

Transcript of Interview with Antonia Okafor by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Antonia Okafor

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

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Location (Interviewee): Houston, Texas

Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we discussed include:

Working for Gun Owners of America and as a second amendment advocate. The second amendment and empowering women. First hearing about COVID-19 during honeymoon in France in January 2020; traveling in Italy. Church going onto Zoom; isolation from church family. Living in Colorado early in the pandemic, moved to Houston in July 2020. Safety needs during the power outage in Houston in February 2021. Patriarchy and medicine; healthcare cutting care to patients. Pregnancy during the pandemic and isolation. Comparing COVID safety procedures during both deliveries; giving birth with a mask on. Breastfeeding and stress. The murder of George Floyd. Having a white husband and difficulties communicating with white family members about issues of race and racism. Shifting to a libertarian mindset. Work safety and financial safety.

Antonia Okafor 00:00

Hi my name is Antonia Okafor. It is Friday, August 5, 2022. And I'm in Houston, Texas.

Kit Heintzman 00:11

And what time is it where you are?

Antonia Okafor 00:13

It is 10:04am

Kit Heintzman 00:16

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Antonia Okafor 00:24

Yes.

Kit Heintzman 00:26

Thank you so much. Would you please introduce yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening?

Antonia Okafor 00:31

Yes. I Antonia Okafor I, I would say profession wise, first, I'm the national director for women's outreach for Gun Owners of America. I'm second, I'm an advocate. I'm a mother of two little ones, too, specifically babies a toddler as well, and husband to a pastor grew up in Dallas, Texas, most of my life. And then after got married, moved here to Houston. So I'm here. But essentially, my biggest passion is empowering women. And the means to do so

has been through the Second Amendment and in my work and advocacy through Gun Owners of America, and also the organization I started Empowered2a, which was in 2017. And now as part of GOA,

Kit Heintzman 01:28

Tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

Antonia Okafor 01:32

Well, oh, man, the pandemic um I would say was year, starting, like late 2019, to early 2022. And during those years, actually, before we moved to Houston, we were in Colorado, that's where my husband was, he lived in Colorado. So I would say the vast majority of a pandemic, I would say, the very beginning. And the most intense time was actually in Colorado, which a lot of the states had different rules and everything in Colorado. That really impacted us, I would say, early 2020. And that's how I was. Early 2020 actually, I found out, I was pregnant. So I was pregnant for the majority of my time in Colorado, it was mostly just me being inside the home, we were in a small town in northern Colorado. And for the most part, it was just staying at home because they didn't let us really go out. I remember majority of it was us going to home improvement places that were still open. So it was mostly me pregnant, it was pretty warm already in Colorado. Still trying to get into my new position, which is what I'm in right now. I just started my my position as the national director for women's outreach at the time. So but most of it was at home, not able to do any events, not able to really go out other than, you know, going to Home Depot. So we made a lot of excuses to go Home Depot a lot. My husband was working as, this was even before we started a church here in Houston. so my husband was working in Azeck Superstore, that's what it's called, so it was a home improvement place, which at the time was one of the quote unquote, essential industries. So he was able, or rather, he had to continue to work, and not from home, but had to go to work every day. So it was just me most of the time at home, in my early stages of pregnancy.

Kit Heintzman 03:55

When did you first hear about COVID-19, and what were your early reactions?

Antonia Okafor 04:00

We actually first heard it during our honeymoon. We took a honeymoon six months after we got married. So we got married in summer of 2019. And then we planned to go to Italy, so Rome and France, Paris for a couple of weeks for our honeymoon, saved up and finally went in January. So I think it was about mid January because I was also celebrating my 30th birthday as well. So we went there and we actually first heard about it. I remember we were in it was Paris, and we're in the hotel room and looking watching TV in the news and it was talking about this Coronavirus that was happening in China and I just remember thinking oh man, I'm glad I wont say glad it's over there, but I was like, I'm sure hopefully that's not going to come to America. And just with while we were there actually. I'm sorry it was when we were in Italy is really when we started realizing he was going all over the place. Because that was when they started actually turning away. When we're in Italy, they were turning, turning away cruise ships from coming into Italy. So within that two week period, a lot of I mean, happened really quickly. So again, when we went back to America weren't thinking was going to be a big deal after we came back. But shortly after, it really became a big deal. That's when they were saying nobody can go from Europe back. And people were trying to come back to America. And so that was by then already, like early February, when a lot of that happened. That's actually when we got back was early February of 2020.

Kit Heintzman 05:45

When did it dawn on you that it was something more serious in the US?

Antonia Okafor 05:54

Honestly, I think so., at the time, I was still part of a Bible study group that I was with, before I moved from Dallas to Colorado. And they were, it was mostly moms. And they were talking about Texas, actually, because that's where it was from. And so I was in Colorado and things again, state by state were different. And I remember it was a lot of the counties because I think Texas had said that, essentially, they weren't going to push any, because there weren't even masks at that time. That was yeah, when they were thinking about just again, shutting everything down, and everybody had to go home and stuff. So masks was even a thing yet. But when they were doing that they were doing county Bell County, so one of the counties Dallas, had decided that they were going to start shutting stuff down. And a lot of my friends were in that. So I got a lot of that from them via like messaging and everything. And so the biggest things early on was like, part of my thinking at the time was like, oh, man, like that's not happening here in Colorado. And then of course, I mean, it just started happening pretty quickly. And in Colorado was actually the same type of stuff, if not worse, because it was the whole state. But yeah, that was kind of the early stages. And just a lot of I don't think that's gonna happen. I don't think it's gonna happen and it happening pretty quickly. So is this a lot of reactionary, like, for a lot, a lot of disbelief at first of this is happening here, but it's probably not going to happen here. And until it happens, it happened where I was. So in Colorado, it happened, I would say by March, it was, we were pretty much in that whole shutdown mode, where only essential workers were able to go to work and everything. And I was mostly staying at home. And by then I was already so I found I was pregnant, actually, again. So I got we had our honeymoon set six months after we got married. So I found out I was pregnant during my honeymoon. So, January 2019. So at that time, I was also going through like the first 12 weeks of early pregnancy, which for people who know first trimester is not fun, you're very tired, you feel sick, everything I was feeling at that time, including also having to be isolated and being at home. So that that was my March, April. timespan of 2020.

Kit Heintzman 08:27

I'd be grateful if you could share more about going under isolation with lockdown while your husband's working outside as an essential worker.

Antonia Okafor 08:36

Yeah, I think there were so many different things. I mean, the fact that you're already already at a place that was like we had, we live in a town 2000 So it was a really small town. I had just moved there, you're moved to Colorado from home. So I'm all my family, all my friends are still in Dallas, Texas. So learning and growing with the people there but far away enough that I wasn't close to my church family and stuff like that. So it was isolating in many different aspects outside of COVID. But then being pregnant in early stage of being pregnant and not having or being able to do things as much as what I would have done before, working out, you know, as well doing all the things that would have helped relieve stress. But then on top of that, the stress and the uncertainty of COVID of the lockdowns and having a stay at home not able. Church was also that was another thing church. Our church community had to stop meeting. So that was taken away as well at that time, so everything was on Zoom. My husband was you know, his work was since we're a small town was about the traffic 45 minutes away. So early in the morning, he was gone. And then he wouldn't come home until, you know, seven or eight, you know at night. So it was mostly me and I mean it was a definitely a dreadful experience would not recommend getting during a pandemic in general, especially the first trimester. But it was especially isolating because he was an essential worker. So he had to go to work, versus a lot of places were already implementing remote policies. So it

kind of got frustrating to say it lightly of of being isolated, having that, you know, staying at home, and I was working, I was able to do stuff remote anyways, even before COVID. So thankfully, that was implemented before all of this happen. So I could work still and keep my job. But I was working mostly from home. But the things I did events and stuff were obviously weren't able to do. So I wasn't able to travel and do the things I get to do now. But on top of that, my husband had to go to work and had to go rope work and a non remote status. So just being scared of like, what was going to bring home every day as well, because, of course, you go to work, but then COVID still exists, right? And so I was pregnant, my immune system was low. So it was stressful, like wondering, is he going to get COVID is going to bring it home. And then not having essentially just being isolated all day, and not having that ability to talk to really anybody and at the same time only trying to figure out what's going on in the world through the news, which is not helpful with curbing any type of anxiety. So it was a very stressful, very anxiety filled time. And then on top of that, that was also with George Floyd and all of that that summer. So it was a really stressful time.

Kit Heintzman 11:43

2020 did have so much going on beyond the pandemic. I'm wondering, you mentioned George Floyd, I'm wondering if you want to say more about that. But also anything else you'd like to say about the pandemic times that weren't necessarily COVID specific?

Antonia Okafor 12:01

Yeah, the pandemic, yeah, so that 2020 20 2019 2022. But that was probably, I would say, as a black person, as a black woman, and as also mom. With George Floyd, that was pretty impactful to me. I want to say even more so than the pandemic, I'm very blessed. I didn't have any family members who died from COVID people got sick, I got sick, but nobody who was seriously hospitalized or who died in my circle. So I'm, I'm thankful that I didn't have to experience that. So that's why I say that it wasn't that pandemic as the the sickness aspect of it wasn't as impactful other than the government reactions to it. So shutdowns not being able to, you know, isolated from family from church, my church family, all of that. And travel. But other than that, like the biggest things to or what was happening with, I would say, George Floyd is the biggest one. But I mean, Ahmaud Arbery also happened during that time. Breanna Taylor, I mean, oh, my goodness, just as a black person, but I would say actually, it was Elijah McLean. And that happened actually in Colorado, that was the most impactful to me, because, you know, I have a son, that's Isaac, my son, so I was carrying my black son, you know, in me. And so just as a black mother, and just resonating with those mothers who were dealing with the loss of their, their children, their sons. I mean, a lot because of the color of their skin, if not the most. I mean, it was very in your face about that. And so that really impacted me the most stressed me out about, I mean, what is the state of black men in America? What is the state of like, how am I going to protect my son growing up? I mean, there's so many of those things and having to sit in it at home by yourself. I'm in an interracial marriage as well. So my husband's white. And so that was another thing being in Colorado, which is not very black, lets just, lets just leave it there. It was isolated in that in that aspect as well. Like feeling I had to teach a lot of the people around me, maybe well meaning but it was a lot of can you can you I don't know this experience. Can you tell me and it's like I understand where you're coming from. But with a pandemic, with everything going on me being just pregnant, everything's like I can't give history lessons and why you should care about what's going on and my whole perspective of life. You know, so it was a lot of that as well and which I think also kind of isolated more people too, because a lot my family I have a whole family side, and that's white, you know, and the tensions of those conversations right and attention to my family that's black and not feeling like they can really talk to my husband's family or my husband and trying to feel like you're in the middle and the peacemaker between that. So

while carrying a mix child and like what, what that aspect and what that's going to look like going forward, so a lot of conversations happened as well. But again, a lot of conversations because my husband was working most of the time, I had to kind of deal with all of that mostly by myself. So that was probably, I mean, I had a lot of views change. And I would say I'm pretty conservative, pretty vocal, actually. I went more liberty libertarian, independent after that, because just a lot of people in that world, a conservative worldview, I frankly, just did not handle that well. And I really realized even more importantly, like my, my own political beliefs, but then the fact that the intersectional aspect of me being a black woman, and a black mom, and how that is different, and how that added more stress and anxiety than I think a lot of my white male peers, just I mean, and I have a white male husband. So to see that in full display was very interesting to see that contrast of how we saw things so differently. But we have this, you know, we have this child, that's literally a mix of us two, and bringing those two worlds together. So but yeah, a lot longer than I thought it's gonna be.

Kit Heintzman 16:46

It's perfect. I wish we had so much more time. I'm curious, what does the word safety mean to you?

Antonia Okafor 16:52

Hmm. Safety. Safety means, I think I mean, I'm a second amendment advocate. So that means physical safety. So safety, protection from and I even like, as if I'm don't get have access to it, or it doesn't affect me, but the ability to get out of that. So safety, the ability to defend myself against those who are trying to physically harm me, is the first thing I think of safety, I think of stability. I think of security, I think of a place emotionally that I can be safe in as well as physical.

Kit Heintzman 17:45

There had been this really sort of narrow understanding of safety in the confines of like COVID, as a disease that needs to be managed. And wondering, in that teeny, tiny framework of safety, what are some of the things that you've been doing to make yourself feel safer?

Antonia Okafor 18:04

While to feel safer, I think I realized my lack of being prepared of, you know, if this happens, again, the things that I didn't have access to that were being taken away really quickly. Savings. I mean, the one thing that we had some safety of was that financially, although my husband had to work, he was deemed by the government, an essential worker, so he could work. I mean, that's the sad thing is that he could work and make a living for us, I could continue to work because I was going remote. I was already remote worker anyways. So thankfully, our income didn't change. So that financial safety was a big part of it. So I was able to do that, and also safely, you know, as much as possible from being sick. And even if I did, I had the means by having insurance. So I knew if something happened, at least I could have the ability without going into a huge financial hole, which I grew up with a single mother who didn't have insurance. So I know what that looks like and how that feels. But yeah, I mean, there's so many of those aspects out there. But for me, that meant preparing preparation of being prepared to have the things that I mean, from toilet paper to, to water. I mean, that's another thing that happened during the pandemic time in Houston. So going away from Colorado going to Houston, which we moved to Houston in late 2000. So July 2020, we moved to Houston. And so here not too long after in February 2021 was the what happened in Texas where literally there was a boil water notice. So we for a week did not. There was, um, thankfully, our, our water I'm thankfully our power stayed and went off briefly but stayed for the majority of that week. But we were in a, we're in the Fourth Ward, and close to downtown and most of the homes had no power,

we didn't have water for a week couldn't shower for a week, we the water that we could have didn't, it couldn't be just from the water here, like we had a boil it or, and then that's if you have power, right? And then if not, we had to get water bottles, water bottles, you could not find where, you know, non existent. So that was part of the pandemic era too. So all of that to say so I started going into safety and everything is just, I think that was my parent primary focus at first physical safety. But to go through like with literal, like wanting and lack of in those really essential ways made me realize I need to prepare to have water bottles. So whenever I can find water bottles, I try and buy them. Formula, which is not really well actually, it's 2022. So the formula shortage also took place. And so ever since my second child, I had another child and this whole two year span. So whenever I see formula, now I buy as much as I can. I mean, there's so many things of like, knowing that you're not safe in this quote unquote first world world, you know that you have to be prepared in case things like that happen. So I think last two, three years has shown that more than anything, is that you're not safe in a first world, quote, unquote, wealthy country. Things like that can happen, you can be restricted from going outside and having relationships with your friends and seeing your family, your church family, you can be restricted from going outside, you can be restricted from having access to clean water.

Antonia Okafor 22:05

Having access to formula for your child when the really the stress and everything of it's really hard to breastfeed your child and the stressful world right now. So I went away from that pretty quickly actually went to formula. And then a month later, you're you're having trouble finding formula. I mean, that was insanity. So a lot of that same thing with also the ability when I'm out. So I was pregnant. And a lot of the maternal aspect of things of not being able to have your family come into the room with you when you're having your child or have your child. So that whole experience of having your family see you and everything completely gone having to wear masks while you're giving birth. That was a part of my experience as well. Like all of that, just unique things that have happened because of the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 23:02

Would you share something about the sort of physical experience of giving birth while masked?

Antonia Okafor 23:10

Yeah, probably as bad as what you think of it is. So yeah, awful. Sometimes I just wonder the people who put policies in place at the hospitals, do they? Honestly, it's probably men. That's it. I don't know why a woman would say, you know, what, especially a pregnant woman who's giving birth actively must have a mask on. That was the craziness of the whole mass thing afterwards. So but yeah, it's, I mean, restrictive. I mean, you feel like you already feel like you can't really breathe anyways. I mean, get having breaths and have it going to the pain and yelling and screaming and pain. And having to continuously have all the people like as if that was their number one concern was keep your mask on more than like, I felt concerned for my own self, you know that they were concerned about me.

Antonia Okafor 24:10

I think that was the biggest thing is feeling like healthcare, was cutting corners on their focus on the patient. And that's how I felt with a lot of policies, the fact that I couldn't have I mean, my husband was able to come. And we had to take that. So the first experience my firstborn, was he was born in 2020, October 2020. So that was mask. That was you're very lucky to have one person if they leave so my husband could not leave the facility. If he did.

He wouldn't be able to come back. So Fine. Thankfully, I didn't have another child at that time. But then I had another child a second time I had to make sure my mom had to fly in because the children weren't allowed inside.

Antonia Okafor 24:59

In the hospital room, so I didn't have 24 hour care for my now toddler while I was giving birth to my second child who I still had to have a mask on, couldn't have visitors. So, and that was also the experience I had throughout, again, policies that I don't just don't think a woman was making, that you had to keep your children at home, well, who's going to take care of your child when you have to go to your doctor's appointments. So same thing with my doctors appointments, every doctor appointment I had, which at the end of pregnancy, or going once a week, at least, every my child had to be with a sitter or somebody watching him, you know, during the day, because the hours are eight to five, so my husband's at work. So things like that. And again, I think we have some of the financial means to do that. But I couldn't, I couldn't imagine that people who don't have the financial means to do a lot of that type of stuff. It was very financially restrictive, to have children during the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 26:06

I know you have to run to another meeting. So I'll guess I'll just ask if there's anything that you'd like to share that my questions haven't made room for yet? I'd love to

Antonia Okafor 26:16

Yeah, who knew this is gonna be like a therapy session. Like, oh, I have a lot of these things I never really got to talk about Man. I mean, I'm glad that you guys are doing this. I'm sure that experience is going to be so different for people. And again, I'm so thing I mean, it's also very helpful to know how thankful I am like grateful of stuff I did have other people didn't have it, definitely put that perspective in my, I really get about that perspective a lot. And we tried to donate and help people that just could not work literally could not work because they were restricted from the government to do so.

Antonia Okafor 26:59

So I just hope that we learn from these lessons. So so we don't have a, we're going to have pandemics we're going to have you know, I mean, that's an illness as long as we're human beings are going to have illness. So just have better responses and responses that from every industry from obviously from the medical industry, or, you know, I wont say industry I hate saying industry, but the medical space too. The government, obviously, of making policies that are going to help the people to be able to help [inaudible] to help themselves, but to be able to do the things that are going to empower us so we're not dependent on others when we don't need to be so let people work. And figure out policies to help make remote work possible and accepts us accessible. Know the importance of fellowship and the mental health aspects of when we keep people from seeing other people, especially their own families and circle groups, how degrading that can be to people's dignity and livelihood and just well being. So I hope he put those type of policies in place and keep that in mind when we're thinking of stuff when this stuff happens again, because it will happen again.

Kit Heintzman 28:23

Thank you so much.

Antonia Okafor 28:25

Absolutely. Thank you