

Alexandra Phan Oral History, 2020/07/26

Interviewee: Alexandra Phan

Interviewer: Hope Gresser

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Location (Interviewee): Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

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Transcriber: Sally Velez

Abstract: Alexandra "Alex" Phan shares her experience of the pandemic. Alex is a Master's student at the University of Ottawa studying Virology and working in a lab which focuses on emerging viruses- most recently SARS-COV-2 (Covid-19). She describes her activities during the pandemic and the sense that she and other researchers are somewhat removed from the collective trauma the rest of the world is experiencing, as their routines have not changed drastically. She also discusses the changes in student life and what it is like moving out of your parents house/living on your own for the first time in the midst of a tiered lock-down.

Hope Gresser 00:01

There we go. Okay, so, my name is Hope Gresser. I am a Master's of Public History student at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently in Ottawa, Ontario. Today's date is the 26th of July 2020. And today I am here with Yes, Alexandra Phan. Also in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, who I have known for 11 years now. We went-

Alexandra Phan 00:34

Oh wow!

Hope Gresser 00:36

Yes, we went through school together. So we are friends, and she is going to be discussing her experience with the pandemic today as a Master's student studying virology-

Alexandra Phan 00:49

Yeah!

Hope Gresser 00:49

In this time. So, first question I have for you. And part of the way this works is, if at any point you want to divert, please do, we're going to try to keep it as chronological as possible. But if there's something that you're like, Oh, yes, this, go for it.

Alexandra Phan 01:07

Okay.

Hope Gresser 01:10

What do you recall about the start of all this? Do you remember the first time you heard about the virus? What did you think about it initially?

Alexandra Phan 01:18

Yes, so the first time I heard about the virus was probably before Christmas. And it was not, in the context of a pandemic, it was in a very casual discussion with my PI Marceline Cote. And she was really just mentioning it as a new virus that had emerged. And because we're an emerging viruses lab, she was just talking about how there's probably going to be a lot of literature on it. And at that point, I hadn't heard any major news about it. So I just kind of compartmentalize it in the back of my mind is something I might want to read up on later. But I did not think that it was going to turn into anything big until around a little after Christmas, when the news started really picking up on it.

Hope Gresser 02:10

So contextualize that a little bit jumping back, do you want to explain a little bit about who you are and what you do and how you came to this?

Alexandra Phan 02:20

Yeah, so I study emerging viruses, because I'm a master's student in the program of Microbiology and Immunology at UOttawa. And so our lab so far up until this point has primarily focused on Ebola. But with the pandemic and with the need for new, like literature and usually, like, my PI is pretty new, but usually, you know, you start to branch out and so this is kind of her forte, this is an emerging virus. So we have now branched into studying the Coronavirus or SARS CoV.-2, and yeah.

Hope Gresser 03:09

So, how does this compare to any other health crises you may have lived through? Or have maybe, in your case studied in the past and like, how do you compare them?

Alexandra Phan 03:22

Um, so, the only other thing that I've studied in the past in in terms of research and just like not just in class would have been cancer and for that, like cancer, I think, affects individual lives more than like a pandemic has been a very collective experience for basically the entire world, it seems. Whereas cancer was something that I knew is dangerous. Everybody knows cancer is dangerous, but like, I've never I don't know how to explain it, but it's almost like the experience of a pandemic feels a lot more hard hitting because its not so common. And then you add a second part to the question, I can't remember what it was.

Hope Gresser 04:25

Just anything, any health crises that you've experienced?

Alexandra Phan 04:30

Oh, um.

Hope Gresser 04:31

Sort of thing, like-

Alexandra Phan 04:32

I, yeah.

Hope Gresser 04:33

Not necessarily, personally, just-

Alexandra Phan 04:34

Yeah. So personally, I, I haven't had any major health crises. But I mean, when H1N1 was a thing, I remember it being like, I think that it did reach some kind of like pandemic type status, but not to this degree. I don't remember how like the World Health Organization classes every- classifies everything. But I remember being told to be careful and to wash my hands and to be clean and stuff like that. But with this Coronavirus, it was, first of all very, very sudden to me like everything just shut down. And within a week, we were not allowed to do anything at all. Whereas with everything else that I've ever experienced, it's been like, either much more gradual or the effect has been not as drastic. Yeah.

Hope Gresser 05:34

Kind of playing off of that a little bit. So what does a typical day looks like for you right now? What has it looked like, at different points in the pandemic? Because that has changed over time, and how is it different from before?

Alexandra Phan 05:52

Okay, so I guess I'll, I'll start with like before, on a daily basis, I would just go to the lab, and then and then just go home, but I would be taking public transport a lot more. And then I would go out pretty often, like not super often, but once a month, you know, or a little bit more I would go out to eat, I would go to the mall quite a bit. And I hug a lot. I'm, with people I'm close to like, I'm really touchy feely. And now we're not allowed to do that. And so at the very beginning of the pandemic, when lockdown started in Ottawa, I had a sore throat. And I don't think I mean, I haven't been tested, but I doubt that it was the Coronavirus, but I was home for two weeks. And that drove me like, absolutely not to lose my schedule. And personally, to know that some of my friends and colleagues were in the lab doing the actual research that I wanted to do and was supposed to be doing felt very, like irritating to me, not against them. But just because I felt like I was missing out just FOMO. And then, after that two week period, where my sleep schedule was all over the place, I was absolutely not productive. I think I tried to stay productive by reading papers and working on an assignment that I had due. And it just was not really working out for me. I started going back to the lab, and then from that point, until the phase one, sorry, one second. Sorry, someone at the door. Until phase one started, I was in the lab eight to ten hours every day. And that was you know, just to do research. And that was exhausting. But comparing to what other people were telling me about stay at home and my very short two week stint sitting at home, I prefer to just because I had at least a schedule to stick to and like some kind of purpose in the morning to get up and go somewhere. So like I found that I felt very lucky to be in that position. Plus, being at home all the time, like feeling cooped up, is also not a good experience. And I got to actually interact with people my own age and who were interested in the same things as I was. And so it was really good break from just being at home. And at the time I was living with my parents. So being around parents all the time can also get really irritating even though I love them very much. Yeah, and then I mean, a lot of things have happened. I don't know if you want me to go into the details of my moving and stuff like that.

Hope Gresser 08:56

Yeah, sure. Yes.

Alexandra Phan 08:58

Oh, okay. So about a month and a half ago, I also moved out of my parents place and then into a new apartment. And I had actually planned to move in May, but since we were in very strict lockdown in May, I pushed my movement. My movement. My moving to a month later, so I lost a month's rent on that. But by the time I moved things were starting to open up. And now in our apartment, we try not to have too many people over at one time, but we are pretty relaxed with having people that we trust over and then recently we were looking for a room- a new roommate and we just had people come in, but they just wore masks and we wear masks and we're pretty safe. I can't bus to work anymore. So I depend on a co worker for rides. I could bus to work or bike. I'm like trying to get a bike. But yeah, public transport makes me a little bit nervous. So I'm not doing it.

Hope Gresser 10:08

Yeah. Have you done it at all? Since the lockdown-

Alexandra Phan 10:12

No.

Hope Gresser 10:12

Kind of

Alexandra Phan 10:13

I have not set foot on public transport at all.

Hope Gresser 10:13

started? Same.

Alexandra Phan 10:17

Yeah.

Hope Gresser 10:25

How are you getting your essential supplies right now? Or how were you getting them when you were at home with your parents and stuff like that? So like groceries and medications and things.

Alexandra Phan 10:36

So-

Hope Gresser 10:36

Just doing that.

Alexandra Phan 10:38

Groceries, I'm still getting groceries, like, my parents were getting groceries when I was living at home. And I'm getting groceries now, because I'm not living with them. I just wear a mask. And I think at the beginning of the pandemic, my parents were not wearing masks, because we were told not to. And then as the like, as things progressed, and we've been instructed to wear masks, and so now they are anything else we try to order. And like sometimes with food, I will go to like a takeout place and just make sure that I have a mask on and social distance.

Hope Gresser 11:24

And how often are you like, are you going once a week? Were your parents going once a week? Or is it like more frequent or less frequent?

Alexandra Phan 11:30

I would say it's about the same as before. So it be approximately once a week. For myself, yeah, it's also on average once a week. It hasn't changed too much. They did stock up at the beginning, though. They stocked up a lot. They have a lot at home. Yeah.

Hope Gresser 11:55

So what have you been doing with your spare time? Has it changed at all, what you're doing, or?

Alexandra Phan 12:01

Um, yeah, a little bit. I mean, I didn't go out too much before. Anyway, I spent a lot of time just on my laptop and on Netflix. So my Netflix usage has gone up a lot, because there's not really anything else to do. Um, I yeah, I used to go out to dinner with a friend probably Yeah, like, once or twice a month. And now I'm not doing that at all. We do sometimes try to Uber Eats. And when I do meet up with friends, it is no longer in restaurants. I am hesitating about patios, even though they're open now. Mostly it's parks. Like anywhere I would meet anyone would be a park and I'm sitting on my blanket, and they're sitting on their individual blanket. And we're six feet apart and not sharing drinks or food the way we like normally, I would not be opposed to that all but now I'm like, unless I know them really well. That's not gonna happen. Yeah, and even if I do know them really well, it's like, within probably like my best friend or my significant other that I would share food with. But other than that, no.

Hope Gresser 13:19

Because you also have a lot of friends that are in the same field as you. So how do you think, or do you think they've responded the same way to everything you have? Or is there kind of a any different responses that you're sensing?

Alexandra Phan 13:36

Um, I think it's, it was pretty varied, to be honest, because as a virologist, or as virologists, we study the mechanism of the virus, like entering cells, but we don't necessarily study like pan- when the pandemic and like how fast a virus will spread, like just within our lab anyway. And so really, that that's epidemiology. And so I remember at the very beginning, before lockdown started, a lot of us thought it wasn't going to be a big deal, even though we are virologists and, and like, I think the public expects us to know everything. And to be fair, like we're also most of us, most of my friends are first year master's students. So our knowledge is still very, very limited. And I remember a lot of us saying, you know, it

wasn't, it wasn't going to be a huge thing and that the media was blowing it up too much. The only reason I remember feeling like just for myself, I remember panicking a little bit earlier than some of my friends did. And that was only because I had started a Twitter account and I'm on like, Academic Twitter, and there were profs everywhere that were much more knowledgeable than me being like, The WHO, oh, sorry, I shouldn't call it The WHO the World Health Organization, I read as WHO in my head, the World Health Organization needs to declare pandemic status now, and they didn't until much later. And so I was seeing a little bit of panic amongst, like, higher ups in my community that kind of ticked me off a little bit that I should start worrying as well.

Hope Gresser 15:23

On that, how do you think the public at large perceives your profession in your community? And do you think that's changed at all? Or is it still people don't know what you do?

Alexandra Phan 15:34

I'm, I think now, when I tell people what I do, they at least know that it's relevant. So that's good. I think before I remember telling people what I did, and a lot of people said, what is that? And now they're like, Yes, tell me what you know. And, and then I can talk about my work and get excited, and people actually want to listen and stuff like that. In terms of, I think that, at the beginning of my master's, I was told that there would not be a lot of jobs in virology, and that I would have to really compete to do well in this field. And then as soon as the pandemic started, I think that might change within the next five to ten years, maybe by the time I'm all graduated. And, you know, like I'm planning to pursue a PhD. So if and when I graduate from a PhD, maybe there'll be a lot more open positions, there's been a lot more funding. In terms of the public, the public's perception of virologists, I think anyone who trusted health care professionals and the medical field and science before is really just more aware. But I think anyone that didn't trust the system, before still doesn't trust the system, like anti-vaxxers are still anti-vax, vaxxers, and anti-maskers are still anti-maskers. So I don't think that there's a huge shift in whether or not people believe what I have to say, it's just how much they're willing to listen.

Hope Gresser 17:18

Have you had any encounters with those kinds of people, or have you been nice and away from that?

Alexandra Phan 17:24

I've been in my bubble, it's really just people that trust the instructions.

Hope Gresser 17:30

Fair enough.

Alexandra Phan 17:31

Yeah.

Hope Gresser 17:37

How do you, you perceive what you've been doing recently? And it's value?

Alexandra Phan 17:47

I think that what I'm doing right now has value for the scientific community. Because the research that I do is very fundamental. It's not going to lead to a vaccine or an antiviral right now, you know, I'm like, I wouldn't say that it would affect people's lives. As immediately as a lot of other work that other scientists have done. I think what I'm doing is more contributing to this growing pool of information that hopefully someone else can take and and that will have a bigger impact. I do think it has a lot of value. Either way, it's just probably not what people expect me to be doing. I'm not developing a vaccine. And that's what most people think that they do when I say I'm a virologist. Yeah.

Hope Gresser 18:46

To shift gears, what is the mood among your family and friends from outside the lab right now? Or has been over the course of the-?

Alexandra Phan 19:01

initially, paranoia. Initially, it was like, you know, my mom, I don't think she ever went outside for like a good month or something like that. She just wouldn't go outside. And I had a friend whose sister had a co worker who tested positive and there's a lot of paranoia there. Now, though, I think people are getting used to social distancing and used to just kind of like how things are and so now it's, there are people are just being more careful, I think. But yeah, initially paranoia. I remember. At the beginning of the pandemic, I think people started to create their own In bubbles, so even if you didn't live with someone, if you had a specific circle of people that you knew you would interact with, regularly, then you would just create that one bubble. And so my bubble would have been my parents, my co workers, and my boyfriend. But at the beginning, I did not go to see my boyfriend. And I like I felt bad, but I just really didn't want to get him sick, or myself sick. And because I was one of the only people that I knew, leaving my house every day, it just felt like, I was being unfair, like, I already had the privilege of actually leaving my house to go do something, and I didn't want to abuse that. Not power, but just like that, was that privilege? Yes. But then, things started to kind of calm down, I don't think the policies or the rules changed when I did start to go hang out with my boyfriend, but it was more like, Okay, I'm used to my schedule. And I know what that what I'm doing is safe, I'm washing my hands and stuff like that. And so I can add one more person to my bubble, and, and just make sure that that's it and that I'm within my, my little circle of people. Yeah.

Hope Gresser 21:29

If you were creating an exhibit, or writing a book about the pandemic, what would you include? What would you want people to know?

Alexandra Phan 21:40

Oh, that's a good question. Um I think the main thing that I would want to highlight would be the trust or lack of trust of the government in different countries, and how that has affected the outcome of the pandemic. So as far as I know, New Zealand is doing really well. And I think China and South Korea are also doing really well. And they and these countries had people who really listened to the policies that were being put in place right away. And unfortunately, the States is not doing well, in a lot of areas. And it seems in those areas, people have this general mistrust of their government and their policymakers. And so if someone were to write a book, or if I were to write a book, like I think that exploring the relationship between politicians and the people that they're supposed to serve, and the

history of that would be pretty important, because it's very unnerving to see people not trust their government. And it's sad to see that they don't trust their government. And it's also really frustrating to know that they're putting themselves and all these other people in danger because of it. I think that was the the main thing. And then also, I would probably want, just like people's personal stories sprinkled throughout, firstly, just to make it more personable, and to kind of show the differences in individuals lives, because I think that there's a lot of privilege that plays into how comfortable you are during the pandemic. So I think shedding light on everyone's life from, you know, the least to the most privilege might be something else that would be interesting and make people in the future maybe feel less alone, especially if they are at the bottom of the totem pole, so to speak. Or if they feel that they're the bottom of the totem pole, then yeah.

Hope Gresser 24:18

I'll address both of those things separately. So first off then, where do you, well, context here. We both grew up in a city that is the national capital, where I think pretty much every household has at least one parent working for the government.

Alexandra Phan 24:33

Yeah.

Hope Gresser 24:33

So where do you think Canada falls in that equation in terms of trust of the government, and where do you fall in that, I guess?

Alexandra Phan 24:46

Um, I think we trust the government well enough I'm a little unsure I did hear on the radio about a month or two ago that according to some kind of survey, that Canadians tend to trust their government more than our neighbors in the States. I know that there's still been protests and people not really taking this seriously in Canada, but I, I personally haven't experienced it. So I don't feel like I can speak to that. I think-

Hope Gresser 25:22

Mhm.

Alexandra Phan 25:22

That pretty privileged. And I think that the government has done enough that we would listen to their policy. If not, if, even if we don't truly, fully agree with them or understand them. I think that that people are find the government reasonable enough, and that they the government hasn't done anything too outrageous. That would, like, obliterate our trust with them.

Hope Gresser 25:50

Fair enough.

Alexandra Phan 25:51

Yeah.

Hope Gresser 25:53

And then the other thing you mentioned was kind of intersectionality here, and -

Alexandra Phan 25:58

Mhm.

Hope Gresser 26:04

Levels of privilege.

Alexandra Phan 26:07

Mhm.

Hope Gresser 26:11

Where do you see yourself in that? And-

Alexandra Phan 26:15

Um. Go ahead.

Hope Gresser 26:17

Sorry. And has that affected your experience at all? Of the pandemic?

Alexandra Phan 26:22

Yeah, so I think I am quite privileged, I know that I have a lot of financial privilege, because I graduated my undergrad debt free, so I don't have anything to worry about. Yeah. And I'm, I'm also an only child. So like, my parents don't have to spend as much on two individuals and taking care of two people. And I've, again, had no health crises of my own. So yeah. And the fact that I am, I haven't lost my job. And, and that, essentially, like I am now more needed than I was before, also has been really good. Like I, my mental health has not really suffered, I've been stressed only because I've been working a lot but it's, it's not really a stress that students like students experience that type of stress all the time. So I still have income, I still have a job, I still have a place to live. I have or I had a vehicle when I was living at home, so I was still able to go places, if I needed to, just to work because everything was closed, or to, to the grocery store, like my parents could drive, there was no need for public transport. So yes, I think I'm very privileged in that sense. I think that because I'm Asian, I was pretty worried about whether or not I was going to get racist remarks. Um, and I, I haven't had any, like, outright hate. I've had a couple of remarks from people who are quote, unquote, joking. And it's a little uncomfortable, but I don't like I don't really react to it too much. Because, to be honest, I was expecting a lot worse. So yeah, so that's another thing that maybe I feel like a little bit less privileged on. But because my social circle is also, like, pretty progressive, I've, I haven't experienced anything that would have hurt me too much at all.

Hope Gresser 28:57

Do you mind? What kind of remarks, do you mind-

Alexandra Phan 29:00

Um.

Hope Gresser 29:01

Elaborating? And you can say no.

Alexandra Phan 29:06

Um, I'm just trying to think of like, specific things. So, actually, I am going to say no, because-

Hope Gresser 29:17

Yep.

Alexandra Phan 29:18

Yeah, yeah. I just will say no.

Hope Gresser 29:21

Fair enough.

Alexandra Phan 29:22

Yeah.

Hope Gresser 29:23

Um, so yes. What do you want people to know about your experience of this pandemic?

Alexandra Phan 29:33

I'm just probably that it was very unique as compared to the majority of the rest of the world. Because it was different and like, I couldn't relate to the meme online of being cooped like day something something of quarantine. I like I couldn't really relate to that. So, yeah, but it was unique. And that I had this discussion with my co workers that one day when everyone was, you know, when everything is over, and everyone's just talking about this pandemic, whether or not I would feel slightly removed from this collective trauma that the rest of the world has experienced, I, I don't know if I would have, would feel that, I think that I could relate to it to some extent, but I think that I do, I am a little bit removed from it, just because I had a, I had the opportunity to go to work, everything that I did was voluntary, if I wasn't comfortable, I wouldn't have been, I would have still been paid and not had to go into work. So, yeah just that it was different.

Hope Gresser 30:42

On that, on that still being paid and not having to go into work or other labs open? Or like were they open during the more stringent shutdown? Or was it just you guys that opened up?

Alexandra Phan 30:53

It was only people that had gotten COVID-19 funding. So as far as I know, it was myself or like my my lab and another group. And then as people started to get more funding, I did hear about some other labs like down hall or in another building, opening up and letting a couple other students in. And it was not everyone in the lobby, it was only people that were allowed on those specific projects. So yeah, and

then we in, at the beginning of June started are phase one, or like point five or something of introducing people so we were at 30% capacity and now we're we've increased it to something slightly higher. And we're taking it in shifts and we have to wear masks almost the entire time. Unless we are in an isolated room like I am in right now. Then we can take our masks off. Yeah, so like now all the labs are open, but we're not allowed everyone in the lab all at once it's done in shifts, yeah.

Hope Gresser 32:09

And on that when I think about it, you guys are connected to the hospital.

Alexandra Phan 32:13

Yes.

Hope Gresser 32:14

So have you noticed anything about the hospital and their protocols? Or how is have their protocols affected you guys?

Alexandra Phan 32:25

Um, I think the first week that I was in I was not allowed to cross into the hospital at all. I don't remember exactly when but that did change because we are collaborating with another lab that's in another building so I do have to cross through the hospital but I personally wasn't super affected I would just bee line through there and the hospital has been like I don't pass the emergency room or or the ICU or anything so I don't really see any activity it's just like a couple of people in scrubs and they always have masks on and gets pretty calm

Hope Gresser 33:07

All right that is all the questions that I have.

Alexandra Phan 33:18

Oh, cool.

Hope Gresser 33:20

Is there anything else that you wanted to say? Or any questions that you have?

Alexandra Phan 33:25

Ah, not really no I think I'm good.

Hope Gresser 33:31

All right. Well, it was good talking to you.

Alexandra Phan 33:35

Yeah you too. Thanks for having me.