

Transcript of Oral History of Amanda Harding

Interviewee: Amanda Harding

Interviewer: Gabe Olson

Date: May 6, 2021

Location of interview: Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Abstract: Amanda Harding was UW-Eau Claire student studying abroad in Italy during the time of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interview, she discusses her experiences with the pandemic as a Midwesterner stranded abroad, as well as her personal opinions regarding the pandemic in general. She also discusses some of the differences in the handling of the pandemic she experienced abroad, compared with what she has experience in Eau Claire. She also talks of the rising politicization because of the pandemic and how she has learned to deal with it.

Gabe Olson 0:01

Hello, today is May 6, 2021 at 12:04 PM. For statistics, there are currently reported 32,313,016 COVID cases in the United States with 575,491 deaths. And in Wisconsin, there are 600,936 cases with 6,863 deaths. That's— Wisconsin currently has a vaccination percentage of 37% of the population fully vaccinated and 46.4% with at least their first dose. With that out of the way, could you please state your name and age for the record? And if you don't mind, also providing demographic information with race, ethnicity and gender?

Amanda Harding 0:59

Yeah, Amanda Harding is my name. I'm 22 years old. I'm a female. Um, I am Caucasian. Yeah.

Gabe Olson 1:10

Okay. And Amanda, how do you spend your time your time? Do you work? Do you go to school? What do you do?

Amanda Harding 1:15

Full time student.

Gabe Olson 1:16

Full time student. Okay. Where at?

Amanda Harding 1:19

University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire.

Gabe Olson 1:21

Okay, and what do you study?

Amanda Harding 1:23

I study psychology.

Gabe Olson 1:25

Okay, when- What do you like— What would you want to do that with that in the future?

Amanda Harding 1:30

I'm actually, well, I graduate in about a week and then I'll be getting my Master's for Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Gabe Olson 1:37

Okay, so you're going to grad school?

Amanda Harding 1:38

Yes.

Gabe Olson 1:39

Congratulations.

Amanda Harding 1:41

Thank you.

Gabe Olson 1:42

All right. And so you live in Eau Claire?

Amanda Harding 1:45

Yes, I do.

Gabe Olson 1:47

Okay, and what is it like living in Eau Claire?

Amanda Harding 1:50

It's been a lot of fun. I'm surrounded by—the demographic is a lot of college students, so it makes it fun, because you're around a lot of people that are the same age.

Gabe Olson 2:01

Okay, and when you learned about the COVID-19, pan—COVID-19 how have, if they have at all, how have your thoughts on it changed since you learned about it until now?

Amanda Harding 2:17

It's changed in a lot of ways I would say. I mean, I think for a lot of people, and for myself included when I first heard about it, um, maybe we didn't think it was as big of a deal as it was, or maybe we thought that it would be a short-term thing, maybe like a couple weeks, maybe a couple months. But then it just continued going on and on. And so now we're looking at, like, over a year, and there'll be a year and a half soon, so.

Gabe Olson 2:41

Do you see any end in sight in the near future?

Amanda Harding 2:46

I think what the rollout of the vaccines, I'm hopeful that come fall, things will be fairly, like almost 100% back to normal. I'm not sure about mask mandates yet, and what people are going to do about that. I'm hopeful that we don't have to wear them anymore, but I don't know.

Gabe Olson 3:04

And what do you think the things about the pandemic have most concerned you throughout the past year and a half?

Amanda Harding 3:13

I think the biggest thing is that it's been very politicized. And like just both like ends of the spectrum. And so I think that's concerning, because you don't always know when information is going to be reliable. Um, another thing is just like, there's always new information coming out. And so just like keeping up to date with that, and knowing what's happening, but not getting overwhelmed, and especially like being in the psychology field and in the mental health field eventually, I just know, there's a lot of burnout happening and I see it with literally everyone from like parents to employees to students specifically. So I'm not quite sure like, I'm concerned about the upcoming like, I don't know what people are calling it, I think like the, like quarantine anxiety or other things like that, that are like resulting with this

Gabe Olson 4:02

Okay, And and you mentioned problems in mental health. Do you feel that this pandemic has, from a psychological perspective caused problems with people's mental health in any way?

Amanda Harding 4:17

I mean, absolutely, I for a good—I know with myself too, specifically—but for a good, like that beginning like three, four months, where everyone was like quarantining at home to themselves, just that isolation is not good for us. And I know for me, I don't know if I should like get into this now with being like in Italy—

Gabe Olson 4:38

Go ahead.

Amanda Harding 4:39

...and having to come home. Okay, so I studied abroad in Italy in the spring of 2020. And I had to get sent home obviously, so I was there for about a month and a half. And I got sent back home, and in my mind, I was just like, you know what, it'll be okay. I'll go home and I can just wait the two weeks quarantine and then I can see my friends like it'll be okay like— But then I went home, and then after those two weeks, Wisconsin all of the sudden went under mandate. So, I went what felt like a really long time having like, not seen a lot of people or any friends, and then just having that transition too from being in a foreign country to being back in Wisconsin, was pretty difficult for my mental health personally, and I know it was for all the study abroad students that I talked to. That's something that I have a different perspective on, because I was abroad in Europe when I happened.

Gabe Olson 5:26

Yeah.

Amanda Harding 5:27

Versus being at home with like, family and friends when it's happening.

Gabe Olson 5:31

I think I think people sometimes forget that you were in Italy. Italy was a hotspot for the pandemic at the time it was first coming out, and do you think maybe people looked at you differently when you came back in some way?

Amanda Harding 5:46

Absolutely. I came back and I remember wanting to after my two weeks, like maybe see a friend or something and they were like, really hesitant to but then also, I felt like I had different information being in Italy than I did in America. Like we were getting information faster with our news. So that was super interesting. I also feel like too when I was in Italy, I kind of had more anxiety earlier on about it, because I was like getting this information about like, there's this case in Rome of like a couple who has COVID or because we were all kind of aware of COVID and being in China, you know, like for December and a little bit of January, but then obviously come February came in Italy. And so just getting that information constantly from like the What was it? It was from the consulate, the American consulate in Italy about just like, what was happening and how many people were getting it, and like where and yeah, it was just anxiety inducing. [chuckles]

Gabe Olson 6:47

Yes, I understand that. And how can you compare your experiences with COVID in Italy with your experiences here in Eau Claire?

Amanda Harding 7:00

Hmm, that's a tough question. Um, well, when I was in Italy, everything was very uncertain at the time. Um, I was actually in Milan, um, the weekend COVID hit Milan. And that's where the big outbreak happened. So like, all I can say about that experience is that I got on the train I got into Milan on Friday, everything was fine. But then by Sunday morning, when we are getting back on the train to go back to Florence, masks were sold out everywhere in Milan, um, every single new station was broadcasting about the number of people who had it and like the deaths that were already starting. And at this point, the cruise ship, I forget what it was called, like the pearl or something, maybe that one cruise ship that was coming to America that's been like held for like 10 days, like that was being broadcast. So, at the time, everything was really uncertain. I remember talking to my roommate to be like, when we get back to Florence, we need to find the nearest pharmacy, and we need to get masks immediately. Like I don't know what's happening, none of us know what's going on. We're currently in a foreign country like we don't really know the healthcare system here as much like we need to just like be on top of our stuff. And so that was like a scary a little bit because even professors and all this going on one of my professors was a lot older, and she expressed her concerns. And she started wearing a mask. And she felt so guilty wearing a mask around us for like that week, because at this time mask was not normal. Right? She was like, "I'm so sorry, I'm not trying to offend anyone I just don't

know what's going on. Like, I'm really like, older and I don't want to risk it for my husband.” Which is funny to think about now because now it's just like the norm for everyone to wear masks. No one feels guilty. It's actually the opposite. Like if you're not wearing a mask, you feel guilty. And so like with being an Eau Claire, and just as time has like changed, or, gone on... I feel like like, like we have more answers now. And there's more like protocols put in place. And I think that's like a big difference from when we first started to now and like my experience in Italy to now.

Gabe Olson 8:58

Okay, so you don't see a difference in location, but more as more experiences getting different. So, experiences with COVID as time goes on, people shift their perspectives.

Amanda Harding 9:12

Actually, yeah, that's a good way to say I would say that.

Gabe Olson 9:16

Okay, now, are you currently employed in any way?

Amanda Harding 9:19

Not currently no.

Gabe Olson 9:21

Okay. And were you employed when the pandemic came out?

Amanda Harding 9:24

I was yes.

Gabe Olson 9:26

And did the pandemic affect your job in any way?

Amanda Harding 9:30

Actually, weirdly enough people. Well, yes, it did affect it. And it affected it in a positive way for my summer job that I do. So, I work with like a family-owned business. And it's basically just like a factory job and we make industrial sized curtains. And my company was able to—the, the owner of it was able to come up with, um, one of those like plexi-glass like, standing like dividers that we now have everywhere at like stores that can hang or be put in restaurants. And so, they like, we're able to like, rush that out get that like patterned, like handled. So as a result, there was like an increase in like them hiring employees because we were able to find a way to use our company to make something that's helpful for the current pandemic.

Gabe Olson 10:16

Okay. Interesting. Nice. And let's see, do you do have any concerns? As far as employment goes with the pandemic, or I guess maybe in your case, do you have any concern concerns in your future, as a grad student with the—regarding the pandemic?

Amanda Harding 10:36

A little bit, I'm hopeful that come in the fall and spring, things start to get back to normal. But in the meantime, I know, with my graduate program, a lot of things are very hands on. And like with being like a counselor, like there's something about being face-to-face with your client versus being like, just through the screen. And so I'm not fully sure like how we're going to do like my future internship and practicums. Unless if we're able to be in the room and wear masks, I'm not sure. I think things like that have been really different. And, like, very interesting for people to handle and deal with.

Gabe Olson 11:12

Okay. And how has the pandemic affected people, you know, as far as family or friends? Have people gotten it that you know?

Amanda Harding 11:26

Yeah, a lot of people that I know, a lot of my family members actually have gotten COVID. I haven't. But it's, it's been difficult. I think something I think about is just like the politicizing of it for start, like, not to bring that back. But I think that's really difficult because everyone kind of has different opinions and families, and it just heightens. And obviously, this is happening during the election year. So like, that's another thing to add on top of it. But I think I've noticed some people are a lot more fearful about things. I know, some people who've, like, never left their house until they were fully vaccinated. And personally, I couldn't imagine going a full year not even getting like dinner, or just running to the grocery store and being inside. Of course, it's everyone's own comfort level. Like that's something I've like really learned to deal with, like, everyone has a comfort level, and like people need to do what's comfortable for them. And no one can tell someone else what that is. But I've noticed that with like professors, or maybe some other people, but then there's the other side, where I've noticed people are more, I mean people still care, but they're more trusting or worthy, or their more like, maybe not as afraid to like continue living "their day to day life". Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing is up to that person to decide.

Gabe Olson 12:49

Yes, understandable. And how have you adapted to live in, in the pandemic? Have your ways of living changed at all?

Amanda Harding 13:00

During the beginning of it, and definitely during like that summer of 2020, I would say, was the biggest like, change just, staying in a lot more and spending a lot more time with just like my immediate family, which was really nice. Yeah, I would say I've always been a very, like, clean person. So, for me, nothing has changed, I actually prefer the amount of cleaning that's been happening, or like, we're wiping down the buses or anything public. Like I've always been very, on top of like, using my own like things or like, always wash my hands before and after grocery shopping and whatnot.

Gabe Olson 13:33

Yeah, you're probably happier with people being more clean around you.

Amanda Harding 13:37

I personally, am like, we're wiping down our tables and our desks. And I'm like, I don't know when these were last cleaned. Like, I've always been before this. Um, so otherwise, I feel like with being in college, I guess the biggest thing too, though, is just like lack of a social, like setting our life that has honestly been very difficult. And especially coming from such a high in Italy, right? Like, that was so much so much fun. And then coming back, it was just like, really difficult. And—

Gabe Olson 14:06

Yeah, go ahead. Sorry.

Amanda Harding 14:08

No, you're good. And so just like, even like right now, like, obviously, like I'm of age, and like we'd go out to the bars or we'd go out and get dinner, we'd go and do things and it's just like, was very limited, at least in the fall for sure. Um, which is difficult because you start to not hang out with certain people that you were like class friends with that you would normally like meet out in social settings. And so in that way, I don't think connections are made as easily. Oh, and the biggest one that I've struggled with too, especially as like a senior is I was—this is kind of the year where I would really get to know professors at a deeper level. And I really struggled to do that which made applying for grad schools a bit difficult because I wasn't as close with certain professors because there was just that, like disconnect not being able to just show up in their office hours or just talk to them after class in person, you know?

Gabe Olson 14:56

Yeah, and do you feel like there was a similar disconnect with what you experienced in Italy? Or?

Amanda Harding 15:04

A little bit, but not as much, because unfortunately, I left about two or three weeks after, like, COVID kind of hit Italy. So for one of the—

Gabe Olson 15:16

Okay, and how much time did you get to spend there in total then?

Amanda Harding 15:19

In total, it was about a month and two weeks. And I was supposed to be there for four months. So...

Gabe Olson 15:24

So, it got cut pretty short.

Amanda Harding 15:26

Yeah.

Gabe Olson 15:26

That must have been devastating.

Amanda Harding 15:29

Yeah, it was, it was really, really difficult. Especially because at that point, I had just solidified like my friendships and understanding the city and like, where everything was. And so I got like an email actually at like, 3AM, Italy time, like saying that I had to get sent home. And then that was very anxiety inducing, too, because, um, we, they're like, you need to find a plane ride, like, immediately do what you can. And like, it was just a hassle. It was a lot but, yeah.

Gabe Olson 16:00

Did they help you at all in trying to get back or trying to help get your classes finished?

Amanda Harding 16:08

It was really difficult, like, not really, because at least the institute that I was in Italy, they had never done anything online ever, like throughout all their years. And so like making classes go from like in-person to online was a super difficult transition for them. I remember like not hearing about it for two more weeks after having been back home in Wisconsin. And then Eau Claire did a pretty decent job. They like offered to like fund you back money for your plane ride home. If you couldn't get it, like changed with no fee. But they didn't help you with that. So it was kind of up to me to call my parents and be like, I can't make these phone calls right now. Is there any way that you can call the airlines figure this out? For me? Um, yeah.

Gabe Olson 16:53

Sounds like a difficult experience.

Amanda Harding 16:56

Yes, very much so.

Gabe Olson 16:58

So, do you think that was one of the biggest challenges that you faced during the outbreak or the pandemic? Or do you think there have been other bigger challenges in your life since then?

Amanda Harding 17:11

I would say that, leaving Italy slash [/] being in Italy was the biggest challenge I faced. I, um, it was just very difficult having to leave that place and come back home and everything was very uncertain. And then on top of that, itself, I don't feel like personally, the school did really anything for the study abroad students. And I personally feel like study abroad, students were impacted in the most harsh way in comparison to all their other grad students, or college students who are currently in Eau Claire. Just because all the students at the time were still either living on campus or living off-campus and were in the community and were able to be like, accessibly reached. But the study abroad students were all over the world. And I— personally, it was very difficult and like financially, did not get any help at all. So I lost out on a lot of money that was never reimbursed back either from Italy because Italy didn't have the funds. And now Italy is in a recession because of the pandemic. And then regarding the school, and I even applied for like the this is like my biggest actually like issues is that I applied to, for the government funding. And like, they still gave out other money to students who needed new laptops, because now we're not in person or other things. And all I wanted was money to pay

back. That I would be living like, I don't need, you know, like my apartment paying?

Gabe Olson 18:42

Right.

Amanda Harding 18:43

And so now I'm like living at home, but like, I still need to pay to live at home, but I never got back that money. So financially, that was like, a really difficult thing for me to deal with.

Gabe Olson 18:53

Frustrating, yes, I can—I can understand that. Can you describe the feelings that you had when you realized that you had to cut your trip short and leave?

Amanda Harding 19:04

Oh, I was so devastated. I was so so hopeful at the time that I was willing to stay in Italy in quarantine. I'm just my mini apartment with my roommates. Like, I—I think I was more sad about leaving my roommates than I was about leaving Italy. Right, Italy will always be there. But that experience with those specific people will never be back. And so for me, it was really, really difficult and really sad—saddening. And at the time, I didn't know if it was that big of a deal either. So I was like, why are they making us leave when we could just stay here and like, wait it out? Um, but then obviously America started to like close borders on things and then it was like, well, we really have to get back but—

Gabe Olson 19:46

Right. And do you still keep in contact with the friends that you made there?

Amanda Harding 19:50

Yeah, I do. I keep in contact them always so.

Gabe Olson 19:54

Good. So, you talked about the vaccine before, what thoughts do you have about the vaccine that is currently coming out?

Amanda Harding 20:09

I have such mixed opinions on it. Um, so I think that it's great that we now are at a point where we have a vaccine that appears to be doing what needs to be doing. I'm, I'm really grateful for that, actually, it's been great that we've been able to roll it out so fast and like, get this going. Because I mean, I believe vaccines work. Um, I think the only hesitancy that a lot of people tend to have and that I always hear is just that it's not FDA approved. I mean, it is for emergency use, but they're still finishing up that six months of that testing trial. And so, which I think we're reaching to the end of really soon, I'm pretty sure like, by the end of this month, honestly, or even before. I mean, I currently have my first dose for it. But that was a tough decision for me to make, because part of me is just like a little uncertain still, because I mean, okay, I trust vaccines, I know they work, but it's just like getting, like, I'm still choosing to like to be a part of this trial. And that's something that everyone needs to make them themselves, right? Not everyone's comfortable with being a part of like a trial run, which is kind of what this

is. Um, it'll be really interesting to see, though, I don't know, I mean, like about, like mandatory vaccines coming in the fall or things like that will be really interesting, which a lot of people argue like, Oh, they can't do that. But we already have mandatory vaccines to go to college to go to certain countries. So technically, I mean, they absolutely can.

Gabe Olson 21:36

Okay, so you, your opinions on those kinds of restrictions are? That it's okay, in certain circumstances?

Amanda Harding 21:46

Yes, I think so. As long as I think I've heard like some schools plan on doing this in the fall, where it's like, either regarding health or religious reasons, you can choose not to do it. And I still believe that that should be the case for everyone. But I think that like, it's good to highly encourage it.

Gabe Olson 22:02

Okay. And you said you got your first dose? Did you have any side effects?

Amanda Harding 22:08

Yes, I did. I was really, really sore in the arm, like, one night I like couldn't even move my arm, and then the fatigue, and then I had the chills. But they only lasted for about two days.

Gabe Olson 22:24

Okay, and what were your feelings like afterwards?

Amanda Harding 22:29

I feel pretty good about it still, like, I'm still glad I'm doing this because I want to continue on into my summer and have fun and do things that I want to do. But I'm still a little anxious about I'm not gonna lie, like I said, a little bit of anxiety about it, because we don't really know. And I know, it's like the right thing to do. I'm going to trust that the doctors and the people who are who designed the vaccine and our administering it are doing their job properly. I think everyone—everyone wants to end this pandemic. So I don't know why there would be any reason that people are not doing all that they can to better help our society.

Gabe Olson 23:06

Yeah, we're all fighting the same fight.

Amanda Harding 23:07

Yes.

Gabe Olson 23:10

So, what have you been your primary sources of news during this past year? And have they changed at all since the pandemic?

Amanda Harding 23:20

A little bit, um, what's the, I would say okay, so like, the CDC has been like, the biggest one,

and then, um, honestly—

Gabe Olson 23:31

Not even specifically, just about the pandemic, just in general.

Amanda Harding 23:34

I really don't like watching the news to be honest. So like, if something like big happens with that, I'm going to like research about it and look up stuff, but I'm not particular about certain news. Like I don't, I don't subscribe to any certain news journals or articles. Because I don't—the news, honestly, is never anything good. Usually, it's very, very difficult. So I try just to not even get involved with it. Unless if it's something like, I'm hearing about it, well then obviously I'm going to research about it. But I think that's different than just like reading the daily news.

Gabe Olson 24:06

Right. Do you get news from social media at all? Or?

Amanda Harding 24:10

I usually hear about things first from social media, but I always take that with a grain of salt. And then I usually go and the only word I can think of is like research. So I'll read in multiple different sources and like what things are saying about it.

Gabe Olson 24:20

Okay, that's understandable. Do you think that there's any issues regarding the pandemic or just in general that the media or people aren't covering or people aren't talking about enough?

Amanda Harding 24:34

Hmm, no, not really. Not that I can think of honestly. I feel like everything's pretty much getting covered.

Gabe Olson 24:47

Okay. And how do you think your governmental leaders have reacted? Do you think they've reacted in a positive and efficient way regarding the pandemic?

Amanda Harding 25:02

Yeah, for the most part, I would say, I think it's been pretty. I mean, positive. I don't know, that's so difficult, I think. I think it takes both presidencies to have gotten to the point that we're at. Like, we can't—

Gabe Olson 25:16

Well not even just the just the presidencies. And that is, that's that's a good thought. But, also like, on the state and local level, do you think that the government has been doing a good a good job, at least in Eau Claire and Wisconsin of responding to the pandemic?

Amanda Harding 25:34

Yeah, I would say so. I know, some people weren't happy about certain masked mandates or different things, but I think, I think, I think it's been handled pretty well. Yeah, I would say. Or

at least looking back now, like hindsight is always 20/20, right? Maybe a time I maybe felt a little differently, but like, looking back, I think things have been handled where they should be.

Gabe Olson 25:53

Okay. Has your experience tran—transformed how you think about your family, friends and community?

Amanda Harding 26:02

Yeah, a little bit, I would say. I feel like, I have a in one aspect, I have a stronger appreciation for like time with my family. I'm really grateful I had the time over the summer, when everyone was like, stuck at home, because I was living back at home, to be with my family. And like, just putting the effort into reaching out to your friends more. I would say. But I also think it's been really difficult because anxiety and tension are really high right now. They've been high throughout all of 2020 on top of, like, so many other things that have been happening in America. And so I think in some aspects, it's been difficult for people because everyone has different opinions, and everyone's at different points in their lives, so, everyone has different beliefs about what is best for them and what's best for society. And so, in that regard can be difficult. And the pandemic I think, really heighten that right. I feel like we've kind of been slowly reaching up to this point. But the pandemic really pushed it really fast.

Gabe Olson 26:59

That makes sense. No, I understand. And as far as distance learning, do you think you've had a overall positive experience? Or how would you—what, what do you think of your experience at UW Eau Claire in regards to responding to the pandemic?

Amanda Harding 27:19

At UW Eau Claire, I feel like distance learning has been okay. I just can't be like, it's just being in person is still always gonna be better. In my opinion, it's been difficult. I also notice a lot of students just like, don't have their camera on, don't talk in class, there's no more like discussing. And that's really difficult because like having your camera on and doing class at home, like you're really opening up like your home to like your classmates, if that makes sense in a weird way. I think that having in the spring, our classes be mostly in person a few, like, were split, like hybrid has been really good. I think I've felt like, like, I've actually been talking to my classmates again, and like sitting next to them and communicating and like sharing ideas. And I did not like being distance learning in the fall. While it was probably a good choice to make because it was good for our health and to keep us safe. I don't like it. So.

Gabe Olson 28:20

Okay. So I have reached the end of my question list. So I think we are done. Thank you very much, Amanda.

Amanda Harding 28:30

Thank you, Gabe.

Gabe Olson 28:31  
For your time.

Amanda Harding 28:33  
Thank you

Gabe Olson 28:34  
And I, Goodbye. [laughs]

Amanda Harding 28:36  
Bye. Thank you