

COVID-19 Oral History Project

Transcript of Interview with Victoria Musser, Fundraising Officer, Arts for Lawrence, Indianapolis, Indiana
Recorded Friday, April 17, 2020

Interviewer: Emily Leiserson

Topics: COVID-19 impact on arts organizations, fundraising, COVID and apartment living, COVID and families, rural and urban divides, COVID and artists

Emily Leiserson

All right. Hi everyone, this is Emily Leiserson. We're recording an oral history. It is Friday, April 17, 2020. The time is 12:40pm. I am doing this for the COVID Oral History Project as part of IUPUI's Arts and Humanities Institute, and I'm here with Shonda Nicole Gladden, who's a co-researcher, and we're interviewing Victoria Musser. Thank you, Victoria. So Shonda, could you introduce yourself really quickly, and then Victoria?

Shonda Nicole Gladden

Sure, as Emily said I'm Shonda Nicole Gladden. I'm a PhD student at Indiana University on the Indiana University, excuse me on the Indianapolis campus. I am part of the IAHI, along with Emily, and I am a co-researcher. I'm going to be in the background though, because this is this Emily's lead video lead research interview, but I'll pop in with some questions as necessary, but I'm still here. So good to meet you Victoria.

Victoria Musser

Nice to meet you, Shonda.

Emily Leiserson

And thanks for being here Shonda.

Shonda Nicole Gladden

Oh, you're so welcome.

Emily Leiserson

All right, Victoria, just any information you'd like to share.

Victoria Musser

Yeah. So my name is Victoria Musser. I am the Fundraising Officer for Arts for Lawrence. I've been in that position for a year yesterday, I think.

Emily Leiserson

Oh happy workiversary.

Victoria Musser

Yeah. It's a weird time to have a work anniversary. Yeah.

Leiserson

Okay, great. Victoria you got our, I know you returned our verbal, or our informed consent form. But if you could just verbally, on the video, confirm that you received it and that you're that you understand and are okay with us recording this for a database.

Musser

Yep, I received it, and I am a-okay with this being recorded.

Leiserson

Great, thank you so much. Alright. So we'll start with just some background questions, and we can talk about your work, and just your life in general, and expand out from there. So, yeah, can you tell us about just the primary things you do on a day to day basis; what your life looked like before COVID-19 and how it's changed now?

Musser

Yeah, I mean, on a work basis, I usually worked from 8:30 to 5:30, and a lot my day was writing thank you notes, calling donors, planning, you know, donor events, things like that. On a personal level, usually, you know, in the mornings I wake up my daughter. In the evenings, we come home, have dinner, 7:30 she goes to bed. And we kind of hang out from there. In terms of life after COVID-19, obviously I'm working from home. My husband is also working from home. It's definitely been a challenge. Usually, I have a, like I said, I have a one year old daughter, she would go hang out with grandma during the day while we were at work. Grandma is immunocompromised, so that's no longer happening. She is as well now isolating at home. And so my husband and I had to find some middle ground of how do we parent and work at the same time. So we found this really good system where we trade off an hour. And we just know that during the hour that we have our daughter work isn't going to be as productive as we like. But that's a system that works for us and we're able to get the, all of the immediate things that kind of we need to get done to fulfill our jobs. So that's kind of what life is like now.

Leiserson

Yeah, that's impressive that you guys have been able to do that. It's not easy.

Musser

Yeah, I say that with a grain of salt because some, you know, life with a one year old is always interesting and unique.

Leiserson

So, yeah. Have you guys planned to start her in daycare, and has that changed?

Musser

So we were in a unique position. I went back to work when she was six months old. And there was a little, there was about six to eight months of time in between there when she did go to daycare, because my parents hadn't moved to Indianapolis yet, they were still about three hours north of us. And when she hit around one years old, which she's 19 months now, she transitioned to being watched full time by my parents, so it's been an incredible blessing to us.

Leiserson

Yeah, yeah. Okay, so what do you think, when did you first hear about COVID-19? What were your thoughts then, and how have they evolved since then?

Musser

Yeah, I am definitely ashamed to say that I was one of the people that heard it, you know heard about it circulating in Wuhan and kind of assumed that it would be like every other pandemic where the United States really isn't phased that much. I mean, I remember when I was in high school, the swine flu was really big, and everyone was kind of worried about that, and then when I was in college, ebola. But the reality is the United States by both of those wasn't really affected by either one of those. And so my initial reaction was "my life's not going to change, it's going to be like every other pandemic." I remember the first case that hit Indiana. And I remember realizing then and there that like this is different. We were actually in Michigan. My grandfather had passed away. And so we were dealing with funerals and helping clean out the house and things like that. And I remember hearing about the first case in Indianapolis and realizing that like it was something to be afraid of. And especially being in Michigan and thinking like, you know, I don't really know what the cases look like here, like should I be afraid. And so, and then it only grew from there and we learned that you know, we should definitely be exercising caution.

Leiserson

So, yeah, yeah. And you are, let's see. So, how old are you? 23?

Musser

I am 22. I'll be 23 this June.

Leiserson

You're so young. I always forget that. Okay, and so, what, as you've seen it evolve, what issues have concerned you the most?

Musser

Definitely my loved ones. You know, as far as I understand the science is that my likelihood from recovering from this is very high, in the fact that of course I should be exercising caution, you know, washing my hands, using hand sanitizer, staying six feet away, but my odds of recovering from this are fairly high. However, I have an immunocompromised mother, who I fear for a lot. She has had extended hospital stays for minor things in the past, and she's really I'm most concerned about, as well as I have a 93 year old grandmother, who has lived through so many things. And it really, those are the two people that I worry about on a daily basis. But as far as me and my life, I have - sorry my dog - I exercise caution, you know, I stay six feet away from people. I, you know, have hand sanitizer all the time, and use hand sanitizer all the time, but other than working from home, my life hasn't changed too awful much, other than not being able to congregate with family.

Leiserson

Yeah that's that's frightening, we'll keep them in our thoughts and prayers. That's hard. [Thank you.] So, how has COVID-19 affected your job, your workplace overall, both for you and for the organization you work for?

Musser

Yeah. So, I'll kind of first talk about Arts for Lawrence and kind of how it's affected us in general. Of course we're an arts organization, we're a theater, we make most of our program revenue from social gatherings, from theatrical performances, art classes, you know, gallery walks, things like that, and that's not possible. We estimate that we'll have lost roughly \$60,000 worth of revenue in 90 days.

Leiserson

Wow. What's your overall budget?

Musser

Yeah, so our overall budget for this year was \$500,000 to \$503,000. So that's a large portion of our budget.

Leiserson

Over 10%.

Musser

Which that number alone is startling, you know, but we've been in talks with the Arts Council and all of those meetings that are happening and - sorry my dog sees another dog outside of the window. But you know we've now come to the realization, I think in the beginning of all of this, we were like "okay you know 60 to 90 days, we'll shelter in place, and then things will go back to normal." And we've kind of realized now that that is that is not going to happen. And that even after the shelter in place has been lifted, people aren't going to go back to theaters, people aren't going to go back to art classes as they used to be. And so you know we're really looking for the next six months possibly longer to continue virtual programming and rather than like public programming. And so we've had to completely change everything that we were doing because none of our programming before was really virtual, we only considered virtual as really marketing. So kind of everything about what we do is changing.

Leiserson

Yeah. What is your audience like demographically? I know a lot of performing arts organizations have an older audience, typically,

Musser

Yeah. That is for sure, a lot, a large portion of what our demographic is. We have the kind of the privilege in the situation of also saying that a lot more of our target market, I should say, is 30 to 45. A large part of our already audience is older than that, but target market is definitely a younger market. And we're seeing a lot of that to be ringing true. And so that that is good for us, hopefully.

Leiserson

Yeah. Well me maybe, tell us about some of the ways you guys have adapted your programs.

Musser

Yeah, so we actually just got done, so April 15 was World Art Day. And so we had been planning for several months before COVID happened to have a campaign and to have an art class, kind of like a wine and paint party kind of thing. And so, when COVID-19 hit, we decided to transfer that to a virtual programming model. And so, you know, we set up a private Facebook group. And so that once an individual registered we could add them to that group. And we went live with Cheryl Lorange. She is a local artist, and she taught the class, we did a supply pickup curbside. So individuals will pull up to the curb, honk, and we would come out with their supplies. And originally we had estimated maybe, maybe 10 people to sign up for the class. Just because our classes tend to be not one of our best attended programs. And we ended up having, I want to say it was like 33 people sign up for the course. But we were overwhelmed. And I think it's just a reflection of that like people, people may be stuck in their houses, but they still want stuff to do just like they did before all of this happened.

Leiserson

Yeah. Well, and I've seen some of this, because in full disclosure for the record, I work with Victoria because I'm on the board of Arts for Lawrence, and we've done some fundraising efforts together. But I've been impressed. At one point, you said, there's never been a better time to do art. Is that still what you're seeing?

Musser

Yeah, for sure. I mean, on a personal level, I'm doing more art now than I ever did before this, and I work in the arts industry. But, you know, before where I could be, you know, going to my parents' house or hanging out with my sister, or grocery shopping, or I don't know, doing the number of things that you do on a daily basis. And I can't do all of those things now, but I can still be in my house and I can, I don't know, write a poem or I've been, I took a watercolor painting. And I spend more time with my daughter, and she's coloring now, and so just like, you know, and I even think about when I'm not actively partaking, in creating art, I'm consuming it, you know. I'm listening to music, I'm watching more TV than I've ever watched, you know, I'm thinking more about how to entertain and keep my house happy. And really the answer to that in my life is consuming art, and I'm sure I am not the only one out there who's kind of in the same boat.

Leiserson

Yeah, what would you say, the value of the arts is right now? Is it the entertainment value or are there other pieces of it?

Musser

I think that that question is two fold, in the fact that, you know, there is the simple piece of it that we live in kind of a scary world right now. Amid financial uncertainty, no one knows what the stock market is doing, no one knows if six months from now they're gonna have a job still. And so, there is a piece of it that going into like entertainment, art, like movies and TV shows, it's really helpful to just shut off everything that is going on in the world around us and sit for an hour or two in a movie and not to think about all of that and just to shut down and be with your physical senses of, you know, what am I seeing in the show, what am I hearing in this show. But I think the other fold of that is, you know, dealing with all of that, that like therapeutic aspect of it right, that, you know, it is in the same sense that when I'm thinking about where I'm going to put the paint for my painting. I'm not thinking about it having anxiety about what the future now holds because of all of this. And so, I think it's both. I don't think you can separate the two from each other.

Leiserson

Yeah, that makes sense. What concerns you the most about how this is affecting artists or arts organizations.

Musser

Yeah. I think I'm really worried about the financial piece. You know, small arts organizations, and we even see it, we even see it on large scales right because, you know, I don't know if this is true but we've all heard that like possible movie theaters are closing their doors, and like big names are closing their doors. And you know that reality that if people who have made millions in the past are shutting their doors, what is your artist down the street who makes you know paintings, what, what are they going to do? I'm really afraid for all of the people who have worked so hard on their talent and their craft and building their brand to just dissolve because of this. And I don't want to see that happen. I mean, in terms of communities and collectivism, I mean, we all know that those small artists and those individual people are really what bring communities together and to support them and to make them work and to do things like our Cultural Campus. I mean we as an organization would exist without those little individual artists, and I'm really afraid that in the coming

future ,because of finances though, they'll dissolve, and I don't want that to happen.

Leiserson

Yeah. Do you have any data, any information about how it's affecting the individual artists that you partner with?

Musser

Not that individually I work with.

Leiserson

Even anecdotally

Musser

I don't see those numbers quite as much as maybe Toni would. But you know I have the information from the NEA about like \$3.6 billion the arts industry is estimated to floss because of this. So yeah I mean that's really scary.

Leiserson

Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, absolutely. So you mentioned your Cultural Campus. Can you tell us a little bit more about that and how that's being affected by the pandemic?

Musser

So we are the lucky recipients of a Lilly Endowment \$5.5 million Strengthening Arts and Culture grant that is allowing us to build a Cultural campus. So before the grant we were just a theater. So we operate a historic Theatre at the Fort, which is a theater that was built when for Benjamin Harrison was a active military base to entertain the soldiers. And in 2015, we as an organization moved into that theater as a tenant of the city's; the city owns the building. In 2018, we received that grant, which allowed us to do several things. So we are going to turn our parking lot into a green space, with some interactive art, things like the musical swings from daily tous les jours. We're doing an interactive sound sculpture, so that when people step on these footprints they'll hear the sounds of a soldier or general in their ear talking to them. We're working on a virtual app, so that you can see some of the history of the fort come alive, as well as a amphitheater for outdoor summer concerts that we do. We have a concert series called Fridays the Fort, which is a series of six cover bands, we bring school in, and things like that. As well as a visual arts building, which will host classes, a gallery space, as well as a visual artist, a resident visual artists position that will have a workshop space in there as well for them, as well. As renovations to the theater helping a building that was built in, I believe 19- gosh, I want to say it was 1920, something, kind of get together with modern standards of theater technology, while keeping the beauty of the historic building. So that's kind of the Cultural Campus. We are really lucky that we received that funding in full. And while things always go over budget, and you have to reach out to funders to kind of help with that, but a lot of that has not been affected. Yeah, I would say that one has not really been affected. And it actually helps us as an organization to remain relevant during this time. In that people are looking to the future now more than ever, because there's not a lot to be hopeful for in this particular moment. And so it's really, it helps to keep us relevant that as things go back to normal as we start to receive a vaccine, we'll have this amazing opportunity finished and ready for the community.

Leiserson

So, that is great. It's great to have a hopeful future. And it does sound amazing. It's great for the community. You guys I have to apologize if you can hear background noise here, we have a six year old. There's a major battle going on in the next room.

Musser

It's okay, I get it. It's part of the world we live in.

Gladden

It adds texture to the interview.

Musser

It's real. It's raw.

Gladden

The archival nature of doing oral histories in the wake of COVID, You're fine.

Leiserson

Thank you. Shonda, do you have any other questions about this, or Victoria anything else you want to say on your work?

Gladden

No questions, but I'm curious, as you think about the future of a Cultural Campus in the wake of COVID-19, are there ways that you are exploring a digital cultural campus in this season?

Musser

You know, in terms of programming, we're exploring the idea, especially in the wake of the success we had with the World Art Day program. Definitely more virtual classes. And helping, even though artists in their traditional sentence can't operate, helping to help them have revenue. So one of the things that we do that may be a little different than another theater is we choose to do a 50/50 split with artists, rather than an upfront cost. And we do that to help support emerging artists so that there's share in risk and reward. And, you know, whatever money you make, we're gonna split, it's not necessarily a, you know, write us a check up front. And so, you know, we can still move that program, or that model to virtual programming, and, you know, we're thinking through, you know I'm thinking in the sense of like, so the musical swings and the interactive walk. You know, that's all nature so that would be pretty easy to do in terms of making sure you're staying six feet apart and when someone comes down the pathway you go around them and things like that but kind of the musical swings that would be hard to do in a virtual setting. But, you know, things like our theater show, we're exploring other virtual possibilities there, and our programming in itself we're moving virtual. As far as the cultural campus and its physical setting, you know, we don't really have any plans to move that, but we're always open to the ideas if you've heard of something cool anybody else is doing.

Leiserson

Yeah, that seems to me that's always been one of the sticking points with placemaking, you know, that there may be some virtual, you know, virtual reality type things but, at this point, the technology may not quite be there yet, too. Okay, well, so transitioning a little bit to talk about your lifestyle. How have you seen the COVID outbreak affecting your community and the way you relate to your community, neighborhood, other groups?

Musser

Yeah, I think I've always been, I've always been a very, I like social interaction. I like having a community. I like being around people. And the idea that, like, when I go into a grocery store, I'm afraid of the people around me and the risks that they can pose to me and my family is a feeling that is so foreign, and a feeling that almost makes me ashamed. Like when I go into the grocery store that I'm afraid of the person coming down the aisle next to me because what are they going to expose me to? Or, you know, just the idea that like I did carry out from Panda Express the other day, and there was someone who like came closer than six feet - she was like two feet from me and I was like, "Whoa, like, can you can back away from me? Can you give me that space?" And like immediately as soon as it came out of mouth I was like, I hate this. Like I hate not being able to be together with people and to be afraid of my neighbor. And, you know, just simple things like I live in an apartment that has a shared hallway and like, I'll hear people cough and I'll be like, "Oh, does my upstairs neighbor have it?" And now every time I touch a doorknob to leave my house, I need to be afraid. And I just, you know, I hate that I'm, I am a kind of afraid of long term what's this gonna do for, you know, the immigration debate in this country? Are we going to be afraid now even more so, of who would be considered, you know, other in our nation? Are we going to be, you know, like, what long term effects is this going to cause in terms of as a weapon people can use against other people to limit their access to our country?

Leiserson

Yeah. Yeah, that's really well put, all of that. So, what do you see? Just kind of observations in your neighborhood, looking out the window, you know, looking around you. Are there visually different things happening now?

Musser

Yeah, I mean, I make the joke all the time that I've never seen so many well manicured lawns so early in the spring season, but just the like people are always out in their lawn working on something. Or, you know, also lots more people and taking walks. I've never seen so many people on the sidewalk. So many people walking dogs. But, you know, and I also I feel kind of bad. So we're. We've just purchased a new construction home; within the next month, we will be moving into that. And so, in the coming times, we have will have a yard very soon, but I think about all the people who are still living in an apartment complex, and we don't have access to safe outdoor spaces. You know, we, there's no place for my kid to go play outside, unless I want to go to a state park, which I don't really want to go to a state park right now because of the risk of poses. And I just, you know, thinking about low income individuals and the access they have, and how like even now, they're at a disadvantage to getting those things that are just so simple, it's going outside, playing in your backyard. So like, I don't know. I see that very, very much right now.

Leiserson

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, some of those things that are so easy to take for granted if you have them. It's been thrown into really stark contrast. So, um, so we're here in Indiana. You mentioned the parks. Yeah as far as I know they haven't closed the parks; we've had this kind of shut down, but somewhat limited shut down. What are you seeing in terms of the concepts that we see on the news all the time: self isolation, flattening the curve? How do you feel those ideas have impacted your life, and do you see them impacting other people's lives? Do you think that they're taking hold in the community?

Musser

You know, I don't know, um, so you're kind of asking are people taking the stay at home order seriously.

Leiserson

Yeah, yeah. How do you, I guess how do you think you and others are responding to these requests to stay at home? Yeah, are they taking it seriously? And is it, do you think, making an impact?

Musser

You know, I personally have been taking it moderately seriously. I don't really go to the grocery store anymore. I utilize pickup services. You know I'm still doing like takeout and carry out and things like that, but obviously not going into restaurants. And I am not really hanging out with my family, which is kind of my social circle, which I would often be hanging out with. But you know we're doing things like I'll bring my daughter, and she'll be able to see grandma and grandpa through their, they have a front porch kind of window type thing. And, you know, I understand that the best way to contain the virus would be to completely isolate in my home, but there's a mental health aspect there, right, that you've got to stay as healthy mentally as you can. Especially being close to my family like that's been one of the hardest things that like we used to see each other multiple times a week and we don't anymore except through like technology. You know, I think the majority of Indiana is taking this pretty seriously and bunkering down to the best of their ability but, you know, there have been times where it's that awkward thing where I'm yelling at my parents that like you're going to the store too much, don't go to the store anymore. But, no, I don't know. I don't know the answer to that question. I don't know.

Leiserson

No, that's okay that's helpful. It's just your experience. So there's no right answer. So yeah, you mentioned mental health, and the trade offs. And I want to talk a little bit about each of those. I guess first, what do you think all of the trade offs are that are happening right now, between physical health, mental health, are there other ones that you see that people are having to weigh and consider?

Musser

Yeah. I mean, I think, I think we all joke about how, what is it, the COVID 15? Like instead of the freshman 15. That is very real in our house. We are eating more sacks than we have ever eaten. So I mean that's definitely going to take a toll on our physical well being. But there's also an aspect of, you know, there is a limit to how much TV you can watch before you just start feeling mentally like crap. You know, and there is a limit to how much you can, you know as the weather is colder now and it was warmer, it was at least nice to to open the door and have a little bit of fresh breeze coming in. You know, now it's a little bit colder, and it's not as nice to go out and at least stand on a small patio. But, and this is the part where I think art really can play a large role in that. You know, I'm scared at what the world is going on. I'm sad that I cannot see my loved ones like I would like. You know I miss just, I'm a very verbal person, I talk my problems out. If I have something that is

causing some emotional tension, I will, you know, go grab coffee with a friend, or I will meet with someone at church to kind of talk about something like that. And I know we've transitioned as best we can into virtual programming, but there is an element to human connection that just can't be, that can't pass through virtual. And I think that's been really, really hard. And I think dealing, like even on a... So, for Wednesday I had to go to work and do the supplier handoff for that World Art Day class. And I came home that night, and I felt so much anxiety because I had to interact with people for the first time in a long time, that like I had the virus, I was now going to spread it to my one year old daughter, you know, every little cough I was like oh this is it, this is it, this is it coming on. And, like I know in my mind that that's not a rational thought; it takes 14 days to incubate. And you know, I was safe, I used hand sanitizer, I tried to maintain as much distance as we could, but there's definitely a level of mental health problems through all of this. You know we've all heard the jokes that like, we love our loved ones and the people we're being quarantined with, but also like, when this is over, I need my husband to be like six yards away from me. You know, and as well but, um, yeah.

Leiserson

Yeah, I think what you're talking about in a way is like a generational trauma that we're all going through, that we're all living through. Does that strike you?

Musser

Yeah, for sure. Yeah.

Leiserson

Yeah. What, how is it affecting your daughter, at 19 months?

Musser

Yeah, she doesn't understand. So the couple of times that we've done that, through the glass meeting with grandma and grandpa, she doesn't understand why she can't go see them, why she can't get a hug from them, why they can't pick her up. Why, why can't we open the door. She doesn't understand. And there's also, she's like me she's a busybody, she likes to go out and go to the park and, you know, walk around and meet new people, and she can't do that right now, and she doesn't understand why. We've noticed that she's having some sleep regression. She's not napping. Like right now she's supposed to be napping. She is on the other side of that wall, and I can hear her knocking on the wall. She's not taking naps at all. She's having a harder and harder time going to bed at night, and that's just because I think it's because she's not getting the activity during the day that she normally would, if she could go outside or to see grandma, grandpa, or to do all the things we normally do. And she misses her people. She really does. And, you know, we chat virtually the best we can, but she'll bring me my phone and she'll say bah bah bah bah bah bah, because she wants to talk to her Buppa, and you know even she's learning that like this is how we communicate now. This is how we interact with the outside world and like, that's kind of sad to me that like, at a time when she's supposed to be developing so much, she's learning that like, Oh, this is how we talk to people. [Yeah.] We don't go see them.

Leiserson

Yeah. Yeah, that must be hard to see as a parent.

Musser

Yeah.

Leiserson

Yeah. So, I have some next questions about news, about kind of government and policy and looking forward, but I wanted to check in with you guys to see if either of you have any thing more you want to ask or say about this kind of lifestyle section of questions.

Gladden

I'm just curious again. You mentioned various members of your household. Could you clarify your daughter's Buppa?

Musser

Yes Buppa means Papa or grandpa.

Gladden

Okay, so your daughter wants to reach out to the Grandpa. But I'm also curious, as a member of your household, in terms of, because I don't think we've had anyone on who had a dog. I'm curious if you're noticing any differences in the way your dog family member is behaving with all of you being home and the kind of changes that you experience there with your canine family?

Musser

Yeah, no, she is in love with the fact that we were all home all the time. She is a very high energy, very people oriented dog, and she thinks this is great. I am kind of worried about when we have to go back to work, and like is she going to experience a level of like sadness or depression that she has to go back to like we choose to kennel her during the day when we're gone? And so like is she gonna feel sad, is she gonna, you know-

Leiserson

...have separation anxiety?

Musser

Yeah, yeah. Because she's currently sleeping on the couch over there, you know, she loves this. She gets, she plays with my daughter during the day. She has so much more interaction and activity in her day, and she's really happy.

Leiserson

She's a pretty young dog. How old is she?

Musser

She is, she will be a year old in June.

Leiserson

Yeah. Awww. Yeah.

Gladden

She's a baby. Thank you. Pandemic puppy. That's going to be pretty interesting. [Dog barks.] Oh, I'm sorry.

Musser

No, you're okay. Someone in the hallway closed the door.

Gladden

I thought she heard me say puppy, pandemic puppy. And I thought wow, that's a smart dog.

Leiserson

Really, yeah. [Laughing.] What is her name, your dog's name?

Musser

Eva. Eva. Yup.

Leiserson

So have you been listening to the news, Victoria, or reading the paper, or getting news from other sources, and what sources have they been?

Musser

Yeah. So as a true Gen Z-er, I get all of my news from the internet. I don't have traditional TV. But, you know, in the beginning I watched all of the live press conferences, and all of that thing. And my politics is going to

come out here, but I no longer watch them because I don't feel I'm going to get any truth from the presidential cabinet and the members. I do pay attention to like Dr. Fauci, when I see them, and things like that. But, you know, it's been really hard to see reports from like other countries that may not have, you know, we didn't have the systems in place to deal with this in the way we should. But other countries are definitely experiencing that at a much higher level. I remember reading about like an article in Venezuela about an individual who had had a passed loved one in their home for a long time, and the authorities wouldn't pick up the body. And just like the awfulness of all of that. And you read about the potter's fields in New York City. And like all of that. And in the beginning I clicked on them to read those articles. I'm not, I'm choosing not to click on them anymore. It's just hard to read, to read that, you know, your fellow human beings are going through this. And I think as especially someone who chose to work in a non-profit, who chose to go into the art industry, I want to help, and I want to change things. And I don't have the skill sets to help or change things at the moment. I'm not a medical professional, I'm not a politician. You know, the only way I can help is to try to make sure that we have arts programming to support people. And I'm working on that. But this is where we're at.

Leiserson

Yeah, I think that's a real challenge to figure out how can we, any of us, help and stay socially distant. Do you, so when you say online, is that mostly you're seeing those links through social media, or other places online?

Musser

So both. So social media and then when I know that a live streaming or something is going to happen, I'll just Google it. And Google sends you those like news things every day about like what's happening, and you can click on them as an alert as well.

Leiserson

Yeah. Well, from what you have or have not seen in the media, do you feel like there are issues that are not being covered that should be?

Musser

Yeah, for sure. I'm going to go, I'll go back to the idea of New York and like the potter's fields. But like, you know, I was reading articles, they're about like individuals who are undocumented, choosing not to claim their loved ones bodies because they're afraid of what's that going to mean to them. And that breaks my heart. Like I cannot imagine if a loved one had passed away and I wasn't able to say goodbye to them because I was afraid of my undocumented status. Or even that like we just buried my grandma and my grandfather, and I know how much that costs. And, you know, I can't imagine being a low income individual and not having the resources to bury a loved one. Especially, I mean, this is so unexpected, right? You know, it's sad to say, but there's a life order. As an individual gets increasingly older, we start to expect, to save, to plan, to do all of those things. But you know, people are dying unexpectedly. You don't expect your 50-year-old mother-in-law to pass away from something like this. And I just can't imagine. But at the same time, like those voices are not being heard. You don't see those on mainstream media. You know, if it's not about face masks, it's not viral.

Leiserson

Right. Have you, do you know anyone who's gotten sick?

Musser

So we have been lucky enough to, no one in my immediate family has gotten sick. We were worried there for a little while. I have an uncle who is in a vulnerable category. He has a terminal cancer. And we were really afraid because he was showing some symptoms. But he went to the hospital. He got tested, he was negative, and he was released. So I don't know anyone who's tested positive at the moment. No.

Leiserson

Okay. Well, so what do you saying how municipal leaders on the local level, state, and federal level all have responded?

Musser

Yeah, you know, on a local level of the City of Indianapolis, Mayor Hogsett, I think he's done a pretty good job in terms of, there is a level here that kind of our, our democratic society and our idea of freedom in relation to this idea of a stay at home order, mandating where you can and cannot go. There's a tension there, right? And that's what we're seeing in Michigan, of people feeling that tension and deciding to go one way or another. And I think he has done a pretty good job in a conservative state of trying to manage that. Because, you know, if you go too far in one direction, you will see what you saw in Lansing. I think given what the situation is and the knowledge of his constituents, he's done a pretty good job. In terms of the governor, you know, I think he's in a similar boat that knowing your constituents, knowing what they will accept and what they won't accept is, puts you in a really hard place. The part where I start to feel that things weren't handled really do go on the federal level. You know, you read things about how in 2018 when he took office, he dismissed the CDC's group for like pandemic preparedness. And I understand that it's normal when you take office to dismiss the previous cabinet members, but he didn't choose to rehire anyone, and that's where I'm like, oh my goodness, you had all of the warnings and you chose not to take them. And like I said before, you know, I choose really not to listen to him anymore because I don't feel that he and his support individuals are spreading truth or really anything valuable.

Leiserson

Yeah, so, and I totally understand not listening, but how do you think it affects you and others when you do or don't have confidence in what government officials are saying?

Musser

Yeah, you know, I think we all saw the hoarding that happened at the very beginning of this and is still happening but I don't think at that level that it was the very beginning. But I think a lot of that stems from we, you know, if I don't trust my leaders, and my leadership to control my country and to control my state to control my city, I'm going to do whatever I can to protect my family. And I think that's a lot of what happened, right. That like, I don't feel like I'm being protected, so I'm going to do what I can to protect me. And I know that, you know, I had some anxiety issues at the start of all this. I have horrible nightmares about the idea of like post apocalyptic society and the idea that there's no control and it's chaos. So like when all of this started, those feelings all came to the very top because people were hoarding, they were talking about store runs, they were talking about you know stay at home orders. And I definitely had those anxieties, and I can remember like having conversations with my parents about, you know, my husband, we grew up, I have grown up in rural society, we are rural Indiana. You know guns and personal protection are a very prevalent in our society, and I can remember thinking like, you know, we don't have anything to protect our household. We live in an apartment complex. I don't have anything to keep my family safe. Someone can knock down that door pretty easily, and like, as this thing has, you know, kind of happened throughout this time, we've kind of realized that like that level of response isn't quite needed at the moment. But when it all first started happening, I very much felt that, that like I need to protect my family, because our leadership is not.

Unknown 2:35

Are you still connected to the rural communities where you grew up?

Musser

Certainly. Yeah.

Leiserson

Do you have a sense that this pandemic is affecting them in the same way as the city or differently?

Unknown 2:49

It's definitely affecting them differently. Whereas I have a lot of, you know, friends from college, I graduated

from Indianapolis. A lot of them are taking this seriously, as you look at our numbers continue to crawl up in the city of Indianapolis, but a lot of the friends that I graduated from high school with in a rural setting, I see them not taking this seriously at all. I see them still family cookouts, they hung out for Easter. They, they're doing all of those things because, you know, in their county they have eight people who have contracted the disease. They're taking it a lot less seriously but you know at the same time, my husband has two sisters in high school and middle school, and you know they canceled school for them as well and, you know, my mother in law works at a rural post office, and they're putting up all the personal protective measures. And I think it's a little bit of a mixed response. That business is taking it very seriously. They don't want to be the ones who get sued later on because they didn't protect their employees. I think a lot of individuals are like, oh, we only have eight cases, it's not gonna be as bad as the city is. I don't really need to take this as seriously as maybe someone in a city would.

Leiserson

Interesting. So you've talked a little bit about this, but I'm wondering if there any other things you want to say about the future? You know, how this experience has impacted or transformed the way you think about your friends, your family, your community, going forward?

Musser

Yeah. I think it makes me definitely realize that, you know, I did not take germs, I did not take them seriously before this. You know, I remember when my daughter was first born, and you're always concerned about oh they're not vaccinated yet, so they're still very immune. And I remember like, you know, the first six months of her life, we didn't isolate ourselves completely, but we did choose to like not go to, you know, large expos with her things like that. Because, you know, a very young child is very susceptible to that but we did everything else pretty normally. And I don't know, I just, I'm just realizing how before I had this idea of pandemics that like, Oh, well we have modern medicine now, we won't have a pandemic, and I live in a first world country where we know wash our hands, and we take showers and we, you know, Clorox our countertops, like, we won't have one of those. I remember growing up, thinking that, and even thinking that into adulthood and now realizing that like, that is, that is not true. You know we're living during a pandemic. This can happen to first world, third world. This can happen to everybody. And I just thinking that like, well I remember growing up and like they would talk about you know like the bubonic plague and like that happened because people didn't have high levels of sanitation, and like thinking like okay we're fine then. And just realizing that that's that's not the case, we need to be prepared.

Leiserson

Right. Right. We were also privileged to live for, you know, close to a century, without any major pandemics but that doesn't mean it can't happen. So we are, it's April 17; Indiana was originally supposed to reopen or could potentially reopen on Monday the 20th. We've now expanded or extended that, at least in Indianapolis to May 1, as of today, I think. But, what are your thoughts on how, what you would like to see as we move forward and maybe gradually start reopening?

Musser

Yeah, man. This is such a hard topic, because I think about individuals. You know my brother in law, sister in law, they both work in the retail industry, and they've been temporarily laid off because of this. You know their businesses were considered non essential. And so they've had to file unemployment, you know. And I think about them and like they're both young and relatively healthy, and right now the biggest threat to them as a family is not having their income, you know. But at the same time I think about like, you know, individuals who are more and more vulnerable, and having to go back to work and how to them, their biggest threat right now is that I might lose my life. And like, how do you try to protect both of those individuals, and I honestly don't know, you know. Like I said, My husband and I are both really lucky that we work office jobs that for the foreseeable future, we can work from home. We can keep my daughter. You know we can continue to do social distancing measures. But, you know, I try to give our politicians and our world leaders some slack that they're trying to walk the line on both sides of that issue. And you know I'm really glad I'm not. I'm really glad I'm not in their shoes trying to make that decision, but I also recognize that, you know, my perspective at the moment is exactly from what I'm surrounded by, and I am hoping and praying that our world leaders are surrounded by some smarter individuals who are giving them some advice. So.

Leiserson

Yeah, yeah. Well I think we're gonna start wrapping up with our last few questions. Shonda, do you have any final questions?

Gladden

Only if it can be a short response. I don't know. If it feels like it's gonna be a longer response if you don't have time, feel free to forego it. But you mentioned that one of your outlets prior to COVID-19 in terms of being able to have kind of social engagement was your church family. And so I'm curious if you could speak a little about your spiritual and emotional health in the wake of COVID-19?

Gladden

Yeah, so I'm really lucky I live, I worship in a church that is very adaptable. They have moved completely to online virtual church services, as well as trying to do midweek services through virtual programming, as well as the church leaders are reaching out constantly through phone calls, text messages. You know we're working in small groups of like three or four trying to do, maybe phone calls or encouraging or just checking in on each other. And while all of that has been great, there is a level that, like I said before, there's a level of virtual gatherings that just doesn't meet the same needs as physical gatherings of seeing those people. Of, you know, physical touch, like, you know, psychologists have done studies that like that helps to boost people's feelings of connectedness and, you know, we're missing that right now.

Leiserson

Yeah.

Gladden

Thank you.

Leiserson

So I'm gonna throw out a kind of self serving question, but I'm curious, Victoria. We are doing this Oral History Project potentially for several more months as we're still going to be impacted by the crisis. And we're trying to reach out to as diverse a group as we can, you know, in terms of gender, gender identity, sexuality, race, and also people in different walks of life, who are on the front lines or not. Are there any people you know who you think would be good interviewees good candidates for an oral history.

Musser

Yes, I have a couple of staff members who I think that you should interview, and I will encourage them to reach out to you as well. You know I have a sister who is a photographer; if you'd like, I can reach out to her and see if she'd be willing to participate. And she's an, like an individual artists.

Leiserson

Oh, great. Yeah.

Musser

I'm trying to think of any other artists I know. We have a large social media gathering and you know I should check with my executive director, but if you're wanting some, some marketing around this, I think we'd be happy to kind of try to market that and get you some artists who might want to participate.

Leiserson

Oh, thank you. Yeah, yeah. Let me check on that as well but that's a great idea. Thank you so much. Do you have anything else you want to mention or close with Victoria.

Musser

No, I don't think so just that looking right now it's really bleak, and looking to the future I hope that people think locally more. Think about, you know, watching movies from Hollywood are great quality, and they're great quality, but your local theater impacts the community more than you think. You know, the idea that buying locally doesn't just help someone in our country or in the world, buying locally helps your neighbor. And we need to think about that more than ever, how do we help our neighbors.

Leiserson

Yeah, absolutely. Well, Thank you both so much. Shonda, thank you for staying here and for all your

questions. I know you're super busy, and Victoria you're busy as well clearly. So you know, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us, for volunteering.

Musser

I'm happy to do it. I'm happy to do it.

Leiserson

Awesome. I'm going to turn off the recording here.