

Transcript of Interview with L.M. Bennett by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: L.M. Bennett

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 10/18/2022

Location (Interviewee): Woodbridge, Virginia

Location (Interviewer):

Transcribed By: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we discussed include:

Being immunocompromised, and living with mother who is also immunocompromised; being mother's primary caregiver. Working in healthcare, COVID policy. Going from long cross-state commutes to remote work; comparisons between zombie hoards and pre-pandemic public transit. New Jersey and New York having lockstep COVID policies. Economy motivating health policy. Living in a predominantly Black community at the beginning of the pandemic, and appreciating the cooperation in the community. Privilege and entitlement's relationship with breaking COVID policies. Being in a long distance relationship, getting engaged; visiting fiance in Portland, Oregon; long distance anniversaries. Delaying a milestone birthday celebration; spending 40th birthday alone. Delaying routine medical procedures, eg. mammogram. Mother's extended hospital stay. Socializing on the Clubhouse app. The writing process. Having had an asymptomatic case of COVID. Easy access to vaccination when working for a hospital. Limited access to mental health services in the USA. BLM and police brutality. Fear of calling for mental health support for a friend; the risk that a calling 911 will end in harm/death. Safety and freedom of movement.

Kit Heintzman 00:02

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time and your location?

L.M. Bennett 00:08

I'm LM Bennett, and it is October 18. At 4pm, which is a Tuesday. And what else did you say in the location?

Kit Heintzman 00:19

Location?

L.M. Bennett 00:20

I am currently in Woodbridge, Virginia.

Kit Heintzman 00:23

And the year is 2022.

L.M. Bennett 00:25

Yes, the year is 2022.

Kit Heintzman 00:28

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

L.M. Bennett 00:37

I do consent.

Kit Heintzman 00:39

Thank you so much for being here with me today. Could you just start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening? What would you want them to know about you and the place you're speaking from?

L.M. Bennett 00:50

I am LM Bennett. I am 42 years old. I live in Virginia. I'm an author, I also have a day job. I have a lot of thoughts about the pandemic. And I'll try not to ramble on too much.

Kit Heintzman 01:11

So tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

L.M. Bennett 01:16

Um, it was it was crazy. I was just turning 40 when it started. I just had this this whole thing set up with my friends, we were gonna go out to a local, like video game bar, they have like these really old time video games, you put a quarter in, like old school, Mortal Kombat, Miss Pac Man, it was that bar that we were gonna go to. And I was really excited to hang out with my friends. I hadn't seen everybody at the same place at the same time in a while. So we were all going to go out. And then everything just started happening. There were all of these different reports of new cases found here. New cases found there. Don't go out. Don't do this. Don't do that. So then we all just kind of cancelled it. And I spent my 40th birthday alone. But um, I was able to make up for it the next year, flew out to Washington, did a drive to Oregon and get my 41st birthday in style. But that 40th birthday. Still kind of little sour about that.

Kit Heintzman 02:40

What did the 41st look like?

L.M. Bennett 02:42

The 41st birthday. It was beautiful. My now fiance surprised me with a trip. Her mother said you, we were like long distance at the time. And her mother said you have better not let that baby spend her birthday by herself. She already spent her 40th birthday. She cannot spend her 41st birthday by herself. You have to invite her over. So she invited me out to Washington. And then she planned this whole trip. We took a drive out to Oregon visited Portland. And we stopped at this beach, which was it just kind of weirded me out a little bit because it reminded me a lot of the Jersey Shore except the water was on the other side. But we stayed in this nice waterfront property. And like watch the sunset, just eat sure, is it charcuterie we had that and champagne and pizza and it was great.

Kit Heintzman 03:55

The extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure pre pandemic?

L.M. Bennett 04:04

Well, I work in health care. That's my day job. And I found like the ease of of service as well. I mean, sometimes it was convenient. Sometimes it's not because if you have a sickness, you're expected to come into the office come hell or high water. But I found that like during the pandemic, especially if it was something small, they only care we can see you over the camera for that, like don't come to the office. Um, another thing that I I noticed, I mean, there were certain things that I needed to get done and I just kind of put off like even once it was safe again, I was still scared to do it. Like, you know when you turn 40 you're supposed to get your mammogram and everything and I just put that off as long as I possibly could because I was kind of scared to leave the house, I think by that time, like my mom was back in the house with me, she's immune compromised, immune compromised, so I had to be a little bit more careful about when I went out. And like the precautions I took when I was out, and like having to take the subway was still back then a little bit scary. People were still sitting very far apart from each other, like now everybody's just like, all stacked up on each other, like nothing ever happened. But people were sitting very far from each other, like, oh, this person is sitting here. So I have to go and sit all the way on the other side of the car. Like the first time I had to deal with that, that was a little bit, it was a little bit weird. Because I used to take the subway to work every day and used to just be smashed up against people. So just the single wide berth that everybody was giving me, everybody else who was on the train, it was just just a little weird. But to get back to health care, I found that certain services like mental health services, like it were very difficult to come by, like when things really started happening, and you really couldn't leave the house. That was a little bit tricky to navigate.

Kit Heintzman 06:32

Do you remember when you first heard about COVID-19?

L.M. Bennett 06:37

Um, well, the same way everybody else did, mostly just like in the newspapers and on the television. But they were still talking about it being very much in China. And like, there was no thought that it was going to make its way here. And then it did. And we started hearing about that case in Washington and then started hearing about some scattered cases in New York. And, actually, and this was how we got sent home from work. Someone in our building, we had like a very large building with lots of different businesses like several towers and everything. Someone who was not even in the tower that we were in, they came up positive. So then they were telling us don't talk to reporters outside don't do this, don't do that go out the back door like they were telling us not to not to talk to everybody. So everybody's starting to look around like, like, like getting a little bit more. I guess nervous that it finally found its way here. I felt like it was just like oh its in China, you guys don't have to worry about it, then don't talk to anybody because someone in our building has it. And you have to go home for the rest of the day. And we'll let you know when it's safe to come back. I felt like that just happened very, very quickly. And then everybody just kind of went home and stayed there. Like for the longest time my desk was just like all my books and my like, collect Funko Pops. Like I just had a bunch of like a Jackson Five of Funko pops like on my desk and I remember having to go back a little bit later and, and get them off my desk, get my cards, my pictures and everything off of my desk, because we were going home and they were like we don't know when you're coming back. We have no idea when we're going to bring you back. And you may not even come back and we haven't come back. We like some people in my office. They just ended up like taking that. That time to just move. Some of my co workers moved upstate. After two years, I moved down to Virginia. And that's kind of just how it is now. Everybody is pretty much scattered.

Kit Heintzman 09:17

Do you remember what you did when you went home that day?

L.M. Bennett 09:21

Um, I was a little nervous. I mean, I didn't. I didn't think to bring home like any of my textbooks or anything. I was just thinking, oh, you know when it's safe, they'll clean up though. They'll do their thing and then we'll we'll be back. I just to me it was just a regular. It was just a regular day. I don't remember taking any special precautions or feeling anything other than we'll be back when we're back.

Kit Heintzman 09:54

When did it dawn on you that things were getting more serious?

L.M. Bennett 10:00

When we had the second case, in our building, and they just kept sending out, you know, constant emails about when we might be back in the office and the cleaning protocols, and this is how many people are allowed to be in this space at this time, I really knew that things had gotten serious when there was just no timetable about when we were going back into the office. And I figured that, I don't know, I just kind of figure it, I just had it in the back of my mind that we were gonna go back to the office, but then just didn't happen.

Kit Heintzman 10:46

Pre pandemic, what was your day to day looking like?

L.M. Bennett 10:50

Say that again

Kit Heintzman 10:52

Pre pandemic, what was your day to day looking like?

L.M. Bennett 10:55

Oh, I would get up and take the subway to work, like I took to New Jersey Transit to New York, Penn Station, then from there, took the subway worked in an office, like an open air office, like everybody had cubicles, there was a shared coffee machine, a shared refrigerator, we used to, if we didn't eat in the cafeteria upstairs, then we would like go to a restaurant or something like that. Or maybe like bring food back up to the cafeteria. And then you work you take your coffee break and you go home. On the subway, the very crowded subway, sometimes, I used to joke about how, when we were all standing there, this tiny little section of New Jersey Transit, that is inside a New York, Penn Station, there's like a low, the lowest level is New Jersey Transit. And people would just be kind of standing there waiting for them to announce the track that the train was on, and then everybody just kind of takes off. And next thing you know, it's almost like those zombie movies, how everybody just starts moving at once. So you have to fight your way through the crowds to get to see if you are lucky enough to get a seat and then you just come home, like the train station was like a block away from my house. Like when it stopped there. If not, then I would just get off there. And like maybe walk back a mile to my house. To me, that was just like a regular day.

Kit Heintzman 12:47

And then what did regular days look like after the pandemic hit?

L.M. Bennett 12:52

Wake up, put on my robe, maybe grab some coffee, and sit in front of my computer for hours, until lunch came around. And then I would take a commute to the kitchen and come back to my work area. And then when I was done for the day, then it take another commute to my kitchen or to the restroom or to the living room or, or whatever until it was time to wake up and do it all over again.

Kit Heintzman 13:27

How did that transition feel in the early days?

L.M. Bennett 13:31

It was still a little bit like I had to get used to it like I was almost angry at first because I'm just like, we could have been doing this the whole time. But it really came down on me how much time I had spent commuting to work, commuting to work, commuting from work. And then I just be sitting there and then I have hours and hours of time to do nothing if I want it. I mean, I was usually doing like other things, my other job. But if I wanted to, I could just sit there and loaf in front of the television for a couple of extra hours and not do anything and not be like rushing home or having to worry about what to make for dinner or anything just kind of sitting there and just chilling.

Kit Heintzman 14:30

Early in the pandemic, what were some of your reactions to what was going on?

L.M. Bennett 14:39

This will never happen here, we'll be fine. This will never happen here. We won't be locked down like I remember watching those videos of the people singing to each other on the balconies in Italy. I was like oh that'll never happen. And then it totally

Kit Heintzman 15:01

I'm wondering with contacts in New York and New Jersey, what are some of the things you noticed about the way that different governments were handling COVID policy?

L.M. Bennett 15:13

I loved how New York and New Jersey were lockstep with each other, just like you had the different governors on the west West Coast that were all acting, acting in lockstep with each other. If one did it than the other two did it the governors of Washington, and Oregon, in California, they were all acting as a unit. And they did the same thing here with Governor Murphy and Governor Cuomo at the time. Because there were lots of people that lived in New Jersey, worked in New York or worked, lived in New York and worked in New Jersey, so they had to be on the same page, or else, it was going to be pretty disastrous. So I very much appreciate it. Like the daily conferences that both Governor Murphy and Governor Cuomo did, in which they kind of reiterated what the other said and and we're very much acting in cooperation with, with local government, like with the mayor of New York City, and the different mayors of the towns in New Jersey, like everybody just kind of fell in line. I really

appreciated that, that there was no bickering or infighting, because that was like the last thing we needed at the time.

Kit Heintzman 16:43

What are some of the things you noticed about the reactions of people around you?

L.M. Bennett 16:49

I noticed, now this is possibly because like I lived in a predominantly black community, and a lot of the resistance that I saw to like the different guidelines know coming into stores without masks and whatnot, like I didn't see anyone, like pitching a fit because they couldn't enter a supermarket. Or they couldn't enter a pharmacy without a mask. I did see that in other places. And when I did see it, I was a little bit dismayed. But I was also grateful not to see it in my community. And I say, like my local community, because we kind of knew we were a little bit more susceptible. Like they knew, like at first there was jokes about oh, like, we were immune, but then, you know, the joking stopped, and we're like, yeah, no, we can totally die from this too. And we're a little bit more vulnerable than other populations. Because of the different comorbidities that we have. A lot of us are diabetic, or they have hypertension, a lot of us have lupus, like a lot of us have different conditions that make it make it easier to take us out with this. So then I found that there was, like I said, a lot more cooperation. So I was I was happy about that. But then again, like I said, you'd have like these viral videos of people just like completely losing it because they couldn't go into Piggly Wiggly without masks. And I want to speak to a manager. And this is against my rights. And I was just I just remember just being very annoyed by that. And also thinking that both these people don't care because it's not really killing them. Or they're safe in their houses where they don't have to be on top of people, they're less likely to be living in apartments, on top of other people, they're less likely to have to take buses to and from, they're less likely to have like front facing positions. So I'm like, of course they don't care. But again, I was just grateful not to experience too much of people in my local community and I see the larger black community just throwing temper tantrums for like random things. I just I saw a lot more cooperation. And the only thing I was more or less annoyed by is having to wait in long lines like if you did have to go out to the grocery store, like waiting on long lines to get in because they could only let like a certain number of people in in there, you could only go up one way down the aisle and down the other way down the aisle like those were minor annoyances, but they were things that I think that people were willing to do, you know, to prevent being on a ventilator. So yeah.

Kit Heintzman 20:24

Would you share a story or two about what an example of that cooperation looks like?

L.M. Bennett 20:30

Not complaining that you can't enter the supermarket without your mask. And another. Again, other like I said, Before, people giving each other more space on the subway, some people had to go to work, no matter what, like you weren't allowed to close, like the people that they call the central workers, the people who worked in the supermarkets or people who worked in the pharmacies, or people who were doctors, or nurses or whatever these people still or people who worked in the public transportation, bus drivers, people who were a little bit more willing to give these people grace and space to do their jobs without being jerks.

Kit Heintzman 21:27

Would you share a bit about how you understood and we're thinking about your own vulnerability.

L.M. Bennett 21:34

Um, as I said, previously, I'm immune compromised. And my mom is immune compromised as well. So like, I remember, like the early days of like, when I had to go out to the supermarket I remember just being like terrified, not wanting to really touch anything, like just ripping off your clothes, and then it you came through the door, wiping down groceries and everything. And my mom has a bit more of a severe immuno compromised condition than I have. So I remember anyone not really wanting to like leave her in the house by herself, because she was not, she's not mobile. So like, I remember that. And then I remember just needing to come up with a system so that I didn't freak out when I had to leave the house. Did you remember to wipe down your groceries? Did you remember to change this before you did anything? Did you remember to wash your hands? Did you remember to wipe down the knobs? Did you remember to, did you remember to do this? Did you remember to do that. And I remember being just a little bit more anxious than usual. Because then, like forgetting to do stuff, like those are the stories you're hearing. I forgot to do this one thing, and then I got it. So that made me a little bit more worried and anxious.

Kit Heintzman 23:15

How was your mother handling everything?

L.M. Bennett 23:18

In stride, um, she was handling it the best way that she could like she had her own conditions that were sent during the pandemic. So she was like, aware of certain things but then like, she wasn't aware of certain things. I know that I remember like sometimes like coming in and she's like watching the different. Watching the different. What is the word that I'm missing? Watching the different like conferences that Governor Murphy and Governor Cuomo we're doing. So she was she was keeping on top of things like the best way that she could. I think I was probably a little bit more freaked out than she was.

Kit Heintzman 24:12

2020 had so much going on. That wasn't just COVID-19 As did 2021 As does 2022. I'm wondering other than the pandemic, what have been some of the other issues on your mind and heart over the last couple of years?

L.M. Bennett 24:25

Oh, boy. Well, the whole Black Lives Matter thing. That really, that really took up a lot of time and took up a lot of mental space. Like because I felt like we were constantly hearing about like someone who like died in police custody or someone who was shot running away from the cops or someone who was asleep in their bed and got shot or someone who died because someone had called in a welfare check. I remember those kinds of things were really those things were really pressing in my brain. And I remember, I'm not gonna use any names, and I don't even honestly, I don't even talk to this person anymore. But I remember, like getting a message from someone. And it was like kind of a odd and worrisome message. And she told me that she wanted to just like go to sleep and not wake up. So I was like, completely freaked out. And I just remember going back and forth, and back and forth. And back and forth in my mind, about whether or not I wanted to call anyone to help her. Because of the different things that were happening, because of you know, what happened with Breanna Taylor, and what happened with George Floyd. And, like, I remember, like talking to her on the phone, my hands were just like, going like this the whole time, like just just feeling like all of that anxiety. And what do I do? What do I do? What do I do? I can't put down the phone. Because then this but then I don't know if I'm saying the right thing to her?

Or how do I keep her on the phone? And can I hang up the phone long enough to call someone to ask that like, that was? I think like an addition, because when that was happening, I'm pretty sure like COVID was happening, and everybody was stuck in their houses. So like that was like really heavily on my mind. And it just kind of compounded things. And it's something that I still like think about to this day. I mean, like, how many times do you like see someone that like possibly needs help, especially if it's a person of color. And I'm just like, am is me calling someone to help this person like endangering them and somehow, or, like, I just remember, there was one time where I was just like walking down the street and the girl heads had to flag a policeman because she was in trouble. And I just remember staying there. And I wouldn't leave until till the policeman left. Because I didn't want anything to happen to her. So it's those things that really weighed heavily on my mind as a as a person of color. And thinking there's anything else I don't know just the whole. Well, this is like more recent stuff, like the whole Supreme Court and abortion thing that just think is awful. Like are really considered for a second wearing the wearing the red cloak for Halloween just to make like a statement. But there's, there's just there's a lot that is that's going on. And I feel like you know, us having gone through what we've gone through as a country, like just, it kind of just adds to all of that stress. It makes you think of things in a different light that you hadn't considered before.

Kit Heintzman 28:49

What are some of the ways that you are offering and receiving support from people around you while all this was going on?

L.M. Bennett 28:57

I don't know if you heard of this app, but it's called clubhouse. There's like, I mean, if you think about it's kind of like some rooms are kind of like listening to an interactive podcast, but if you wanted to get on stage, or if you wanted to just kind of sit in audience and listen. I'm like, I would go into those rooms a lot. And then sometimes like I would, I don't want to say that that was like my only human interaction for the day because I was in a long distance relationship too. So I was hearing from my partner, but sometimes like I would be in the house by myself, if my mom was in the hospital for hours and hours and hours, like not hearing any other voices except for the ones on television. So sometimes I would go on to clubhouse and just like talk with people, and like I would say like offer whatever support I could like not like trying to be a therapy Is there anything but sometimes just like how did you hear someone someone so just like gossiping or just like talking about, like stuff that's on television or something like that just kind of trying to normalize the fact that you know, us these are these people who like all needed human connection and probably like weren't getting it as much as as they like. So I was pretty much a part of that. And I was on clubhouse relentlessly, like during the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 30:38

Yeah, you'd mentioned your mother going to the hospital, what was it like having her go out for that care while all this was going on?

L.M. Bennett 30:46

Um, like, I felt twofold about it. I was her sole caretaker. So like, this would kind of be like a reprieve. And then I felt bad about that, about, you know, feeling that well, finally, I can just look after myself for a little bit. And I don't have to constantly worry about whether something I'm doing is going to make her sick. Or on the other end, it was kind of tough, because then she's not around the house anymore. I can't just run and be like, Mom, did you hear so and so? Like, did you see Bold in the Beautiful today? Or did you see that on the on the news? Did you

hear what they said? Like I would have to, like call her to talk about that stuff. And so like, I realized, like, I miss having her around the house too. So then I wouldn't feel that kind of way. So it's like it's a very, it's like a very unique way. And sometimes I wouldn't know how to classify it again, miss my mom. But again, that relief that I have a little bit of time to myself to eat tacos for three days and not have to worry about what she's going to eat too, because she doesn't eat tacos. Yeah.

L.M. Bennett 31:11

What's it been like being in a long distance relationship?

L.M. Bennett 32:28

It was brutal. Because she and I had gotten together like that September before everything happened. And we had seen each other again, like that December because then she had as soon as like, she left New Jersey, that first time she was just like, I'm going back there immediately. I want to see her, we're going to hang out together. And I did see her that December and then I saw her again that February. Like because I had planned it out. I was putting together like an anthology for a book that I had published and I was really hustling to make sure that everything was complete. I wanted to stop working on the project by January 31. And then I was like, after that I'm going to Washington I'm going to hang out with my baby we're going to have a good time and maybe I'll get to go back in March and then things started happening and I did not see her again until June because of all of the different restrictions that there were on travel and like I just remember like having to do like major holidays and stuff and like like anniversaries and stuff like long distance because you couldn't travel. So it just it's it really it really sucked I was committed to her I loved her and I knew that you know it wasn't going to leave her but at the same time I'm just like why can't we be in at the same place at the same time? But it's just like the weeks and months going without seeing each other and then not having any idea when you're going to see each other again like that was hard.

Kit Heintzman 34:43

What does a long distance anniversary celebration was like?

L.M. Bennett 34:47

Well, we both got dressed up. And like I found like online this there's this like really pretty dress it had is like a pink dress that had like sparkly hearts. It was just, I thought it was adorable. So, um, I made sure I was like wearing that dress. And I had gotten a paint by numbers kit. And then I sent her a paint by numbers kit. And we just kind of sat there and did our own little sip and paint. Long distance. Later on, I found out that she hated painting. She tolerated it. Because it was like a cute idea that I came up with, I was just trying to just trying to do something so that we just won't be like staring at each other the whole time during our anniversary. And then, oh, gosh, all right. And then if I can also tell this story. During our anniversary, like I had this whole big thing planned, she loves records, like she has like a whole stack of records, like behind me, you can't even see it in the corner. And I'm not going to show it to you because it's got like boxes and stuff on it because they're still moving in. But she loves records. And so like I had this great idea to do, like a custom record, I just picked a bunch of songs that were our songs are just like kind of reminded me of her and I had them pressed. And I had went on Fiverr and I had someone make up the record, art and everything. And then I had went into Photoshop, and I put down the different song titles. And I was like, this is going to be the most fucking awesome anniversary gift.

L.M. Bennett 36:46

And I sent it out to the to the company and and had the record made and everything and I was like, this is like this is done ahead of time. It's gonna be waiting for her. I'm so excited. And I sent it out and anniversary came and went, and it was still pending and pending. And it was stuck at the Postal Service. And Bellevue was a belt is Belleville Washington Bellevue Washington, it was stuck at that processing plant, like for the longest time. And I'm just like, I'm like, Oh my gosh, um, and then when I actually finally got to go out there for our anniversary, which was like late, like maybe a month and a half later, then I finally got notification while I'm in Washington, that the record had come back to New Jersey. So I was too through, just to through with everything. But she's wonderful. She took it in stride, she really appreciated the effort that I took to get her this record. And yeah, there's a lot of hiccups. And there's a lot of missing each other. And a lot of when am I going to get to see you again. And then like, when you do have those moments of seeing each other in person, like it's just all the more intense because then you're just like, I want to hold on to every moment. And I don't know when I'm going to see this person again. And I don't know if maybe something might happen. Or maybe she might change your mind. And I might change my mind. And then we don't see each other again. And this is the last moment we have this like a lot of things like that, that we're going through my mind. So and then on top of that, we were seeing a lot of people around us like breaking up. So and I don't know if maybe they were just like, I'll be damned if I'm gonna go through quarantine with this person. But we saw a lot of people breaking ups and then we were just like, Oh, wow. So it was a very interesting experience being in a long distance relationship, but we made it

Kit Heintzman 39:27

What was the engagement like?

L.M. Bennett 39:31

It was nerve racking. I heard. She was telling me about trying to get the ring. Like she went to this person and that person and they were just like, well, we're not going to do a custom ring until she can come down here and have it fitted but then I couldn't come down because my mom had gotten out of the hospital so I had to be with her. So then that person retired and then there were just other things that that came up. And then she had like a little replacement ring that she was carrying around with her everywhere. And she was terrified to ask me. But then, you know, she's talking to her friends and her friends are like, loves you, like, you know, she's not going to say no, just ask her. And then the way she asked me, it was, it was perfect, because she just told me the story about how no one in her family had ever gotten, like the traditional engagement, the on one knee, the grant proposal, no one had ever done that, like her brother had turned to her sister in law and said, you know, we've been together for a while. And it's a natural progression to the relationship that we get married. And that was kind of his proposal, like, almost sounded like a business. And I think like someone else had told them, you know, we're getting married. So I got like, the same type of like, proposal, like it was, it was kind of weird. Like, if I tell you what, you'd be like, Oh, no, but it was perfect for us. And she just kind of asked me, and she gave me the temporary ring, which I'm still wearing. And I was just like, I didn't know what she what she was asking at first. But then I kind of looked at it. And I was just shocked. I was like, is this a proposal? Are you asking me to marry you? And of course she was. And then she was telling me about how she had thought about pulling out the ring when we were at the wharf at DC and like doing it in public. And I just realized that I would have been completely horrified and embarrassed by that. Because public proposals are just not my thing. So like, the way it happened, you know, after our third anniversary dinner, just sitting in the car, just kind of joking about everything that it happened, it was just like, it was just error after error with a dinner. We were like joking about that, and how the waiter didn't like ring us up correctly. So we were joking about all that, and it just kind of have in the middle of that. But it was perfect. And I always just like cheesing so hard. And like soon as we got back to the house, we

told my mom because I can keep a secret for like five minutes. And my mom can keep a secret for two and a half minutes. So, you know, we told her, she's like, I knew something was gonna happen, I knew something's gonna happen. So that was pretty much the proposal.

Kit Heintzman 42:57

What's it been like writing during the pandemic?

L.M. Bennett 43:00

It has been difficult. Because again, you know, my mom, because she's not in great health, sometimes. Entire days go by, and which I'm doing my day job, doing stuff around the house and taking care of her. And I sit down, and it's like, seven, eight o'clock at night. And I'm like writing, writing. After all this, like my brain is mush. I've been reading notes and whatnot all day. So then I'm just like, writing who has time for that. Um, but sometimes. And I hate like kind of using this language, but sometimes I'll hear like a sentence or someone will say a word. And the next thing I know, I'm sitting down, just like banging out words, sometimes uninterrupted, sometimes uninterrupted. And then I feel like yeah, I'm like, I could have been doing this all along. But then I really don't feel like I could have been doing this all along. Because sometimes my brain does not react to stress well, so then the last thing I'm thinking of is sitting down and writing words, no matter how much they want to come, sometimes I just can't get them out. But then, like, I just started to, you know, give myself a little bit of grace, like, yes, this is a very stressful situation. Yes, you're doing the best that you can. Everybody's doing the best that you can. So like, you know, don't freak out like and, and I started to realize that my brain works a little bit better when I give myself a little bit of space to like, imagine the story and not just sit there and try to force it out. If so then like I've learned to build in times of rest, where I just sit on my porch and do nothing, maybe have a glass of wine or a glass of coffee, or probably something sugary I shouldn't eat or hotdog or something. And then my brain just start saying, well, here is what should happen in chapter four. And then the words come. So I've learned to, and this is a weird way of putting it kind of tiptoe around my brain realize what it means and then be like, Okay, so here's that thing that we want to write about. But we're not going to tell the other person out there that's worried about like, 50 million different things to do, we're just gonna write this down, and then do the other things and then come back to it later. So learning how my brain functions, helps me to write a little bit better and sometimes clears up that bit of that bit of fog that comes when there are perhaps one too many things to do.

Kit Heintzman 46:17

I'm curious, what does the word health mean to you?

L.M. Bennett 46:20

Health? I would say wellness of body and wellness of mind, emotional wellness, feeling safe in your home, feeling safe in your skin. Just feeling I guess that bit of comfort so that you can do what it is that you need to do. And, where else am I glad with that? I would say it's comfort mostly that you're making, like the right decisions for yourself, for your family, for your household. It's more than just like physical to me, it's more than just like, oh, I feel like running a mile today. It's it's more, it's more than that. It's more than I'm going to do a couple of jumping jacks, it's like, do I even want to do jumping jacks, I know I should be doing jumping jacks. I'm gonna do jumping jacks because it makes me feel good physically. And it clears my mind so that I can get other things done. Like it's, it's feeling good and safe in your body to do the things that you need to do. For me, that's what it is because I'm constantly busy.

Kit Heintzman 47:52

What are some of the things you want for your own house and the health of people around you?

L.M. Bennett 47:57

One, I want everybody to be able to leave the house without guilt. I know that that's something that I find that people like they don't think twice about it. But people like me, I still think about it a little bit. If I see an event or something like that. I don't, I don't think about like, are people gonna look at me weird if I wear a mask like at that point, I'm kind of beyond that. I don't care about that. But I want everybody to be able to live life. To feel healthy mentally to look out for other people who maybe are not feeling well mentally for everybody to just be able to get the care and the resources that they need so that they can live the healthiest life that they possibly can. That's something that I want for myself. Something I want for my fiance for my mom for my friends, something I want for everybody.

Kit Heintzman 49:12

What does the word safety mean to you?

L.M. Bennett 49:14

Safety, safety, that I have for me personally for myself is that I have the space that I need to create, that I have the space that I need to work that I'm not worried about how I'm going to feed myself worried about how I'm going to feed my family, that I'm not worried about how I'm going to make my rent that I feel good like If I have to go out at night or something like that, that nothing is going to happen to me or that I'm not going to find myself pulled over for doing something stupid or, or anything like that or that, that I'm allowed to come and go freely and do the things that I need to do. And like I said, again, have the resources to do the things that I need to do like that makes me feel safe. And it makes me feel like I can get through the day with the least amount of stress as possible, like there's going to be stress, like around every corner. But like when you don't have to worry about certain things, then you can manage the stress a little bit better. At least that's how I feel for myself.

Kit Heintzman 51:01

Thinking about sort of the narrow biomedical context of safe from the virus, and I know you've said some already, but if there's anything to add, what are some of the ways that you've been, what are some of the things you've been doing to make yourself feel safer while all of this has been going on?

L.M. Bennett 51:18

One it's making sure that I wear my mask out in public especially like you know, if I want to go out and do something like if I want to go to a basketball game, or like I'm still meeting like my, my fiance's family. So it's like going out to going out to meet family or her coming out to meet my family. Just making sure that I'm wearing my mask. And that if I'm you know, outside wearing clothes all day, like those don't make it to my bed. Or that like I wiped down groceries like as soon as they come in, or like wipe down a wineglass or whatever, like, or, you know, make sure that constantly like I keep around like Clorox wipes and stuff like that. It's it's making sure that I am not doing anything, even though I'm like I'm immunized and boosted and reboost and, and all that stuff is like making sure that I don't get like too complacent. So then I don't do anything to introduce it again to my house because I had it. I didn't know I had it. My mom had it. She didn't know she had it. She just like got away with a cough. So I'm like, that was kind of a wake up call. Because then I kind of double down on what I was doing before. But like making sure that I don't allow any anybody to be like, oh, you're still afraid of so and so like, hell

yeah, I'm still afraid of catching COVID a second time because obviously, we got lucky the first time. So it's doing things that make me feel okay with going out into the world and trying to live as much as possible outside of the home. Without, like, unnecessarily putting myself and other people at risk. It's just making sure that I follow, like my set of inner processes to make sure that I'm doing this all as safely as possible.

Kit Heintzman 53:47

How did you come to make the decision to get immunized?

L.M. Bennett 53:51

Um, well, I worked for, I don't want to say work like I don't still work there. I still work there. I work for a major metropolitan Hospital in New York City. And I just remember them like sending out an email blast that they had it even though at this time, like everybody was at home. I remember talking with my one of my co workers and she was like, Are you gonna get it? And I was just like, of course, I'm gonna get it because at that point, like I said, we had already had it, we'd already had COVID and I wasn't aware that we had COVID Like, my mom found out when she did a test for like a surgery that she was going to have they did COVID testing as part of that. And then they said that, you know, her levels were high and they were like it's not an active infection but and I'm like, what? So then of course I went out and I got tested and mine came back high too. So, to me it was just learning that the vaccine was available. Say no more is done. And when can I schedule this to get this done? I'm not delaying, and I didn't delay.

Kit Heintzman 55:07

Was access easy?

L.M. Bennett 55:09

Yes. Because I was employee of the hospital.

Kit Heintzman 55:15

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

L.M. Bennett 55:18

Oh, I'm a little bit more hopeful. I mean, sometimes that's tested, when you hear like, oh, well, you know, Omicron is going down. But we found like two or three others, I'm just like, really. But it's feeling like, Okay, this thing is here, and it's not going away. No matter how much you want it to go away, it's probably not going away. So it's learning to maneuver around it, and to just live with it. I kind of hate that we have to live with it. But you can't cry over spilt milk at this point. It's just something that is just, it's just here. And we have to do the best that we possibly can. And just, you know, continue to, you know, do what we need to do. So that we're not introducing ourselves and like our vulnerable family members and friends and whatnot to of things that could possibly kill them.

Kit Heintzman 56:29

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

L.M. Bennett 56:34

Um, I'm hoping and we're starting to treat it like it is that I don't necessarily agree with. But we're starting to treat it more like it's the common cold, or the common flu. So I'm hoping that we are able to continue, and I know, there's always going to be some people out there who like who don't want to get shots and whatnot. And that's their prerogative, you know, their body, their choice works both ways. But that will continue to do what we need to do that we won't allow, like a fear of crashing the economy again, over this too. Like to not have it so that we're rushing people back to work, like if they're sick or whatnot. Even though I know where are we starting to do that, I'm just hoping that there's not going to be any more major resurgence of it, that's going to keep everybody locked down. I just again, I just hope that we can all do the best that we can to just make sure that everybody is as safe as possible. And that I say that like both from the person perspective, but also local governments and national governments, even though there's always going to be people who don't believe or think that everybody's everybody just overreacted and just got all bent out of shape out of love for nothing to just continue to make good common sense. decisions for yourself and your household that we can all do that and all I guess give each other space to to do what's right for for all of us.

Kit Heintzman 58:44

Do you think we've learned any lessons out of the pandemic?

L.M. Bennett 58:48

Not a single one as a society, not a single one.

Kit Heintzman 58:59

What about more personally?

L.M. Bennett 59:02

Say that again?

Kit Heintzman 59:04

What about more personally? Have you learned anything?

L.M. Bennett 59:08

That people really don't give a shit about other people. That's what I've learned.

Kit Heintzman 59:17

What are some of the things you do to take care of yourself?

L.M. Bennett 59:22

Um, again, making sure that I take out time for myself. Like if I need to just sit on the porch for five minutes and watch the sunset I make sure I give myself that. Because, like a lot of what you feel a lot of, I mean, mentally, emotionally, like physically a lot of what you feel it comes from here. So it's making sure that I'm okay here and I'm taking time for myself to breathe and and giving myself that space that I need to, like I said, work that I need to create, so that I can not only continue to look after my own health, like take my vitamins and whatnot, but to also be a caregiver to my mom and make sure that she's taken care of, as well they get, it just all starts with listening to what my body needs, even if it just means reps, even if it just means they can just kind of lay on the

bed and watch the Great British Bake Off for a little bit, it's making sure that I give myself the opportunity to do that, and not allow the demands of work and this and that to override what I know that I need to do.

Kit Heintzman 1:01:00

Do you think of this pandemic as a historic event?

L.M. Bennett 1:01:04

Yes. Because it just, it really changed every aspect of our lives, a lot of people like myself, we are able to live wherever the hell we want to live now and still be able to make a living. It just, it just a really and then, you know, unfortunately, on the flip side, some people their lives got worse, with a pandemic, like with the lack of, of options, and the quality of life, their mental health, I mean, a lot of people saw their mental health decline and their physical health decline. People started drinking more, and just doing different things that were necessarily like bad for their bodies and their minds to kind of escape the stress of everything that was going on. And, and to know, like a one person who feels like he brought his mother's death on by doing something he shouldn't have during the pandemic, and she got sick and died and he just hasn't been right ever since. So there was, you know, like the good effect that it's had on some people in society because then they're just like, Okay, I really got to stop, be essing and take care of myself. But then like I said, you have the other people who, for them, life will never be the same. And they're always going to like wonder if they did something different. If this person would still be around like this, there's just a lot of a lot of things like from the person level to like, the much larger social level that I think that we're just now beginning to find out about this is definitely one of those things, it's not even going to be like a blip in the history books. Like it's going to be one of those things that people continue to study and analyze, like decades from now. Like what society was like before, what we were doing while it was happening and how we all changed afterwards. I mean, physically, to like some of us gain weight. Like you know, my my partner calls it Rona romp. Just like physical changes, but like, you know, all these different things that that occurred. A lot of people's lives are forever forever changed.

Kit Heintzman 1:04:13

What do you think scholars in the social sciences and humanities so fields like literature, sociology, Poli Sci, what should we be doing to help us understand the human side of the pandemic?

L.M. Bennett 1:04:26

It's doing oral histories like this. Because then, like you get stories from all different walks of life, all different parts of the globe. Like, when when you had sent me the email, like I was looking at it, it's weird enough, but I was thinking of the Novel World War Z, and how that's made of like, all of these different stories like what what happened at the beginning of the plague and then I um, how like the different countries were fighting the plague. And then like when it was over like after that, I think it was like the last battle of something, I just remember lots of details, like on the body details from those stories, but it is definitely just telling stories of just regular people, and how their lives were changed and what their government did or didn't do to help them or how they, how they adjusted afterwards. It's just telling different people stories that I think is going to help people to really understand the human impact of this virus.

Kit Heintzman 1:05:53

Thinking back to when you were growing up, what are some of the things you wished that you had learned more about in history?

L.M. Bennett 1:06:02

Um, well, I just watched the woman King. So I really wish I had learned more. And I realized that like, even like being in a Catholic school, like we did, because I grew up in a predominantly black area. So we did lots and lots of black history, like different, famous, notable black Americans. But like, when you watch movies like The woman King, you watch these different documentaries and whatnot, like you just realized that you just barely scratched the surface. So I kind of wish I learned more about that kind of thing. And because it's, it's, it's interesting to me, and I feel like some of those things like they provide historical context to what it is that we're experiencing right now. So I guess, like growing up, I wish I had learned more about those things. It's never too late to learn about those things. But that's something that I would have liked to have seen more when I was coming up.

Kit Heintzman 1:07:22

This is my last question. I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian in the future, someone far enough away that they know lived experience of this moment, what would you tell them cannot be forgotten about COVID-19.

L.M. Bennett 1:07:43

What cannot be forgotten about COVID 19? How important it is for people to work together to ensure not only their personal safety and health, but the personal safety and health of the people in their community, the vulnerable people in their community. There were certain things about vulnerable communities that kind of got swept under the rug, rug, and they just all kind of came out when this happened. Because again, a lot of people were doing public facing jobs. And these were the people who were getting sick and they were dying first. So I would just say, never forget how much vulnerable people were affected by this. And how those people need to be protected more.

Kit Heintzman 1:09:05

I want to thank you so much for the generosity of your time, and the thoughtfulness in your answers. Those are all of the questions I know how to ask at the moment, but I just like to open some space if there's anything you want to share that my questions haven't made room for. Please share it.

L.M. Bennett 1:09:22

Um, there's like nothing I would like to say on camera.

Kit Heintzman 1:09:30

Sounds good. Thank you