

Thomas Backus Oral History

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My name is Thomas Backus, T-H-O-M-A-S-B-A-C-K-U-S, and I am 28 years old, and I live in Tempe, which is a suburb of Phoenix in Arizona with my fiancée. Today is April 10, 2020. As of right now I am a copy editor for a retirement company and I do photography as a side job. Honestly, I never thought the pandemic would get as bad as it did. I, like many others, am guilty of saying that Coronavirus was no deadlier than the flu. However, at the time of this recording, there are nearly 1.6 million cases of coronavirus worldwide, and about 90,000 people have died. Here in Arizona, there are currently 3000 cases and 90 have died. But it was definitely a slow progression here. When people started to panic buy toilet paper back in early March, honestly, I just thought everyone was buying into a media-created panic and just thought they were crazy. I even remember looking in awe at these grocery carts filled to the brim with toilet paper and cases of water and ramen noodles and thinking that you know all this panic buying is honestly going to be far more harmful than the virus itself. But I think I really started taking it seriously when I saw the numbers of infected people, especially here in Arizona, continue to rise and rise as time went on. Business after business started to close, sporting events began to get canceled. Pretty soon all restaurants were only open for takeout or delivery, traffic became almost non-existent. Shopping malls began to close. First it would be one store at a time, and then eventually it was the entire mall that was closed, flights began to get canceled. It really got to the point where I was unable to ignore all the different events that were happening and all the different closures. And I realized this is not the flu, this is something much, much more serious. And being a photographer. I even did a photoshoot at Sky Harbor Airport just to see an empty airport, the entire parking garage, all nine levels were empty. When I walked down to the check-in desks at the American Airlines desk, all the self-check-in kiosks simply read "not in service." And I immediately thought to myself, America is not in service, which is what I titled my photo series. I was a history major in college. So it's very hard to think that at this very moment, we are living through history. I was born in 1991. And for my generation, the defining event was 9/11, which for many millennials, including myself, were too young to remember. Matter of fact, I was in fourth grade. So I don't really remember it that well. But this event is going to be an event which I will be able to remember vividly and one that my future children and probably even future grandchildren are going to ask me about and we are going to study in history books forever. As a matter of fact, I can even hear the voice in my head of my future grandchildren asking me, you know, grandpa, did people really panic buy toilet paper? You know, and our generation at least the millennial generation is very familiar with the phrase pre 9/11 and post 9/11 and what that means as a whole. I firmly believe that we're going to be referring to coronavirus in the same way. I know there will be a new normal, but what is it going to look like? Well, we don't know what that's going to look like yet.