

Transcript of Interview with Helen Farrar by Joshua Farrar

Interviewee: Helen Farrar

Interviewer: Joshua Farrar

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Location (Interviewee):

Location (Interviewer):

Abstract: Oral History of Teacher, Wife, and Mother, Helen Farrar about her experience during the pandemic while her husband was activated on the COVID-19 Relief Mission with the Texas Army National Guard.

Joshua Farrar 0:03

Hello, everyone, my name is Josh Farrar, and this is my wife Helen Farrar. So I'm here interviewing my lovely wife about her experiences when I was activated on the COVID-19 relief mission. So a little bit of background, I'm in the Texas Army National Guard. And I was told on April 17, that I'd be activated starting April 18, with the Texas Army National Guard, in order to go down to Houston, Texas, where I served doing COVID-19 testing for three months, where we went into meat packaging plants. We also went to nursing homes, assisted living centers, and several other COVID-19 testing centers throughout this period. So obviously, I was given about 24 hours notice if that before I needed to report with the military, and this took me out of my wife's sphere, with very little notice, and in the midst of a global pandemic. So I wanted to interview her so we get a little bit of background on what her experience was during this time. So, Helen, what was it like having your husband activated on continuing orders throughout this time period? Was it difficult with the girls?

Helen Farrar 1:15

Yes, it was certainly difficult. Probably the worst part of it was the uncertainty of not knowing when Josh would be back. And just because it was like, this is the end date, and then it would be extended and extended and extended. So that was definitely difficult. And of course, at the beginning, it was especially difficult because we had both been home together for about a month, since the schools had been shut down. And so that had been really awesome. Really fun to enjoy the beautiful weather home together. So having Josh removed really stank. And- and so just the transition period, especially was really difficult.

Joshua Farrar 1:55

So who all did you have living at the house during this time? Who all were you responsible for?

Helen Farrar 2:02

I had my two daughters living with us, almost three years old, and almost one year old. And I was responsible for them. Also living here was my brother Peter, and my sister-in-law, Kim, and Catherine was living here too at that point. I think it- when Josh first left, my sister, my brother, and my sister-in-law were all living with us. And then throughout Josh's absence, pretty much one by one, the rest of them left as well. Except I still have my daughters, of course.

Joshua Farrar 2:37

So you also work as a high school teacher? How did you balance all these different factors in your life, given the pandemic? How'd you factor in teaching on top of all this?

Helen Farrar 2:48

So thanks be to God, the expectations were greatly lowered for what teaching entailed. So I was able to do pretty much everything I needed to during naptime, which is about a two hour period in the afternoon. So I would have to sit there and record a lecture, and then post it online, make assignments online, and do grading, and as well as being available for the students to come on for tutorials if they wanted to. Hardly anyone ever came, maybe like three students in the course of the two and a half months that we were all online. So that wasn't as demanding as it could have been. Also, luckily, there's another teacher who teaches the same subject as me. So she and I were able to help each other out. So we really only had to do half the work. So it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. The expectations were pretty low, so that was nice. But it was just all during nap time. And that was difficult because that is not guaranteed; nap time is never guaranteed. So there are multiple lectures that I was recording that featured background noises of children.

Joshua Farrar 4:00

So when you say tutorial, what's a tutorial?

Helen Farrar 4:03

So I would have to be online on GoogleMeets for an hour every day. Just like literally just sitting there, the students would have the link to the Meet as well. And so if they had questions on an assignment or on a topic, they could join the GoogleMeet and ask their questions. It's like office hours.

Joshua Farrar 4:23

So you have the teach, watch the girls, help manage some of your in laws and brothers and sisters. Was there not childcare services available during this time? Who was watching the kids before this happened? And did that not continue?

Helen Farrar 4:42

That's a good question. Probably [laughs] Josh was watching the kids during this period... I'm rewinding in my brain right now. [both laugh] I really don't remember... Oh, I remember we had some college students who were watching our kids. Yep, which I actually managed, I would be the one who would contact them and make sure they showed up and stuff. So yes, I was actually in charge of this even though it slipped my mind. But so, yeah, we pretty much obviously we weren't going to keep paying them to watch our kids if we were home once the schools were shut down, so I'm sure there was maybe stuff available. I know our neighbor was still sending their kid to daycare, at least towards the end of the summer. But yeah, we were watching the kids. And that was good for us. They saved us money, and I got to spend time with my babies.

Joshua Farrar 5:37

So you weren't- the biggest worry was money- money, monetarily speaking, it wasn't worry that these people would be a vector to bring COVID-19 into the household?

Helen Farrar 5:48

No. [laughs] No, not at all. Yeah, I mean, Josh was literally working with the COVID people and stuff. And we went and visited him every weekend. So... every weekend that we were able to,

Joshua Farrar 6:04

So you went and visited me? Oh, yes, I remember. So do you think that that was something that in retrospect, you wouldn't have done? Given your knowledge on COVID-19? Or do you think that...

Helen Farrar 6:18

Like that I thought it was too dangerous?

Joshua Farrar 6:20

Yeah, maybe?

Helen Farrar 6:21

No, no, I think it's dumb. No, it was definitely worth it to visit Josh. We would have stayed with him the whole time, except that he was in a hotel room. And I mean, it was a really nice hotel room. But there's just too much gear and setup and routine with the kids that it wasn't worth it to be there all the time. But it was definitely worth it to visit on the weekends, go swimming at the pool, eat in the lobby. And you know, eating in the lobby is better, because then we didn't have to clean up as much after the kids. And so, yes, explore the hotel, touch all the buttons in the elevator and stuff.

Joshua Farrar 7:08

So when you say dumb, what do you mean by that? I'm sure it's not your full statement on COVID. But what has been your experience in dealing with it?

Helen Farrar 7:16

I think it is blown out of proportion. I think that the most negative effect that, at least the people in my sphere, including my students, now that we're back at school, I think the biggest negative effect is the loss of income and jobs. That was something that at the hotel when Josh and his crew were leaving, the housekeepers who we had gotten to know a little bit and talk to regularly, they were really sad that they were leaving, because they were all going to get laid off once the soldiers left. So I think that the worst impact of COVID was certainly the economic impact. And for my students as well, again, thanks be to God, we did not suffer negatively, economically, but I think that again, for the people that I interact with the most, that was the biggest concern, and the isolation. And just the loss of all structure and routine. Also, I think that was a big negative impact for my students and their families as well. Again, going back to my students coming on tutorials in the spring, I would have a student come on, maybe I called home and was like, "Hey, your student is failing, they need to do these test corrections, they need to come on to tutorials", and they would come on, and it was, you know, at home, terrible internet connection, five siblings in the background. They're all like, waiting for their turn on the one computer with the crummy internet connection. And it was just obviously really difficult for these students... for these students to do that, and even other students unable to come on because now that they're home from school, they've had to pick up some extra work because mom and dad have had their hours cut. And you know, so it's not like them being quarantined was isolating them and keeping them safe from the pandemic, it was just removing structure, removing meals, regular reliable meals from their lives. And yeah, so that was definitely negative for them way more, in my opinion, than the virus itself.

Joshua Farrar 9:38

So, we talked a little bit about the societal effects, then, what was the societal effects on you specifically, with the girls here? Were you able to get out and interact with others? Or were you stuck here?

Helen Farrar 9:52

The biggest blessing of COVID was that I got to know my neighbor, two doors down, really well. And like I said, it was March, gorgeous weather, so we were both outside a bunch, they have two little girls about the same age as our daughters. So we made some great friends and that's such a blessing. We still spend time- they actually watch our daughters this semester now that we're back at work, Josh and I, and we visit them regularly, you know, have game nights and stuff. So I am so blessed to have Erica and her- her family as a resource for me during COVID with Josh gone, sometimes feeling really lonely myself or not lonely even so much as just alone with all the burdens of parenting. And so having her to spend time with to have adult conversation with for our girls to interact with each other, that was really a huge blessing. And I'm... so in a way, my social life flourished during quarantine, I went from zero friends to one friend, so that was pretty exciting. Though a huge negative was that the churches were closed. And that was- that is a huge part of our life. And so Josh and I had recently joined a Bible study, and we were really excited about it, finally getting a little more involved at our church outside of the liturgy itself, and then that was shut down. So that really stank. Yeah, and not being able to go to Mass was really sad.

Joshua Farrar 11:30

What is liturgy?

Helen Farrar 11:32

Mass.

Joshua Farrar 11:33

What is mass?

Helen Farrar 11:34

The service, but service isn't really the right word, because we're not performing a service. We're celebrating a liturgy. A liturgy.

Joshua Farrar 11:45

So going to church on Sunday?

Helen Farrar 11:47

Going to church on Sunday, yes.

Joshua Farrar 11:50

All right. So we've talked about your time as a teacher, we talked about your time interacting with friends in the community in your time with me gone and visiting me. What would you say, given the last nine months of COVID at this point, would be the biggest continuing negative from it, either from your interactions with friends, family, or students? And then where do you think we go from here with COVID? What change would you like to see?

Helen Farrar 12:24

I think that it's hard to say the biggest negative. Personally, I'm disappointed that the dance halls aren't open yet because I would love to go out and go dancing. And I think it's silly that they're closed since it's not like, you're forced to go dancing. And so if you're an at risk person, you're being forced to go dancing, and you might catch COVID. If you're worried about it just don't go. And, and also, it's school. Lately, my biggest frustration is the sneeze guards, the blast shields that put everyone in an isolation cubicle where it makes it difficult for me to see them so I can't read faces. I'm like, scrunching down and like looking around, falling over and stuff trying to catch any glimmer of understanding or confusion in the students' eyes. They can't see the board as well. It's really redundant because they're all wearing masks anyways. So I really hate the sneeze guards. I think it was probably a waste of money. And, and I don't think they're very helpful. What was the question again? I feel like I'm getting off topic.

Joshua Farrar 13:40

Oh, what changes would you like to see from there?

Helen Farrar 13:45

I mean, I'd like everything to go back to how it was before, perhaps with more cautious screening. So if a student has symptoms, they have to go home or something, you know, being a little more proactive with sending home sick students because schools have always been a cesspool for disease. So maybe, you know, we- we could stand to be a little cleaner and stuff but

I don't think that it has to be isolation chambers and masks and sanitizing and gloves all the time. So I'd like more normalcy with that. I'd like all the students back at school because with a few exceptions, there are certainly some students who are very self-motivate, but there are many who are not. And they opt for the at home option so that they can go shopping during the day or sleep in. There have been countless times where I've called at like 10:30, 11:00, noon, and you know, talk to a parent and, "Oh is so and so there" and "Oh, yeah, let me go wake them up first." It's like, you know if the parents- if the parents are responsible to bring this children to school during normal times, I think they should be responsible for holding them accountable for online learning as well. And that's just not happening. So I think the best solution to that would be having the students on campus. And, yes, so I wish everything were opened up again, maybe with still more options. So if you are at risk, you're regularly coming in contact with people with comorbid-comorbidities, or you're just, you know, scared of it, then you should maybe be given more leeway to avoid interaction. But I don't think it should be mandated.

Joshua Farrar 15:41

Yes, that was what I was gonna ask you in the closing question. I know that you aren't trying to minimize the death and suffering that have come from this pandemic. Just trying to minimize the continued suffering that comes from the after-effects and side-effects of the pandemic. So you kind of answered that anyway. So that concludes all of my questions. Thank you for being with us again, Helen Farrar, Josh Farrar here, talking about Helen's experience raising two kids, a couple of young 20 year olds in the household as well. And doing that while working a full-time job in the midst of a pandemic with a husband gone on a military relief mission. Quite a task. So talk to you all later.