

Transcript of Interview with Ryan Nordstrom by Amanda Torres

Interviewee: Ryan Nordstrom

Interviewer: Amanda Torres

Date: 09/03/2021

Location (Interviewee):

Location (Interviewer):

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

Abstract: Ryan Nordstrom is lab pack chemist who decontaminates building for his job. Ryan begins the interview with describing how his job works and his experience travelling to and from work during the pandemic when most other people were working from home. Additionally, Ryan describes how he has to complete COVID questionnaires every day to establish contact tracing as well as being physically tested for COVID once a week in order to do his job. Ryan closes the interview with the thought that people should remain calm in situations like a pandemic and fact check information that is coming out so they know what is really going on.

Amanda Torres 00:03

Alright, this is Amanda Torres, the day is October 3 2021. I am with Ryan Nordstrom, we are currently recording this via zoom at Florida Gulf Coast University. So let us go through the consent form it is served to as a historical archive, and that this is going to comply with oral history mostly living through the COVID 19 pandemic. And I did get your signature as this consent in willingly given to me, we shall be able to express and convey our historic preservation of this project. So thank you so much. Let's start with some questions. If you don't mind if we can ask how do you say and pronounce your name?

Ryan Nordstrom 00:50

My name is Ryan Nordstrom. same pronunciation as the store that's the usual go to I give people.

Amanda Torres 01:05

And your age, race and ethnicity?

Ryan Nordstrom 01:09

I am 25 years old, I am a white male.

Amanda Torres 01:15

And currently, where do you live at the moment?

Ryan Nordstrom 01:18

Currently, I live in a town outside of the city of Boston in Massachusetts.

Amanda Torres 01:27

And so living in Massachusetts in the midst of this pandemic, I guess, where we could start is what is your occupation, And what does your work have you do every day?

Ryan Nordstrom 01:37

So my technical role for my work is a lab pack chemist, which when you break it down essentially is that I am a person who goes to facilities that generate hazardous waste. The waste gets sorted put into proper containers and then shipped out for disposal, be that for landfill or being incinerated in a specialty incinerator. This has also led to me, given that it's a hazmat job. I've also done decon things for COVID. Like I've gotten them entire decons and facilities before. I have also, presently I'm stationed at a hospital in Boston. And I handle hazardous waste there. But it's the no two days are ever quite the same. But the pandemic has been a very interesting experience for me as I got this job just before the pandemic started. So it's essentially all I've ever known with this job is the pandemic and how it's affected thing.

Amanda Torres 02:42

And as you said, You did handle hazardous waste. Did you ever have to deal with any waste that dealt with COVID?

Ryan Nordstrom 02:52

That is correct. There have been two separate occasions where I have gone to a COVID decon. That's decontamination where we went into full Tyvek suits. And we went into this facility with their essentially defoggers, they're the same type of thing you would see pest control people using for say, spraying like poison into like high reaching trees like heavy sort of fog. Instead of putting in insect poison we put in decontamination material and we're able to decon the machines and there reach high places with it. I wasn't personally handling the machines as I was a new hire then. But I was in there with spraying down machinery wiping down machinery. We went to that facility multiple times before we were stationed at the hospital. I know I have coworkers that went back to there several times afterwards because some facilities wish to have just preventative quick decons to get ahead of COVID.

Amanda Torres 03:53

Make sense, yes. So with your job, as you said, did it shut down like other businesses? And of course with the pandemic, how did your job respond with COVID-19? Did they have a plan put in place with your business?

Ryan Nordstrom 04:12

With the company that I worked for it it was a very interesting experience as my boss, he's done decon jobs for SARS, he's done decons for Ebola, like deconing hospital rooms where they're keeping patients there. And initially, he was telling me that, at first it seemed like you know, it's gonna be another swine flu, where it's like a panic over nothing. And then meanwhile, a week later, it's like, you know, this is a once in a century pandemic. This is nothing we've seen before. And it's just kind of crazy, you know? But after that, it's, we're very quick to adapt. And if anything, COVID made our jobs much busier like we might, unlike other businesses that shut down given that we were hazmat company, we were trained to decon place Is that had COVID in them and deal with hazardous situations. Our business was actually rather booming for a while. I think we brought on to other people to help fill out things because there's such a demand for what was going on at the time with all the decons. And since then we've kind of stepped away from that a little bit, stepped more towards the hazardous waste side of things, as things have kind of stabilized a little bit with COVID present. But yeah.

Amanda Torres 05:28

yeah, seems like- I'm super curious what is a decon if you can actually explain to that one?

Ryan Nordstrom 05:34

Okay, so decon is just an abbreviation of the term decontamination.

Amanda Torres 05:39

Hmm,

Ryan Nordstrom 05:39

so typically speaking, we would get a, the name of the chemical, like the specific brand is escaping me at the moment. But essentially, it's a souped up version of a standard like household chemical used for like getting rid of germs, it's like, as opposed to say something you get like commercially is like 5% concentration, the rest of it's like water for cleaning up an area ours is, I think, when we get it initially, in like a five gallon thing, it's like 90% concentration, which we then cut down to a much safer concentration to work with before put into the foggers, obviously, but it will still be like something like 10%, I think 15% still well on enough to kill any sort of bacteria or microbes that are on things. And then after it evaporates off, it's harmless to humans.

Amanda Torres 06:33

So I guess we can go into, you know, how did COVID you know, with, you know, all this going on, of course of your job in place? Um, I'm curious to know, how does it affect your ability to travel, you know, with work? And both your time and off time? I mean, dealing with all these chemicals, how did it affect your daily life, almost?

Ryan Nordstrom 06:57

It's interesting, because before we had ourselves stationed at the hospital, I was driving into the office each day, which now the traffic's returned to takes about 45-50 minutes to go from my house to there. But when COVID first hit, and everyone was in that first two week to a month period of staying inside, I could reach there in about half an hour, easy. You know, because the highways were empty, there were no other cars on there. I remember, we actually had to get a, for lack of a better term, a permission slip, like a government document to keep in our car, to say that like, Oh, hey, we were actually like traveling right now. We are vital personnel, you know, we have to get to work so we can get into our vehicles and go do deacons. Like say, if a state pulled us over or something when we weren't supposed to be out. But since then, and since getting stationed at the hospital, I've been taking the train into work, which initially was just Ghost Town going in and out the train rides were free for a while, and then they started charging them again, and eventually, I've noticed gradually, the trains have gotten full again. And it's been very as of late it's actually been kind of hard to find a seat as people just kind of adjusted to life with COVID. You know, obviously everyone has to wear a mask on the train, regardless of if you're vaccinated or not. But it's it's still just kind of a surreal experience just kind of seeing all this stuff when you think about it, you know?

Amanda Torres 08:23

Yes, it's it's very scary.

Ryan Nordstrom 08:29

Indeed.

Amanda Torres 08:29

so I guess I wanted to also know, with this ghost town sensation, and everyone else did those close to you also get affected or, you know, did they get sick during the time of COVID-19? You know, has anyone gotten infected? And what was your reaction towards responding to the news if you knew somebody or anyone you knew got sick?

Ryan Nordstrom 08:55

I'm very fortunate in that none of my immediate family have gotten sick with COVID. I know people who have had family members get sick, some that have passed away, unfortunately. But my immediate family, my parents, they're in their early 60s. Thankfully they have not gotten it. My neither my brothers have gotten it. Though some coworkers have gotten it and they had to quarantine and stay away for X amount of time. There was a brief scare with one of our clients on site had for one of the shipments had come over to just speak with us handover paperwork and whatnot. And he went home sick early that day. Shortly after that had completed and he got a COVID test. Turns out he had COVID and there was a brief scare on like if I had COVID by just being near him. Now that morning, I already gotten COVID tested as we get tested on site there at least once a week we were required to and I was cleared. I got cleared that same day. Or the following day I wouldn't got cleared again, but the, hospital itself was a bit nervous about us coming back. So somebody else covered for me, well, I have worked in the office that

we assisted someone else in the office, and also assist with some of the shipments and other facilities. Because I had been tested by that point, I think three times at three separate places that I've been cleared for COVID. And I wasn't sick. So aside from that, that was the closest call that I've had. But otherwise, I've been relatively fortunate to not be too affected by it.

Amanda Torres 10:27

And does your work make you basically do a lot of testing before you come into work? Do you have to fill out an application for COVID clearance?

Ryan Nordstrom 10:37

That is correct. The hospital I stay at, they have a basically to get digital survey that initially it was like a bunch of different questions. And it's like if you have any symptoms stay home. But they simplified it a bit then. So it's like if you have any of these symptoms, hit yes, if you don't hit No. And also has you list contact information. Essentially, it's like a contact tracing thing so that if any of my immediate coworkers get tested and are sick, they can let us know. That's that's how I knew about the other person that had gotten sick, I had gotten called by the school itself, saying that I couldn't come back because there's a slight miscommunication on their part, they thought I tested for COVID, and it was not the case there was someone else. But again, it was sorted out eventually. But aside from that, it's just I tested every day with the digital survey. And then once a week, I have a physical test. It's a nasal swab in in each nostril. And it's the same results. Every time, me being cleared. I got them later that afternoon.

Amanda Torres 11:42

Would you prefer a different kind of test if they offered it is the nasal a bit overwhelming some days?

Ryan Nordstrom 11:50

It's not too bad as its self administered, it's a different variant than the one that was early on where they stuck it like all the way back into your brain, more or less. I'm fortunate enough that I never had to experience the discomfort of that one. So I probably just stick with the current testing that I have now.

Amanda Torres 12:10

In the midst of this whole pandemic, and especially working with biohazard, as you said, and you know, you're working as decon were you able to gain access to protective gear such as PPE, as you know, knowing and hearing on the news, it was quite difficult?

Ryan Nordstrom 12:24

You Yes, actually, we were very fortunate in that as a hazmat company, we have easier access to distributors for getting personal protective equipment. But there was a very big panic early on from a lot of people just trying to get gloves and face masks and everything, to the point where hospitals were having difficulty getting stuff. And there was a good stretch where I wasn't even using a facemask at the hospital, I was using a respirator so like full on like half face respirator with filtered cartridges. Like

anytime I had to go in there to say pick up chemo waste or something, or some other chemical in the hospital. Eventually, as things calmed down, I was more able to easily actually get masks that we could use properly in there.

Amanda Torres 13:12

And as you as an employee handling waste, did you have to handle different differently at that time, you know, before then than previously before when you're handling these, these bio hazards, of course, especially now with COVID. And how did you emotionally respond to these new bio hazards that was put in place for you guys?

Ryan Nordstrom 13:39

It's been relatively straightforward for myself as a lot of these restrictions came along with the job as I was hired more or less as it was really less than a week after being hired that COVID really hit the states. But it has been interesting seeing the restrictions kind of adapt and change with time. Some things loosening some things getting tighter. But you really can't blame people for being cautious when it comes to this sort of thing as it is a once in a century pandemic. At this point. I think it's undisputable.

Amanda Torres 14:18

And so with this once in a century pandemic, I guess I would love to ask what would you offer as advice and future events, and perhaps maybe even future workers who are probably listening to this, on how to respond to another pandemic? Well, what would your advice be to those listening now? And how to respond to future events just like this?

Ryan Nordstrom 14:44

What I would say is the most important thing is to not panic. To be panicked and to be worried is natural, but don't let it control your actions. Give yourself a few seconds to feel it but then just go forward thinking alright, what do I need to do? do right now to keep myself safe to keep my coworkers and family safe? What is it that we need to do to get things done? That would be my main bit of advice. And especially, try and sort out the actual facts of what is applicable to the disease and the things surrounding it. Try to sort out what is real versus what is conspiracy theory nonsense, ramblings. And basically just look into it and just double check, you know.

Amanda Torres 15:31

always fact check yes.

Ryan Nordstrom 15:33

Exactly. fact checking is a big thing. You know, any, I'm sure, it's gonna get more and more true with time that anybody with internet connection can say anything to anyone, and will sound just as loud and important as the next person. Be they someone who is a trained medical professional, or someone in a field that is very experienced with what's going on like myself with hazmat or it's just some random Joe

Schmo who is spouting some sort of conspiracy about lizard people taking over the world. It's it's all very, it all can broadcast just as easily, I guess is my point but. just do be cautious.

Amanda Torres 16:15

I guess we can never be too cautious in these times. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Nordstrom for this interview.

Ryan Nordstrom 16:23

And thank you for interviewing me, Miss Torres. This was a very pleasant experience. If you need anything else, or any follow up questions, let me know and I'll happily help out as best I can.

Amanda Torres 16:32

All righty, thank you so much sir. Have a good day.