

Transcript of Clinton Roberts Interview by J. Michael Bailey

Narrator: Clinton Roberts

Interviewer: J. Michael Bailey

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Location (Interviewer): Ogden, Utah

Transcriber: J. Michael Bailey

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Abstract:

Clinton Roberts grew up in the small town of Blanchard, Oklahoma. He has lived there the balance of his life and continues to work the family-owned Insurance business his grandmother started. In addition to working as an insurance agent, Clinton is also a graduate student of History at Arizona State University. In the interview, Clinton discusses what it means to live and run a business in Blanchard during the COVID-19 crisis. He discusses the challenges he has faced and the changes he has personally made. He further discusses the changes he has witnessed in his local community, within his family, and his relationship with his long-time girlfriend, Kelly McDaniel. He also reveals the toll these changes have taken on his mental health, relationships and livelihood; the fear of “not knowing” his diagnosis after falling ill in recent weeks, and the stresses of taking care of his grandmother during this illness.

JM: This is J. Michael Bailey of Arizona State University HST 580 for the Journal of the Plague Year archive. Today is July 11, 2020. And I am conducting a phone interview with Clinton Roberts. Clinton will be talking about his experiences of living during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects it has had on those living in the rural town of Blanchard, Oklahoma. Good afternoon, Clinton. Thank you for joining us. Can you tell me a little bit about Blanchard, Oklahoma? What is Blanchard, Oklahoma like?

CR: It's a small rural town, but we're kind of at the edge of the metro area in the, in central Oklahoma where Oklahoma City is, and Norman is. For the most part, it's -- it's still got a lot of small-town values, but it's a -- it's a fast-growing community. A lot of the people who live here work in Oklahoma City, Norman, Chickasha-- the bigger towns that are kind of around this area.

JM: How long have you lived in Blanchard?

CR: I've, I've lived here since I was about two years old. And during that time, I had moved from just a small city next to Blanchard, but I've only not lived here when I was in college and just a couple of years around that time. So, other than that I've lived here basically since the late 70s. So just basically over 40 years at this point.

JM: When you first heard about the COVID-19 outbreak, Clinton, what were your thoughts about it living in a rural town like you live in?

CR: Honestly, when I very first heard about it, I kind of followed... I usually follow the national news pretty closely at least online. Just for my own curiosity in my background. I enjoy reading on stuff like that. And it seemed very far away, especially for a small community like us. A lot of the bigger cities where people... are in the airports and they're traveling internationally and stuff like that, that seems very far away. So, when things were happening in China, and were happening in California and New York, it all seemed very far away. And it took kind of a long time before it felt like it was nearby.

JM: Has any of your thoughts changed since then?

CR: Yeah, it really has changed a lot. One of the big things that changed is when it started to become right here in Blanchard. For long time, you would just have a small amount of cases here and there, but they were just spread all over Oklahoma and it was, you know, very small amount of people. But when people in Blanchard tested positive, it seemed like at that point, it was very real. It seemed like it could happen anywhere at that point because we seem so isolated from the world outside, you know, being a small town. So when people started coming back from spring break, and some people had traveled to, I think it was like Alabama or Florida or somewhere like that during spring break, and they basically brought it back with them and then a whole family, you know, got quarantined in Blanchard. That was the first time it really hit home how close it could get. And of course, since then, we've had cases sporadically, including I don't know how many active cases we have now close to 20 or so active in our town. But before that, it seemed like it may not ever happen here. And then, of course it you know, it did happen

JM: Since the outbreak has occurred, how has your community responded to those events you just mentioned?

CR: It's...it's been -- overall, the community itself has responded kind of different ways. certain places have been very proactive. They went to alternative ways of opening their businesses. My mom, for instance, her church did a virtual service for the first time ever, they, you know, there wasn't a lot of tech savvy people that were doing things like that before and then all sudden, they seemed like they wanted to, you know, find some ways to kind of proactively, you know, avoid some dangerous situations. Since then, it seems like the way that people have responded depends on their beliefs. It's, it's definitely something where there are people who don't believe that there's a danger, and then there's other people that are continuing to wear masks and things like that. And it seems like as the cases get closer to Blanchard and more cases occur in Blanchard, a lot of the people who I think, doubted it are starting to come around. And it seems like there hasn't been a larger push to respond in Blanchard even though it's not everybody.

JM: Where do you fit in your community, Clinton? What I mean by that is what do you do for a living and things of that nature? Can you tell me a little bit about where you fit in your community?

CR: Yeah, I, my family has an insurance agency that they've owned since the 1970s. And that's when they got it from, basically, another relative, but it's been in my family for close to 50 years now. And I work there and I've worked there since I was a young boy and I'm an insurance agent in this insurance company now and in the community itself, I, my office is kind of like right downtown Main Street, and my family is one of the families that's been here a long time. So, I feel like I'm kind of integrated into the main part of Blanchard. I think a lot of people probably know me, or at least they know my family. So, I feel like I've been kind of a part of the community most of my life.

JM: Now you say you were integrated in the community based upon you basically your job and the things that you have done for the last 30-40 years with your family business? [Clinton affirms] How has... how has this, how has this pandemic affected your employment or the business itself?

CR: Yeah, it's, it's definitely when I was younger, my grandmother and my grandfather and a lot of people were, were the ones that were making the big decisions for the company and now that my grandmother's getting older, even though she's still the owner, she relies on me for a lot of things. And it was kind of hard because I was the one that had to make the decision to close the door. And I was the one that had to kind of come up with ways for us to do things. And one of the things that we did, and I think that the date was around March 19, is we put up a sign and then we posted in Facebook that we were going to be closed to the public. And at that time, we were still working at the office, but people had to kind of slip us paperwork through the mail drop and then we could email and mail stuff back. Since then, things got worse to the point that about a week or two after that we just outright closed the office and we just have a phone number up. Now, we all work from home. I still go up to work almost every day just to do little things, but we don't interact with the public at all face-to-face anymore.

JM: How... How has it affected the employees-- You mentioned that you work from home? How has it affected the employees of your business? And if it has affected them, in what ways?

CR: My -- my mom, she worked there part-time and she doesn't have internet from home. So, basically it affected her quieted quite a bit [laughs] because she just opted to not work as much because she doesn't have that ability to basically work from her home. And then my girlfriend [Kelly McDaniel], she works there part time and since she's normally a full time teacher, she's really had to pick up a lot of slack in my work because she's one of the people that has the access to like work from home and as you know, has a smartphone and things like that. So, her duties have kind of increased. So I it's kind of affected our employees in uneven ways, some employees have basically not really worked very much anymore. And then other employees, like myself and my girlfriend, we've actually had to increase our duties. I feel like I'm kind of on call, you know, seven days a week, maybe, you know, two or three hours past the time I'd normally be home, you just kind of never know when something will occur.

JM: Now, because you're no longer doing transactions face to face with people in the community. How has that affected the business?

CR: Yeah. I, early on I think a lot of people were frustrated that we had made the decision not to be open. I think a lot of people didn't consider it necessary. As time gone. As time has gone on. The, the businesses in our community have continually kind of accepted this and they've done the same thing. And customers have noticed that other businesses aren't open, or they have limited hours, or it's by appointment only. I think a lot of people that aren't in the food industry, in particular, have kind of been expected to not be as convenient as maybe the food industry has tried to be more convenient. They've tried to find ways to make curbside, you know, deliveries and, you know, and all these different things because the food industry really can't shut down. And of course, we're essential enough that we can't just close, but they also-- the public doesn't really expect us to do all those things that you know, the food industry does. I mean, I don't know exactly, you know, if every person was happy that we closed, but I think a lot more people are understanding of it now. And they've realized that it's not that hard; they could call us, and we could email them or stuff, and we could fax some things and we can take payments over the phone. And, and I think people are starting to get used to the idea that they could get more things done over the phone, even though in a small community, I think people prefer face to face contact

JM: Because of the changes that you've had to make and that your community has had to make economically and socially based on what's going on with the COVID-19 crisis. How would you say that your community has changed overall?

CR: I would say overall, the main way it's changed is that it seems to be that, that coexisting with COVID-19 is, is really difficult for a small community. The overall feeling is everybody wants the normalization of life before. It's kind of hard to accept that there might be an alternative way of living that was different than the way we had before. And you can see that expressions through schools that, you know, are adamant about wanting to reopen this fall as normal. Kids in the local area are already doing summer sports stuff, preparing for fall football, even though you know, like, not specifically in Blanchard but some other small towns have had some of their athletes test positive, because you know, of the testing that they're doing. But it seems like there's a push for people to really want things to be back to normal, even if maybe it isn't going to be safe. It seems like the real change in our community is that they are really pushing to find alternative ways to get things done. If they can't get them done outright, exactly the same way as before.

JM: Now these targeted ways of getting things done, can you give me an idea of of what you mean by that?

CR: Yeah, it was one of the things that was really unfortunate for my community is that you know, we didn't have a graduation, we didn't have a prom, for all those seniors in high school, you know, this this spring, and you know, you you never get your senior year back. You know, I can always go to work next year and work's kind of the same every year, but you're never really a senior again. And so one of the things that our community did is they did a drive through graduation, so that the kids can actually have a ceremony and they can do it in a social distance way and they can do it outside and everybody in the

community could take their cars and decorate them and do all these really fun things to make it, you know, a good thing for the kids. And I was really impressed by that. But I was also impressed with the fact that our city itself, not the school, decided to shut down Main Street Blanchard and they actually hosted an outdoor prom for the kids to do. And I think that's the kind of ways that our community is, is tried to provide something. I know that you can never have, you know, everything be the way it used to be but it's good to have that effort to try to provide something, to have some kind of memory of some things that, you know, would have otherwise just been lost.

JM: Now, we've spent a lot of time talking about your community and how you fit in the community, how the community is reacting to COVID-19 and the pandemic right now. What I'd like to do is change directions and ask you things that are a little bit more on the personal level [okay], beyond your community, beyond your employment, how has COVID-19 affected your day to day activity?

CR: Oh, yeah, it's really changed it. Of course, like the little things I do for work that that I used to do the little errands and things like that. It seems like now when we do any kind of errands, we're taking our mask with us, I'm constantly having to-- like clean things with cleaning products. And every time [train interruption] we get out to do things, it seems like there's layers of precaution we have to take --and that's one of the things I've really noticed is that we spend a lot of our time now guess attempting to be moresafe. And that didn't used to be even a consideration. Before this, I think a lot of times we went to the grocery store, went to get groceries, our main concern was that the milk didn't go bad [laughs]. And now it's not like that at all. We spend 15-20 minutes wiping down our groceries and making sure that certain groceries don't, you know, go into the freezer or go into the refrigerator until we can get the cleaning product off of them also, and it's --it's -- it's just like there's a layer of things that we have to do every day that kind of adds to the anxiety, and adds to the pressure of day to day life.

JM: Now you have mentioned your longtime girlfriend, Kelly. How has this situation affected the things you do together? I mean, what kind of alterations or alternate things have you had to do for recreation or spending time together that has been affected by the crisis?

Yeah, it definitely has affected a lot of the fun things we used to do. We would go to places like Norman, which is nearby, but it's a -- it's a bigger city. And we used to go there, and we would just go to places even if we didn't really spend money, we would walk around. Like we normally try to get 10,000 steps every day on our, you know, our little trackers. And we used to go places and look around and do things and it's like now you know, we don't really get out of the house, especially not for just that stuff. And when we do get out, it seems like there needs to be a necessity, there needs to be something important we have to do. So, a lot of our activities now are in the home. So, of course, I spent a lot of time with with school as a graduate student, but we do try to take time to watch, you know, a TV show or something on Netflix and just try to wind down and spend some time but it's, it's -- it's still not the same. We definitely don't do as many things as a group. Like we don't go out to eat, you know, we don't do those kinds of things that we used to do a lot. And so, it is -- it is considerably different to have, you

know, like the limited amounts of things that you can do every day reduced down to kind of what you do inside the house.

JM: Beyond your relationship with Kelly. How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected your association and communication with other friends and family?

CR: It's definitely reduced a lot of it to Facebook and text messages and phone calls. There's times when you think you have plans and a friend wants to come to town and wants to see you. And you know, and you want to have all these things that you do, especially during the summer, you know, when people plan, vacations and things like that. And it seems like everything like that just got put on hold overnight. And people don't even expect to make plans now. In like March and April, we were making plans like oh, in June, we'll do this in July we'll do that. Well now that those times have come and pass and it kind of seems like the extension of COVID-19 is going to keep stretching. We don't really make plans anymore. Everything is more online. The connections between a lot of my family and my friends. You know, we limit our contact to only the closest family members that we have to take care of.

JM: How do you feel like that has actually affected the relationship itself with those people?

CR: I --at first, I think it was frustrating because I was taking it a little bit more seriously than some people, because I was having to help take care of a grandmother, an elderly person that I considered, you know, somebody that had, you know -- like they were, you know, could be affected -- you know, easily so I wanted to kind of protect her. So, I didn't do as many active things as my friends were still doing early on. Now that time has gone on, I think they all kind of realized that. Because I think the realization that, you know, that there's limitations has kind of made everybody come to the same conclusion. So, I think as a whole it would be nice to interact with, you know, a lot of my friends and family in person. But I think everybody is kind of on the same page. We kind of understand it better now, then like, at least two or three months ago, you know, a lot of people didn't understand.

JM: Right. Now you did mention that you had been protecting your grandmother, I believe is what you said from getting sick [yes] and things of that nature. Had -- do you know anybody that has gotten sick during COVID? Or has experience with a, with any of the sickness?

CR: I haven't -- I don't know anybody personally who got COVID-19. Everybody I know that got COVID-19 is like someone at my mother's church or friend of a friend, somebody that I didn't really know. So, my main experience with this was the -- I actually just recently was sick a couple weeks ago and the fear of not knowing, you know, if you could be possibly -- cause then I had to worry about well, who's going to go to my grandmother's house? Who's going to do these things? Because I now have to presume that I mean, I could be contagious. Even if it's not COVID-19, I don't want her to be sick of anything because it's dangerous to go to a doctor or hospital right now. And so, it was really scary just to be sick in general. I definitely kept my distance. I limited my contact with even my grandmother to the

point where sometimes Kelly would just go to my grandmother's house, or sometimes I would go, but I would stand outside, and I would just talk to her from the door. It was -- it was hard. And it was kind of frustrating because I knew that in the end, I would probably feel better. But I felt that fear that I mean, I could potentially give this to somebody else, and it could be COVID-19. I was never tested. And I really didn't have the opportunity to go to like a drive through testing nearby, or I probably would have. In fact, that The main precaution is I didn't want to go sit in a small doctor's office or a hospital when I knew that there were people there that had it. One of my symptoms were nausea and like stomach pains. So I just kind of isolated myself and hoped if things didn't get worse, then that would be the end of it. Because I was afraid if it wasn't COVID-19, I could potentially get COVID-19. Because of my ongoing sickness, I might have weakened immune system and have to expose myself to COVID-19 at a doctor's office or a hospital.

JM: Now with your personal experience of -- with illness, and you mentioned the fear of not knowing as being part of that process. How has this affected your mental health and well-being?

CR: It's -- it's honestly -- it's been really stressful. I would say, like a big part of my stress right now is school being a graduate student. It's kind of hard to juggle that and work. And it seemed like COVID-19 came in there and just upped every bit of the anxiety I had about all those other things. And it just kind of combined into this overall feeling of dread. It seemed like I had so many things on my plate, I had so many worries and I really didn't have the opportunity to ever feel like things were necessarily getting better because of course, we watch the news and COVID-19 keeps spreading, especially in Oklahoma, things kind of get a little bit worse every day. And so it definitely adds to this overall mental feeling of not being in control and not really knowing where things are going to lead to like that. That sense of uncertainty.

JM: Now, you mentioned that you had this feeling of not feeling like you're not in control. We only have just a few more minutes left, but we can spend on this topic. But I would like to ask just a couple final questions that have something to do with that comment you just made. One of them is, is there's -- there's an ongoing debate about municipal leaders and government officials and how they've handled the outbreak. In your opinion, how do you feel like these leaders have handled the outbreak? And as a follow up question that how -- what things would you change that you have seen as have been maybe deficient or -- or would just change in general?

CR: I, I honestly have seen kind of moderate amount of, I guess, responsibility, especially at the local and the state level. Specifically, at the state level, we haven't had very many rules or laws enacted to prevent people. It's mostly a control of like restaurants and things like that. There's no requirements for masks, beyond a few cities to kind of have city ordinances And that's kind of frustrating because you know that like, depending on where you're at, you don't know your safety level. So, it just makes people want to stay home or you know, who are afraid. I think the thing that I would kind of want to instill later, what I would want to change is I wish that we had a little bit better guidance at a state level. I feel

like, at the state level, we get mixed signals. And I think, like in hindsight, if we would have had better laid out rules that were kind of clearer that applied to everybody equally in the state, then I think it would have alleviated a little bit of my anxiety because I at least would have thought that somebody was proactively doing something that I could let a little bit of anxiety go, because somebody was in control. And for the most part, things kind of changed too much and that's not really how it's happened.

JM: Clinton, one final question for you. If you, if you just take a moment and tell me what you think you've learned most during the time of the COVID-19 crisis.

CR: I think one of the things I've learned the most is that historic times kind of happen all the time. I've always kind of looked at like different things in history books, and, you know, things we've studied in classes, And it's always seemed like, oh, there was this time and there was such hardships, and things like that. And I don't know if I'd ever really lived during one where I felt like the end of it was so open ended. I know we've lived through economic crisis and things like that, but I've never really seen a pandemic where you didn't know when it was going to end. And I think that's kind of like the big takeaway for me is knowing like, historic times aren't just in books. You know, they can just happen any time, and then you have to be prepared for almost anything.

JM: Thank you very much Clinton for your time today and for contributing to the Journal of the Plague Year archive. I appreciate your time and I wish you the best. Thank you.

CR: Thank you.