: So then, how has the current situation with COVID-19 team affected your community? Whether that's your work community, your neighborhood community.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Well, it's really, really sad to drive past the parks. Minnesota always has had this big push for municipal parks. And so just about every town and city in Minnesota has loads of parks and they're all closed. They have caution tape around playground equipment and there's signs up everywhere, like the parks- parks, playgrounds are closed. City parks, like the trails are mostly still open you can go there. A couple of them that have like little fishing piers are open, but they have signs up all over them about social distancing. I'm seeing a lot more people though like out taking walks. Part of that might be because it's finally spring, although we are supposed to get a blizzard tonight, but I- I moved here last fall while it was still nice out and there's a lot more people out taking walks now than there was in the fall. They seem to be doing a pretty good job about staying in their own little groups. However, I also drive by, like on my way to work, I drive through this whole section of townhouses and more than once there have been whole groups of people on the porches of these townhouses clearly having a party. Like, I don't think you all live there, but yeah, it's like half the stores have empty parking lots because they're closed and the other half are packed. I know that like the fishing opener, which is supposed to happen in like two weeks, the governor's big ceremony for it has been pushed back to next year's fishing opener. You can still go fishing, but the governor is not doing the big ceremony about it. And water sports and recreation, feed- like, so around water, that's like Minnesota's thing. That is the thing. Ice skating, fishing, boating, camping next to the lake, going to the lake, swimming in the lake. Because Minnesota has like a million lakes. They're- they're a huge source of recreation and income for the state. And that was because the lakes are such a huge source of income, that was why last year, after all of the blizzards that we had last year, the governor wrote off snow days so that schools didn't have to go to the middle of June, because it was going to affect tourism in the northern half the state. And I know that in the southern half of the state, the economy is pretty much all agriculture. And the northern half of the state it's all mining, forestry, and tourism. So yeah, this should be interesting to see how that goes. Fishing is actually specifically on the list of recreational activities allowed to Minnesotans. Fishing is, it's on there. Traveling to go fishing is on the list of acceptable travel.

Megan Owens: Wow.

Talitha Brandel-Black: It's kind of- it's kind of interesting to see just how big of a deal Minnesotans make out of fishing.

Megan Owens: And you kind of already answered this a little bit, but have you seen people around you change like their opinions or the day-to-day activities that they're doing, or even their relationships in response to COVID-19?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Oh, absolutely. I know a lot of people are getting really antsy. I know there's a lot of people who are seeing things they either didn't appreciate before or don't like about their partners. I know that I certainly have with my husband, although they're mostly

things- is like, oh, I didn't realize that he apologizes to our rabbit. Yeah, it's adorable. Like you'll- like the rabbit lives in our kitchen and has, he likes cardboard boxes and has lots of cardboard boxes. But Jason tripped over a cardboard box the other day and the rabbit like startled and ran back into its cage and Jason's like, I'm so sorry! Yeah. I was in the other room and he just like was apologizing to the rabbit. It was really cute. But I think, I think our relationship is certainly doing better. We're both like talking to each other a little more, I think. We're also seeing each other a little bit more too. He works nights and so we- and I work like during the day. We never see each other. But because I'm working a little bit shorter shifts, I am usually home then when he gets up before he goes to work, so. But yeah, I know- I have a co-worker whose already deteriorating relationship that needs to be done is really struggling a lot more than it usually is. I know that my youngest sibling keeps texting me complaining about our dad because they're home from school and Dad's always home. He never leaves the house anyway, like ever. But school was the escape and that's not available anymore. So I think there's a lot of- I am seeing both good things in that people are coming closer together and not so good things in that close proximity isn't always a lot of fun.

Megan Owens: And then we've seen a lot of stuff in the news and things like that, about self isolation, about flattening the curve. How have you and your friends, family, and community have- how have they responded to requests to self isolate and to try to flatten the curve?

Talitha Brandel-Black: For the most part, they seem to be doing pretty well. I know statistically- I saw a set of statistics based on Google's location tracking information, that proves that Minnesota is pretty good about staying away from other people. Minnesotans, for the most part, are responding to that piece of information with the yes, of course, we don't do other people. So it's kind of a thing that we- just- like people have been doing really well at- when stores like- my store has been limiting the number of people that are allowed in the store. That's 15 people total, including employees. There's usually five employees, so it's ten people at a time in the store- form a line outside, but they've been doing really well at standing roughly six feet apart in line. It looks pretty normal for a line in Minnesota. People don't tend to bunch together unless it's really cold outside. But- and I know that like my family personally, my grandparents, they live in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. They have been staying at home watching bunch a hallmark movies, their hallmark movie people, and they have a neighbor who gets them groceries. For the most part, it seems like the people I know are doing pretty well at it. It's a little concerning to see the dudebro townhouse parties but its people, I don't know. I can't really do anything about that. So I can do what I can. And that includes not going anywhere. And I can do that. I can place food orders online and like, when I don't have, absolutely don't have the energy to make food, I can place an order online for picking up, and I don't have to interact with people. But like Walmart, it's not so good. Shelves like- the shelves are only like seven feet apart. You can't stay six feet apart from people in a packed Walmart. And the Walmart here is always packed anyway. They are trying to direct traffic a little more though. They've got like, you know, barricades up so you can't go walk through the self checkout to get into the store? You have to do, yeah. You do have to walk around them. It's like they're trying, kind of. I haven't been to a Hy-Vee or a Target recently even though I usually buy all my groceries at Hy-Vee, because I needed jeans. So I went to Walmart instead. But I did hear that Hy-Vee has put down like tape

arrows on the floor. I know my boss put down, everywhere where people tend to congregate in our store, she went and taped X's on the floor six feet apart. Stand on the axes, cash register x, other cash register x. Then throughout the queue like X's six feet apart, over by the cut counter here, six feet from the cut counter. Here's two squares six feet apart on the floor. And I've seen that some other places too. A lot of gas stations have tables in front of their registers. The liquor stores, which in Minnesota, a lot of them are municipally owned and so and they're also specifically listed under essential businesses because Minnesota gets a lot of- I think there's a lot of income to governments, to the government from the liquor store. I know most, certainly in most rural communities in Minnesota, the liquor stores are owned by the city, and so it's the most direct source of income for the city. And because a lot of people, I think are coping with this by drinking a lot, it's a good source of income for the city. All the liquor stores here have big- this big plastic plexi glass like these big shields with a little hole in the bottom to pass money through, and they'll like have you hold your ID up to the plastic. But other than- like they're open regular hours, they're pretty busy too. But it seems like for the most part people seem to be doing okay at the being distant thing.

Megan Owens: And you mentioned Hy-Vee, is that like a local?

Talitha Brandel-Black: It's a- it's a- yeah, it's a upper Midwest chain, comparable to Kroger or Winn-Dixie. I don't know, Ralph's, I think is another one. I think that one's like way out- like out west. But yeah, it's like the- it's like the chain that has- you know, it goes across five or six states and in- in the upper Midwest, that's- that's what it is is it's a Hy-Vee. But yeah, it's like a Kroger.

Helen Jesse: Yeah. Can you spell that for us, so we can have it in the transcript?

Talitha Brandel-Black: H-Y-hyphen-V-E-E

Helen Jesse: Ok, that's not at all how I thought that was spelled.

Talitha Brandel-Black: I know, I know.

Megan Owens: That is- yeah, not at all how I wrote it.

Talitha Brandel-Black: It's- it's- that's weird grocery store spellings for you.

Megan Owens: Yeah. We're in Indiana, so I haven't encountered one before, but.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah. But I have- I have relatives in Ohio, so I- I know that the, the most similar chain out there is a Kroger, so.

Megan Owens: So then this is another thing you also kinda touched on a little bit already. But in what ways do you think that COVID-19 has been affecting people's mental and/or physical health?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Well, I think a lot of people are not exercising as much. I know I'm not because I'm just simply not working as much. And it's- I haven't had the energy to like even on the really nice days, bike to work, which is what I was planning on doing. The- and I know I keep hearing from a lot of my friends online, they're like, yeah, just don't have the energy to go for a bike ride. But I also hear about the same number of people who are saying, when I'm really stressed, I tend to go for long walks, long bike rides. And so- and like I have been seeing more people like out taking walks. So that's, that's good. I know I at least personally on the mental health front, have been incredibly stressed and anxious. The, and it's, it's not helped by increasingly grim news. And I'm unfortunately not in a place where I can just sort of turn the news off. I- I feel like I do need to be keeping an eye on it.

Megan Owens: And then have you or anybody that you know gotten sick during this outbreak?

Talitha Brandel-Black: I had a brief chest cold. It presented kinda weird. I like lost- the first thing that happened was I lost all sense of taste and smell, which in young people seems to be like the first symptom of this. So that was kind of- that was, it was weird. It might have just been- it might have just been anxiety. And that is a thing that happens with colds. So- and I didn't get any like- like I didn't get really sick either. I only ran a fever for a couple of hours over the course of that whole like nine days I was out of work. But I don't know anybody who has actually gotten this or has gotten like sick sick. I know my mother-in-law is really freaking out because she is a dietary aid at a nursing home, and she's- she has a couple of friends that have been diagnosed with this, but I don't know anybody personally, no.

Helen Jesse: What is it- like, do you know anybody who's gotten tested for COVID or like, what's that like in Minnesota?

Talitha Brandel-Black: So my boss's boyfriend did because he is super high risk and he was sick right away at the beginning of it. He did it through a drive through testing thing right before the state started limiting them severely because they were worried about running out of testing supplies. They're still worried about running out of testing supplies. And as far as I'm aware, Minnesota is limiting testing to hospitalized cases or people who are high risk.

Megan Owens: And you've mentioned before you've been watching a lot of news and things like that. What's been your primary source of news during all of this?

Talitha Brandel-Black: I use Google's like "articles for you" thing. A lot of the ones that come up are CNN or WCCO, which is a Minnesota news channel, or it's the Star Tribune, which is the paper out of Minneapolis. Yeah, I think it's Minneapolis. Their articles come up. Most of those places, along with most of the local like Minnesota's local news stations have made all of their articles about the COVID-19 crisis free. They're not behind their usual pay walls. I don't like actively go Google search news about COVID-19, cuz that's, that's- I don't need that in my life, but I do read the articles. I do read a lot of the articles that Google suggests. And

about once a day, I do do a search for news regarding what's going on in Minnesota for this, so yeah.

Megan Owens: Have your news sources changed at all during the pandemic?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yes, I'm paying more close attention to it. I'm reading a lot more articles on more local news sites, stuff within my own state. The local news, like the local local paper, like Mankato's paper, is never super interesting. It's not a large town, the crime rate's not particularly high. So it was in the news for like three days when somebody got arrested for something like drug possession, like, oh, news this is still news. But yeah, I've been reading a lot more local stuff. I've been paying more close attention to the news in general, because right before all this, all the news was just politics. And that's mostly super overwhelming for me. And so I try to, I try to avoid most of the news during a big political cycle year just because it's really depressing usually.

Megan Owens: And then are there any important issues that you want to highlight or that you've noticed that the media is or isn't covering?

Talitha Brandel-Black: The media doesn't seem to be doing a super good job on, at least not that I've seen, on covering exactly what is going on with the whole election. We have a presidential election this year. And I- frankly, I'm a little concerned that they're going to try and push it back, which is ridiculous. And I hope that if they start talking about that, that there's such a big- I hope that if they, if they start suggesting that that might happen, that people will flip out and be like, oh, no, no. I do know that Wisconsin has been under a lot of fire in last few days because their primary was this week and they they held it. They held their in-person primaries. Minnesota is super lucky in that it's really, really easy to absentee ballot in Minnesota. You don't have to have a reason, you just have to request one. That's it. And they'll mail it to you. You just have to fill it out, have somebody look at it and see that it's not filled out. Fill it out, either drop it off or mail it back in. It's insanely- and I know that not all states are like that. And I know that a lot of states like pretty much require in-person voting. But yeah, I think- I think a lot of like- I think the news isn't highlighting also that this thing is not actually granting people the time to get stuff done, like people on Facebook keep saying it should be doing, because it really is a widespread traumatic event. And I think, I think the media is not acknowledging that particularly well.

Megan Owens: So then how have municipal leaders and government officials in your community responded to the outbreak? Especially if you've been paying more attention to like local news and stuff like that.

Talitha Brandel-Black: I know that here in Mankato, again, they closed all the parks. They- all the school districts now, in the last few days the- the schools have all closed their playgrounds as well. Minnesota was very prompt on the- let's not congregate all of our children together in buildings where they have to be close together. As soon as they were talking about this, they're like, OK, look, everybody, just go home. We're going to figure out getting this back online. Just everybody go take two weeks off. We'll figure it out- as far as like the schools go. I know there

hasn't been any like forceful shutdowns of businesses here in Mankato. But I know that like in our- like, our- the Joanne chain there's been a couple of stores in Minnesota that have had to be shut down by law enforcement because they weren't adhering to social distancing stuff. The store in Shakopee was shut down because of that. And the store in Willmar I think as well. I know Willmar is closed. I know Rochester is closed. Faribault is only doing online stuff. So I think we're also, part of our business is probably getting, we're getting a funnel effect. All the people who are regulars at these other stores are coming to ours instead. But the governor of Minnesota, Tim Walz, seems to be doing a pretty good job. He's been- he's been constantly in the news. There was a chance that he might have been exposed. He immediately went home. When that like happened, he immediately went home and didn't leave his house for two weeks. On the chance that he might have been exposed. He delivered his State of the State Address from his living roomâ€¦ a suit and tie, nice, governor-y chair. But yeah, in his own home. He has been addressing the public regularly. And it's been- I know that the state government set up a whole response page in the state government that has the document listing who counts as essential workers, who- and I actually donâ€™t, anymore, our storeâ€™s been trying to say they're essential, but the guidelines have changed in Minnesota, so I'm guessing we're going to shift to online orders only now because in the last couple days that was changed to craft stores have to be doing online only orders. And we- and it's only supposed to be for stuff to make personal protective equipment. I haven't heard anything about- since I brought that to my boss's attention, I haven't heard anything about what our store is doing. I had yesterday and today off and yesterday, I just stayed home all day. Cause I really needed a day off. And the- but yeah, the governor seems to be doing a pretty good job. Heâ€™ I don't actually remember. I think he was just elected, 18 or 19. I don't remember if he was elected in 18 or 19. I don't even remember if I voted for him, but I probably will vote for him if he runs for a second term, which is either next year or the year after. I- I think. It's not this year, next year, or the year after. But yeah, he- I'm pretty impressed. The comparison is just really dramatic to like how the federal government is handling this. And it shouldn't be. State governments and federal governments should be like on the same level of like on-top-of-ness with this whole mess. But they're not. Minnesota's seems to be doing pretty well.

Megan Owens: Do you have any thoughts, then, on how the federal government in particular is responding to the crisis?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah, theyâ€™re not doing a very good job. The President continues to say just remarkably idiotic things. And it's a little- I know that one of the things I kept seeing early on in this was that he was refusing to, despite the fact that he and people, like- despite the fact that people around him were like getting sick, he refused to either stay home or get tested for it, which doesn't speak super highly of his concern about the whole thing. Yeah. Iâ€™ and like I mentioned, I'm a little concerned that he's going to try and push, get the, get the election pushed back, or that this is going to spread out long enough that people are just going to be, like- theyâ€™re just either not going to show up to vote or that they're going to be like, look, we don't want a big change in the middle of a crisis. The same sort of thing that wound up with FDR being elected four times. Because people didn't want to change the- in the middle of a crisis. So I'm, I'm a little concerned that that's going to happen as a result of, and I'm a little concerned

that the federal government's immense mishandling of this is a purposeful bid for that. And I realize that that sounds a little conspiracy theory-ish, but the last four years have been a political nightmare. And so yeah, it's a little concerning that this happens during the election year.

Megan Owens: Yeah. And then you mentioned earlier about the essential guidelines changing in Minnesota. Could you just speak a little bit more about that?

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah. So we got a whole, like- there was the original essential guidelines list and it had very vague details on govern- on what qualified for retail, which of course than a company like the one I work for jumped on that immediately. They issued, weeks ago, a letter to all the employees that weâ€™re supposed to carry and show to law enforcement if we get stopped, that lists us as being essential. The critical worker definitions all changed in the last few days. Here, let me findâ€¦ They're like basic- like things that- it's healthcare and grocery stores, gas stations, the liquor stores, which are specifically listed in here. I downloaded the whole 18-page document to send to my boss, because the new- the new guidelines included changed guidelines for our stores andâ€¦ but yeah, the whole thing has been- itâ€™s- it was like doubled in length when they extended the stay at home order. The critical worker definitions like that, doubled. The length of that document doubled. And I know that like veterinarians are excluded from it. The financial services, so like people who are working at banks are essential. Defense, hazardous materials, critical manufacturing, and they're like pages long descriptions about what falls under these things. A lot of them are government things or things that tie directly to people living. Or, you know, like being able to call somebody if somebody's trying to break into their house. I know arts and crafts stores got changed to, I was trying to find it here. Arts and crafts stores got changed to just essential stuff only. Oh, there it is. â€œWorkers supporting arts and craft stores, but only to the extent that they're distributing materials for making personal protective equipment, EG homemade face masks. Such materials must be purchased prior to pick up electronically or by phone, and must be pre-packaged by the manufacturer, distributor, or the store. Workers supporting arts and crafts doors are notâ€”in bold-otherwise exempt.â€” So yeah, that should be interesting to see how that changes what our store is doing. We're still kind of- my boss is still kind of tied by what, what her bosses tell her she has to do, because she's concerned about keeping her job too. And all of us would like her to keep her job because she's a good boss. And so we'll see how that all shapes up in the next few days, because everything is changing so quickly.

Megan Owens: Yeah. And so then sort of tying into that a little bit, but how has your experience, how have your experiences so far changed how you think about your community, your current situation, family, friends?

Talitha Brandel-Black: It's made me more assertive, which like I would feel legitimately guilty for telling people that no, you don't have something. Now it's like, no, we don't have it. And I'm so- I don't know if it's because I'm operating on this constant like low-level anger or what. But I have, I've noticed I've become more assertive. And like- kitty! I also, like- my faith in the federal government was not super high, but it wasn't like rock bottom low either. It is now been shaken considerably further than it had been. I am definitely going to pay more attention to like state

politics, I think in the future, just because it's really, this has really driven home exactly just how far distant the federal government really is when you live in a nation made up of a bunch of little, that's essentially made up of a bunch of little nations, that all operate under their own rules. And I think- I think it's really showing exactly where to, like- I've really been thinking a lot more about how exactly the various tiers of government all tie into each other. Like where state things are limited by what, like- where local things are limited by state things but are limited by federal things. And so, like, I think there's things that like because the federal response has been so lax, it's trickling- there's a trickle down effect, but it's, it's really interesting to see. It's really making clear exactly how those governmental tiers all interact with each other.

Megan Owens: And then knowing what you know now, having experienced what you've experienced, what kinds of things do you think that individuals, communities, and governments as well need to try and keep in mind for the future and potential other situations like this?

Talitha Brandel-Black: That the economy is not a sentient, single creature. And that we certainly need to keep in mind that like as, as communities, people need to keep in mind that workers, no matter what it is they're doing, are people. I think that's, I think that too is becoming more clear to people as well. College students who work at gas stations are not faceless entities. They're college students who work at gas stations who have their own lives and stuff. And people who are working retail jobs. If you're in my store questioning why we're open, why are you here? I hope that this whole thing will make people more cognizant of their choices in interacting with other people and how they choose to interact with other people, at least like, you know, on that immediate community level. I think, too, that as well as this happening in an election year after four years of dumpster fire politics, following a dumpster fire election. I think a lot of people, at least certainly in my peer group, are going to be a lot more interested in taking an interest in the fact that we live in a democracy and need to exercise our freedom to do things like vote. I think it's going to make a lot of people, especially people like me, who are working jobs where we're not- we're not really essential, but are being told by our corporations that we are, because they clearly- clearly, it's the result of caring a lot more about profits than the people who work for you. I'm a minimum wage- I'm a minimum wage corporate drone. Like I- I know and knew beforehand that I am replaceable and the corporation, corporations don't care. But I think that- but yeah, I think that a lot of people, especially in situations like I am, are going to have more interest in exactly what they can do for policy, for the political situation. And I hope it will shake up a lot of the corporate sponsorship issues that politics always seems to be rife with. All those conversations that crop up during presidential election years.

Megan Owens: Yeah. I mean, that's- that's really well said. Did you have any more questions, Helen?

Helen Jesse: I don't. Is there anything that we haven't asked you that you'd like to talk about?

Megan Owens: Mm hmm.

Talitha Brandel-Black: I don't think so. This whole thing has just been so weird- like the whole situation has just been so incredibly bizarre. The first day I went back to work after my chest cold was gone, I- it was nine o'clock in the morning. I live in a city of 50 thousand people. I live on a fairly busy road that goes right past the university. It's always busy. It was dead. Nine o'clock in the morning, dead. There was like three cars. It was one of the most surreal experiences I've ever had in my life.

Megan Owens: Yeah!

Talitha Brandel-Black: It's just like bizarre. The traffic has kind ofâ€¦ mostly, it's not- it's less than it used to be, but it's moreâ€¦ I don't know if it's just me getting used to it, or if it actually is- there actually are a few more cars on the road now, but it doesn't seem quite soâ€¦ That first day was just really surreal.

Megan Owens: Yeah, I can imagine. But that's all the questions- sorry, my cat. That's all the questions that I have for you, but thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview, it was great to talk to you.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah, yeah! Public history projects are just super cool, like- my, like I said way back in the beginning of this, my bachelor's degree is in English and history. And so like, yeah, itâ€™s- it's cool, like this is a neat opportunity, I am- it makes me feel better about like, the whole thing. That regular people are like, their- their voices are gonna be recorded for future historians to write angry papers about labor laws and stuff.

Helen Jesse: Yeah, thatâ€™s- that's kind of the goal of it, is like.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah, yeah!

Helen Jesse: It's kind of giving me sort of a better sense of, you know, agency and control in the situation. We are living through a historical moment, so we are trying to get as many people's voices as possible so we can as a society learn from this, so.

Talitha Brandel-Black: Yeah, it's, it's super cool- like, you guys are doing great, and itâ€™s great work you're doing, so. Yeah, super great.

Megan Owens: Yeah, well, thank you so much! I'm gonna go ahead and stop the recording now, but let's see.