

Interviewee: John Verdon

Interviewer: Jared Verdon

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Abstract:

John Verdon was born and raised in Lansing, Iowa. After attending college, John had a long and successful teaching career at Waverly Shell-Rock High School in Waverly, Iowa. John Verdon is currently retired and resides in the town where he was born and raised. In this interview, John Verdon illustrates how COVID-19 affected his life, his family, his friends, and the small midwestern community he lives in. He discusses the rising number of COVID cases raging across the United States, leadership response to the pandemic, how individuals that he knows responded to the virus, and what impact COVID-19 has on our future.

JMV: All right. All right, I think we're recording. All right. Well, first of all, I should have said earlier, thank you for letting me interview, interview you for this archive. It will be really cool for future generations, or whoever else that wants to view how the virus has impacted individuals with different lives. It's just it's kind of cool to see how it's, unfortunately, how it's affected people. But thank you for being here. Just a reminder, this is going to be publicly available, so if there's questions you don't want to answer, or maybe that just that you that you don't want to answer yourself, that's totally fine. We can just skip them. And so yeah, let's start off, can you tell me your name, and then state the date and time, please?

JV: Sure. My name is John Verdon and V-e-r-d-o-n. And Today is November 14, 2020. And we're coming to you from the banks of the Mississippi River in northeast Iowa.

JMV: Awesome. All right. Just to kind of put everything into context, I have some statistics. In the United States, there has been 10.7, approximately, 10.7 million confirmed cases and 243,000 deaths. So, it is very real here that is for sure. Um, so I guess we'll start off with, with the questions. So, um, what are the, I guess, what are your primary, we'll start off with, if you don't mind sharing your demographic information, race, ethnicity, gender.

JV: Sure. I said before that I'm a white American, 79 years old. And we live in a small rural community in Northeast Iowa, about 1000 people, and mostly retired people, older people.

And, and, of course, that's, that's my concern, is, is that this virus seems to be hitting the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions, harder than, than young people. And, and which, which stands to reason. So, I guess my other concern is the lack of consistency from government officials, and in particular, the White House and, and the President and, and he doesn't seem to buy in to what his medical experts are saying. And unfortunately, he you know, in the United States, we have two major Democrat, two major political parties, and they run about 50% each. Recently, of course, Joe Biden was elected with I guess, 50 some percent and, and President Trump received, like 40 some percent, 47, I think, but it's 70 some million people voted for each of the two candidates. So, it's, it's a very split country. And unfortunately, it's my feeling that the political machinery in Washington, the Senate, the President, that there's a tendency to not take this pandemic as seriously as it should be. And I feel that there's a lot more that could have been done and should have been done. You said, we've got 244,000 deaths in the United States. I mean, that's a quarter of a million. I just, it's just figures you can't, you can't imagine. And I don't know how much of it could be it could have been avoided. But it seems to me like it's a terrible, terrible waste of life. So, so that is my concern as we move forward is that we need to have a political system that is 100 percent solid behind what needs to be done medically, to take care of this pandemic. And it is nowhere near as bad as the Spanish Flu that killed millions of people back in 1918, and 19. But of course, today, we have such an elaborate communication system, like this zoom that we're on, I mean, you know, almost instantly what is happening all around the world, in a matter of minutes, you know, where, in 1918, it took days or weeks to get, you know, communication from Europe to the United States. And, and so we have the technology. And, and that's what we need to address is, how do we take care of this pandemic? As quickly as we can. And I understand that vaccines are on the horizon. So that would, that'll certainly help. But yeah, okay. What's next captain?

JMV: Awesome, great response. I guess my next question would be, what are the primary things that you do on a day-to-day basis? Let's and let's compare it, what was your primary day to day schedule, before the pandemic, and how it is now with the pandemic in motion?

JV: Sure. We'd been retired for almost 20 years. And our, our daily routine has been to visit friends and go out for coffee, and socialize and attend our church, and get out on the river and enjoy the beauty of nature. And of course, this pandemic, has changed all of that. We don't go to church, we don't socialize, we don't even see our, our family, don't have a chance. And, and you just feel that it's too risky, to even go to visit your family. And that's, that's pretty sad. But that's the truth of it, is that, you know, when you have twenty extended members in the family, and they're all out working and doing things every day, their chances of picking something up and transmitting it down the line to, to Gram or myself, you know, chances are pretty good. So, this pandemic has changed, not only what you do, how you do it, and how you how you think about things that are happening in the world. It's had a big impact.

JMV: Right? Yeah, definitely. Great. When you first, when you first heard, or when you first learned about the, the COVID-19 virus, what were your initial thoughts? And how has that

changed as time has went on, as this pandemic has went on? How does that, how does that change your perspective of the virus itself?

JV: Yeah, when we heard that, that the virus was in the United States, you know, the President was talking about it in a very minor tone. And he was saying that it's no big deal, that it'll be gone in a few days. And, and you know, that we shouldn't worry about it. Well, but yet there were experts that, medical experts, health experts that kept saying, but this is a different strain, and it's a virus that can have a life changing effect, and that it can kill people and that it will kill people and, so, you know, things have changed from the very beginning where, number one, it was not a big deal to now where it's a very large deal, and people are trying to accommodate those, those necessary changes, it would have, I think it would have been a whole lot better if the government had a program in mind, or, you know, ready to go a program that would address the needs of the nation and the needs of the hospitals and, and so these are things that we need to look for in the future, we need to plan better, and know that this kind of thing is going to happen again. And but it is interesting, as I said earlier, with all of our all of our knowledge, all of our skills, all of our communication, all of our, we can take a heart out of the body, and, and replace it. It's, you know, it's, it's amazing. It's amazing that a tiny, single celled, you know, virus, like I said, can put our nation to its knees. But that's what's happened. And, yeah, so those are things that we need to address. And those are things that we have learned. And the, you know, it'll be a whole lot better in the future.

JMV: Right. Great. Yeah, it's. So, my next question I have for you is what issues, I know you kind of elaborated on it, but maybe zero in on what issues have most concerned you about the, the COVID-19 pandemic? What has, what has concerned you most since this pandemic started?

JV: Well, I think the, the thing that has disturbed me the most has been the lack of communication, and leadership, from our government officials, and I'm disappointed, I'm disappointed. [dropped Internet connection interrupted interview] medical staff was, was telling everyone how important it was to wear a mask. [dropped internet connection interrupted interview]

JMV: I am back. Yes, I'm back. Um, okay. All right. So, we had a little connection issue there. So, I'll ask the question again, just so we can get a clear answer. What issues have most concerned you about the COVID-19 pandemic?

JV: Okay, I was talking about the fact that we need to have consistency from the highest level of government, our president, his team, down to the governors in the States, and everybody needs to be on the same page. We need to have people listen to what the CDC, the, the medical, the health of people are saying that it's a very serious virus and, and that we need to take precautions we need to prepare. And that's my greatest concern. This is a this, is a lesson, a lesson for the future. And, and it will end as soon as this vaccine comes on, is available, comes on the scene, but it will come back again. And in another version, another form. So, this is a

training exercise, and we're all part of that exercise. And hopefully, you know, we'll all survive but, but we have been told that many hundreds of thousands more probably will not, and so, so that's what we need to do. There are these issues, and we need to get every American on the same page. And as I mentioned earlier, there seem to be a lot of people that don't believe that it's dangerous, and that it's a major health issue. And, and they would love to keep the [dropped Internet connection interrupted interview] Sure, there you are.

JMV: All right.

JV: That's okay.

JMV: Yeah, no, we're good. Um, so let's go to next. We'll move on. Unless, unless you had any other thoughts on, or major concerns?

JV: Well, I had, I had one other thought here. That with regards to the important issues, I was saying, I think it's important. I think whenever you have 50 states, and you have a president, and you have the medical experts, if there was, if everybody bought into this to the problem at the same level, that would make it so much easier. But what we have is we have an inconsistency between the medical experts and the President, and the Senate, trying to, trying to, gloss over the problem. And they're trying to keep the country open. And they're trying to, I hate to say this, but I think, make themselves look good. And, and then we have the 50 states and all the governments, all the governors, that some align with the President and his Republican strategies, and others do not. And it is too bad that we don't have everybody on the same page. But that, that is a problem. It's a problem in a democracy, like the United States. In a dictatorship, you could say, 100 percent, this is the way it's going to be. But anyway, that's a great concern. I know that there are even people in this small community that feel that it's no big deal. And I heard one man say, "I don't know why they don't just let it run rampant. And get it over with?" Well, that's, that is a mindset that we have. And, of course, that's not the answer. And that's not going to solve the problems and hundreds of thousands, more people are going to die. So, I would like to see a united front, from the President to the Senate, to the governors of the states, to the, to the communities, and, and if we could do that, then this, then this would be ended. And we'd come out of this pandemic. Other than that, we'll have to do the best we can and wait for the vaccine and make sure everybody gets the vaccine and takes it. And I've heard there too, that some people are saying that they aren't going to take the vaccine. Well, that's, that's not going to help a bit. So those are my concerns politically, and [_____?] on the national level. Okay?

JMV: Yeah great. Great.

JV: Let's see what other.

JMV: So, in terms of how, I guess, how has the, how has the pandemic, how has COVID-19 affected you and your family, our family, obviously, in our day-to-day activities, how has it affected your family's day to day activities, interactions and stuff like that?

JV: Yeah, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a great effect on our family, you know, not only from our personal relationships and that, you know, we haven't oh my gosh, we have a new granddaughter, great granddaughter. Two months old now. And, and we would love to go and visit Mabel Mae. And we'd love to hold her in our arms and give her a kiss and cuddle her. But we know we can't do that, you know, there's a, there's a possibility that I would transmit something to her. As we travel to that location, you might pick something up. I know that there are, like I said, 20 family members here. And in our immediate family, three sons, their wives, their children, and now we have a great grandchild. So we are, we're growing, we're growing family, which is wonderful. But yeah, we haven't had a chance to be together. And each of those members of the family, Phyllis and I are retired, but the rest of the members of the family are out every day. One is an optometrist, an eye doctor meeting with patients. Another works in, in, in a restaurant, and is out every day, some are going to college, and, and they're interacting every day. You know, so it's, it's, uh, oh, and others are teachers. And I, I feel so sorry, for the education system, I have a connection to that, because I was a teacher for 38 years, and I, and I know what they're going through. And, and being a teacher, if you're in the classroom with 25 kids, each of those students would be a potential conduit to bring something to you as the teacher from their home. And so it's, it's seems that it could concentrate the virus on you on the teacher. And of course, then the students interact, and they can pick up the virus and take it home to their families and, and so this thing spreads out. So that's, yes, my concern, this is, you know, there's nothing more sacred than your own family. And you want only the best and you want to protect your family. And the best way that we can protect our family is not get together and not risk us giving them a virus or them giving the virus to us, and changing our family structure forever. So, it's a big deal. This, this virus, and I hope, I hope and pray that with the intelligence that we have in the United States, and, and all of the abilities that we have, that we can come up with not only a way to handle situations like this in the future, but, but come up with a way to create a vaccine to protect us, you know, and we can't let this sit on the shelf now for another 20 years, and not do anything and say well, there'll never be another virus. That's not that's not going, that's not the way to handle it. This is a learning moment. And, and we need to make sure that learning takes place. And when this does happen again, we have a plan in place so that we can address it quicker. And take care of America. Okay?

JMV: Awesome. Yeah.

JV: Okay.

JMV: Um.

JV: Is there something else here?

JMV: Yeah, yeah, plenty on the list. Let's maybe turn our attention towards the community, your community itself, our community also.

JV: Okay.

JMV: How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected you, affected your community? I mean, obviously, you're retired, so you, you yourself are not employed. But you know many people who are employed, you obviously go to church, you're very active in the community. How has this, this outbreak affected your community personally?

JV: Right, that's a good question. You know, and in a small community of 1000 people, I wouldn't say we know everybody, but we know a whole lot. We know most of the people that live in this community, and our community is largely older retired folks like us. So small community, there's very little manufacturing here. There is a power plant that employs about 27 people, I believe, there is another factory that employs maybe 100. And other than that, you know, the members of the community are involved in the businesses on Main Street. And there's also the construction workers that live here that pour the concrete and build the homes and, but not a lot. Most of the people that are in in Lansing [Iowa], as I said, are retired. And I don't know what the percentage would be, probably 60% are retired. And there are a few smaller, young families. And many of the individuals, the younger people, the working class, go to La Crosse [Wisconsin], or they go to Prairie Du Chien [Wisconsin] to work. So, the community is very atypical. And it's not the usual community that has 40, 50,000 people or more, and it has all sorts of businesses and industry in their towns. I do know that, as I said, we take it very personally when somebody gets sick, or somebody dies for heaven's sakes. And, and we join with those people. And I know that there have been deaths in our community over this COVID-19 pandemic. I know that the, we have a nursing home and at last report, it was like 30 people, some residents, but also some of the healthcare people that are there, some of the workers had picked up the COVID virus. So, and people have died in the nursing home. So, there are concerns and, and I know that our businesses are struggling, because people don't go out to the restaurant anymore. It just doesn't happen. We have called in by phone and we order something and then we drive in and they bring it out. And, so we dine at home. Our church is closed, it was closed, it's open now, but it's been closed a couple of times. But our pastor serves two churches. He serves our church, and he gives a sermon at 10:30 in the morning. And then he has another church in a neighboring community and he begins that service at 8:30. And the unfortunate thing about it is that the two communities are extremely different, and our church community, it believes that we need to wear masks and we need to wash our hands and we need all of these things, sanitize and social and the other community does not. And, and so we have a paradox. We have a situation here, where our pastor goes to that church and [_____?] people largely unmasked. They don't have the sanitizers. They don't separate, they don't socially distance. And so, I've told the pastor, that, that he could be a carrier when he comes back to our church and preaches a sermon. As a matter of fact, I, I have talked with his family. And I've told them that when all five of them go to church in this other community, and then all five of them come back to our church, there's the possibility of a major spreading that could take place. And I've, I've given I've mentioned to them the possibility of maybe go to that other

church one Sunday and not come to our church. The next Sunday come to our church, and not go to that other church. So there, there are all sorts of situations, even in a small community. And when I, when I walk into some of the stores uptown, I will be wearing my mask and so on. But there will be other people coming in that do not. And it just, it just upsets me to think that they don't care enough about me to protect me from the virus that they might have. And even some of the small businesses, if you walk in to get an item, and I'm wearing a mask, many times the, the owner of the business is not wearing a mask. And I don't understand that. Here, again, we need to have continuity from the president, to the governor, to the local community, and if our governor in the state of Iowa would say everyone must wear a mask, when you're interacting and you're in a business environment. I just think that would make it a whole lot better and safer for all. So yeah, our community is pretty different. It's very, oh, and one other thing, I'd like to say that we live on the Mississippi, and a lot of tourism. A lot of people come to the Mississippi. Because matter of fact, I talked to a friend who runs a large houseboat rental business, as well as small boats, fishing boats, that type of thing. And he said, this has been the greatest year ever. In his business, that people families are booking his boats, they're coming to the river. And, and it's because it's something they can do with their family and get out on the Mississippi and be safe. And so this, there is a business that has actually profited from this pandemic, more people coming, renting his boats and getting away from it all than ever before.

JMV: Right. Yeah. You don't usually [_____?]

JV: That's a real positive. Okay?

JMV: Yeah, awesome. Awesome. Yeah. You kind of touched on it a little bit. Um, have you seen people around you, you know, maybe your family or maybe the community more, more, so change their opinions or their day-to-day activities in response to the pandemic itself?

JV: As far as, yes, we've seen people that have changed their mind and, and have changed the way they live, and the things that they do. And even our, we have some very good friends that we use to get together not every day, but two or three times a week, and have coffee and cookies and play dominoes, play cards, go for a boat ride, hop in the car and go to a movie. Well, we don't do that. We don't do that anymore. As a matter of fact, we, we, when we do get together, which is maybe once every two or three weeks. We make sure we stick apart, and we, and we socialize but it's entirely different. So, this has this has impacted our relationship and, and there you know, with, with others, we it's just little things that have changed. Like we used to pick up the mail for a friend and drop the mail off at her door. And some days she would pick up the mail and, and bring it to our home and we would visit and we don't do that anymore. And, and the reason is that, you know, she could be bringing something here or we could be taking something to her. So, yeah, this this pandemic has affected a lot of people in a lot of different ways that you don't normally think about. And, and it bothers me, you know, whenever somebody comes into my space and isn't wearing a mask, and doesn't believe the same as I believe, I have a good friend of fishermen Tran a fishing partner, and, and he will stop on occasions and talk to me. And I have to try to keep him outside the door. And I pull down the screen and talk to him through, through the screen. And but it's just simply because he doesn't

understand, or he doesn't think that there's the possibility that he could infect me. But I don't know, maybe I'm maybe I'm a little bit too cautious. But I just know that this, this disease if it gets started in our household, could have, you know, a life changing impact? And I don't want that. Not just yet.

JMV: Yeah, for sure.

JV: Okay?

JMV: I don't I mean,

JV: Yeah, you don't either.

JMV: Oh, right. I mean, you know, I don't think you can be too cautious. Great. Yeah. You kind of talked about government officials and leaders and their response. How have municipal leaders, government officials in your community, how have they responded to the outbreak? From the, from the beginning, even to now if there's been a change there.

JV: Yeah, this is a very difficult when, when you have local authorities that are, it's difficult for them. When I'm thinking of the town policeman, the local council, made up of members of the community, the local policeman in his family are a member of our church. And so, we're very close with them. And you know, they're, I have, I know that a mandate has been made, for example, that you have no more than 50 percent capacity, for example, in a bar, and, but I know that in some cases, that has been overlooked. And [dropped Internet connection interrupted interview] Okay, we're back up and running.

JMV: You're back. Yes. Yeah, you were talking about local, local officials in your community responding to the outbreak. If you had any more thoughts on that, that you wanted to get out?

JV: Yes, yes, I do. There's, there's one more thing. Well, actually two, I got another one in my mind. But I was I wanted to say that it's very difficult for local officials to enforce some of these restrictions on the businesses and on different events. And I was talking about a family wedding that we attended. And there were probably 100 people in attendance. And it bothered me and my wife, because we have been concerned about this pandemic for quite some time. And the wedding was in an outdoor setting. Yes. But I would say there were 100 people. Very few, very few had a mask on. Maybe there were like six or eight of us that did have a mask on. My son and his wife were there. And actually, my older, my younger brother and his wife were there and they had a mask, and my younger sister and her husband were there and they had a mask but of the 150 people that were there, well over 100, no one else had a mask on and it just it, it makes it very difficult. And the interesting thing is that the local police officer was leading the ceremony. But I, you know, he was out of his jurisdiction, he was leading a wedding ceremony. And so anyway, that's one situation I, I know that we also attended a funeral of a very dear friend. And we did not go to the funeral in the church, we went to the internment to the burial at the cemetery. And here again, we were wearing a mask, and there were a couple of others.

But of the 50 or 60 people that were standing around the grave, no one had a mask on. And so, there is there is such a lack of consistency. And I don't know that I blame it so much onto the local authorities or not, but somebody needs to have the courage to insist that people wear a mask. And, I think in this local community, you know if, if the governor would say everyone must wear a mask that would give the local police officer a little bit of, of backing and maybe he could do something about it. But no one likes to cause a problem for anybody else in a small community. Okay?

JMV: Yeah.

JV: Okay.

JMV: Alright. Well, I'm going to ask one more, kind of a question about the future to conclude our interview here. I guess, knowing what you know now, what we've all experienced, what you've experienced, what do you think that individuals, communities, governments, as you've been talking about, need to keep in mind for the future, for future pandemics or, you know, another spread of maybe a different virus like that?

JV: Yeah. That's a very good question. You know, what are we going to do in the future? That's, that's really good. I can say that you know, my 79 years of age, I've never seen anything like this before. You know. I know that, that there, there were all sorts of, the measles and the mumps, and Ebola, and all the things that have happened in my lifetime, but this is the first viral outbreak that I've ever seen. And, and it obviously caught a lot of people by surprise. But we have, we have people that are so smart, and so, so intelligent, they, they have seen these things [_____] and they know what needs to be done. And, I have faith that this learning opportunity, that the American people and people worldwide, [dropped Internet connection interrupted interview] and we're going to be able to handle it. And we're going to do a better job the next time around. You know, we can blame everybody, how did it get started [dropped Internet connection interrupted interview] all these things, but the fact is, this is life. Viruses and germs, are, are that's just part of living. So, I have faith, that the, the doctors will take care of this and in good time, we'll, we'll be able to do a better job as a government. I think it's unfortunate that Donald Trump had to be in office when this happened. But maybe he could have handled it a little better also. So, it's, it's something we have to accept, and we have to move on and do the best we can. So, I'm glad I live in the United States.

JMV: Right.

JV: Okay?

JMV: Yeah, awesome. Well, that's, I think,

JV: You think we did it? Is there more?

JMV: I think we're good. I think we got a pretty good interview here so, I guess to reiterate, thank you so much for letting me interview you,

JV: Yeah.

JMV: This is kind of a cool project.

JV: Yeah, it is a cool project. It will be interesting to see what all of the other students come up with. You know, how this,

JMV: Right.

JV: How it all comes together. Yeah, good job.

JMV: So, I'll send you, send you a link and stuff where it, where it will eventually end up being archived. So yeah, thank you very much.

JV: Well, okay, okay thank you for interviewing me.

JMV: Alright. See you.