

Interview with Chloe Ylitalo by Alexis Polencheck

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Abstract: In this interview, Chloe Ylitalo describes how COVID-19 has affected her life regarding college, work, and family life. Chloe has attended two different colleges during the pandemic and compares how they handle it differently throughout the 2020 year. Chloe attended Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College in Ashland, WI for her Medical Assistant degree in the spring, and University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire in the fall for her Micro-Biology degree. She touches on the first responses to COVID, what has changed for her, mental health, and how different parts of the state have reacted. She also gives her opinion on how she expects the country will react with talk of a vaccine coming, as well as how she wants the schools to change.

Alexis Polancheck (AP): All right. Today's date is November 11, 2020. The time is 12:01pm. For current statistics, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US, there have been just over 10 million COVID cases as well as 241,000 deaths because of it. And in just Wisconsin, there have been 293,812 COVID cases, and 2,482 deaths because of it. So, we're gonna start this interview now. What is your name? And do you mind sharing demographic information for the study like race, gender, age?

Chloe Ylitalo (CY): Yeah. Hi. I'm Chloe Ylitalo. I am 20 years old, I'm white, Caucasian woman, I identify as female. That's my demographics. Yeah.

AP: Awesome. Where do you live? And what is it like to live there right now?

CY: I live in Eau Claire, I'm in the suites in the dorms. It's different than I would have ever expected because I'm a transfer student coming into college in a very different situation than it would normally be. So it's been a weird adjustment, not just because moving, but also because having to, you know, be precautious wearing your mask, you know, always washing your hands, like every time you go in and out of your room. Just stuff like that has been a little difficult. But yep, I'm in Eau Claire in the city and in the dorm rooms.

AP: Awesome. So, since you're a college student, how often do you get to go home or like are they even in Eau Claire?

CY: Yeah, so my family lives about three hours away in Ashland, Wisconsin, a little bit outwards, but Ashland, Wisconsin, basically, in the county at least. And I mean, at least once a month I get to go home. I have a friend here who drives me, I don't have my own car here so that makes it a little bit more difficult to- planning wise just to get home. But usually, like once a month so far has been how often.

AP: Okay, so how have the different cities handled it compared to Ashland [Wisconsin] and here?

CY: Ashland [Wisconsin] is a little bit smaller, we have about, last time I knew about 6000 people there [population of 7,963]. And, you know, we still have bars open there, we still have large gatherings, things like that, because it's not taken as seriously I think as in a city, where you have, have 10s of thousands of people here [population of Eau Claire, WI is 68,866]. So, it's, it's definitely taking a bit more serious here. I mean, they still have like the mandatory wearing masks. But I think the attitudes are definitely a little bit different.

AP: Alright. So, when you first learned about COVID, what were your thoughts about it? And how have your thoughts changed since then?

CY: First hearing about COVID, I'm a medical assisting student on top of a microbiology student, so, I look at things a lot through the medical professional view. So, the minute I heard it, I kind of took it seriously. I also have pre-existing conditions, so I was also a little bit worried about it. Yeah.

AP: Okay. [laughs] What issues have most concerned you about the COVID-19 pandemic?

CY: I think people taking it too politically, is just like a very big concern. I think either just taking it too politically or taking it not serious, or taking the precautions of the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], or the even County Health Department has put out. Just the attitude kind of as mostly concern.

AP: All right. So, what has been your employment situation during COVID-19?

CY: I actually was laid off because of an argument that I had at my previous work over mask wearing. So, I worked at a restaurant, which already was mandatory to wear masks at the time, but nobody was taking it seriously. That's why I first-hand kind of say that attitude is the problem, is my most concerning problem. But I was working in a restaurant kind of was told to be aware of people not wearing masks, and if I see it to say something by my manager, so when the owner's wife of the restaurant was walking around without a mask, I brought it up to her, she immediately got defensive, saying, you know, "I'm protesting, I'm not wearing a mask". Just because of her political views. I had nothing against that. But I just I have pre-existing health conditions. I've had cancer in the past, I have asthma, I don't have a very strong immune system.

So, it's a very big concern of me for people to be wearing masks. And so, I got an argument with her over this. I texted my manager who was her son, [laughs] and it's a family owned business, so they're very close, obviously. And he told me to just go home, there's nothing he was going to do about it. If I wanted something done about it, you know, I had to contact the police, and which I did, I contacted the health department of the county, I contacted OSHA because- Occupational Health and Safety and Health Administration- contacted them, asked them to file a report. I went through that, I didn't press any charges or anything, they got warned a fine. But that was a work situation. Since then I haven't been able to work, I haven't been able to find anything, which has been very difficult for me because I come from a low-income housing, so money is always an issue for me, but just not being able to find a job right now is the most concerning. And that's just my situation right now with employment. Yeah.

AP: Okay. Since you did have a job, what changes were made at, at the pizza place?

CY: Yeah. So, after I contacted the health department, they, they were warned a fine after that they were mandatory to wear masks, obviously. We were open to the public at the time, too, so that was another huge concern of mine. They were required to wear masks, they were required to have an inspection done by the county. And they, since then, from, from what I've heard, I am really not comfortable going there anymore, obviously, but from what I've heard, they are handling it a lot better now.

AP: That's good. All right. How has the COVID pandemic affected the employment of people you know, or in like, what ways has it affected them as well?

CY: My family personally being- Is the people I'm closest to, I really don't have many people here that I know the best. But my family in a small town, their employment really hasn't been affected because they have a lot of long-term jobs that they've been in. But there's been a few family friends I know of that have been laid off because of COVID with an indeterminable amount of time, they don't really know when they're going to be going back full time. My dad works in a town garage, where he only works with one other person, so they've just been- pretty much nothing has changed for them other than when you get in a truck together, you wear a mask. But, not a lot has changed. I know, like, nationally, obviously, there's been a lot of laid off people. But as far as personally knowing them, I really don't know a lot of people that have.

AP: Okay, so how has COVID-19 affected your family's day to day activities, or even just your college life?

CY: Yeah, definitely a change and a struggle for people that I know to be wearing masks. It's hard for all of us, [laughs] nobody really wants to but we have to. Taking extra precautions, I think is, just far as like not taking as many trips to the store, or if you do to make sure to stock up. Kind of a lot of people just kind of have like a constant stress in the back of their mind, I think, over this. So, a lot of people in my family mentally have not been handling it the best. And I really don't have a whole lot to say on that, my family really hasn't changed a whole lot concerning the pandemic, oddly enough. [laughs]

AP: [laughs] Okay. So, how has COVID-19 affected how you associate and communicate with friends and family?

CY: A lot more phone calls. [laughs] A lot more talking over the phone, a lot more video calls than I'm used to. I have- My mom and her fiancé live out in Washington, so I haven't been able to see them since the pandemic started. I was planning on spending Thanksgiving with them, I was planning on spending the spring with them, and that's all been canceled now because of, because of COVID. I'm sorry, what was the question? [laughs]

AP: [laughs] Your communication with the friends and family.

CY: Oh, it was, yeah. Just not being able to see my family. I have a lot of family out of states on the East coast and the West coast. And I haven't been able to see them at all since this started mostly. Yeah, a lot more phone calls a lot more video chats. [laughs]

AP: Alright. So, what has been the biggest challenge that you faced during the outbreak?

CY: Personally, for me, I have a lot of mental health problems going into this already. I have bipolar disorder, so being in a dorm room for most of my day is a little bit hard. I'm used to being pretty extroverted and spending a lot of time with people outside, but because of COVID I haven't been able to join many groups, or see many people outside of that other than my very close friend who is the only person I really get to see because we're afraid of spreading anything. But social wise you know, it's not been, been very easy. [laughs] Just mentally I think is the greatest struggle for me because doing online classes is not easy when you're just kind of stuck in a dorm room all day you're used to being in class and being able to ask your teacher anything whenever you want. So academically has also been a struggle for me.

AP: Okay.

CY: Those are the main things I think, yeah.

AP: Yeah, alright. So, what has your family and friends- What do you guys do for recreation now like games, books, anything really, that you had to change to be able to do?

CY: Oh, just when I do get to see my friend, a lot more binge-watching TV shows than we really ever would have. We're very used to going out and planning something which has not been able to happen being in the city. You know, family wise, I haven't been able to see a lot of family. Mostly just my dad. I haven't been able to, to see my grandma the most, which, she's also somebody I'm very close to. Because she's been tested quite a few times now, she's, she's not been doing the best. So, so family I haven't been able to spend much time with but when I do see my dad, we live out in the country so, like, our entertainment is going for a walk on our property away from people.[laughs] And, and yeah, not, not a whole lot has been happening recreationally. [laughs]

AP: Yeah, definitely. Okay. So how has COVID, the outbreak, affected your community? Like your school church? Any- I mean, your job was obviously affected, but how else was other parts of your life affected?

CY: Yeah, so I'm- What am I trying to say here? So, the school has obviously been taking a lot of precautions. Limiting the seats in the, in the cafeteria areas and things like that, on top of testing, which is now weekly. So that's definitely been a really odd change for us. Just, just being aware and taking more precautions. I personally am a fairly religious person I used to go to church, you know, every Sunday. When the pandemic started, that wasn't an option anymore. And it's, it's funny, because my church is only a tiny 20 people. [laughs] But we can't, we can't have our congregation together anymore, like that, which is very sad, because that's another community that I don't get to see very often anymore or talk to. But I'm just, uh, yeah- Just kind of a very sad separation that's happening, but we're trying to get through it the best we can.

AP: Alright, yeah. How are the people around you responding to COVID? [laughs]

CY: [laughs] My family's very upset about having to wear masks all the time they've been just, just, every time I talk, it's a complaint. It's like, Oh, I'm so sick of wearing masks. Every time you get out of the store it's the best feeling ever to take your mask off and, and things like that. Everybody's pretty stressed right now about the situation because I have such a large family. We usually have reunions like every six months, and we see each other and want to talk to each other all the time. We can't do that anymore. Even just graduation parties, birthdays, things like that, that you can't do anymore has been very sad and stressful. But everybody has been very optimistic about, about everything. Also, you know, we complain, but we don't go against anything, obviously. [laughs] But, it's a weird mix of just being really hopeful and optimistic about the vaccine happening and coming and, and just being patient and trying to keep yourself occupied too on top of things.

AP: Definitely, yeah. Have other students been reacting the same way as you have?

CY: Because I personally just don't have a very large community here to- of people that I know, I really don't [laughs] don't know. The people that I do know, here have been, been just very patient and just taking the same precautions as everybody else.

AP: Okay, yeah. How- Have you seen people change their opinions and like, like their relation- like how they respond to the pandemic? Like since March till now?

CY: Yeah, I would say so. I mean, in the small, small town that I live in, everybody at first was just like, this isn't- This is going to fade away. Even my, my medical assisting teacher who was a nurse for 20 odd years and a medical assistant for 15 years, she was even like, "we don't need to worry about this right now" at the beginning of March when, when it was happening. She was really only worried by this. "We're gonna be back in class in a few weeks, we're gonna do great." And you know that attitude change the more we got news our- the more we got news about it and, and the more we, we found out about it, and how many cases we had the United States. So, I think it's just been taking time for everybody to take it seriously. I think at this point, a majority

of the people have, have been, you know, taking everything very seriously and taking those steps towards preventing spread.

AP: Yeah, okay. Do you happen to know anyone who has gotten sick with COVID?

CY: I have family friends out in the country that have been. They've been affected a lot by it. It's mostly older people that I know who one of them has now passed away within the last week I've heard. And that's very heartbreaking. It just kind of grounds you on how serious everything is, right now and how we should be taking those steps.

AP: Definitely. In what ways do you think COVID has affected people's mental and physical health?

CY: A lot. [laughs] That's a really good question. A lot, as somebody, personally, who struggles with bipolar disorder, depression, you know, anxiety, it's really difficult to be indoors for this amount of time. It's, it's so important to just try to keep yourself preoccupied whether it's with like, your schoolwork or, or you know, like games and stuff in your dorm room. It's really hard mentally for a lot of us but physically, I think you know, it's also a struggle just being in your, your room and in your house for so long. You don't really- You kind of give up on, on your exercise daily. It's just so easy to put it off until the next day, because you're like, I'm at home, I have so much time now. But then your day goes by because you're binge watching something or you're, you are staying so preoccupied that you just kind of kind of glaze right over it. So, I think both have been affected quite a lot by, by this pandemic.

AP: Okay, yeah. So, what have been your primary news sources about the pandemic?

CY: I get a lot of news online, which probably is not a good thing. I get, I get a lot of news online, but for the most part, if I'm genuinely like, looking into something, like wondering what the actual facts are, I look on Political a lot, or I'll glaze over CNN [Cable News Network], that's kind of biased, but I get a lot of pop ups from them. But mostly online, whether it's social media, and then I look into it or what, what else.

AP: Okay, yeah. Have the news- Do you rely on the news? Or like, do you have like- Do you avoid certain sources?

CY: I try to avoid sources that I think are biased. I think like Fox News, obviously, CNN are- have both very specific political sides that they like to cover. So, I try to avoid them the best I can. I found- I, I really don't look up a lot of news, [laughs] which isn't the best thing to do. But sometimes I try to avoid it so, so I think just, just staying clear of mostly those two is kind of what I look for. [laughs]

AP: Yeah. All right. Has your school tried to inform you or like do they have a way to inform you of how many cases there are and like how it's going in the town?

CY: Yeah, so UW Eau Claire, we have the COVID dashboard which gets updated daily. It's a, it's a little behind it, it'll show you the day before but, but it does show you I think the most recent

cases on campus at least, I can't speak for off campus if they're really including that or not. But on campus at least I think they're doing an okay job about showing those on the dashboard. Yeah.

AP: Okay. So, what has the school done to- I'm sorry, to try to prevent it? To prevent the outbreak of it, the spreading of it, I guess?

CY: So, so we've- They've definitely closed down a lot of the groups and organizations that are bigger we have normally like the Blu's Organization Bash, which I was very excited for coming in as a new student, but they had to cancel it, they had to put it online. And a lot of the activities and stuff that were happening for Halloween I know were very focused on social distancing or, or moved to online. And they have done, like I said, kind of closing down the cafeteria area, in Davies obviously moving tables and stuff apart taking some away. And just the weekly testing now. And I think that's kind of all I can say on that. [laughs]

AP: [laughs] Yeah, that's great. So, how have leaders and government officials in your community responded to the outbreak?

CY: Our- That's a good question, because I don't think I can answer it the best. [laughs] But, our governor has definitely tried to take precautions, I think, towards this. Our public health department is doing really well in and taking really good precautions against everything that's going on. They put out a lot of news pretty quickly about what's going on in the community, I think, which is nice. I- Yeah, I really can't say a whole lot about that. I'm sorry.

AP: Okay, well, I don't know if you can really answer this one then either, but do you have thoughts on how the local state or federal leaders are responding to the crisis?

CY: I personally, being on campus and things like that, think that maybe moving to an online format would be nice. I'm already all online, I'm just staying in the dorm rooms now pretty much. That's just my personal opinion, everybody's going to be different, obviously. But, but I think that one step we could make is maybe moving the universities to online in Wisconsin again, seeing as we are hitting another second wave of everything.

AP: Definitely, yeah. So, knowing what you know, and you know that certain individuals and communities and how the government's responding, how do you think, like- What do you have in mind for what will happen in the future?

CY: In the future, I mean, everybody is just kind of- We've been hearing news about this vaccine so, I think everybody's starting to take things a little less serious, because they're like, oh, we're almost there, we're rounding the corner. When in reality, you know, they're, they're still in testing, and they're still doing a whole lot. In the future I think it might just become a little less serious in the United States because of that unfortunately. I- Yeah, I guess I really don't know what the future holds for us here.

AP: Okay. [laughs] I don't have any more questions. [laughs] It was really great. Do you have any other things that you'd want to talk about? Anything that I haven't asked you about?

CY: You know, as a medical student, I just, I think that everybody should be wearing their masks, you know, social distancing, trying to stay away from large groups, if you can. Staying in your room, unfortunately, is one of the best ways to do it. I know it sucks, but it is. Really, I don't have much else to say on that. You know, the CDC, and the- and your public health department gives, gives you the best news, no matter what source, those are definitely the two you can rely on. [laughs] That's about all, I really don't have a whole lot else to say. I'm sorry about that.

AP: No, that's all right. Thank you. If you just want to state your name again, and we'll be good.

CY: Yeah, I'm Chloe Ylitalo. Thank you for the opportunity of having me on this interview. Thank you.

AP: Yes. Thank you very much.