

Transcript of Oral History Interview with J. Michael Bailey

Interviewee: J. Michael Bailey

Interviewer: Clinton Roberts

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Location (Interviewee): Ogden, Utah

Location (Interviewer): Blanchard, Oklahoma

Transcriber: Clinton Roberts

Abstract: J. Michael Bailey grew up in Ogden, Utah. He spent 20 years in the performing arts as an actor, director, writer, and musician before becoming a secondary English teacher in Ogden. He is married and has six children. As a father and husband, he offers his feelings about seeking recreation for his children and the tension it causes within the home to be quarantined together. J. Michael shares his thoughts on the coronavirus affecting his job as a teacher at a title one school and the difficulties of distance learning for his students. He also touches upon the overwhelming nature of receiving informative and necessary news during this time period. He further adds insights into being sick and being tested for COVID-19, as well as the mental and physical health strains this causes. J. Michael reflects upon how his community has been divided along lines of politics and how this has caused him to question the role of leadership at the different levels of government.

Clinton Roberts 0:00

This is Clinton Roberts of Arizona State University HST580 for The Journal of the Plague Year archive. Today is July 11, 2020. And I'm conducting a phone interview with J. Michael Bailey. J. Michael will be talking about his experiences of living during the COVID-19 [coronavirus 2019] pandemic and the effects it's had on those typically employed in the performing arts industry. J. Michael, what are the primary things you do on a day to day basis?

J. Michael Bailey 0:33

Oh, primary day to day right now I, I most of the time student, in grad, grad school's pretty much taken control here on this for me. Typically, during the year, I am, I am an English teacher. I teach secondary English at, at a junior high school here Ogden, Utah.

Clinton Roberts 0:51

Okay. During your day to day life, during the last few months, when did you first learn about COVID-19? What were your thoughts about it?

J. Michael Bailey 1:05

As I first learned about it, I was teaching at the time. So, it was kind of a big deal. We were a little bit worried about what would go on with not only our employment but being, you know, locked in doors with, you know, 35 plus kids in each classroom that made us a little bit nervous. Really the hearing—I heard about COVID for the first time, like most of us did on the news. And so, my concerns—but it really spawned more concern for, for the underlying health issues that I had, and being able to perform my job in an adequate manner to take care of my family. That's the biggest concern I had.

Clinton Roberts 1:44

Well, how have your thoughts changed since then, like as you've heard more things and and things have kind of developed what How have your thoughts changed?

J. Michael Bailey 1:54

I'll be honest, I think it's, it's gotten worse. [laughs] I, I, I think I feel like my, my concerns have deepened over time. The more we know about the virus, somewhat we know about how its transmitted and, and, and how it affects the human body, over time, even for those who have, quote unquote, you know recovered. My concern has deepened, because it, it seems as if, I don't know—I, I think that sometimes the concerns of those who, who want to be responsible and who are really concerned with our fellow man and our families aren't taking it seriously. But as time goes on, it seems that there's, there's a growing divide between those who do and those who don't take it seriously. So, my concerns are more for, for the safety of my family and those around me, in the face of having to deal with people who are not taking the precautions necessary to reduce the amount of transmission that's occurring.

Clinton Roberts 3:02

As far as COVID-19, how has it affected your job?

J. Michael Bailey 3:08

It affected it pretty big. I mean—I, I, you know, I, I ended up teaching from home, like most did. So, we used online platforms, which for my, my school's a title one school, so, you know, roughly 70% of the kids had access to the internet. And it was spotty, at that, for some of those. Most of them did not have computers at home that were, were able to be used to access online instructions. So, the scramble to provide them with the technology, as well as access to use that technology, was pretty big. You know, I, I, I think the lack of preparation, on behalf of districts and states as well as the education system in general, really plagued the outcomes of, of 2020 when it comes to school. So, the effects on teachers were pretty huge. It affected me in a great way because I felt like I actually worked more when I was working from home than I did when I was in the classroom, which was a pretty big deal because I thought I worked really hard when I was there. But I, I found that it put a lot of undue pressure upon teachers, students, and, and parents to be teachers in their home. So, it altered my job quite considerably.

Clinton Roberts 4:27

As far as, like COVID-19 pandemic, has it affected any of the people that you know, like their employment? And in what ways have you seen the economy, in general, change around employment of other people?

J. Michael Bailey 4:40

Right, right. I have a huge interest in the performing arts. I, I, in fact, I spent 20 years of my professional life as a professional actor, director, writer, musician. So, I, I kind of surrounded myself with that demographic of people. Now that's, that's specific demographic is, is difficult to maintain steady income anyway. It's that feast or famine thing they talk about. Some years are really, really great. Other years are very lean. But with the with the outbreak of COVID-19, you know, I found that—luckily, I was out of that industry by time this hit. But I would say 98, 99% of the people, I know in the industry, have taken a huge hit, when it comes to income and stability. You know, it's affecting them in ways that I can't even imagine. And it's not only the mental

health of being locked down, and like all of us are, but it's also dealing with the financial end, not having income come in, not being able to get access to unemployment income because of the sheer magnitude of people applying for it. I mean, most of my friends are in Chicago or New York where there's millions of people applying for these things. So, you know, it has drastically affected those people that I know whether in my circle of influence or friends that are still in the performing arts industry. It's taken a huge hit and an altered life for, for most, if not all of them.

Clinton Roberts 6:12

As far as your, your personal family, how has COVID-19 affected you and your family's day to day activities?

J. Michael Bailey 6:20

Well, we're all still alive, which is a good thing. At the same time, you know, it's tough living under the same roof 24/7 and, and having to deal with kids who don't quite understand that they can't go play with their friends. They can't go out and just go to the, you know, the swimming pool or to a waterpark, the Lagoon Amusement Park or any of these other activities they're used to doing, especially during the summer months. We've had to really restrict them doing just because of the social distancing guidelines and, and the threat of infection. So really, you know, we we've come closer together as a family, I think, but also the tension separates us in the home because we're constantly around each other and there's no real release. There's no real ability to get out and, and experience the things that they normally would. So sometimes tempers tense and flair more than we'd like them to be in the home. The kids don't quite understand. And it does affect me in my life as well, because you know, we're able to get out and get some relief as well. So, it has altered the way we live our life for sure. Having to, you know, scrub groceries down when we bring them home, having take-out instead sitting down at a restaurant or not being able to go to the movies, things like that. They make a dent in your social lives as a family, which also makes a dent in the emotional capacity to deal with things.

Clinton Roberts 7:47

What are some of the things that you and your family have done as recreation, like an alternative thing that you've done during this time to kind of use as entertainment?

J. Michael Bailey 7:59

Right, right. I, you know, I, I purchased a bunch of camping gear. [laughs] And so we've gone camping and stuff, gone outdoors, went back and into places where there's not a lot of folks and have an opportunity to, you know, build a fire, set up a tent and explore the outdoors a little bit more, which is good. It's something that we've wanted to do for the last few years but we—this has kind of forced us to, to center ourselves on things that we can do. And that's one of them. We have been able to, taking drives out to the bird refuge, you know, movie parties at home and baking our own pizzas at home, things like that. Throwing the ball in the backyard, bike rides, just cuddling on on the couch, whatever it may be. There's you know, it it's forced us to do activities and recreation that are more involved with just the family in mind.

Clinton Roberts 8:52

How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected your community? Have you have you noticed changes in your local community?

J. Michael Bailey 9:01

A lot. A lot. You know, I mean, I think I think it starts to reveal and underline divisions that you didn't see before. Because we're, we're pretty divided here there's either, either wearing a mask and, and are following guidelines or you think it's a hoax and you refuse to wear a mask, it infringes on your rights and that sets a pretty, you know—I mean, it goes all across the country. But here in this community, particularly, it's been a pretty strong issue, pretty hard line between divisions of people here. So, it makes it difficult because we have had some outbreaks here in this area and largely due to people who just don't follow some of the guidelines. So, there creates frustration between neighbors. Things you have to start understanding that you have to start evaluating your own way of, of looking at people not judging and starting to understand them. But at the same time, the divisions have been pretty huge. I mean, I know that the businesses in this area had taken a huge hit. We have a lot of eating, eating establishments here. We also have a lot of consultation businesses and, and arts organizations and things like that which require large groupings and things. They they've had shut their doors, just for the mere fact that they cannot get around the social distancing guidelines. So, it's become a real issue of the community. Luckily, I think a lot of the community benefits, just demographically, from the jobs they have—unemployment has been an issue, but the lack of income hasn't been as big of an issue because we have churches involved to help people here. So, a lot of the churches have stepped-up to help people with income loss and things of that nature, which has been nice. But nonetheless, it is not like any other moderately—it's not a huge populated town, but it's not a, a, a rural town either. So, we're definitely a suburban atmosphere here. And, and it's affected us, but not as greatly as some of the other more metropolitan areas, the loss of income.

Clinton Roberts 11:18

Have you or anybody you know, gotten sick during the COVID-19 outbreak and what has been your experience in responding to the sickness?

J. Michael Bailey 11:27

Oh my goodness, yeah, I've had colleagues pass away during—from the pandemic. I've had a mentor, one of the first directors I ever worked with when I was coming up in in the performing arts in the the theatre industry. He struggled with COVID for, you know, 70, 80 days before he passed away. And his family was here and he was in Michigan. So, it was a rather hard, difficult last 70 days for that family. They're still grappling with the loss and not being able to be there with dad when he passed away and had to postpone the funeral for, you know, 20, 30 days afterwards and stuff like that because of contagion. So, it, it, it has hit it has hit friends of mine pretty hard. I have friends of mine in New York City because the industry is so large there with performing arts. It's kind of the major hub and being the way New York has been hit by this outbreak—I have friends who have been infected and, and had been through various stages of, of how the virus has actually affected or impacted their life. I have colleagues of mine who have passed away, again besides mentors, and so you know, people who have had the disease for over 90 days have passed away. So, I myself, and you know, I've tested a couple times and I tested negative the last time. But for three weeks, I had symptoms that were, were pretty severe at times that came and, and went with nausea, and body aches, and intense joint pain, and fevers, and coughs, and inability to roll out of bed because I just didn't have the energy. My cognitive abilities to remember things and understand things changed considerably. My eyesight changed considerably. So unfortunately, I think mine was a, a false negative. Luckily, I didn't

end up in hospitalization, but it was a long road for three and a half weeks or so. I still have issues it's a day-to-day situation with myself and then trying to, to function with some of the—some symptoms i've, i've had to endure. But i've been lucky because mine have been minor compared to a lot of my friends and what they've been dealing with.

Clinton Roberts 13:53

Besides, you know, the people who actually suffered with COVID-19, in what ways do you think that COVID-19 is affecting people's mental or physical health in general, like you know, just people who have to live with the, the pandemic and all the, the things that we do from day to day, how is that affecting their mental and physical health even if they didn't get COVID-19 themselves?

J. Michael Bailey 14:18

Well, I think I think that's a good question. I, I think, really, I think that [sighs] fear is a crippling thing. And I think with the COVID situation, we, we don't know a lot about it still. And the more we come to know about it, the more we realize how devastating it can be, which increases that fear. So, it's the fear of the fear of not knowing but it's also the fear of once we know, are we going to get infected by it? Is it going to infect us the way they say it's going to affect us? So, I, I think that those factors of fear really play on a person's mentality and their mental state or emotional state. The, the fact that people are losing jobs or without income also plays on the stresses and the mental health of the individual and it affects all, all through the family. So, I think, you know, just as devastating as the physical effects have been from COVID, the emotional and mental health aspect of the disease is just intense. I noticed the, the trend in mine, for my anxiety and my clinical depression that I've suffered with over the years. I mean, it's had been heightened extremely by this this this mess that we're in. And, and especially when we see the way it's been handled, and by I mean, there's lots of different opinions on that. My, my opinion is it's been handled really poorly in the United States. And because of that, I think it has also increased anger, which increases the, the problems with mental health. There's, there's a sense of anger that that people haven't taken, responsibility or, or leadership with the responsibility they should. And so, I, I, I think all those factors have contributed either people who have COVID or do not. It's affecting everyone that way. It's also affected people who are neighbors saying, "this is a hoax, this is this is ridiculous, why aren't we opening up." So, the anger there is also affecting people. So, you first, you know, kind of this this outreaching hand of, of, of reasons, or tentacles of reasons, that people affected mentally and, and emotionally by just the presence of this pandemic in general.

Clinton Roberts 16:36

As we've increasingly spent more time isolated in our homes, a big source of information is what we, we seek in the news to find out what's going on in the world around us. What have been your primary sources for gathering news during the pandemic?

J. Michael Bailey 16:24

I've paid attention to the CDC [Center for Disease Control] and the World Health Organization. I've paid attention to CNN [Cable News Network] and MSNBC [Microsoft National Broadcasting Company]. I've paid attention largely to NPR [National Public Radio] and PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] news outlets, because I think they're a little bit more simpler. And so, I think, think that that, you know, and they, they may be more accurate. They're challenging facts

instead of a skewed version of them. But I have, you know, I mean, I've even looked at Fox News and some of the other outlets just to get a different—a slant on what's going on. Of, of course, those versions—those that ventures into those, those outlets have just convinced me more than I should never do it again. But I, I think that's part of the problem with the mental health you just mentioned a minute ago is because we have such diverse news outlets or media outlets right now that are skewed by partisan beliefs and ideologies instead of just getting news. So oftentimes, I think that's a point of confusion whether wear a mask or not wear a mask, whether it helps or doesn't help, you know, whether the numbers are correct or whether there skewed. You know, doctors get more money for, for giving that diagnoses on, on COVID patients versus non-diagnoses. Yeah, so there's this this this slew of, of news that you kind of have to sift through. So, my, my truth in the news outlets has been more for—really focused on, on those outlets like, like PBS and NPR who, who, who are known for getting the information as they receive it and instead of skewing it.

Clinton Roberts 18:31

What do you think are some of the important issues that the media may or may not be covering? Have you noticed any stories that you kind of follow that you wish you would have heard more about or that you didn't see as much as you thought you should have seen?

J. Michael Bailey 18:47

That's a good question. I think we've been—I think we've been barraged by a lot of stuff. You know, I think there may be sometimes too much. Because I think I think maybe we can we can look at an issue and see five different spins on it. And oftentimes, I think that's as contributory to why we feel the way we do mentally and emotionally. So, your question kind of addresses something that's kind of a, a hot button for me, but I think that oftentimes the media is looking for sensation instead for an accurate representation. At the same time, I also think that there's a lot of media outlets and, and journalists who are trying to—really trying to report in an honest manner to help the situation. So, the often the times, we receive—it requires us to look at the information they're receiving and decide whether that is important information or whether we need more of it or, or less of it. You know, to answer your question, I, I don't know. I really think we've been barrage barraged with such, such great amounts of information. You know, I would love to hear more about the success stories of people recovering. But at the same time, the more we hear about success stories about people recovering in the more than people who don't take it seriously already, you know, loosen the reins a little bit more and, and allow themselves to take it even less serious than they did before. So, you know, I think it's important. I think it's really important to talk about the devastation of this disease and not leave those to silences where people figure it out on their own. And, you know, which unfortunately most are. But I, I found because of these media outlets, you know, unless you're really been touched in your own personal life by this—by the disease somehow, it makes it really difficult to understand the magnitude of it.

Clinton Roberts 20:46

And as kind of a final question here, I, I, I would like to know. Knowing what you know now, what do you think—

J. Michael Bailey 20:54

Yes.

Clinton Roberts 20:54

-that individuals, communities, or governments need to keep in mind in the future? How, how would you want them to look back and remember this time and what can we learn from it?

J. Michael Bailey 21:04

Leadership, leadership, leadership. I think what we have learned is that leadership is, is essential in times like these. I was just I was just watching an interview last night with an author who has recently written a book about the presidency being the hardest job on the planet. But one of the key points he made was that one of the, the, the key jobs or responsibilities of the President of the United States is to, in times of crisis, in times of hardship or pain, stress, danger, his job is to be that evening out mechanism that that comforting voice to bring people together and to help them strategically endure the process while finding solutions that are more positive. And unfortunately, in this scenario, I do not feel like we have seen any of that from a majority of our state leaders and certainly from our, from our presidential administration. So, I think what needs to be learned is that leadership is not only key for economics and trade and foreign relations, but it's key to helping domestic issues like this, like pandemics, being prepared, not getting rid of things that former presidents have put together to prepare for pandemics just because they have input on it. It's essential that we vote people in that will take care of us not only in foreign relations and the protection from military dangers, but also the domestic things we face here as normal everyday citizens, pandemics being one of them. If we were not prepared for these things, then it, it devastates all other aspects and of, of the government and then life as an American. So, preparation and leadership are probably the two biggest things take away from this one for me.

Clinton Roberts 22:57

J. Michael, I sure do appreciate your time. And I, I appreciate the, the amount of information that you were able to share with us today. Is there anything else that you felt like we should have covered that you would like to add?

J. Michael Bailey 23:10

No, just stay safe. Just stay safe. Wear your mask. You know, listen to the listen to the things that they're telling us. Because it's, it's crucial that in this day and age when science seems to be challenged by ignorance that we actually listen to voices who, who really have our best interests at, at heart, which is keeping ourselves safe. So just do what's required and keep each other safe. That's our responsibility.

Clinton Roberts 23:36

Thank you so much, J. Michael.

J. Michael Bailey 23:38

Thanks.