

Transcript of Interview with David McKenney by Emily McKenney

Interviewee: David J. McKenney
Interviewer: Emily V. McKenney
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Transcriber: Emily V. McKenney

Abstract:

David John McKenney lived in rural Michigan for most of his life. In this interview, David reflects upon the challenges that COVID-19 wrought on the rural school districts for which he works. He describes how he and his coworkers wrote code that helped transition students to remote learning and saved other districts countless hours of labor. David also touches upon his experience in Ukraine and the flu quarantine that occurred there seasonally. He contrasts this with the current American quarantine and highlights his concerns about freedoms of speech in reference to lockdowns. His concerns about freedoms of speech also extends to the future of Christianity and the church. He expresses his anger about the 2020 election season. In addition, David discusses his frustration with rioting in Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington. David remarks on the shift in real estate from urban areas to suburban areas and the rise in construction. Finally, David comments on his participation in pandemic trends (such as baking bread) and increased time spent with family.

Emily McKenney 0:01

Today is Thursday, November 19th 2020 and this is Emily McKenney interviewing David McKenney. David is the Chief Technology Officer for Cheboygan, Otsego, Presque-Isle Educational Service District. The purpose of this oral history interview is to investigate David's perspective about life during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is intended to supplement the archive, A Journal of the Plague Year, or JOTPY's, Rural Voices Call for the benefit of future researchers. David, thank you for agreeing to speak with me.

David McKenney 0:34

You're welcome. Glad to be here.

Emily McKenney 0:37

[Chuckles] All right. So let's start with some personal questions. When did you first hear of the pandemic and what went through your mind?

David McKenney 0:46

I guess it was last- last January, when I heard that it was really serious. And yeah, I guess everyone was kind of shocked and surprised and a little bit frightened about what- about the possibility.

Emily McKenney 1:08

What kinds of changes have you made in your day to day routine?

David McKenney 1:12

Well, yeah, throughout the year, as things got locked down and stuff, it changed things quite drastically in the sense of not driving to work, but working from home and- and- not going to the store very often and not going out to eat and- and- you know, if you're going to get something from a restaurant, it's take out and not go into churches much and things like that.

Emily McKenney 1:45

Have you ever experienced a situation that was similar to the pandemic? And how is that different?

David McKenney 1:52

Yeah, when we were in Ukraine, we had what they call quarantine, during different flu seasons, about- about- every year about for three weeks, they would shut down the schools and do the similar kind of thing. But definitely that has not lasted as long as this.

Emily McKenney 2:14

How do you think the way Ukrainians have handled the pandemic differs from the way Americans have handled it? And what are the key differentiating factors?

David McKenney 2:24

Well, I think the Ukrainians are more willing to follow whatever the government says. Less freedoms and less history of freedoms make you just follow where I think Americans are- are- want to hold to that freedom, and thus it's harder to follow a directive - imperative given to you.

Emily McKenney 2:56

Can you describe the darkest period of the pandemic for you so far? And what has helped you through this time?

David McKenney 3:07

Well, I guess, in the spring about April, where they shut us down for like, six, eight weeks, that was hard, because you know, you want to do stuff, you want to get out, and we have so many things to do, and then you're not able to do that kind of work. So...

Emily McKenney 3:34

Is there anything you regret about the way you've dealt the pandemic so far?

David McKenney 3:43

[Pauses] Well probably if I had to do it all over again, there's some times that I didn't go to church, or didn't go out. And I probably would go out a little bit more. Because- because the way the - the virus is, it's an airborne virus, so it's the air you breathe. So it doesn't matter if you're just, you know, walking down the street, or you know, unless you're absolutely staying home all the time. You know, it's out there and you can get it.

Emily McKenney 4:24

But I guess being packed in a church that would affect, you know, the air you breathe and being in such close quarters?

David McKenney 4:32

Yeah, it's - it's maybe a little bit more of a risk. But overall, I think the risk reward is worth it.

Emily McKenney 4:42

Can you expand on that?

David McKenney 4:46

Well, how- how much risk are you willing to take to live your life? You know, if- if you communicate to the people these are the risks. They- you know that if you go out without a mask that you're more likely to get the virus or if you go out to an area that has more people, you're more likely to get the virus. But if you communicate and you educate the people of that, then you let them make that choice. You know, the only thing, and I understand the logic of it, is that, as the number of people who get the virus increases in a short amount of time, it overwhelms the medical system. And that's really, to me, the only reason for having any kind of a lockdown.

Emily McKenney 5:57

Let's move into some occupational questions. How has the pandemic affected your work routine?

David McKenney 6:05

Oh, quite a bit. Because I work with school districts. Both in the spring, when we shut down, we had to scramble just to get any kind of best effort education for those students during that time. Then in the summertime, with the virus continuing and stuff, we were able to plan for the fall and got- got a bunch of stuff done so that we could do remote learning. And now this fall, we were able to actually implement that and have that in the classroom that the students actually - some - some schools were using the same software in school as they would at home or remote. And almost all of them did it at least one day a week to train the students how to use the software and how to get on. And that really has helped the transition as we move again towards a - another lockdown. The students are more capable of doing that. So my work of getting that all set up and running. It was a tremendous amount of work, especially in August, when we had to move all the student data into that system. When you have 8,000 students and 10 school districts to move the data, that's very difficult to do.

Emily McKenney 7:45

Yeah. How do you think the teachers and the students in these districts have been handling the changes?

David McKenney 7:55

I think the students have handled it very well for the most part. They're- the interesting part- there's- you can see the difference between students who thrive with the in-person school atmosphere, and other students thrive with a online type environment. So that- that's interesting to see that. I think it's harder for the teachers because they have gone from being in front of their students doing things to have to teach in a totally different manner. And that's- that's a difficult task and having them do it in such a short amount of time. It's difficult.

Emily McKenney 8:40

I think you've mentioned before the challenges that the teachers have encountered and sometimes that can be a little combative.

David McKenney 8:50

Well, yeah, it's more probably the frustration part and the fear of the unknown, that makes it - that brings about the frustration, that combativeness of- of the environment. It's because they- they understand that the way that they're doing his schooling has to change. And it's quite a big change. And they're frustrated that they have to make that change in such a rapid- rapid chance and then getting the data and all that set up just so that they can use it was such a huge challenge that they really had no time to prepare for their classes.

Emily McKenney 9:47

Can you explain how your coworkers feel about the changes the pandemic has brought on your work?

David McKenney 9:56

Because I work with a lot of people who are not teachers...they're not face to face with the students anymore they're - they're administration and that kind of stuff. Our work has changed from a lot of face-to-face meetings and that kind of stuff to a lot of people working from home, working remote. And so you're using Zoom and other applications to do virtual meetings, which makes it a little bit less personal- personable. But we're getting used to it now. So it's- it's kind of normal again. But it's definitely different than- than what we're expecting- we would expect and have done in the past.

Emily McKenney 10:51

What kinds of lasting changes will the pandemic have on your profession?

David McKenney 10:58

Well, on the schools themselves, it's going to have a drastic change. When we went back to school this fall, I would say 30 to 35% of the students, initially, stayed home and did learning remote- remotely. But up until a month ago, probably 80% of those students went back to school. First of all, I think they noticed that, that remote schooling was difficult. And they also noticed that they didn't have the social part of it, which affected a lot of students. And yeah, so it was quite a- quite a drastic change.

Emily McKenney 11:57

Tell me about the areas where you feel your workplace has fallen short during the pandemic.

David McKenney 12:10

Well, one of the things that- that was one of the hardest and most frustrating part was moving to the online learning system. We were sold by the state saying that they were going to- here- here's the application that works and they had the plans in place and- and a bunch of the school districts out of 50, 60 of these or more school districts in the state went in and said, "Okay, use- we're going to use this software." Well come to find out, they did not have- they are definitely not

prepared for that kind of influx. They were not prepared for just teaching, you know, just getting it set up. And because of that, things definitely fell short. From the expectations that were there. And it was just a tremendous amount of work. Just to get it- to be able to get it to use. An example was getting the data out of the one- one system and put into their system. They had no idea how to do that. And it was actually our school district that said, "We need to automate this." And we spent almost a month writing scripts, and then writing programs basically to take the data and move it into their system automatically. And then we shared that with, like I said, about 40-50 different school districts in the state. And that's what really saved us. All of our districts - saved us so much time and effort to move the data. So...

Emily McKenney 14:24

What kind of programming languages did you use for that?

David McKenney 14:28

That was written in a script language called Perl.

Emily McKenney 14:34

Can you spell that for me?

David McKenney 14:35

P-E-R-L. And basically, it's- it's a language that's normally used for just special, small jobs that go out there and they'll start something or grab something real quick. But the- the main programmer had enough experience that he knew how to use that program to get into databases itself. And then what we did is took it and expanded that into a method that would grab the data from the main learning management system, or student information system, which is called Power School. And it would grab it from there and then we would import it into their system. So it was really quite complicated in getting that done. But what we did is our programming, and it was difficult on us, but literally saved hundreds and hundreds of hours for everyone else. Because they- they would have had to do it manually. There was no other process to do it.

Emily McKenney 15:58

That's very impressive.

David McKenney 16:00

So yeah, it was- it was very challenging.

Emily McKenney 16:05

Let's move into some bigger picture questions. Can you describe the kinds of changes you've noticed in the community? How restaurants, businesses, and so forth have changed?

David McKenney 16:19

Yeah, I mean, it's- it's quite a drastic change, especially in the restaurant industry, where you really- during much of the lockdown time, you couldn't even go in. So everything was curbside. Or if you went in, you would just grab takeout and- and- and leave at that point. So people obviously frequented the restaurants less, because it was you know, just the way it was. And then

I think long term what it is going to do is that it's going to change the way people visit restaurants and stuff in the future.

Emily McKenney 17:11

Can you expound on that?

David McKenney 17:15

Well, I think initially, it's- it's still going to take quite a bit of time for restaurants to get back to the way they - they were. I think long term that they will- the takeout kind of thing. Many restaurants did not do a lot of that service, where now they do a lot. I mean, that's how they're making it. So those services will really continue. But they will also grow- grow back into their in-person service, You know, the stores themselves, I would say many of them are drastically hit because people aren't going to the stores. They're buying it through Amazon or they're buying it online. And now a store that you really go to is the grocery store or the Walmart kind of thing. Or you pick up what you can't get online. Or something that you need quick. Also, like the home improvement stores, especially in the spring, are super busy because people had to stay home. So it's like, well, if I have to stay home, I'm gonna fix my house. And that's what they did. So that was- that was interesting to see that some of those stores actually increased their sales.

Emily McKenney 18:52

Yeah, speaking of businesses, like Walmart and grocery stores, what kinds of shortages have you noticed? And how did this make you feel when you saw those?

David McKenney 19:04

You know, toilet paper, that's obvious and, and paper towels, paper products, in general, were very scarce at the beginning. [Pauses] And if you go into stores, you know, the hand sanitizers were all gone. The- those kind of cleaning products were all gone, and they still are limited. By- by the summertime, most of that limitations had been lifted. But they're now going back again. The stores are picked over again, as people are going and hoarding stuff because they are now being forced back into their homes more. So, yeah, it's interesting to see the shortage of- of different items, an item that you would, would always be there wasn't there- wasn't available anymore. So you- you had to change your- your menu or what you're thinking about doing just because those items aren't there.

Emily McKenney 20:20

So thinking about us as a nation, how do you think America will have changed post-pandemic?

David McKenney 20:33

[Pauses] I think America has changed quite drastically that the people are willing to give up freedoms that they would have never thought of giving up in the past. But because of this, they're saying, okay, well, we can do this and they think- or we can give up this freedom. And I think long term, that that will continue. And- and other things as well, definitely- definitely think long term it's going to affect the church and some of the freedoms there that- that we have will not be available, long term. Freedom of speech with not only the pandemic, but the political landscape has changed drastically. I- even this week, we know that the tech giants were very much aware of- that they were limiting freedoms of speech. But they did it anyway to influence

different things that are going on to prove that they are - or to control the narrative that's out there. So...

Emily McKenney 22:07

Can you tell me what it was like to experience election season during a pandemic?

David McKenney 22:13

That was quite brutal.

Emily McKenney 22:17

[Chuckles] Yeah.

David McKenney 22:17

Just because of the, the negativeness of- and this polarizingness of the situation in the United States right now. The last election was bad. This one was horrible. And- and- the use of the pandemic as a political device to sway people's opinion where neither side was the cause or the- the reason why-, you know, there was a pandemic. So I mean- it's- it was quite a- yeah, interesting and- and terrible election season in my opinion.

Emily McKenney 23:24

When you say words like “horrible” and “terrible” what are you specifically referring to, besides the divisiveness and so forth?

David McKenney 23:38

Yeah. Because of the- the polarization between the two parties, you would see, you know, riots in the streets and people burning stuff down because of initially, because of what they said was race, and then they said it was because of the president and then they say it was because of other things. So there- the anarchy in the - in the country, the willingness to move towards a socialist environment. But I think mostly the just the total intolerance of anyone who didn't agree with a certain party or value system. Especially when it's the one party who says that we are tolerant, that is the most intolerant in my view. That's first of all hypocritical but it also just changed the - the landscape of our country in many ways and is still being affected right now.

Emily McKenney 25:07

How do you think this rioting is affecting public health?

David McKenney 25:14

[Pauses] Well, it's interesting that the government can say that everyone's on the lockdown, you have to stay in your homes, but then you can have 350,000 people in a riot and protesting this and that with no social distancing, with no mask, and they don't care. And they don't do anything about it. Rioting in Portland [Oregon], and Seattle [Washington], has gone on for literally months, on a daily basis and nothing is done about it. To me, that's- that just tells you how far our country has gone in that direction.

Emily McKenney 26:03

Well, let's switch to some lighter questions now. During quarantine, there have been several trends such as baking sourdough bread. Have you participated in any of these trends?

David McKenney 26:15

I think we probably made some bread. And I think there was a coffee thing there. So - but - I don't know what...

Emily McKenney 26:29

Banana bread maybe or...?

David McKenney 26:31

Maybe, I can't remember. But it's out there. Obviously cooking has - has changed a lot for people because they're inside and they're cooking a lot more. So the menus probably started out with peanut butter and jelly. And now it's, you know, something more than that. So those are the kind of things- the domestic things- for the most part, I think, have been more experienced that way. You know, from just how you meet how you have meetings, how you talk to people, and where before you would maybe talk- pick up the phone or use your cell phone. Now you're Zooming so you can see him. You're- you're doing meetings that way where you used to go to the meeting now it's- now it's- you're getting up and you have a meeting at eight o'clock, and you're in your pajamas and things like that. So...

Emily McKenney 27:39

Can you tell me about any unexpected surprises or joys you have encountered during this time?

David McKenney 27:50

Well, I won't say that I don't- I like working from home for the most part. It allows, again, some freedoms that you don't have when you have to get up and go to work all the time. Plus time spent traveling, which is nice that way. What other things...?

Emily McKenney 28:22

Maybe just more time spent with family or things like that...?

David McKenney 28:26

Yeah, I mean, yeah, you're- you're around people more in that sense of you're around your- your- family more. Which is- is good that way. You - again, it's more the domestic side of things I think that has grown- has grown a lot.

Emily McKenney 28:49

Do you feel like the home was maybe neglected pre-pandemic and now people are spending more time at home, they're improving it more, maybe they're baking more?

David McKenney 29:02

Yeah, I think the people, maybe have lost- lost the value of it. And now they're seeing that value again. You see that a lot in the trend of people moving out of the cities into the country. There's a lot more of that. Harbor Springs School District, you would think that with a pandemic schools

would go down; they actually increased by 25% this year with the number of students. So- so you can see the value of people getting out of the cities moving to a rural area. Yeah.

Emily McKenney 29:50

Yeah, I remember reading about that. I saw an article recently about a kind of a mass exodus from New York and you know other urban areas. And I guess that will have some long lasting impacts. What do you think about that?

David McKenney 30:06

Yeah, because people are- are not just saying, "Oh, we're just gonna be up there for a little while." They're buying- real estate's through the roof right now. And you can't find stuff that's not ready to be sold, you know, or there's not a- it's supply and demand and the supply is so low and the demand is so high right now. So- I- that's definitely an area that has benefited. But in the early parts, they- they were drastically down. You know, for the first five, six months of the year it was terrible. And then, now it's booming. So...

Emily McKenney 30:57

You mean real estate is booming?

David McKenney 30:58

Real estate. Yeah. Yeah. Other areas too have, at first, like construction was down, but now they're trying to catch up and they've been really busy that way. So...

Emily McKenney 31:14

Well, was there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered in this interview?

David McKenney 31:19

No, I think we've covered it pretty well.

Emily McKenney 31:21

Okay. Well, thank you for your time. And thank you for speaking with me today.

David McKenney 31:25

Oh, thank you very much.