

Transcript of oral history with Heather Martens by Monica Ruth

Interviewee: Heather Martens
Interviewer: Monica Ruth
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Location of Interviewer: Cameron Park, California
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Abstract: This is an oral history of Heather Martens by Monica Ruth, about her experiences of the pandemic. Heather shares her experiences as an administrator and facilitator of staff in her work role, her thoughts on pandemic life at home, and as a mother and partner. Heather also speaks a bit about conflicts over mask wearing, and what she hopes the future holds.

HM: Okay.

MR: Hi my name is Monica Ruth, and I'm a graduate student intern with the COVID-19 archive at Arizona State University. Today's date is March 17th, 2021 And the time is 11:17am Pacific Standard Time. I'm sitting in my home in Sacramento, California and speaking with Heather Martens to record some of her stories about pandemic experiences for the COVID-19 archive. Heather, do I have your consent to record your responses and add them to the archive with your name?

HM: Yes you do.

MR: Great. Well thanks so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me, I really appreciate it. Let's start by you telling us your name, your age, where you live, and a little bit about your family.

HM: Okay, I'm Heather Martens, I live in Cameron Park, California. I am 49 years old, and I have a domestic partner whose name is Jeff and a daughter who is 10 years old, her name is Juliana.

MR: Great. So can you tell us what a typical day or week was like, for your family and before the pandemic?

HM: Yeah. Jeff and I both are full time employed. So we typically, Jeff gets up really early he's working two jobs actually, and he gets up really early and goes to work, and gets home late. And so I typically would be the one getting up and getting Juliana ready for school. And then when she would head out the door, I would myself leave for work. I work a very standard typical eight to five job, Monday through Friday. So at the end of the day I would come home and meet up with my daughter. And we typically would make some dinner, kind of go over our day, and then wait for Jeff to get home 'cause he usually gets home later in the evening, and then just kind of touch base with him on how his day was and connect as a family and work on some homework,

watch some TV. Relax a little bit, we always do some reading before going to bed. And we're generally in bed by 9:30/10 o'clock. Each night, so that's our weekday schedule and then on the weekends we're pretty active, busy family. We're usually doing something around the yard or outside, whether it's in the summer rafting or hiking or camping, and then in the winter we would be skiing, or going to visit friends that live in Tahoe, or working on projects around the house.

MR: Great, thank you. When you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it and how have your thoughts changed since then?

HM: I remember hearing about what was happening over in China, and really being intrigued by what I was reading about just because it seemed like it was taken off really fast. And I remember talking to my area manager at work about it. Who's my, he's my direct supervisor, or was at the time. And just talking about wow this is kind of crazy what's happening over there and how they were locking everything down. I do remember I'm kind of a person who tends to want to be prepared, and maybe even overreact to situations like that. An example would be if I hear that there's a big storm coming when I lived someplace that there was snow, I would be the person that would be out getting water, you know, food, just in case we got snowed in. So in the back of my mind I started thinking about huh, I wonder, you know how we're going to have to prepare for this if this comes over to the states. And I really tracked what was going on and where it was spreading and read a lot of the news stories about it, and was very aware that this was something that was going to come to the United States. And was probably talking about it a little bit earlier than most, and kind of got the, "you're crazy" response from people. And then, I guess it was in November, December, January timeframe, we started hearing more about that it's getting, you know, it's getting closer and there was definitely a sense of fear, I mean I definitely had some fear around it. And, you know, I have never been through a pandemic before and what is that going to mean when it does arrive in the United States? I never thought, "if it arrives," I always felt that, yes this was going to come to the United States. And as that started to become more of a reality we actually started having those conversations at work, and my focus was really more around work than it was at home, at first, just knowing that there were going to be a lot of logistics that potentially would come into play. So we started having those discussions, fairly early on, how we would start communicating with the staff and making sure that we're sharing information. But I did, as it, as we found out it was in the United States and you started hearing about, you know, people were hoarding supplies and, and toilet paper was running out, I definitely had those supplies on hand already. I had extra groceries, I had extra toilet paper. I wasn't trying to hoard it but I definitely was aware that there could be an issue where we would run out. Now, we're a family that camps and we're not afraid of the outdoors so we weren't stockpiling, we were just thought, we'll have just enough to get through a couple months and we have to go outside in our backyard, we'll go outside in our backyard.

It took a while for Jeff to get on board, he really thought that it was being overblown and that I was, not crazy, but just kind of being overly cautious. But over time as it became more of a reality he definitely got on board as well and started, we just started buying kind of the typical supplies, canned food, things like that that you could keep on the shelf. And I think that was the real shift for us, it became, what was an idea, that's something that could potentially happen, to okay this is a reality, and how serious is this? Are we going to be locked inside our house? You know, are we going to have any ability to go anywhere? Are grocery stores going to be open?

There was just a sense of kind of the fear from the unknown, that we just didn't know what the impacts were going to be. So I would say that was the biggest shift of going from, oh wow I'm seeing this happen someplace else and this likely is going to come here to, wow this is here, and not really being sure what the full impact is going to be.

MR: Yeah. So you mentioned, kind of the first, one of the first places you focused your attention was work in communicating with other staff, how do you, how would you describe the way the work environment was impacted by the pandemic?

HM: Um, I mean, there could clearly was a sense of stress. There was a real sense of urgency and fear amongst the staff. And I would say that the stress overall was, “how do we manage this process,” and part of that is because we are spread out geographically and we're in different counties so how the pandemic was being managed differently cr— posed a bit of — I don't want to say a problem but it was just we had to manage our offices differently because of the requirements in the different counties. For example, the Bay Area, our San Francisco offices, our Walnut Creek offices: they were on a much more restricted lockdown, much earlier than the rest of our offices and figuring out the logistics of how do we get these people home, get them the equipment that they need, the supplies that they need, how do we communicate effectively with people working from home, and in my role, we support the offices, so how do we shut down an office yet still be available to support people remotely from an administrative standpoint. I would say mentally, I think that there were two camps there was a camp of folks who were a bit in denial, they didn't think it was really real, that, you know, this was an overreaction. And then there were people who were really afraid and took it very seriously, and were kind of the first to jump on with yeah we need to lock down and work from home and just not go outside. I don't know if I'm answering your question, hopefully that does a little bit.

MR : You definitely are. This is good. Okay. So, looking back, you know from this vantage point, a year past the first lockdown in our area, how do you think the people that you've supported in, at work, have changed?

HM: Um, I think that there's a general fatigue of just not having the freedoms that we're typically used to having. I think that there is a malaise, of not having that social interaction, I think that it's, it's hard to stay connected. As much as we try, I think it's been very easy for people to just kind of get into their individual silos, particularly, particularly because the demands on people have increased so much in their homes with having to homeschool their children, you know, provide daycare, but then also try and maintain full time jobs. We've just seen a level of, I think, burnout, that we haven't experienced before. And this inability to have a true balance between work and home life. I think that's been probably one of the biggest struggles. I also think that there is a very pronounced change in people's perspective around working from home, and their desire to do so, or their desire not to do so, I think there are two very strong camps of people who want to continue working from home and definitely. And then the people who it's just not conducive for them, and they really want to return to the office full time. I would say this much smaller group is the people that are in between who are kind of feeling that they could go either way I could, I could work from home sometimes and I could be in the office, sometimes. I think that's probably the smallest group. I also think that, and this is

work and personal related, but I think that people are having a realization of how over scheduled their lives have been. A lot of us who have kids, our kids are super scheduled, their lives are very scheduled as far as having to be involved in extracurricular activities. Just running them from place to place and parents being involved in that, and our own extracurricular activities, I feel like this pandemic and this forced opportunity, I guess, to be at home and spend your time differently, has, I think, create a new mindset around how do I want to be spending my time. What is my balance between work and life once things get back to normal? Do I do I want to invite that chaos back in? Do I want to be working as much? Do I want to be driving my kids around as much? Do I want them scheduled as much? I think that there's going to be an interesting shift that will play out from this experience, and I'm curious to see what the end result of that will be.

MR: Oh yeah me too. So, in reflecting on how people have needed to refocus their attention on their schedule and their personal life balance with their work life balance. How would you describe your balance of work/life, now that you're working from home as well?

HM: I think a year in I've found a good balance. I'm also in a much different situation than a lot of folks and that I only have one child, and she's at an age where she is very independent, as far as her schoolwork goes. I would say in the beginning, it was definitely a struggle, because it was such a shift for all of us, both just mentally and emotionally and physically that in the beginning, it felt very overwhelming, how do I manage my time, we were figuring things out technologically, we were figuring out... there was a lot on my plate in the very beginning just logistically from work trying to get people set up and getting folks what they needed and being part of the COVID-19 Response Team for our region. There was just a lot of responsibility, and in the very beginning, along with figuring out how to teach my child from home and be effective in that, and address her frustrations. But as time went on, we were fortunate to find a really good rhythm, Juliana really took over her own school schedule and sort of thrived in doing that, and she actually was a student who probably did better working from home because there was less distraction for her. Not that she didn't want to be at school because she really did want to be with her friends and be with her teacher but I think it allowed her to focus a little bit better than maybe she could in the classroom and that transition was a little easier for her. Then we moved into a hybrid situation where she was in school for a couple hours every day. And the transition time was always hard whenever we had to move into something new, was a little bit challenging because we had to develop a new routine. Okay, how do we manage this schedule now? And just managing the conflicts of when she would need help and I would need to be on a conference call and, you know, those, those types of issues but overall I think that we were we were one of the lucky ones we were fortunate to develop a good rhythm, a good routine. There wasn't a ton of stress or change that went along with it once we got into that routine. And because Jeff was still going to work in person, every day, it probably simplified it for us because we weren't having to switch out. We knew kind of what our roles were each day, what our schedule was going to look like, it was pretty much the same all the time instead of two parents trying to swap out, you know who's going to be with her today, who's going to be with her tomorrow, etc. So in that way, I feel like we were lucky, you know, it was harder in the beginning but it got easier as time has gone on, and I would say now Juliana is actually back at school full time, she started this week and I'm starting to get ready to go back to the office on a more regular basis and I think it's just that transition, again. It's more of mental of okay, how do I get back in the swing of things and

mentally feel checked in at the office and engaged at the office with other staff again. And same for Juliana just being, having that shift of okay, I'm in school all day with a full classroom, just managing that transition period. It's always a little stressful in the beginning but it gets better as time goes on,

MR: And knowing what children are going through with this, this big change and all these transitions like you mentioned, what do you think are some key things that children might need to keep in mind for the future, based on our pandemic experiences?

HM: Yeah, um, you know, I think that they're going to be the ones and we're going to see this play out where we'll really see the true impacts of this and I say that more from a mental health standpoint because I, I think that there will be long standing impacts from that, just for the, for the kids, because they lost a lot. You know whether it was the ability to socialize or go to prom or if you're a senior in high school, losing all those experiences that are a rite of passage. I think the lack of socialization and the lack of in-person education from true teachers, rather than parents just trying to get by, if it's going to have a long-term impact as well. But I think the things that are important for them to remember are one: we're resilient. We're amazingly resilient and adaptable, and that's has been incredible to see that we are a community that wants to take care of each other and do what's best and we do have the ability to pivot, really quickly. And we're fortunate in that sense, we have the technology to do so, at least where we live, I know that there are communities that don't have the same technological and financial resources that we do we're— where I live. And there are a whole communities that are being, you know, forgotten or, or impacted in a much different way, but I think as a whole, it's that, you know we are adaptable, we are resilient. This isn't a death sentence; it is something that can be overcome. And you just learn how to live within, within a new norm. Yeah, I would, I guess that's what I would say just try to focus on getting through each day, and trying to find the good and the positive where you can in a really difficult situation.

MR: Yeah. So thinking about all these hopeful words you know resilience and pivoting adaptability and, and all those things you were talking about, do you think there were any silver linings within the past year of the pandemic?

HM: I definitely do. I think that a lot of it was just allowing people to have a slower pace, number one, well slower for some, I guess, completely not for everyone but I do think the world just kind of, was forced to slow down. And I just had a conversation with someone today about that and just reflecting on how it shifts your priorities on, you know, how do I want to be spending my time and what do I value? I think that families were allowed that opportunity to spend a lot more quality time together and really reconnect in a way that maybe they haven't been able to for a long time because the parents are going at 110% and they're— working. A lot of times there's two full time working parents in a home, or one— full time working parent in the home who just doesn't get to connect with their kids the way they want to. I know for me I was much more in tune with what was happening with Juliana in school, and felt very engaged in her learning, which was, that was great. We had a lot of really deep conversations about what was happening in the world, not just with the pandemic, but with the civil unrest and politics and it was a melting pot of just a lot happening in the world right now and it afforded us the opportunity to have those conversations and kind of figure out, where do we stand on these

issues and what's important. You know and I think you just realize kind of who your community is, who supports you, and who's important, and what's important, I think those are, are the silver linings and not to, you know, not to downplay it, but I think a lot of us are able to do projects around our homes and in our lives that we didn't have the time or the luxury to spend on before. So those are some of the silver linings.

MR: Yeah, yeah, thanks for sharing all that so, is there anything else that you would like to share about your pandemic experiences that we haven't covered yet?

HM: I think just the realization of what we take for granted. You know we have a lot of freedoms in this country and I think as a whole it was difficult for us to be told what to do. I think that, you know we are a country that prides ourselves on, you know, our First Amendment rights and I can do what I want and I can say what I want, and we were really challenged in that way this year, and our response if you look at other countries, they were able to shut down and all comply a lot, you know, quicker than we were able to based on how their country is set up and I think when you live in a country where everyone has their own freedoms, that means they have the right to comply or not. Right, so for me I do think that there is an impact in that, that we, I think the pandemic raged in a way that maybe it wouldn't have if we had more of a sense of, this is gonna sound bad, but more of a sense of community, like I care about my community and the people around me as much or more than I care about my individual freedoms. That was something that stood out to me, that I felt like people were more afraid of what was being taken away from them than they were about taking care of people around them.

MR: Yeah, that's a really powerful thing to witness. Did you come across any specific instances of that in either work or your personal life, like where people were really standing their ground?

HM: Um, I think that it was, I didn't run into it, personally. I had conversations I mean, I have a broad spectrum of friends and relatives who felt very differently about the pandemic as a whole, I have a friend to care locally who actually had COVID and prior to her having COVID, she thought it was ridiculous that people had to wear masks, she refused to go into stores that required you to wear masks. And then she got sick and her my mindset shifted a little, but she's still she's young, and she recovered quickly. So I think her mindset was still sort of this is overblown. And I will say I did talk to a lot of people who just felt like, either it wasn't real, or it wasn't gonna happen to them, because they were healthy. And it was a bit frustrating for me just because I had someone close to me who got really really sick from COVID and actually lost a parent from it. So it was real for me. It was something that I walked through with her every day until her dad actually passed away and then she spent a month afterwards trying to get healthy herself. So it was, it was frustrating to listen to people who didn't see it as something real and were sort of, they, they didn't want to be told what to do. They didn't feel like masks were necessary and I frankly I mean I'll say it doesn't help that politically, everything was so charged in the country, that it was a dividing line, you know, it felt like if you were wearing a mask, then you're a Democrat and you're a liberal, and you know, if you're not wearing a mask then you're Republican and you're selfish and, or, I don't know. It just, it was odd to me how it became a political stance, instead of, this is a pandemic, this is a health issue. It became a way that to further divide us and that was really disheartening to me.

MR: Do you think that this issue of mask or no mask, you know, getting involved in the political realm, influenced your participation or your awareness of politics?

HM: Gosh, that's a good question. I'm sure it did have an impact. I don't know how much but I, I live with someone who's very tuned into politics and it was something that was always on the TV, almost to a point where I just didn't want to be around it anymore because to me it was so, there was so much rhetoric and it was so just ugly that it was something that I tried to actively avoid. I didn't want to have those conversations, I didn't... To me, I, it wasn't a political issue but it became one. And it does, I mean obviously we were in a, an election year, that was already very heated. I'm kind of, I'm kind of rambling on this, it's, it definitely had an impact, I couldn't necessarily say how much but I would say yeah I was, I would think about it, if I were at a grocery store, I definitely would think about it. If someone wasn't wearing a mask, and why weren't they wearing a mask and was that a statement on their part? Or, you know, sometimes I would think, what are people thinking of me? You know, are they making assumptions about me because I am wearing a mask and I am complying? And it's weird. It's a weird thing that that crept into the process and it and it was being, I don't I don't know if encouraged is the right word, but it was being stoked at the highest level of our country. That's what was bizarre to me, it was happening at the very top, that they were making these divisive statements about who was doing what based on political party, you know, in response to the pandemic, so it's a very weird time.

MR: Yeah, Yeah, I appreciate your answer for that. So as we begin to wrap up, what do you hope your life is like a year from now?

HM: I've been thinking more about this lately. I hope that I have a general appreciation for health and wellness, and the ability to have a sense of normalcy again I mean, my hope is that a year from now we're well past this and that, we're able to go back to, you know, going to the movies and going out to dinner and congregating with people and travel and all the things that we enjoyed before, but with an understanding of, and appreciation for, what we've just been through, and not losing sight of the fact that there's going to be long term impacts for this. I mean, I personally feel like COVID is going to be something that we just live with from now on, it's going to be kind of like the flu and it might come around once in a while and we'll have to get those masks out and we're going to have to comply in some form or another. And my hope is that it's an easier process, and it's not so divisive, but it's something that we, okay we've been through this, we understand, we know what to do and we kind of fall into that a little bit easier now that we know how to do it, I guess. My hope is that, particularly for kids, that they get the support that they need, educationally to get back up to speed, that they get the support they need for their mental health, that they've had impacts for that. And that they just have that sense of relief and freedom again, to just be kids and do what comes naturally to them which is hang out with their friends. And I really hope that as a country, and as corporations, we shift to a more flexible mindset of having work-life balance and what does that look like, and being able to flex more to individual needs of, okay, hey, maybe you need to work from home sometimes and you've proven that you can do that. And sometimes you need to be in the office because that's where you need to be, instead of this rigid box that some of us have to live within because that's how it's always (_____???) of you need to be here from, you know, X hour to Y hour because that's what we've always done. I hope that there's some, I hope that there's a shift in that way. I think that's it.

MR: Okay, well I really appreciate all of your answers and sharing all this about your experience. Thank you so much for your time.

HM: Thanks, Monica.

MR: You're welcome.