

Transcript of Interview with Katherine Schneider by Alexander Michalski

Interviewee: Katherine Schneider

Interviewer: Alexander Michalski

Date: 05/20/2020

Location (Interviewee):

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Transcriber: This transcript has been provided by Otter.AI with a 2nd pass for accuracy provided by Bryan Paintiff, HST580 intern, at ASU.

Abstract: The interviewee is an older blind person who discusses their experience with the pandemic lockdown in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. They discuss some of the challenges with living with blindness and continuing to work online and the non-inclusivity of other disabilities in teleworking and regular life during the pandemic. Additionally, they describe the challenges of being blind and trying to maintain social distance from people when you cannot see them. They also talk about how a good aspect of the pandemic is the sense of community and neighbors helping neighbors by checking in on people. Lastly, they talk about how they feel that people with disabilities are an afterthought during disasters and one way to remedy this is to have people from the disabled community on planning teams to help identify issues such as access to information and emergency planning.

Alexander Michalski 00:01

So, just to get us started, would you mind? Would you mind introducing yourself?

Katherine Schneider 00:11

Hi, I'm Katherine Schneider. I'm a retired clinical psychologist, I work the second half of my career at UW Eau Claire. And then I retired in '04. And since then I've written four books. And I'm a disability activist in a lot of different areas. I started awards for children's books with disability content journalism with disability content. I'm a blogger, and recently joined the county board.

Alexander Michalski 00:55

All right, excellent. Um, so I take it you live in Eau Claire?

Katherine Schneider 01:03

I do.

Alexander Michalski 01:04

How has, how would you say COVID-19 has affected Eau Claire? From what you've noticed?

Katherine Schneider 01:15

Ah. Less people out on the streets. Lots of buildings close. Restaurants, only doing takeout and the little ones. I worry whether they'll open back up ever.

Alexander Michalski 01:45

Yeah. Yeah, I feel like that's a common common theme, no matter where you go in the state. Which I've been concerned about local businesses, too, with everything going on. But hopefully, things will start recovering soon. When you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it? And since then, how have your thoughts changed?

Katherine Schneider 02:17

Ah, at first I thought mostly about okay, am I at heightened risk? But as time has gone on, I've realized this is not all about me and I began thinking more about public health and who's being affected? How are they being made aware of what's going on? How does this affect different parts of the disability community? And which of my friends are going to be more likely to be affected by it. And what can I do to be of assistance because so far, I'm free and clear and able to help.

Alexander Michalski 03:26

Okay. So I guess piggybacking off of that, what issues have concerned you the most about the COVID 19 pandemic?

Katherine Schneider 03:38

Ah, some of the disability issues. The first one that hit me was the county board, went to online meetings. And they use a platform called WebEx, which right on its front page says, it doesn't play well with screen readers. I'm blind and use a screen reader. And so at first I thought, Oh gee, maybe they should use a different platform. Well, they didn't think they should use a different platform. So is how, how can I make this work? And they do have a dial in number for the WebEx conferences. So I use the dial in and then email, my votes to the convener of the meeting who then adds some into the votes, the online votes the other people are doing, and I try I tried to get them to send me the PowerPoints and stuff like that ahead of time. Electronically so I can read them. I've become very aware of some people do a better job of explaining what they're putting up on the screen. And other people just say, well, as you can see, I won't bother to read this to you. Well, go ahead, bother to read it to me, because I can't see it. But, so it's I managed to get enough accessibility to be functional.

Alexander Michalski 05:36

Okay,

Katherine Schneider 05:36

is it ideal? No, but okay, so that was all about me, the next issue I became aware of was the deaf community wanted the public health briefings to be sign language interpreted. And we've been fighting

for about nine weeks and have not accomplished that yet. They too, have made a workaround, where one of the vocal interpreters has a Facebook group that all the Deaf people she knows join that Facebook group, and then she interprets on to the Facebook group, which is fine for the Deaf people, she knows, but the others don't get anything. So that one haven't won yet gotten a commitment that it's on the radar to be done. But it's not particularly a high priority is what was stated. Now, if I was deaf, it would be quite a high priority to me to have access to current information.

Alexander Michalski 07:07

Yeah.

Katherine Schneider 07:09

So that's the other struggle that I was a small part of was park towers, which is a low income, disabled and elderly housing building on farwell, they had a pop up food pantry, once a week from Feed My People. And when COVID hit, that pantry was closed, because of people weren't keeping social distance to get into a community room and get your food before all the food's gone, people are not going to keep social distance. So it was closed, and that left people going out to Walmart or wherever all which is quite a bit more exposure for them. So when I found out about that, I got involved with reaching out to various levels of city government saying this is wrong. And you and I both know it's wrong, now do some. And they did. And it's back. Being the food is delivered to people's doors, instead of having it in a community room. It's handed out individually, so that was a good workaround. But it took pushing people to kind of think outside the box about how we're going to get this done.

Alexander Michalski 09:12

Okay,

Katherine Schneider 09:13

Then another thing that I thought about was, okay, single people if if you're safer at home sheltering by yourself and you're in the retired, quote, vulnerable age group, or situation. You might need somebody to check on you every day, you know, just to see because you wouldn't necessarily speak to anybody on a given day and they wouldn't miss you. If you fell sick, so I established a small group of friends of mine that were in that situation and were interested in every day, I either send them an email or a phone call, depending on which works better for them. And then if they, if they don't answer that day, I would try one more time, and then I go over and do what it took to get in their house and intervene.

Alexander Michalski 10:36

Okay.

Katherine Schneider 10:37

Now, luckily, so far, everybody's answered, it's all good. And it's just sort of a fun little. Every morning, I send up some goofy question or something, and they respond and fine. But it's, it's one of those

neighbors, helping neighbors, kind of things. That's the good part of COVID that I've seen, I've had a lot offers from people up, hey, if you need anything from the grocery, just let me know, a few of my taking them up on their offer. But it's, it's my way of being able to do that. For other people is doing a little bit of a check in. And then I, there's a visually impaired support group. And I offered that if there was some single folks in that group that needed checking on, I would check on them and see if they were aware of all the resources there are in the community or so I did little bit of resourcing for some of those people.

Katherine Schneider 12:00

And then I decided that I would offer to the Chippewa Valley post, which is a little tiny, online, news outlet in the community, I would do a column for them. Corona chronicle from the sidelines of this whole thing, and try to put out some kind of mental health stuff. But not in a preachy kind of a way, but in a humorous, down home kind of a way. So I keep two or three posts every week for that.

Alexander Michalski 12:00

Okay.

Alexander Michalski 12:59

Okay. So, it sounds like you're a very community oriented person. So I'm curious,

Katherine Schneider 13:09

well I have the luxury of being retired, so I can find my own projects and do what I want to do.

Alexander Michalski 13:16

Of course, yeah. So I'm curious. Um, how has the COVID 19 outbreak affected your Community? I mean, do you mentioned a little bit about people kind of looking out for each other. Has that been a theme? Or is that kind of in an outlier in some of the communities that you're in?

Katherine Schneider 13:39

Ah, I think that's this theme. as sort of a odd way that it's affected me and and affects other blind people. The social distancing thing is hard to do when you're blind, because when you're blind, you don't see. So how do you know that you're six feet from somebody, or less than six feet or more than six feet? And the only way ya know is if they make a noise. And Northern Midwestern people are very polite and quiet. And the most they might do is smile. And smiling with their face masks on, probably doesn't do sighted people much good either. But anyway, so you get how am I going to get information from people now what I asked people to do is please say, Hi, I'm passing on your right. Even if they don't know that right from their left, At least it gives me a hi so I can kind of judge where they are. Or better yet my pit bull that looks like it would like to eat your dog is with me. So that I know that my new seeing eye dog is responding to a pitbull, it looks like it wants to eat me. Because a lot of times people with a misbehaving dog just tried to scoot by real quick. And so the dog is, the first thing I know that there is somebody around, is I hear a snarl. And that kind of gets your attention. And I would so much

prefer a Hi, Fifi and I are passing on your right kind of thing. So it's a that's an odd wrinkle. The social distance thing as I think about when church opens back up. Not even sure I'm gonna go My faith is important to me. But trying to sit I love sitting in the back row and yakking with the other people that sit in the back row and doing that in a six foot distance is gonna be hard to yak during Mass. But also, when it comes time to go up to communion, I usually take somebody's elbow. Because sure my dog can get me to the front of the church and then they can relate me straight out the back door to whereas if I've got somebody's elbow, I know when we're back to my seat. But with a six foot distance there is no approved way to take somebody's elbow with a six foot distance.

Alexander Michalski 17:18

Right.

Katherine Schneider 17:22

So I I don't know if I'm going to even bother with that at the moment. Because you can watch services on Facebook or whatever.

Katherine Schneider 17:37

As I talk with other blind people, the social distance thing I think Eau Claire is polite or a lot of people have been getting sort of snarled at by people if they invade their social distance, you're too close. Well, hello, you could have said something before I got too close. But I I've not experienced that kind of snarly behavior, but other blind people and others places have talked about that. And then there's the problem of the delivery services. Like I get my groceries from Woodmans. And they they have a delivery option. That was working good. First time I ordered after COVID started. The next delivery was 10 days from now. That was available, okay. So you order which you need. Suck It Up till then. And then it turns out well, things that were available when you ordered them are not available. So you get about 85% of what you ordered. Now the reason is, that whole delivery thing was started for a small group of little old ladies like me, who don't drive and then all of a sudden everybody else clambered on the bandwagon. So it was just over run. But the good news is I think because of COVID there will be more delivery options available in the future. Because I think people are liking them.

Alexander Michalski 17:37

Right

Alexander Michalski 19:47

Yeah

Katherine Schneider 19:48

and probably will still like him even after COVID is calmed down.

Alexander Michalski 19:56

Yeah, I definitely think so to

Katherine Schneider 20:00

Voting turned a little bit south for me. When I vote in my precinct, there's what they call the handicap voting machine where you put on your phones and you have a little thing that looks like a remote, and then you, it reads you the screen, and then you mark your ballot by yourself. That was as of 2006. That was the law, that everybody deserved a private ballot. And that's a wonderful thing. But for early voting, or voting by mail, obviously, you don't have that. So I decided to vote early. Because I didn't want to deal with a long line of people standing six feet apart.

Alexander Michalski 21:02

Right

Katherine Schneider 21:03

Wait, waiting to vote. So I voted early. So I had to have a friend help me and the staff down at the city hall, were really pretty condescending, they wouldn't talk to me, they talked to my sighted friend and all this sort of stuff. And yeah, I can, I can go down there and train them and get that to be a better option. But I just sort of plugged my nose and did it. I thought, Okay, well, at least I got voted. The big picture for people with disabilities is that we worry that we're going to be taken care of last in disasters. And I think that's, to some degree, true. Now, it hasn't happened to me, like it did to the Deaf people that still don't have an interpreter. But I think we're an afterthought. And it's disappointing. Back when the big hurricane hit New Orleans. Some people with disabilities were actually killed because they weren't evacuated in time or whatever all. And that was a big, oh, golly, we got to do better. And there were all sorts of committees and et cetera. But it doesn't seem like it's filtered down to the actual how are we going to do this and that?

Katherine Schneider 23:11

My next crusade is with the church thing. I think in each community, they should have a drive thru communion for people that are vulnerable. Because an awful lot of people who go to church, whether it's practice or Catholic, an awful lot of them are of the age and they have other conditions, other than just being old, that make them vulnerable. And they're kind of the pillars of the church usually, but they really should not be at church, even if churches practicing social distancing and all so they ought to get communion if they want. And I saw over in France, they were doing a drive up communion thing. So I asked the priest at my parish who asked the dean of the deanery which is a head of the local group of priests and maybe they'll think about it is what I got so far. But I, to me, if we're really church, we'd be busy thinking about the least of these so that's my next one of my next brooms to ride on.

Alexander Michalski 24:55

Okay. So we have just about I think 10 ish minutes left. So um, I'll ask one more question.

Katherine Schneider 25:10

Is it okay if it's going off script? And not just going down your questions one by one?

Alexander Michalski 25:16

Yeah Yeah, No, that's completely fine.

Katherine Schneider 25:22

Well, good.

Alexander Michalski 25:24

That's totally fine. Yeah.

Katherine Schneider 25:28

Because you can tell I used to lecture

Alexander Michalski 25:33

it's all good stuff. So knowing what you know, now, what do you think that individuals communities or governments need to keep in mind for for the future?

Katherine Schneider 25:45

They need to have people from the disability community on the planning teams.

Katherine Schneider 25:59

Which is, broadly why I ran for county board, because I had the feeling that disability issues are everywhere. And if people who experience them on a daily basis aren't at the table, they're not things that other people think of. And that's it prove true even before COVID, but now I really feel like that there's, there's a lot of things that could get better if people become aware of them and realize that, Okay, we're coming up with the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. And we can feel good about the ramps, curb cuts, etc, etc. But there's so much more that we need to do like information access needs to be worked on. And obviously, emergency planning needs to be worked on.

Alexander Michalski 27:27

All right. Well, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate you taking the time to to chat with me for a bit. Um, yeah.

Katherine Schneider 27:41

This will someday be in in the archive at the university. Is that where it'll end up or?

Alexander Michalski 27:51

Yeah, I believe so. It will end up in the archives. Yeah. Okay.

Katherine Schneider 27:59

And what do you what's your work product that you turn in?

Alexander Michalski 28:06

Um, I'm gonna stop the recording.