

Transcript of Interview with Kyle Ballard by Lawson Miller

Interviewee: Kyle Ballard

Interviewer: Lawson Miller

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Location (Interviewee): North Augusta, South Carolina

Location (Interviewer): Tooele, Utah

Transcriber: Lawson Miller

Abstract: Kyle Ballard is active duty military in North Augusta, South Carolina. Kyle identifies as a gay man and uses the pronouns he and him. He has witnessed firsthand the federal government response to the pandemic as he works on a military base and was given a restriction of movement order after falling ill in March. Despite his illness, he was unable to get a Covid-19 test due to testing restriction at the time. He spends most of his time working at the military base and developing student government for Arizona State University's online campus. Kyle discusses the potential issues faced particularly by LGBTQ+ youth in the middle of the pandemic and his disappointment in the government response across all levels. He lives with his boyfriend Mason and recounts how it was difficult to not see him as much after the quarantine had ended. Kyle wishes the media would focus more on what other countries have done to successfully limit the spread of Covid-19.

Lawson Miller 00:00

Alright, can you - what is your name?

Kyle Ballard 0:07

My name is Kyle Ballard.

Lawson Miller 0:10

And where do you live?

Kyle Ballard 0:11

I live in North Augusta, South Carolina.

Lawson Miller 0:16

And how old are you, Kyle?

Kyle Ballard 0:17

I am 24.

Lawson Miller 0:20

Okay. And what kind of things do you do on a day to day basis?

Kyle Ballard 0:25

My life has pretty much been taken over by student government for Arizona State University online for the time being. But aside from that, you know, like, I read the news, I play with my dogs. I'll occasionally play some instruments, listen to music, you know, read some books that are related to work or school, the, the typical things.

Lawson Miller 0:53

Okay, and how do you identify?

Kyle Ballard 0:59

Is that just an open ended question or is it?

Lawson Miller 1:05

Yes. What do you... in relation to the LGBT community? Do you identify at all?

Kyle Ballard 1:12

Oh. I I identify as gay.

Lawson Miller 1:16

Okay.

Kyle Ballard 1:17

Male, he/him.

Lawson Miller 1:20

When did you first learn about COVID-19?

Kyle Ballard 1:24

I learned about COVID-19... oh gosh, it was either late January or early February that I first learned about it.

Lawson Miller 1:33

Okay, and what were your thoughts about it?

Kyle Ballard 1:38

I would say at the onset, it kind of reminded me of the Ebola outbreak, the most recent one that we had at least. It didn't really occur to me at the time that it could actually make it to the United States and cause as much damage as it had or that as it has now. So I wasn't really too concerned at the beginning. I

mean, it was unfortunate and I saw how many people were dying. But it just seemed like a minor new strain of the flu or something of the sort.

Lawson Miller 2:16

Okay, and what has concerned you most about the Covid-19 pandemic?

Kyle Ballard 2:24

Absolutely the United States government's response to the pandemic. It seems like it's been politicized. And especially in the election year that we're in, it's being used to benefit certain candidates, pushing the blame on the other party. Just a lack of accepting scientific knowledge, all these studies that have been put out by various countries and various scientists. It's been disgraceful. I mean, we've lost hundreds of thousands of lives because of it.

Lawson Miller 3:11

What's your perspective on... or what unique issues do you think the LGBTQ community has faced as a result of the pandemic, if any?

Kyle Ballard 3:24

That is an interesting question. Honestly, I'm not too sure on that. Like how to how to respond to that. I mean, if I'm basing it off of basic health care that LGBTQ+ people receive in the United States. I mean, there's a there's a lot of stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ communities still. And there's, you know, and and in our youth, you still see it it's very prevalent that children are being kicked out of their homes because their parents or their guardians don't agree with the lifestyle. So they disowned them. So then you have just, it's it's a large population of homeless youth or underfunded, non privileged children who don't receive health care to begin with. So then whenever you throw this disease on top of that, they're not able to get the care that they need, they're not able to go get the testing. It's possible that they're not even aware of the proper measures to take to ensure that they're not exposed to the disease or possibly exposing other people to it. So that's the, the largest impact that I can think of.

Lawson Miller 4:49

Have you noticed anything like in particular, in terms of the way that the LGBTQ community has responded to the pandemic?

Kyle Ballard 4:58

Yes, I have, and I'm, I'm not sure if this is a biased answer or even a prejudiced one, but most LGBTQ+ people that I know or I'm aware of identify more so on the liberal spectrum, as opposed to a more conservative one. And the general liberal response to this disease has been trust the scientists follow the CDC guidelines, wear your mask, stay at home if you have to, don't gather with large groups. And for the large majority of LGBTQ+ people that I have noticed, it's, it's been along those lines, but of course, I've also seen the outliers where, you know, I'll be on Twitter or Instagram and you'll see a certain user

calling out somebody for going to a party. So like Ozark and I think it was Arkansas that was a big one where they were calling out people or even Fire, Fire Island Pines in New York. It's a very large, gay destination. And in the middle of the pandemic just a few months ago, and I think it's still happening now you'll see all these large parties where it's mostly cis [cisgender] gay men, gathering in large crowds, and even if they've known that they've been exposed to the disease, they're like, "oh, well, I'm, you know, I'm not contagious, or it's really not that big of a concern." So I've seen both sides of it. But like I said, I feel for the, the large part of what I've seen, it's mostly been the LGBTQ+ community, kind of showing the cishet [cisgender, heterosexual] community, how it should be done.

Lawson Miller 6:55

How have the people around you in your personal life responded to the pandemic?.

Kyle Ballard 7:02

So for the large part, and this could be because I'm in the military. So I do want to make it clear that these reactions, these opinions are mine and they do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Department of Defense or Department of the Navy. For large part because of the restrictions that were under, most of the people that I know have been abiding by it, you know, we're not gathering in groups larger than 10. We're maintaining social distancing when appropriate, we're wearing masks when appropriate. We're doing a pretty good job as opposed to the community around us where South Carolina and Georgia are both spiking in cases. And you know, even still, we'll go out into town and we'll see people not wearing their masks or like right up on me even though I'm very clearly wearing a mask, which should signify that maybe I don't want people that I don't know around me possibly infecting me with this disease. But like I said, for the most part, everybody that I know is abiding by this, there have been a few outliers, and I just don't interact with them.

Lawson Miller 8:10

Do you feel like COVID-19 has impacted your mental health in any ways?

Kyle Ballard 8:15

Yes, I do. Because of COVID-19, our work schedule has been modified. The amount of people going to work has been modified. So personally, my my workload has, which had already even pre COVID-19 had been too much for one person. It's gone up even more. It's to the point now where I dread Sunday's more than I ever have before because I know I'm about to have to go to work the next day and get as much work done as I can. It's just it's mentally exhausting. I'm tired. I need a break, but that's not currently an option. I still have to keep working. I still have to keep filling in for co workers who haven't been able to come in for their various reasons. And there's really it just feels like there's not much that I can do about it right now. So it's been a cycle of trying to de-stress, detox on the weekends and then absorb it all again through the work week.

Lawson Miller 9:22

Have you gotten sick at all during the pandemic?

Kyle Ballard 9:25

I have actually, yes. So March 16th, was the first day that I started to feel sick. In the Southeastern United States though that's right when all the pollen comes out, I have horrible allergies. So I attributed it to that but by about two days later, it felt completely different. So I notified my supervisors at work and my military chain of command, and they sent me home pending further guidance. I was told - actually, should I stop there, or is there going to be more questions about this?

Lawson Miller 10:04

You can keep going.

Kyle Ballard 10:06

Okay. So I was told to wait for their guidance. At the time in like mid-March of this year tests were not widely available. We... still I mean, even though we're not sure now, we definitely were not sure how it was spreading, to whom it was spreading, how much of a risk it posed to certain groups at the time, we were operating under the assumption that "oh, if you're very young, or you're very old, or you have these specific, pre existing conditions, that you're more at risk." I think it's changed a bit now because we've seen more and more younger people being put on ventilators or even dying. So, but like I said at the time, I did not meet any of those pre existing criteria. I'm young. I was not considered high risk. So I was not able to get a test for COVID on the or at the hospital on the base that I'm assigned to. So I was then told by my chain of command, "well, you know, you can try to get one from a hospital out in town." But that ran into its own complications where the hospitals in town were effectively telling you the same thing. And then on top of that, I was under a restriction of movement order, from my commanding officer telling me that I could not leave my house for anything. I could not go into town for groceries, I could not the most that I could do is if I started to die, I could call 911. But my symptoms got worse and worse. I was laid up in bed for a bit, and it turned into 28 days of me being quarantined in my house with my boyfriend, Mason.

Lawson Miller 11:55

Okay, has the pandemic impacted your job or employment status in any other ways?

Kyle Ballard 12:04

It has not affected my employment status. I've been lucky compared to other people where I'm under a contract with the military. Unless I do something wrong, I'm not going to get fired in this certain time period. So I've been maintaining all of my pay and benefits throughout all of this. And of course, I've been working throughout all of this as well. But my coworkers, whether they're high risk, or they've gotten sick, they've been in and out. Like I said, there's been a modified schedule, so that has changed things as well. But as far as affecting me, it really hasn't too, too much.

Lawson Miller 12:44

Has the pandemic impacted the jobs or employment status of people that you know?

Kyle Ballard 12:50

Yes, I do have a few friends from back home, which is actually an hour up the road in Columbia, South Carolina, who have lost their jobs. Most surprisingly to me was two of them worked at the University of South Carolina, but their jobs were no longer relevant when the campus shut down. And they were not giving teleworking options, so they just lost their jobs outright.

Lawson Miller 13:18

How do you cope with the pandemic on a day to day basis?

Kyle Ballard 13:24

At first, it was just taking it a day at a time. But I feel like that's slowly progressed into and maybe this is just the military culture of making a joke about everything or as we say, embrace the suck. It's just turned into making a joke about it. Because, unfortunately, with the current administration, we never know what is going to happen. We never know when a vaccine is going to be developed when the general population of the United States are going to start practicing these procedures that the CDC has mandated, or not mandated, but recommended. So it's, we take it as a comment, we try to laugh about it when we can. And that kind of keeps our spirits up a little.

Lawson Miller 14:13

In what ways has COVID-19 affected your relationships with your friends, fr- family, or significant other, if at all?

Kyle Ballard 14:21

Well, at the very beginning of it, Mason and I were both quarantined in the house together for 28 days, so we saw a lot of each other. But it wasn't bad. I mean, before we were working, not opposite schedules, but we were definitely offset a bit from each other. So we got to spend a lot more time together, which I enjoyed. And as he actually returned to work, I noticed that I was - I don't know if I would call it separation issues, but I was definitely more upset that I wasn't seeing him as much as I had been before. But I would say that we've definitely grown closer. My friends for the first part of this pandemic, the guidance was that I couldn't see anybody. We weren't allowed to have visitors, we weren't allowed to have guests. You could only go to work, to the grocery store, and home. It's since relaxed a bit where we can do outdoor activities together. Provided social distancing is maintained, we're allowed to have a certain bubble of people that we can meet with. So that's definitely gotten better.

And I don't feel like my relationships with them have necessarily been affected that much because there are so many different ways we can communicate. We can use Zoom to have little party nights. We call each other, text each other we'll do face times randomly. But I would say the biggest effect has definitely

been on family. Thankfully for me, my family falls within a certain limit that the Commanding General our base has defined for having visitors. So I'm I'm able to see my family at about the same rate that I was before, but Mason, my partner, his family is from Salt Lake City, Utah. So if they were to come, it would completely throw off everything. We would have to take a certain amount of leave, our personal leave days to quarantine for two weeks from the date that they arrive. And then any leave on top of that the time that we wanted to spend with them if we even want to risk them coming from Utah to Georgia, or South Carolina, where our numbers are so high. So we haven't seen them in over a year now. And it's a minor effect on me but definitely a larger effect on Mason because his family's important and you can definitely see it in his mood.

Lawson Miller 16:52

What has been your primary source of news during the pandemic?

Kyle Ballard 16:57

I would say that it's been Reuters, BBC and CNN. I've historically stuck to those news sources because I find them to be less biased than other alternatives. And then, of course, I get updates at work from the government as well. But yes, I would say those three primarily.

Lawson Miller 17:27

What do you think are important issues that the media may or may not be covering?

Kyle Ballard 17:34

I feel like it isn't covered enough that other countries have been doing things that are effective, and that the United States is completely ignoring that. I hate to use New Zealand as an example, especially since they just had a minor outbreak again, but they made it 102 days without any transmission of COVID-19 in their country, because from the outstart their Prime Minister. She shut down the country she enforced masks. She told people to stay home. And the people there are smart enough to listen to scientists. I feel like that maybe that that point of view isn't pressed as hard as it should be, especially by news agencies such as Fox News, which have again and again had people on their program stating that this is a hoax, that democrats are doing this during election year to harm President Trump's chances of reelection pulling in these people with yes, medical degrees but with just outlandish beliefs that you can't scientifically prove in any way there's no research to support it. But they're, they're pressing that when I think they should be focusing more on "okay, hey, look, Vietnam is super effective with this. This is what they're doing. This is what America should be doing. New Zealand is doing this we should do this. Oh look, Israel opened up their schools and everyone got infected. Let's not do that. And instead they're pushing the exact opposite. So I feel like we should be focusing on the scientific proof what other countries are doing and bringing America to that.

Lawson Miller 19:16

How do you feel about how your local and state government have responded to the pandemic?

Kyle Ballard 19:22

To be candid, my governor is an idiot, as well as the governor of the state that I am stationed in, which is Georgia. So Brian Kemp, the governor of Georgia, was quoted as saying, "I was unaware that non symptomatic people could transmit the disease." That has been effectively stated from the onset of this pandemic. So the fact that the man in charge of keeping Georgians safe was either willingly or unwillingly ignorant to that fact, I think that can give you an idea of how the situation is here. There Brian Kemp and Henry McMaster, the Governor of South Carolina, are both pushing to reopen the schools threatening to hold funding from those schools that aren't offering in person alternatives to online school. They're opening up restaurants and beaches and bars in direct confrontation with what the CDC is saying, with what our numbers are saying. So I do not think that they're handling it well at all. I do not think that they actually care about anything other than their elections, because they know that people will be upset if they're not able to maintain the normal life that they had for COVID. But it's not really an option. So they're doing what is against the people's interests in order to elevate their own. I don't agree with how they've been handling anything at all.

Lawson Miller: 20:55

How do you feel about how the federal government has responded to the pandemic?

Kyle Ballard 21:01

I feel like that's a very broad question because there's so many different parts of federal government. I feel like the CDC and the National Institute of Health, their hands have kind of been tied because yes, they do answer to the president and from the onset, the President has been, you know, xenophobically, and racistly calling this virus, "the Wuhan flu" or "the Chinese virus" and blaming it all on them without realizing like, "hey, it's already in our country, here's the effects that it's causing on us." Withholding ventilators from states because they're not handling the crisis the same way that he thinks it should be held, changing numbers, taking the reporting requirements away from the hospital to the state to directly to the White House. It's, it's suppression at its finest. I mean, I feel like the federal government is putting out the information that they want to be known. They're changing CDC guidance to meet their own administration's... Oh what is the word I'm looking for? I'm blanking. Their agenda to meet the current administration's agenda. So I feel like there have been good things. But at the same time, the amount of bad that the current administration the federal government has done, it's only exacerbating the situation. So they're handling it poorly. But again, all that traces back to who's in charge, who do they have to answer to? And unfortunately, the President has not really made COVID a priority of his it's been a farce, a conspiracy, it's not actually that bad. So I, it's, it's not been handled well either.

Lawson Miller 22:50

How do you compare the pandemic with other major events in your lifetime?

Kyle Ballard 22:57

I would say and maybe this is because of my age, now compared to other things like natural disasters or 9/11. This has definitely have the largest effect and the most noticeable effect because this is nationwide. While things like Hurricane Katrina happened, and everybody kind of saw what happened or 9/11 and everybody kind of saw what happened. Everyone is experiencing this together. So we're all very familiar with "no mask, no service," we're familiar with, "oh, you have a cough or gastrointestinal issues like you need to call into work and not come in." And by far this has been the longest lasting event where I can see everything happening. So I would say this is definitely the most defining major event of my lifetime.

Lawson Miller 23:46

What ways do you think the issues faced by the LGBTQ+ communi- people have been altered or even exacerbated by the pandemic, if at all?

Kyle Ballard 24:03

Going back to homeless youth. I think that it's definitely made it harder for those people to get the health care that they need to maybe have access to shelter that they need. Because I mean, if you're homeless, you're already at a disadvantage when it comes to your personal health. So if you're showing any symptoms, at least here in South Carolina, in Georgia, you're not permitted entry to the shelters. You're not even supposed to go to hospitals, they have to come out and screen you first. So I feel like maybe it's kind of put a roadblock for those people. But anything more than that, I really can't be too sure.

Lawson Miller 24:44

Do you feel like your perspective or the perspective of the LGBTQ+ community has changed at all, after the pandemic?

Kyle Ballard 24:56

I wouldn't say as a large but again referencing those people that are going out and partying, those large gatherings and Fire Island Pines. I would say that at the beginning, I wasn't really seeing stuff like that. But as it's gone on further and further, yeah, there's a large and it's primarily been white cis [cisgender] gay males that are just ignoring everything because their personal life is more important than those of the the people around them. So I, I feel like as the community we're doing really well at the beginning. And then there's this certain offset of the community that have been ignoring guidance so they can attempt to get back at some sense of normalcy, which just isn't an option right now.

Lawson Miller 25:48

Alright, Kyle, thank you for your time.

Kyle Ballard 25:52

Yeah, thank you for asking me to do this.