

Transcript of Interview with Aisha Kaylor with Ellie Lawson

Interviewee: Aisha Kaylor

Interviewer: Ellie Lawson

Date: 04/29/2021

Location (Interviewee): Minneapolis, Minnesota

Location (Interviewer): Indianapolis, Indiana

Abstract: Aisha Kaylor gives her perspective of life during COVID-19. Aisha discusses how COVID-19 affected her work and personal life and talks about the precautions she took in order to keep safe. As Aisha lives in Minnesota, she shares a personal experience with activism at the time of George Floyd's death.

Ellie Lawson 00:00

There's a live transcript if you want to turn that on, I just initiated it. So, okay, so let's...perfect. We're recording. All right. My name is Ellie Lawson. I'm here with Aisha Kaylor. The day is Thursday, April 29, 2021. The time is 9:09 p.m. eastern time. I am in Indianapolis, Indiana and Aisha is in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I want to briefly review the informed consent and deed of gift document that you signed. This interview is for the COVID-19 Oral History Project, which is associated with the Journal of the Plague Year: a COVID-19 archive. The COVID-19 Oral History Project is a rapid response oral history focused on archiving the lived experience of the COVID-19 epidemic. We have designed this project so that professional researchers and the broader public can create and upload their oral histories to our open access and open source database. This study will help us collect narratives and understandings about COVID-19 as well as help us better understand the impacts of the pandemic over time. The recordings, demographic information, and the verbatim transcript will be deposited into the Journal the Plague Year: a COVID-19 Archive in the Indiana University Library System for the use of researchers and the general public. Do you have any questions about the project that I can answer?

Aisha Kaylor 01:40

Nope.

Ellie Lawson 01:41

Taking part in this study is voluntary you may choose not to take part or you may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Indiana University, IUPUI or the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute. Participating in this project means that your interview will be recorded and digital video and, or audio format and may be transcribed. The recordings and possible transcripts of the interview, copies of any supplementary documents or additional photos that you wish to share, the informed consent and deed of gift may be deposited in the Journal the Plague Year: a COVID-19 Archive and the Indiana University Library

System and will be available to both researchers and the general public. Your name and other means of identification will not be confidential. Do you have any questions?

Aisha Kaylor 02:54

No.

Ellie Lawson 02:55

In addition to your signed document, would you please offer a verbal confirmation that you understand and agree to these terms?

Aisha Kaylor 03:05

Yes, I do understand and agree.

Ellie Lawson 03:09

I'm also asking that you verbally confirm that you have agreed that your interview will be made available under the following license. And you agreed to number two.

Aisha Kaylor 03:22

Yes.

Ellie Lawson 03:26

Finally, I want to ask for a verbal confirmation that you have agreed that your interview will be made available to the public immediately.

Aisha Kaylor 03:35

Yes.

Ellie Lawson 03:37

That is the legal things. So, we'll just get back into the background questions. What are some primary things you do on a day-to-day basis? For example, your job, your extracurricular activities.

Aisha Kaylor 03:56

Day-to-day, I work in an office during normal times Monday through Friday. Go in the morning around 9am, would come home around 5-6pm. I usually spent all my time in the office including lunch. Would come home, hang out with my husband, watch television or maybe go to a workout class or something. On the weekends, Saturdays are usually free. Sundays are like housework, but then I usually work from home in the afternoons as part of my job, as well.

Ellie Lawson 04:43

Where do you live and what is it like to live there?

Aisha Kaylor 04:49

I live in Minneapolis, within the city limits. I've lived here for probably five years now. I mean, it's great living here. It's a busy city. Lots of people. Pretty dense. There are a lot of things to do in the city, a lot of restaurants, museums, lots of city parks. It's a pretty, I guess, bustling city.

Ellie Lawson 05:25

When you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it and have your thoughts since changed?

Aisha Kaylor 05:34

My thoughts have definitely changed. I think I first heard talks a bit probably on like NPR in like, January/February, and it wasn't really on my mind at all. It was really, end of February and March that I started getting more concerned. I remember having... so part of my job, I take notes in...I work for a restaurant company, so we have general manager meetings once a quarter and we had a general manager meeting in the beginning of March. They started talking about COVID and started talking about the protocols that they were going to change in the restaurant, like with sanitation wearing gloves cleaning. And, that was the first time that I was really like, okay...this is actually getting really serious and this is in the beginning of March. It was crazy, because that night, I still went out with a friend for her birthday to an event. We went out to eat. The restaurant was packed We went to a 'Bachelor Live' event in the city and the theater was packed, as well. And, then, the next day, or maybe it was a week later, I honestly don't remember, is when things shut down in the entire state. Our restaurants closed. Then, it was like, 'oh...this is really serious. This is scary.' I started becoming more concerned for friends and family and myself, as well. My views on COVID has been pretty consistent since the start of the pandemic. So I kind of knew that it was serious the entire time, like once March hit.

Ellie Lawson 07:42

Okay, so your job you mentioned. Could you detail your specific title, and how COVID has affected or changed how you work?

Aisha Kaylor 07:55

Yes, so I am an operations specialist, which is, for my job, specifically, kind of made-up title because they didn't know what to call me but my position is kind of a catch all. I work in the corporate office for a restaurant company. We own eight restaurants, Minnesota State Fair location, which the Minnesota State Fair is a really big deal here, and, at the time, we have an event center as well. I did like hourly payroll. Just like managing, we do have a weekly payroll process and entering new hires and all that stuff. I did some operations things like managing licensing for all of our restaurants and locations, ordering uniforms, doing alcohol compliance training, just a lot of random stuff. And, then, I also did finance work like with accounts payable, entering invoices on a weekly basis, managing kind of the backend side of our inventory system, reviewing statements and whatever. So, when the pandemic hit, I

was in the office every day, but when an epidemic hit our restaurant shut down and I was furloughed for two months. But, then, once we reopened my job...some co workers got to work from home, fully, completely, but I was going in usually once a week because with my job I just have to be in the office kind of writing checks for a house bank, which is like what servers are tipped out of. I had to check the mail. There were licensing documents. I still even in like June and July, I still was coming into the office for a few hours a week. Besides that, honestly, my job didn't change much, because a lot of my duties are things that have to be done in order to run the restaurant, like payroll has to be submitted every week, we have to submit our licensing documents or the restaurant doesn't run. It was just a balance of figuring out what I could do from home and what I had to go into work for. And, a lot was up in the air too. There was a lot of times when capacity would be opened more, so my job would get busier or we'd have a shutdown again and my hours are like, in the fall, my hours are reduced again. And, there's a lot of uncertainty, as well, working for a restaurant company, like where are we going to survive 2020? Was I going to have a job? Did I need to look...I seriously considered looking for jobs in another industry that wasn't as risky, I guess, at the time, but I ultimately stuck with the restaurant company and we're still here.

Ellie Lawson 11:14

So what concerns do you have about the effects of COVID-19 on your employment, maybe the company you work for, and just the economy more broadly?

Aisha Kaylor 11:29

At the time, and still now, but not as much, as in the summer and fall, I was really concerned for the company. One, whether or not we would survive, just on a pure monetary basis we would get enough money, even with the government assistance, because we were getting small business loans, whether or not our business would survive. But, I also had a lot of concerns, kind of like an ethical dilemma of working for a restaurant company during the pandemic. Working in the corporate office when employees were sort of forced to choose between not having a job, staying home, or coming into work and getting more money so they could pay their bills. I didn't always agree with some of the decisions that the company would make on employee safety, but at the same time, the company is making those decisions within the guidelines of the state and federal government. So the state would be like, you can be open. The onus was kind of put on individuals and businesses to decide whether or not to stay open or stay closed, and I had a real struggle with that. It made me kind of angry because, like, why are you, why is the government putting, yeah, just the pressure on businesses to decide whether or not they're going to bring in income to keep people employed. And I also, I seriously questioned whether or not I wanted to keep working for a restaurant company in a pandemic. So, I had a lot of concerns for our employees. We'd be notified of COVID cases in the restaurant weekly. I mean, obviously, they would be anonymous, but, you know, we'd get an email that there'd be a COVID case at one of the restaurants. So, I had concerns about whether or not employees are being paid enough for the risk they were taking on and whether or not I guess, how employees viewed the restaurant. Also, how employees viewed me, as well, because working in the corporate office, I didn't really interact directly with hourly employees

but I always wondered, you know, if they saw an email from me or something, if I would be viewed as someone who was like agreeing that it was okay that a business was open. But that, I, you know, worked through it. I still work for my company. A lot of the financial concerns, as well. I was worried, but not too stressed, because I knew that it was affecting literally everybody. I was like, 'there's nothing I can do.' I can't worry too much about whether or not I'm going to have a job, because maybe I won't. I know restaurants were closing left and right. People were struggling financially, and you literally can't do anything about it. So, I don't know, but yeah.

Ellie Lawson 15:09

Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the employment of anyone you know and in what ways?

Aisha Kaylor 15:20

It has. One of my co-workers, she was our kind of office manager and sat at the front desk, answered the phones, and did other things from the office, she was furloughed when we shut down in the spring and then she was then later terminated. Just meaning, you know, not asked to come back and permanently, employment ended. In the summer, because, you know, our office wasn't really open, and we just didn't need an office manager. And we were, you know, we were work acquaintances. We got along, and I remember feeling bad for her that she lost her job, and, you know, I still kept mine. But as far as my inner circle like, friends and family, we actually were all fortunate enough to not have to lose our jobs or switch jobs. And my husband actually switched employers during the pandemic like, last summer, he got a new job, which was interesting for him to navigate at the time. But, yeah no, my inner circle has been very fortunate.

Ellie Lawson 16:45

Awesome. Is there anything else you would like to comment about employment or the economy, or anything like that?

Aisha Kaylor 16:59

More just, I, throughout the pandemic, my view on politics was always more leftist, and I think it increased during the pandemic, because I was just so frustrated seeing just the lack of support from the government over the economy, you know, it was choosing, I felt like, we were choosing the economy over people. And, you know, sometimes if I would get frustrated with my employer, I would remind myself there were some businesses that were being the quote, unquote, like bigger person and choosing to pay their employees more or choosing to shut down for a time. But, I couldn't really fault businesses for choosing to stay open when the government wasn't providing much support, outside of, you know, business loans. But I do, and I'm still really frustrated with the lack of support from the government. I feel like people should have been paid to stay home. Businesses would have survived, our government, our economy would have survived, but that didn't happen. And I feel like we're going to be living with the repercussions of that for a long time. That's pretty much it on the economy, I guess, or my employment.

Ellie Lawson 18:37

That's a good segue into talking a little bit more about government. So, this question is, how have municipal leaders and government officials in your community responded to the outbreak?

Aisha Kaylor 18:59

Our leaders have responded pretty much the same as the, our like, state government. You know, they, I give more grace, I guess, to municipal and state governments, because the funding for cities and states is different than the federal government. The federal government has more grace to just put money towards projects, whereas, you know, state and cities have to live within a budget. Our city leaders like, our mayor and our city council, they were, you know, concerned with citizens with how COVID was affecting them, but there, I guess, there wasn't much that they could do specifically. Minneapolis, I guess, did have to have a mask mandate when a lot of cities, and the state of Minnesota did as well, and that was usually enforced or followed better than other cities and states. Honestly, the response to the pandemic itself, or at least my views from the mayor, was kind of clouded pretty quickly by the murder of George Floyd. So, when I think about like, Jacob Frey's response to the pandemic, it's not honestly not really top of mind because of that. But, I feel like our city council definitely was supporting citizens and wanting to make sure that people were protected with wearing masks or enforcing social distancing and things like that.

Ellie Lawson 20:57

So to go a little bit more into the community, apart from those government leaders, how have people around you been responding to the pandemic?

Aisha Kaylor 21:14

I feel like people, at least visually, in Minneapolis, because I never really ventured to greater Minnesota during the pandemic, but the sense from the city is that people were taking it seriously and trying to follow, you know, the social distancing, wearing ma-, I would see people wearing masks just, you know, when they're walking by themselves outside, which honestly wasn't something I even did that often. If I was outside walking by myself or walking with my husband, we didn't always wear masks because we didn't think we're going to come across people. I saw plenty of people who would wear a mask when they were jogging. I did come across people still in the grocery store who wouldn't be wearing a mask or who would stand really close to you, but those people were the exception and not the norm. I remember having some conversations with other people in the grocery store being like 'that person was standing really close... did you see' or, just talking about the pandemic and seeing how concerned they were, which felt good, I guess, that I felt like my community was taking it seriously. My friends and family were as well. Most of our family lives in Indiana. I would just hear stories of their lives compared to mine. They all, specifically like just themselves, they were concerned about the pandemic. They were wearing masks. Trying to social distance as best they could. Although, I guess my family, some of my family's views on the pandemic did differ from mine, at some point. But, as far as my Minneapolis

community, everyone in general seemed to be concerned in taking the proper measures to protect themselves and the people around them, because that's the whole issue with a pandemic is the things you do are protecting other people. I feel like there's a little more empathy there in a city where you're already so close to people and interacting so frequently with other people. Yeah, there is just more empathy there that you need to wear your mask and stay away so that other people can be safe.

Ellie Lawson 23:59

So has COVID-19 changed relationships within your community? Family, friends, and then in what ways, if it has.

Aisha Kaylor 24:13

Not me, specifically. Yeah, no, again, I feel like I've been very fortunate in the pandemic that I haven't had a family member who was like an anti-mask person or anything where I had to have those conversations with them. Yeah, I mean, my friends as well. They all took the pandemic seriously and we, for awhile, I guess I didn't lose any friendships. Also, during the pandemic, it's hard just to keep in touch with people when you can't see them in person. But we still have maintained friendships in other ways. And in my community, as well, I haven't, you know, relationships haven't really changed throughout the pandemic.

Ellie Lawson 25:18

Okay. So, is there anything else you want to talk about within your community in greater Indian- or Minneapolis or anything like that?

Aisha Kaylor 25:33

Um, no, I don't, I don't think so. No.

Ellie Lawson 25:38

Perfect. Okay, we'll move into family and household, so just whoever is living in your house. Has COVID-19 affected you or your family's day-to-day activities?

Aisha Kaylor 25:56

Yes, it has. At the start of pandemic, it was just my husband and I. We both started working from—well, actually was, I guess, furloughed for a bit—but he was working from home full time. So, we were just seeing each other a lot more. At the time, we lived in a duplex that was smaller than the one we're currently in now, so that was kind of challenging. He, we had a second bedroom that wasn't really a second bedroom, like, it could only fit a twin bed, so we kind of made it like a walk in closet. So, just stuffed with clothes and shoes. He was working like in the closet for a couple months until we moved. If I had to like, once I went back to work, I was working on the kitchen counter, and we were just very close to each other a lot. The start of the pandemic, we tried to go on daily walks, just to get out of the house. Go on walks together. Then in May of 2020, we moved into a new place. So, moving in a

pandemic was hard. We asked our friends and his brother to help us which stressed me out a little bit, because when you're moving you can't always maintain social distancing. We moved into a place that was a little bigger, had our own office so we could kind of work more separately from each other. Then, we also got a dog in May. So, our lives were already going to change regardless of the pandemic. Having a puppy just really changes your daily schedule, so yeah, we had that to deal with. But also, it was a good escape from the pandemic, as well, to have a tiny little puppy that you needed to care for and was just showing you love every day when you couldn't see your friends or anything. Recently, though, in 2021, since the pandemic is going on for a very long time, my brother-in-law moved in. He used to live in Seattle, and he just made a quick move to Minneapolis. And so while he's kind of-, he still has this Seattle job is since he's working from home, he was allowed time kind of to look for a new job in Minneapolis. So, he has been living with us, but working from home as well, but he's in the basement so we hardly—he only comes up for lunch and dinner. So it's not really an impact, I guess, on our day-to-day lives. Besides that, you know, Zach and I, my husband Zach, we used to go to the grocery store together before, at the start of the pandemic and still, now, he's the only one who goes to the grocery store because for a while, it was really encouraged that only one person per household go. So, that was just him. So, you know, that has changed a little bit. Not running errands together only running like, only one of us going out at the time. Yeah, it's just been a lot of working from home and interacting and seeing each other more than we were used to before.

Ellie Lawson 30:10

So, what have been maybe a couple of the biggest challenges you faced during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Aisha Kaylor 30:21

Not seeing family was a really big challenge. In July, my mom did actually visit us. She's a school teacher, so she wasn't really interacting with anyone at the time. Zach and I were both working from home, and it was before, I became more concerned about the pandemic effect on myself because, I guess for a while, I took the pandemic seriously. I wasn't going—I still haven't eaten in a restaurant, or even on a patio. But I like, when my mom told me she wanted to visit before school started, I wasn't really thinking about the fact that I could potentially get COVID from her even though she wasn't in school. She was wear-, she wore gloves when she stopped at the gas station on the way up, but my health wasn't really something that I was thinking of at the time until after her visit, and I started hearing more of younger people getting sick and then realizing that I could be that person. And so I, although my mom did come in July, future family visits, my husband and I were hard on like, we're not going to come home to see you. We don't want to travel nine hours to Indiana to potentially get you sick or get me sick. Again, although my family took the pandemic seriously they were still sometimes gathering together, wearing masks, but still being in the house. And like, Thanksgiving came around and my husband and I didn't come home and this is the first time we haven't been with family for Thanksgiving, ever, and that caused some tension, because it was hard for some of my family members to understand why. You know, if we were wearing masks and if we were all being safe, why couldn't I come home. I was like,

because I can get sick. I understand that you are accepting the risk, but I don't want to. There were other times when my family would be together, for whatever reason. My brother would come down from Michigan or my aunt and uncle and cousins would be in town and they would want us to come down for a long weekend or something. Having to explain that I didn't want to take on that risk—even though, yes, I was going, I would go to Target for things I needed on the weekend or Zach would go to the grocery store or I would go into the office a couple days and, you know, interacting with people. I didn't want to add on the risk of going home and being with family. And that was difficult for people to wrap their head, wrap their head around. But now, I mean, my immediate family, we're all fully vaccinated. So, I actually am going back to Indiana this weekend actually because I've been fully vaccinated for over a month, my husband has for a couple weeks, my mom, my grandparents, his mom and grandparents, my aunt and uncle, so I feel better. But, yeah, at the time, it was a struggle.

Ellie Lawson 34:30

Is there anything else you want to comment about your family or your household?

Aisha Kaylor 34:34

So, I guess I was pretty lucky not to know any people who had a severe reaction to COVID, but my husband did get COVID at the start of 2021. That was, I guess, scary, but he didn't like have to go in the hospital or anything. But, you know, that was an interaction, you know, trying to care for him while he felt ill, but also trying to maintain distance from him so I didn't get sick, and I didn't end up getting COVID from him, thank goodness. But, yeah, that was just a, you know, couple of weeks of trying to live in the same household, not really being able to get away from my husband while he battled COVID. But besides that, pretty good.

Ellie Lawson 35:51

So, in what ways is COVID affecting people's mental and physical health, maybe in your circle, or what you're seeing out and about?

Aisha Kaylor 36:06

It's definitely really impacting mental health I think more than physical health. Just not being able to see people, having the stress of worrying about whether or not your close friends or family are going to get sick or lose their job has really taken a toll on people close to me, but then just people that I observe out in the world as well. I know, for a long time, I was very stressed and anxious about my mom because she's a public school teacher, and just, you know, knowing that she had to go into school and interact with people almost every day. Having her tell me stories of some of the things are happening in her school district and with families who might not really taken the pandemic or COVID very seriously at all and knowing that there was nothing I could do for her, and there was nothing she could do about it. She had to go to work. She couldn't, it's, you know, her only source of income, she can't just lose her job. So, just seeing the effect that school had on my mom and also knowing that I couldn't visit her either to comfort her at all was very hard in the pandemic. For me, personally, mental health wise, the

start of the pandemic, I was actually doing slightly better than I had been before. Which was a weird phenomenon that my psychiatrist actually said, a decent number of people were feeling. I've always struggled with anxiety and depression. And I don't know why but the started of the pandemic, it didn't get worse, which you kind of think it would be, like a global pandemic would make your anxiety or depression worse, but it didn't. Kind of knowing that there was truly nothing that I can do for myself, or for Zach, wasn't as stressful as I thought that I would have expected it to be. But that did gradually change over the year with just the police murders and social unrest and then as my mom became more anxious and I couldn't help her, that became more stressful on me, but it was a switch from the start of the pandemic to kind of summer time and then winter. It kind of let up again and honestly our dog helped a lot with that like having a dog that just like doesn't know there's a pandemic going on at all and just needs your care and love was a good release of stress. Physical health wise, it was hard for me because I had tried to be active at the start of the pandemic but just being in your house, or having to stay in your house, isn't very always good for physical health. You have to be very careful and very intentional with physical activity, and I wasn't always during the pandemic. But now that things are lighting up, I hope to change that.

Ellie Lawson 40:21

Okay, so at this point, we're going to move into talking about the racial protests, and just the social injustice that has been happening with the intersection with COVID and that. And so, to start off, I'm just going to ask you about George Floyd. He was murdered May 25th, 2020. And so, what was your initial response, reaction to that, being in the city where it happened?

Aisha Kaylor 41:03

Initial response was shock. Also, because it was so public, which, you know, was a benefit for the trial, but just having so much visual insight into his death was very overwhelming. There was just a lot of anger right away that the place where, you know, it's not like they haven't been murdering people or black men for decades their entire, you know, existence, but also just seeing the links of the time was very overwhelming and protests started immediately. I felt, yeah, like, I wanted to do something right away. It all just all happened so quickly. The police put out the statement that it was a medical incident and whatever and protests started immediately. And there was just so much anger in the city. I remember, I think it was two, it was like the Wednesday that week. I was just at home and just overwhelmed with, at the time my, I was like, I need to do something. I remember following people on Twitter and seeing calls for donations for protest support and for the city, because a lot of the protests are happening in the Lakestreet neighborhood where he was murdered, and then also the Midway neighborhood of St. Paul. So, it was like a Wednesday night, I went, I saw a call for donations. I went to Target, just, it was probably 8pm. I just told my husband like 'I'm leaving. Going to Target. I'm getting some stuff. I saw this, I don't know who this person is on Twitter, but they're calling for donations at this random place.' So I went and bought stuff. I drove to the location and I was like, 'Hey, I saw on Twitter that you're taking donations here.' They were all full for the night and they directed me to a church in the Midway neighborhood, kind of right across from like Allianz Field and near the Target and other stores

that were eventually burned and some businesses destroyed. I just like showed up with all these donations because I just like felt like I had to do something. I didn't join the protest, but I still wanted to support the people. I just like showed up with all this stuff and I was like, 'Here. Where do you want it?' It was kind of chaos in the church because there wasn't really much leadership. There was stuff everywhere, and I like dropped it off that and then I stayed until probably almost 3am in that church just trying to help organize supplies. And, the pandemic was on my mind because we were all wearing masks still, but there wasn't always social distancing inside when people were running around. It was a medic supply station, so people who had medic training would be out in the protests and they'd come back and get medic supplies or snacks, and then they'd go out again. I never feared the pandemic when I was in those spaces, because everyone was taking like, everyone was still wearing masks, people were using hand sanitizer or wearing gloves for the following weeks and months. With any donation support that I was helping with, and if someone had a risk of COVID, they would take a COVID test and they wouldn't show up at the center for a couple of days, or they would notify people that they were around, they were getting a COVID test. But, really, the focus was on the community and supporting the community more than, I guess, whether or not I was going to get COVID from organizing supplies. And, yeah, sorry, what was the question? I guess I have more things to say, but I honestly don't remember what the initial question was.

Ellie Lawson 46:41

No, that's okay. I was just, I, the first question that I asked was just your initial response and action. So, I can follow up with what was like the day-to-day activities that you participated in at the donation center? Like what was your duration? What were you doing during the day? And what things did you collect as donations?

Aisha Kaylor 47:10

Um, yeah, so I wasn't there every day. I went there probably maybe 10 times over two months. But I like, the first night I was there, donations were very, you know, there's food, there are household supplies, there are a lot of medic supplies. In that first night, I just helped random people just organize supplies, because it was just all coming in and there wasn't really any organization yet. There wasn't, there was a leader emerging. But things were just really chaotic. I remember giving the woman in charge my phone number that night, because she was also kind of monitoring the people who were there and the medics that were going out, making sure they were safe because there were reports of white supremacists who had come in, who were driving around. And just, there was a lot of risk of people's safety. There were businesses on fire while I was there. There was one point at night where one of the medics got a report of a white supremacist driving around. At the time, I was just sorting supplies inside the church, but we had to be locked in the church. The doors were locked. There are people that were medics that were standing guard at the doors. They turned the lights off, and I could hear, I heard gunshots. Like, we could hear gunshots in the church from a car just driving around the city and that was terrifying. And, then, once we got reports that it was safe to leave, again, like the fact that it was all happening during a pandemic was surreal. But, you know, I was leaving the church and you just, I look

over and you could see the business, like buildings on fire. I have like videos on my phone that I like, took a picture because it was so surreal to just see so close to me. Just the city burning, or again, in the middle of a pandemic. But, so that was the first night at the donation center and that church was Bethlehem Lutheran Church on the Midway. They became really a hub for the Midway neighborhood. In future days, I just kind of signed up as a volunteer, and I would go and help organize supplies. And that's really the main thing I did whenever I would go to the church. Again, I wasn't there every day, probably only a couple times a week. And just, you know, we'd get donations, you'd have to organize them and then, also, the community would come and pick up the food, so there was bagging of donations. At one point, the city really, responded and there were a lot of volunteers that were helping at the church. Again, they were really strict about COVID protocol, you know, sanitizing your hands and all of that. Everyone had to wear a mask, but there wasn't, again, much social distancing when there is 100 people volunteering, and then the community coming in and out for their donation. At other points throughout the summer, I just like found places on social media that we're doing like pop up donation drives in North Minneapolis, which is a predominantly black neighborhood that has been, you know, systemically overlooked by the city of Minneapolis. And again, there were COVID protocols there, but it was a lot of organizing supplies. A line of community members coming through and you handing down a specific number of items. And just trying to support the community because grocery stores would be closed and boarded up. A lot of people in the Midway neighborhood or in North Minneapolis, public transit was limited both because of the pandemic and because of protests, as well. So, people just couldn't travel to get supplies. So, those donation centers, mutual aid donation centers were just really needed and valued at the time, because not all of the business, community or the city was always responding as needed to the needs of the people in the neighborhood. Eventually, the donation center at the church, they had to get back to just regular church activities. So, that donation center eventually closed I think mid summer, may-, or maybe it was the end of summer. There were less pop up donation drives throughout the city. Those eventually stopped as grocery stores reopened. I didn't get involved at any permanent like, food shelter or anything. My involvement was just really at those mutual aid and pop up centers that happened throughout the summer.

Ellie Lawson 53:56

Were there any ways that—in addition to your service in volunteering—did you protest in any other way? Maybe in a way that we find unconventional than just marching on the streets.

Aisha Kaylor 54:16

No, I actually only want to one protest last summer which I'll go into why after I first explain what the process was. It was more conventional. It was like a car protest. Like we started—I went with my friends. Which again, you know, she was like in the car. We were both wearing masks, but, you know, you weren't really supposed to be in the car with someone who wasn't in your household. But that didn't, it mattered because we didn't want to get each other sick, but there were things that were more important at the time. So we went to just a, yeah, it was just a line of cars that were driving to the city and some of them drove to the Hennepin County attorney Mike Freeman's house. There was a big protest and rally

just in a neighborhood. Which, I think, traditionally, I did see more protests over the past, even before George Floyd, but especially after his murder, where people weren't just, you know, in downtown Minneapolis or around the area that a person was murdered, you know, they were going to neighborhood- like we were going to people's houses, because we're demanding that they arrest and, you know, the charges were brought to Derek Chauvin. And also just, yeah, protesting just his handling and his response and the city's response. So, that was interesting to be in a neighborhood, like seeing other people's houses, you know, crowding the street in front of the attorney's house. And so, I guess, that was the most unconventional thing I did, but I didn't really participate in protests directly at the time. I felt like I could be more support to the community in the donation centers. I think at the time I also struggled with whether or not I quote, unquote, like I don't know, belonged, or where I fit in, in the active protest space. So, I chose to focus my efforts more on the support side. Yeah, just with a donation center and organizing and buying supplies, or like sending some money to someone who, an organizer who is requesting donations for mutual aid so that they could go buy supplies. Like, I did more of those things than active like in the street protesting, at the time, for George Floyd.

Ellie Lawson 57:51

So could you explain, I know we've established you didn't go out and protest on the streets, but maybe could you with your volunteering at the centers—how did protesters, volunteers, people of the community, how were they interacting with the police, threats of white supremacists invading your active space?

Aisha Kaylor 58:26

The areas I was in were more, I guess we, they took, or hearing talks of, especially because the area I was in was also just a medic support area and interacting with protests their main goal was just to help people from the police brutality. So, the overall kind of consensus of everyone volunteering and of the medics was that the police were the problem. So there was no like, sympathy for their violent, you know, reaction to protesters, whether, you know, with their pepper spray or kettling or mass arrests. So, the interaction with protesters and medics and volunteers was always—there's camaraderie. We were all serving the same goal. And, you know, safety measures were taken pl- like, medics knew what to do if a protest was getting more violent or police were, you can usually tell when police were going to start making arrests. They would start kettling people, which is just like surrounding people and pushing them towards one area so that they can make mass arrests. And so, medics had protocols for that to hopefully prevent getting arrested. But there was a lot like, I, especially on, actually the first night, Wednesday night, there were protesters who would be brought into the church space and this was the first time I'd ever seen someone who had been sprayed with pepper spray. Their faces were just red and they were in pain and crying, and that to me, and other people as well, seeing the police response to just anger over the murder of a man in the streets. Really, there was, there's no sympathy for any police officers or the state response or the mayor's response to calls for people to be calm, or, you know, peacefully protest. There were a lot of conversations about the fact that peaceful protests before now didn't do anything. You know, people were still being, you know, Breanna Taylor was murdered in her

home. Ahmaud Arbery was murdered by civilians, you know, lynched on the street. George Floyd was pinned to the ground and just murdered in front of people. And so even the people who didn't, weren't protesting directly, including me, we had a lot of conversations about just the understanding of the overwhelming emotions and sadness and frustration of the people who were in the streets. And yeah, it was all, yeah, protesters and medics and volunteers were amicable. Any interaction with, I guess, the state wasn't always because we knew the anger that was there. We felt it too even though we weren't in the streets directly, we, I still was just as angry. And yeah, but those were kind of, those conversations weren't always happening either. Sometimes when you're at a donation center, you're really just trying to focus on the community. The donation pop ups in North Minneapolis, there weren't always, you know, we would have conversations about why we were there, the police violence and police murder, but during the time it was just focusing on asking a community member what do you need to get through the day or the week and giving that to them. Just making sure that people were okay and people's needs are met for the summer. And, again, I, the pop up donation centers kind of stopped once grocery stores were open more and public transportation opened up more. But, obviously, there were protests again and still are recently with the murder of Daunte Wright. So, it was just kind of the same thing all over again. The same conversations. The same need for mutual aid and donations due to the drastic, just unnecessary, state law enforcement response. And yeah, just helping community members and helping the medics, because the same people who were kind of in charge of the Bethlehem Midway location were mobilized again for these protests. So, a lot of medic support and, you know, donations to the community. And I helped out only twice at a location in Brooklyn Center, because their entire school district kind of shut down and mobilized to get a donation center together for the community. So, again, on social media, I just found a call for volunteers and I just signed up for a couple shifts. It's kind of—it's interesting, and also, really sad that people have become more organized in response to police violence. Like, you know, there was just a signup sheet, or an easy online signup sheet for volunteer shifts or medic support. It was very organized, because we went through it less than a year ago, which is just heartbreaking that people are so familiar with this kind of response. But, it was somewhat easier to get things to the community or meet community's needs this time around.

Ellie Lawson 1:06:24

Okay, so could you detail a little bit more about what the city is going through, your community, with the murder of Daunte Wright in April 2021? Almost a year after George Floyd. But those also in light of the Derek Chauvin's verdict of being convicted of murdering George Floyd. So, maybe just walk us through like, a little bit more of what's happening, what you're feeling. So...

Aisha Kaylor 1:07:01

So at the time of Daunte's murder, you know, the trial wasn't even over yet, and I think that was one of the biggest things that people talked about this time around was that the police—so Brooklyn Center is a suburb of Minneapolis, it borders North Minneapolis, and it's about 10 miles from downtown Minneapolis where the trial was being held. And, you know, the police couldn't even wait for the trial of one of their own before murdering someone else. That was very overwhelming, and for me, it was just

anger. The community was just angry that the police just couldn't, just couldn't stop. And, then, I think more anger was built because the city and the state had such a severe law enforcement response to the protests in Brooklyn Center. They, you know, the police presence on some nights was greater, reportedly, then the protesters. They would preemptively spray protesters with, you know, gases that literally aren't even, can't even be used in warfare, but yet the police are using it on citizens who are distraught over a murder of another one of us. So that, those conversations and that anger was very strong this time around. The police were just so preemptive in their attack against the community. I'm sure you've seen on the news, so the Brooklyn center police department is right across from apartment buildings. So, anytime they tear gas protesters who would be, you know, like, it would affect the people who live right across from the police station. You know, people were putting, they're reports of residents who would put, you know, wet towels to try to line their doors and windows so the gas wouldn't come into their apartments. A lot of them, some people couldn't even leave their apartment. You know, and there would just be, they'd have to deal with loud noise and just the violent police response day-in and day-out. And, also, just from protesters as well. Just hard for me, yeah, 'cause there's the balance of those are people's homes that you're protesting in front of, but also you're protesting in front of them, because the police just keep killing people. And there was, yeah, there's a lot of community anger on just the overwhelming police presence. And like our words from our governor and the mayor of Brooklyn center and Mayor Jacob Frye, as well, because, you know, Minneapolis police were sent to help and State Patrol were sent and the governor called, you know, the National Guard and were sent as well. There was a lot of focus on fear of businesses being, you know, looted or destroyed and not enough focus on the anger of the community that's being repeatedly terrorized by the police. There wasn't really anything you can do about the law enforcement presence, except keep protesting. And there was a lot of frustration in the community because, again, law enforcement was being so preemptive in pushing protesters back or tear gassing them, using pepper spray, arresting people, which would obviously make people more angry. And yeah, just on social media, and within my own circle, there were a lot of just mocking, but also mocking out of anger any the comments that the governor would say about the law enforcement response. Like, saying they're just wanting to protect citizens. You're like, 'no, what you're doing is not protecting anybody. It's just making people angry.' And it was just surreal. The National Guard was also called up because of the Chauvin trial was ending. And that too, they preemptively shut down businesses, put fences up in downtown Minneapolis. There was National Guard everywhere. So, the neighborhood I live in, I would drive down kind of business part of my neighborhood and there will be National Guard like Humvee—I know it's not an actual, I don't even know what it is—but it looks like a war vehicle, just literally on every block on both sides of the street. There'd be the National Guard with giant guns just standing all around the city. The mental and emotional toll that seeing your city occupied by law enforcement for no really good reason is just infuriating. Last week, at the, when it was the day that they were, they're going to announce the verdict, I was in my car because I was already heading to do some errands. I stopped at Subway on my way to the grocery store, because I just need food before. I'm going to rush to get home, but I need food first. The Subway I stopped at is in Northeast Minneapolis and across the Subway, there's this like empty lot and there were this huge like National Guard vehicle and police vehicles just in the lot. When I went into

Subway, there were six National Guard members in there, like using the bathroom with their giant like machine guns. Just like in Subway with me, and that—I don't even, some—I don't know if I even have words to describe how surreal that is to see armed with their helmets and their camo their big black guns just in a Subway with me in the middle of the day. And luckily, I think this is mobilizing people to get more involved in community politics as well, because this year we have our mayoral election coming in November. And I think just the frustration with Hennepin County and the state and the city's response to all of this repeated terrorism, state terrorism, it really mobilizing people to get a change in the mayoral office. Hopefully, Jacob Frey's not going to be mayor after November, fingers crossed. You know I, for me, it's really mobilizing me. I'm caucusing for the first time. I honestly don't even fully understand the caucus process, but I just want to make sure that because there are better mayoral candidates who really understand the city's needs and the pain more than Jacob's response after his empty words and after George's murder, and then, again, with Daunte's murder, as well. I think people are just really—I see action in the future, and that's promising for the city, I guess. But yeah, it's just seeing, or I was in Brooklyn Center, as well, last week, and seeing a line of National Guard and police vehicles and buses going to, we weren't sure if they were going to go arrest people at the time, I don't think they did, they were just moving out, but just seeing the overwhelming law enforcement presence is just, was surreal. The disproportionate response to the community compared to, you know, back in January, when there was a national, you know, insurrection that occurred, but then also local protests where, you know, white people, right wing, would be protesting at the Capitol with their big guns, and there was no overwhelming police response there, but for some reason, when black people are murdered, the state gets a little anxious. And yeah. People are done, I guess. They want change.

Ellie Lawson 1:18:00

So knowing what you know now, going through this past year with COVID, and the protests, and your volunteering, and political activism, what do you think individuals, communities, governments need to keep in mind for the future, as we, hopefully COVID goes away soon in a in a health aspect. But yeah, what do you think needs needs to happen, we need to keep in mind?

Aisha Kaylor 1:18:37

There are a lot of things, but I think it all centers around caring for your community, because a lot of my political or social views just make sense to me because it's caring for the people that are around you. I think politicians and the community, as well, if people just understand that if your neighbors are well cared for, if they have what they need to survive, like if they don't need, they, you know, if people don't need to choose between going to work and getting COVID or, you know, bringing COVID home to their family and paying their rent, or going to work and buying the prescriptions that they need to literally live, or, you know, going to the doctor, or getting their groceries, or access to quality education, or child care. The list is endless, but just, if your community is cared for and needs are met, that reduces the need or the likelihood of that people, 'cause when people's needs aren't met, they might get desperate. I can't judge people for what they do to survive. And I think local, state, federal politicians just need to fund programs that care for people. And right now, some, you know, the community is trying to meet that

need by continued mutual aid. Whether that's donating to a local food bank or, you know, there were times over the past couple weeks, for residents in the apartment across in Brooklyn Center Police where their CashApps and Venmo handles were shared publicly, with their consent, shared on social media. And you know, we were encouraged to send them a couple bucks like, whatever you could, because people having money in their pockets, for just having their needs met, is beneficial for everybody. So, I'm hoping to see and actually be more involved and work towards change at the local level with the mayoral races and city council, as well. Getting people in office who really understand that just the mutual aid and beneficial, meeting community's needs and hoping that that can grow towards state politics and, then, the federal level, as well. And I know, for me, personally, part of that change to meet community needs is eventually abolishing the police. That's not something that can happen tomorrow. But to me, as someone who is new to the movement, very new, I never thought about abolishing the police before 2020, but doing the same thing over and over has not produced results. The police have been constantly terrorizing communities across the country since they were formed as slave patrols back in the day, and reforms are not working. Any reforms that the mayor has put in place since George Floyd's murder, none of that would have actually prevented his murder, or Daunte Wright's. Or and so, to me, the repeated violence from the police, you can't fix a rotten tree, you have to cut it down and you have to plant new one with the community always at the center, with violence prevention, and that's not to say that there aren't going to be people who act in a protective role for the community but it just can't be, in my view, the police as they are today. So, everything I do in the future is going to work towards that and helping to convince people that that's what the city and this country needs. Just caring for your neighbors. And yeah, I'm gonna do whatever I need to do to make sure that people's needs are met.

Ellie Lawson 1:24:16

Do you have any final comments that you want to say before the interview ends?

Aisha Kaylor 1:24:31

I don't think so. I guess just with COVID in general. There is a light at the end of the tunnel with the vaccinations, which is very exciting. I know just with my job in general—again, the Minnesota State Fair is very big here, and it was canceled last year, which is like just devastating to the community and, also, my business as well because we are a popular vendor at the Fair. It looks like, fingers crossed, knock on wood, whatever I have to do, it looks like there's going to be a fair this year. But, we're still not out of the woods yet. There were reports of variance spreading in different states. As rules are relaxed and people are going out more, there are still too many people who don't want to be vaccinated and that's very concerning to me. I honestly have no idea how we're going to get over that hurdle, or if we even can. How do you convince people who have been essentially brainwashed by certain media to believe that COVID isn't that big of a deal like, how do you convince them to get a vaccine? I don't know if you can. So although I am hopeful about the future, in regards to the pandemic, specifically, I don't think COVID is, we're still in trouble. And even just like mask wearing in general, I'm assuming that masks are going to be part of my wardrobe literally for the rest of my life, even if people do get vaccinated and we reach herd immunity. The flu was like completely eradicated this past flu season because people

were wearing masks and washing their hands a lot. So, I definitely see myself flu season or I'm on an airplane 20 years from now, I'll probably still wear masks. Just become more normal. And yeah, I think a lot of Americans have seen the benefit of some of these safety measures. But yeah, I'm just sick of not seeing people. I really miss hanging out with friends, and I want to do it again. But yeah, hopefully that'll come soon.

Ellie Lawson 1:27:19

Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Aisha, for joining us and contributing to this project.

Aisha Kaylor 1:27:27

Yeah. Thank you for reaching out to me.