

Interviewee: Ashley Kiley
Interviewer: Melanie A. Schmidt
Date: December 8, 2021
Format: Video recording, Zoom

Location of interview: Menomonie, Wisconsin
Transcriber: Melanie A. Schmidt
Additional Transcription Equipment used: Otter.ai
Project in association with: University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Abstract:

Ashley Kiley lives in Oakland, WI, and currently works at Black Hawk Park, La Crosse, Wisconsin. In this interview, Ashley discusses how COVID-19 has affected her life, including her work, family life, and mental health. She shares what it has been like to work as a park ranger and hurricane relief worker during the pandemic, and how the pandemic has affected people she knows. She discusses the implementation of COVID-19 procedures in spring and fall of 2020, and touches on the political arguments over masks, and how the hierarchy of the Department of Defense tried to stem the spread of the virus.

Melanie Schmidt 00:03

Okay, so my name is Melanie Schmidt, and I will be interviewing Ashley Kiley. I'll go ahead and let us start with introducing yourself. Ashley, could you inform me of today's date for the archives?

Ashley Kiley 00:20

Today is December 8 of 2021.

MS 00:24

Okay. And do you mind sharing any demographic information about yourself: such as race, ethnicity, your age, or gender identity?

AK 00:35

Sure. I am a 37 year old, white female. I am married and I have one child.

MS 00:44

Okay. Give me one moment, it looks like we're having a little bit of lag. I have a feeling its because of the weather, but it should be fine. Hopefully, crossing our fingers. Also, beyond that, what is your job status?

AK 01:03

I am a full time federal government employee for the Department of Defense.

MS 01:10

Okay, and is- there any other important information you would like to share about yourself in your identity?

AK 01:21

Not that I can think of. [laughter]

MS 01:23

Okay, that sounds good. What are the primary things you do on a day to day basis, for example: like your duties, extracurricular activities, family obligations?

AK 01:37

Sure, so I'll start with work first. I am a natural resource specialist, which is just another way of saying a park ranger. And the main parts of my job are to balance use in the park and protecting the resources that we have. So one of the things that I always tell people is, everything that we do falls into three categories. We protect the park from people, we protect people from the park, and we protect people from people. So everything that we do pretty much falls into that. So my actual day to day depends on who is in the park and what they're doing. But I am kind of the face of the Corps of Engineers. When we have visitors here. I represent the federal government in the Corps of Engineers, and enforce our federal rules and regulations as well as providing just basic visitor assistance. As far as at home, I get up in the morning, or goes to public school, so I make sure she's getting out the door on time and has brushed her hair and teeth and all that jazz. My husband works from home. So he usually is not up in the morning. Um, and yeah, in the evenings, we're usually at home dinner, normal stuff, go for walks with my daughter, that kind of stuff.

MS 03:04

That sounds lovely, actually. Thank you for sharing that. Um, um, where do you generally live? And what was it like to live there before the pandemic?

AK 03:18

Okay, sure. So I live in a town of just under 5000 people. And it is in south eastern Wisconsin. And the town that I live in, despite its size, it is very active. There's always stuff going on in the community get together, like just, it's it's an active place. It's a surprisingly young town. And I think that's because of the schools. We have a private Waldorf school, we have a public Montessori and we have regular public school. So people, younger families tend to move here specifically for the school options. So there's just always a lot going on.

MS 04:06

Okay, that sounds like a pretty busy town, then. Do you mind sharing me what town you're from?

AK 04:12

Sure. I'm from- Well, I live in for Oakland currently.

MS 04:16

Okay. Okay. I haven't been there yet. But that sounds pretty lovely. Um, so kind of going now cyber and into the actual pandemic. And we'll- so we'll start with the beginning since it's still currently going on. So when did you first learn about COVID-19?

AK 04:34

Oh, that- that one broke up. Can you say that again?

MS 04:38

Yes. When did you first learn about COVID-19?

AK 04:43

Oh, I was at work and I kind of perpetually check the news. When I'm at work, just during downtime. And I saw that it was- it was trending and for whatever reason I just latched on to it. My husband actually teased me because it's like the most informed I've ever been on one subject that was just like, consuming at all. So, I was at work, and I knew that it was probably going to turn into something bigger just after talking to one of my best friends who's a nurse. She kind of said, you know, this could this could probably turn into something. So almost immediately, like within the first couple of days of knowing. I kind of prep some of my work because I knew that we would likely be doing something different.

MS 05:32

Interesting. Was this an early 2020? Like, February or?

AK 05:41

Yeah, I want to say February or March. It might have been March.

MS 05:45

Okay, so somewhere around that time. So, thank you for letting me know about your thoughts. How did your- How has your thoughts changed since the first occurrence of these cases in the United States?

AK 05:59

Hmm. I thought this would be over a lot sooner. Um, you know, I did probably 75% telework. Up until our recreation season that starts mid April. And we got delayed opening because we weren't quite sure what we were going to do. And so I guess it was just a whole lot of uncertainty because my position is so public facing. I talk with people every single day. And those people

come from all over the place, and I know nothing about them. So there's a little bit of unease of like, how we were going to move forward as a public agency, public park, and what our role was going to be, and how we are going to be protected. So I would say, at first, it was kind of like, you know, it was novel. It's like, oh, there's something, something big happening. And- and then from there, it's kind of like: oh, no, oh, we actually have to, like, live in this and work in this. So, it transferred pretty quickly to just a lot of feelings of unknown-kind-of-nervousness.

MS 07:12

Okay. For that case- what you said, you mentioned some nervousness. What were some of those concerns that made you nervous? Initially?

AK 07:26

Sure. So I saw on social media, and just in general on the news, that people genuinely fell into two camps: those who were taking the COVID Seriously and following any right recommendations that were coming out and those that just immediately off the bat was like “fake news.” And knowing that we work with all sorts of different kinds of people, I had no way of knowing which camp they fell into. And that, you know, it's not something that I can ask them, most of my conversations are rather casual with them. So, just not knowing what the other people were doing, and knowing that I, still, had to interact with them.

MS 08:13

That makes sense. So going on from there, were you surprised by any of the occurrences or lack of actions that were happening? And why? Why were you surprised?

AK 08:26

I would say, as far as work goes, I was surprised that as a government agency, they were very slow to tell us what to do. And that- that was just kind of frustrating because we all have our own ideas of what we wanted to do. But coming from the Department of Defense, we really needed to follow the chain of command. And it just took a really long time for things to come out.

AK 08:59

And it just, I don't know, there's just so much uncertainty for so long.

AK 09:08

And then as far as personal life: I mentioned, you know, one of my best friends is a nurse. We- we actually had a party plan for our house. The weekend after all of this was announced. And I called her I was like: should we be doing this? I don't know. Like, you know, they're, they're saying no large gatherings. And she said, I doubt is here yet. And this is going to be the last time we're gonna be able to do this for a very long time. Let's, let's just do it! I was like, okay, and sure enough, she was right. We we didn't have another get together until after our friends were vaccinated. And so it just within the last couple of months, we started having social gatherings again at our house. So yeah, it was- it was isolating. Yeah!

MS 09:59

Um, do you have any- afterwards having the party, did you have any occurrences where somebody brought up that they had caught COVID and you had to figure out what to do from there?

AK 10:10

No, luckily, that was so early into it that I don't even know that there was any cases in Wisconsin. And if there was, it was just a couple because I was, like I said, I was absorbing everything there was in the news. So, I knew that since we were at the beginning, we were probably going to be okay. But it still made me- made me feel awkward just because of the optics of it, knowing that, like some of this information had come out, and we still chose to move forward with having some of our friends over.

MS 10:42

Okay. I can see that going to the information, you said, you're very absorbed into what's going on. What were some of those primary sources that you were watching, listening to, or reading?

AK 10:59

So my general go to is usually public radio or the BBC. That's just I listen to public radio a lot. So it's just a source that I'm familiar with and I trust. I'm also on my phone, just my News, the news app on my iPhone, just to click through different things. And I like doing that because I can look at different news sources. You know, I can compare what NBC is saying to Fox News and, and kind of gather what's common in them and what isn't. So, I would say that I was kind of pulling from a lot of different things, but my primary would be public radio.

MS 11:42

Okay. Thank you for sharing that, as the world like learned about the initial virus, especially from the outbreak in China in the late March, you know, 2020. Do you remember about the federal response between Dr. Fauci and CDC, as he is a CDC head, and the Trump administration? And did you have any opinions at that time? From the information coming out?

AK 12:13

Yes. Um, so I come from a family of people who are involved in science and medicine. My mom's a pharmacist, my brother runs some form of medical lab. And my dad, my dad's an engineer, but he's also an EMT. So um, I was, I was kind of horrified at the interactions between Fauci and Trump and just knowing that, you know, Fauci was our, our head guy, you know, he's the one who does these things. It just kind of blew my mind that he was just so discredited. And honestly, it got so upset that I even if I would read about, you know, some of the press conferences and stuff, I would go back and find the videos just to like, watch the interaction of how Fauci was professional in hearing all of this kind of garbage, and how unprofessional Trump was! So to me, that was kind of amusing and horrifying.

MS 13:24

Okay, yeah. Um, did you have any speculations and dynamics going on, as you said that you're rewatching them? Did you have any? Was there a reason why, beyond that, that you would want to watch it? Or was it just that shock value?

AK 13:46

Um, I would say a lot of it was just the shock value. And I found it very just interesting how Fauci was able to hold himself together and still respond without it being personal because it wasn't personal. It's a science based thing. Um, so yeah, I would say just kind of watching the interaction. And honestly, like, most of what Trump does is just like, like, you read the transcript, and you can't understand it. So you got to watch it, because he doesn't make sense all the time.

MS14:20

Okay, yeah. [simultaneous laughter] So has your sense that has your new sources changed at all? Or have they been pretty consistent and what you use?

AK 14:32

I would say, pretty consistent. I would say since last summer, I've really backed off of new stuff, because I kind of got into a lot of the Doom scrolling because there's so much negative stuff out there and so much recording of, you know, conflicts between people because of their different beliefs on it. And it just it got really disheartening. So I kind of backed off of A lot of consumption of news and social media just for my own mental health.

MS 15:06

Okay, yeah, I can see how that would be important. When, when that was going on, as you said it was kind of getting negative and definitely for the mental health. How did this development affect your perception of society, government, and especially your mental health? Well-being?

AK 15:29

Sure, well, the first thing that pops into my mind is on social media. You know, we know so many people on a surface level, and people are comfortable enough with social media now that they, they'll tell more about themselves, which has its pros and cons. But unfortunately, I found that a lot of like, my "my friends" on social media did not align with what I thought what I believed, and it was super disappointing. Um, because I know that had I not been friends with them on social media, I likely wouldn't have encountered those strong opinions. So, that was really disappointing. Um, let's see, what was the question, gain? [awkward giggle]

MS 16:16

You're doing pretty well. Did you have any? Because you covered society, and that mental health, which is really important, especially during isolation. What about the government part?

Like did you- did it affect your mental health or towards even a government perspective on what's going on?

AK 16:36

Sure. Um, so for a long time, we, we kind of rotated who was going to be in the office first, so that we wouldn't have more than one person in the office at a time. And so that was- that was a little bit isolating and out of the norm because once we hit nicer weather, we're all here, it's busy place. And instead, it was, you know, one person at a time kind of taking care of everything. And yet, we still had a bunch of visitation even before a campground opened. So, you know, it was, it was just, it was awkward. Like I said previously, that it took so long for the government to come out with kind of the directives of what they wanted us to do. You know, we close up our office right away, but we were still waiting on some of the verb-age that they wanted us to use because we, we can't just make up our own signs and those instances, so we were able to bounce off of some of our other partner, parks and projects. So, we kind of bounced around and, you know, did some little things that we thought were on the right track, but we knew that we needed to wait or make changes to anything that we did because we needed to take directives from the top down.

MS 17:58

Right. Hierarchy. I understand that, especially with the military, federal. Yeah, for that one. Did you sense that? With- Did you have any important issues that you believe the immediate media did or did not cover? Or even currently, about the pandemic?

AK 18:28

Um, I thought in general, the media coverage was pretty good. Um, well rounded for a lot of different sources. Some of the disinformation was kind of frustrating, like even the confusion at first. Over, like, should we or should we not mask because they said don't mask at first, and, and then they said, mask. So just kind of the emotional whiplash of like, okay, we don't have to do this, we're okay. And now, oh, we need to do this. And we need to buy masks for everybody. And even just like, going places coming into work or going to the grocery store, having to wear a mask. It was it was awkward. Um, but as far as like, my employer as the the government goes, I just feel like everything was really slow coming down. I know, they had a lot more direction in our district offices, which is where more people work, and I get that, but, uh, our parks what we called the field. We were kind of left hanging. So we, we weren't sure what to do. So we kind of did our best until we got more direction.

MS 19:44

Right? Just improvising. There was a lot of that at that time. So going on into more about your work. Oh, where, where do you work? What Park are you at?

AK 19:57

I work at Black Hawk Park, which is Located about a half an hour south of La Crosse, Wisconsin, right on the banks of the Mississippi River.

MS 20:06

Okay, that's pretty close to the reference window. And that's a beautiful sight. In that case, you as you've been discussing how COVID has affected your work? Did you have to put up any protection our PPE, for, for defense against COVID?

AK 20:30

And, yeah, so really the only thing that we could do was we well, first of all, we, we locked our office and we signed it and basically said, you know, if you need something you need to knock so that we would have time to make sure they had a mask on we had a mask on, or to call us. And then the other thing that we did is we have an entrance station where campers register. And normally, it's a small room, and you would people would walk in to the counter, and we would register you there and everything. So, we went to moving our computer to the window. And we did everything through the window. And we had a piece of plexiglass that came down to only having about this much open at the bottom [gestures three inches height] so that we can hand back things. Give them papers, or even with a credit card reader, we'd pop it out the window so that they could touch all that stuff and we just didn't have to. So, I would say that was the biggest thing. We did put signs on our bathrooms asking people to please wear masks, but I honestly never saw anyone put a mask on it on the bathroom.

MS 21:38

So, okay. Did you see a was there? Was it really common for people to not wear a mask when coming in? Or did you have to have that little statement beforehand when people can came in.

AK 21:53

So as far as in the office if the door didn't get locked, and people just walked in, I can see like the office doors right in front of me. So I see people walk in, and I was kind of the the Grinch of the office. So other people I work with do not like to make waves. But I didn't care. I was this was a safety thing. And so people would walk in the office and you know, I'd be like masks. Oh, no, I'm like mask. Let me usually be kind of pissed by the time they talk to me, but at least they're wearing a mask.

MS 22:34

Okay, so did you have anybody, who was flat out refusing to wear a mask, that you had to deal with that situation?

AK 22:43

No, not in the office. Um, and when it came to like this last season, we did open our entrance station back up again, and we wear masks in there. And we had a sign that said, you know, if you're not fully vaccinated, please wear a mask. But one of the policies I didn't know there was a Corps of Engineer policy or Department of Defense is that we could not ask anybody. So you know, even when people came in, and they weren't wearing masks, you know, I have to assume that they're vaccinated. But also like, I just didn't assume anyone was vaccinated. And there was

a few people, I would say, I probably had one, one per shift that someone would walk in with their mask on and they're like, "Oh, I'm vaccinated." Thank you so much. I appreciate that, and then we carry on. But yeah, the assuming that people either are completely vaccinated or not completely vaccinated was kind of a tricky thing to wrap my head around knowing I had to treat everyone just the same.

MS 23:49

Right. I noticed that there was a sense of relief and excitement when people were really open and saying that they were vaccinated. Why? Why do you seem so relieved by that? What what is that positive mentality?

AK 24:05

Um, because it means that people out there are, are doing things for the greater good. I really believe that getting vaccinated is being part of the collective whole. And these visitors that we have, whether they're local or they're from distances, you know, they're traveling, they're outside of their house. They're coming to our park, they're interacting with us, I know they're going to the gas station and all that kind of stuff. So when, when people have volunteered the information that they're vaccinated, it just, it made me feel good. So I'm like, alright, you know, you're-you're doing what I think is the right thing. And that's healthiest for all of us.

MS 24:44

Okay, thank you for sharing that. That definitely helps us understand what's going on in the world during this pandemic. So, thank you for that share. And those ways that COVID has affected your job. Has it changed- changed your employment status, as well? Or in what ways or have you remained at the same status?

AK 25:07

I would say my employment status has remained the same. However, we were able to tell work much more liberally, generally in the field, you know, park rangers maintenance employees, it was kind of frowned upon to let them telework, because, you know, we're public facing, someone needs to be here for our visitors. But that definitely changed in being able to telework a lot more. I'm still doing that I'm teleworking one day a week, just because I have enough work that I can do at home, on my computer. I can't do that full time, obviously. But that's really the only way that my status changed.

MS 25:48

Okay, thank you for that. Because I know some employment has changed for various people in various fields in the economy, you know. And those ways, has it changed any occurrences, or ability to have seasonal staff in the park?

AK 26:06

So I would say the thing that was most interesting that first summer of COVID, was that we were, you know, we were still trying to distance ourselves and not have too many people working together at one time or riding in vehicles together. And we bring on summer students every year, and those students need to be trained. And most of that is hands on training, where you're going out and you're talking to people, and you're showing them examples of how to do it, letting them try, but really just being with them, until I feel like they're ready to go out and represent us. And that definitely got reduced, you know, I would send them information to read and we only have two students and sort of three, but I think that was a budget thing and not a COVID thing. But I would send them things to read, we would try to email back and forth. I encourage them to call or text me at any time, just because I wasn't physically there all the time. So I feel like, out of all the students I've worked with, I feel most badly about their summer, because I don't feel like they got the full experience and the full amount of knowledge and training that most other students would.

MS 27:22

Okay, as this from 2020, or is this 2021?

AK 27:28

For this, that'd be 2020.

MS 27:30

Okay, how was it in this past summer?

AK 27:34

So this past summer was pretty good. Um, we were able to have three students. Um, that was a little bit awkward, because me and my co worker, we were fully vaccinated by the time that they came in, in April and May. And right away, we had one student start early. So then she started at the end of March, the beginning of April. And we told her if you'd like to get vaccinated, you can do that on government time, which was awesome. And so she she was able to right away get in, to get vaccinated, because she was in a public facing role, as well as pseudo law enforcement. We're so we're we are considered like in the first responder category. So we were able to help her get her vaccination really quick. The next two that came in, you know, we gave them the information told them that same thing. We had been directed not to ask coworkers or anything at that point as to what their vaccination status was. So all we could do is provide the information, and we couldn't really encourage them. But we did tell them, you know, if you're not vaccinated, you have to be wearing a mask in the office, you have to wear a mask in the fee station, you have to wear masks on the vehicles. And that was kind of frustrating, because, you know, like, the students talk and so the I found out that neither of the other two were vaccinated, nor did they plan on getting vaccinated. And so that, that felt kind of like, I felt like there's a wall put up. And maybe it was me putting up that wall because I was just like, "I don't know about you." And, and we couldn't talk about it. Um, but the fact that I knew that they weren't vaccinated, I just gave them very heavy reminders that, you know, "you need to be wearing your mask, you need to be wearing your mask." But that's really all I could do.

MS 29:45

Okay, um, as you mentioned that there was a that couldn't ask any more. So previously in the pandemic, asking was part of the norm, and then it changed. Is there any reason why that you remember that that policy changed?

AK 30:05

Well, in the beginning, we didn't have the policy that we just were basically given no information told to be careful space ourselves out, and that was about it. So we, we did, but we wanted to and what we thought was right until that directive came down that, "Hey, you can't be asking people" and we're like, "Oh, good."

MS 30:26

Did you find that early in the pandemic, people more were more willing to share their medical information relating to COVID versus that after that policy was established?

AK 30:48

I would say it really the only times that I heard people talking about their medical status in relation to COVID were people who did not plan on being vaccinated or didn't, didn't trust it, or wanted to, you know, wait a year after the vaccine came out. Because, you know, at that time, we didn't have anything. And there was still talk of it not being real and blah, blah, blah.

MS 31:18

So. Um. So, So there's quite a bit of a discussion either way, but not necessarily a specific. Yeah. Okay. That's good to know. So thank you. Beyond that for your employment, especially since that definitely has affected many employments. Was there any other regulations that you can think of that definitely affected it affected regulations established by the government?

AK 31:49

Yes. So um, we were basically, as we got closer to recreation season, as recreation season started, um, some of the other districts had put together some training videos that were actually about, you know, telling people to wear masks, and you know what to do if they didn't wear masks. Because at that point, the directive came out that on all federal lands and waters and buildings, you had to be masked. And so there's a lot of confusion at first of like, okay, well, if people are sitting on a picnic table, do we need to ask them to mask if they're going into our buildings, we need to ask them to masks. So it was kind of asked or, you know, wondering when we were supposed to enforce these things. And then just kind of knowing people and other districts, I kind of compared notes as to what our district was doing in our district was pretty standoffish on it either sent all the information out. But there wasn't a lot of encouraging us to follow those things. As some other districts did, you know, basically, in our district, at least, I was told, you know, only enforce the mask mandate in buildings. And, you know, right away, I asked, Well, what about, you know, our restrooms or shower building? Because those are areas where more than one person can be at the time. And I was basically just given a answer of, oh, we don't, we don't

really know. And that was that. So we kind of had to just decide what we were comfortable with, both with the risk of, you know, other people not knowing who they were, and then also, how comfortable we were with bringing up the mask mandate with them, because it's a controversial thing. And not knowing what type of person that is, or you know, what the response is going to be? I think that probably a lot of people had a hard time asking people to wear masks.

MS 34:05

Okay. Yeah. And as you mentioned, it was confrontational. Is that relating to just the- the new policies? Or is that the governmental change? Or where did that hesitancy come from?

AK 34:26

I think it was mostly just knowing that people had very different opinions on how to move through this pandemic, and not knowing when I'm walking up someone I never know, unless I've had previous interactions with them. I never know what I'm going to get into, you know, I don't know what their past is. I don't know what their political beliefs are. So, you know, I was always being ready for a confrontation but hoping you're not going to get it. [Laugh] So you have to kind of walk that fine line of being persuasive and defensive, but being kind about it so that they want to like play by your rules. So I wouldn't say it was necessarily a governmental thing, because- that was all pretty loose as far as they what they wanted us to enforce and how they wanted us to do it.

MS 34:05

Okay, so it sounds like there was as much of there as it was something enforced over federally, it still was very much individualized, depending upon the location?

AK 34:26

Yeah, Yeah, absolutely.

MS 35:20

Okay, so. Glad that makes sense. Um, how did these regulations work to accommodate the current conditions of the area? Did it overall? Did it work out pretty well?

Ashley Kiley 35:52

Um, I would say it did. But we really, we, you know, we had people coming here. They were still recreating, they're still camping. But we don't really know what happened afterwards. Like, did they get COVID While they were here? Whoa?! [uncertain shrug] So, you know, I would say that we operated as normal as we could. [sigh] We had to kind of just pretend like nothing was going on.

MS 36:23

Okay.

AK 36:24

Because there wasn't a whole lot we could do about it.

MS 36:25

Okay, I see what you're saying. Did you notice any differences in the recreation or interest and park recreation? And during the pandemic, then previous to it?

AK 36:42

Oh, absolutely. Our visitation visitation went way up. We were full every single weekend, with our electric camping spots. Of course, one thing that did help us stay full was that we we did shut down several of our sites that were close together, just to give people a little bit more space. So, you know, we had limited availability, but that was always filled up. Just people coming into walk and fish and all, you know, get out of their house. We definitely have a huge increase in bodies in the park.

MS 37:22

Oh, Ah. So, you said it was just to get out of the house. Um, Was there? Was it very limited, of what they could do since the pandemic or did, just, people reconnect with nature? Like why would [simultaneous speaking inaudible] they come to the park?

AK 37:

Yeah, I would say that it's it's mostly not having other options. Um, because this was definitely started during the time when anything non essential was shut down. So, you know, even going to the grocery store, you kind of wanted to get in and out, um, people weren't really, you know, taking weekend getaways or anything like that they're staying pretty close to home. And we've got a huge population that's within a 45 minute drive up here. So I think that, you know, it just got to be like, "What can we do all we can go to the park." So, they came to the park.

MS 38:24

That does remind me .I'm early in the- very early in 2020, were parks open for people to gather? And do you remember? A lot of things are having closures. Did that- did that happen in your park, as well?

AK 38:42

Um, we delayed opening a little bit in the beginning of our recreation season in 2020. I don't think we fully opened until after Memorial Day, which is unusual for us, because I think we were still waiting on some guidance as to you know; what we were going to do, what kind of facilities we would have open and available. So we did wait a little longer to open, but we are always open for day use. We don't have a gated entrance at our park. So unless we are flooded people, people come here. So, even when we weren't open for camping, we still had a lot of people, in the park, doing things.

MS 39:26

Okay. So it sounds like people were definitely out and about those times. Well, as I have understood, is that, beyond just being a park ranger, about around when the pandemic was going you had also deployed for hurricane relief. Is that true?

AK 39:44

Yes. In late October of 2020, I deployed to Louisiana for hurricane Laura housing, housing mission with FEMA.

MS 39:58

Okay, what did you do while you were there?

AK 40:01

Um, I did I inspected work of contractors who are bringing in temporary housing units, trailers and campers, you know, monitoring their progress on, you know, whether the unit had arrived, whether it has been hooked up to electricity, sewer, all that kind of stuff, and making sure that it was done to the government standards that were put forth in their contract. So it was a lot of driving around, and just kind of checking on what was going on. Talking with some of the homeowners because, you know, we would pull in, and they get excited because something's finally happening. And so we'd have to kind of explain the process to them that it's, it's coming. But it's going to take a little bit of time. And, you know, explain to them what they can or cannot do with that unit before they get signed over to them. And I lived in a hotel.

MS 40:58

Oh, okay. So, you were at a station, in the hotel. So when the when they- that came through? Did, um, was that before or after there was an implementation of COVID policies?

AK 41:19

That was after.

MS 41:21

Okay, so you still had guidelines to follow? Correct?

AK 41:25

Yep.

MS 41:27

Okay, so, in that case, were you concerned at all about contracting the virus while you're working down there? Why?

AK 41:38

Absolutely! Yeah, absolutely! You know, it all just started with even getting on the plane, I hadn't been on a plane for over a year. And normally with with my work, I get to travel a couple times a year for meetings, or trainings and stuff, and I love traveling. And it was, it felt so awkward to be in an airplane completely full of other people, you know, no empty seats or anything like that. It was- it was a packed flight. Um, and so that made me nervous. And then also, in Louisiana, in Louisiana, despite them having a mask mandate for public spaces. I would say, maybe 20% of the people that I saw just out and about, weren't masked. So I was very vigilant about having my mask. In fact, I purposely brought masks with me that tied around my neck so that I just always had it. I wouldn't lose out my pocket or anything. So it just made me much more vigilant about protecting myself.

MS 42:49

Okay. Thank you for sharing that that would definitely be a concern, when were there any additional regulations that the agency provided while you were staying there?

AK 43:04

Um, so I loosely remember, I know that there was definitely some stuff, but I only loosely remember some of it. If we had any symptoms, we had to let one of our people know right away. And they had FEMA had rapid tests available to us. At any point, if we wanted to be tested, if we had any symptoms, we had to be tested. Um, I don't think that, well, while I was there any of our group got COVID. After I left, though, it happened. So and then I think one of the other things, was they encouraged us to wear masks in vehicles together because there's usually two of us in one vehicle. I would say, some did, most probably didn't. I did for the first few days of being with a partner. But luckily, I got to have the same partner almost the entire time I was there. And she was kind of on the same wavelength as me of protecting herself out in public. So we got so that I mean, we were spending 10 hours together a day that we would just; if it was just us, we didn't mask.

MS 44:17

Okay. That sounds like that aligns with the- that. What was that called? The, your- your inner circle, whoever you're around. [gestures circle and ball]

AK 44:27

The bubble.

MS 44:28

Yeah. Thank you, [simultaneous speaking inaudible] [laughter]

MS 44:30

As we talked about, so, to explain for the records, what is the bubble?

AK 44:35

The bubble is like your small group of people that you will interact with, because you have all kind of made the same agreement as to what your level of risk exposure is. You know, I kept people in my bubble that I knew masked whenever they went out in public, that were genuinely healthy people. And like deploying, the only time that I was in buildings or vehicles and not masked was with my partner who I considered my bubble anytime I was social. Other times in buildings, we massed outside the buildings, we luckily, you know, the weather was good down there. So we're able to sit outside a lot which helped. But that was definitely a kind of an odd change to just, "Let's go sit in chairs outside of this hotel and have a drink."

MS 45:36

Did you still some other policies, these six feet apart policy. And what is that?

AK 45:45

So six feet, you're supposed to stay six feet from other people, um, I think masked or unmasked, but definitely unmasked. And the idea is that your droplets that come out of your face will not hit someone else if they're six feet away, or less likely to, um, I don't think that was- I'm sure that it was recommended. Um, it definitely wasn't followed. You know, we we had morning meetings where we are in a circle every single day, and you would see some people kind of step further out and stuff. And we did have our meetings outside. So, I would say probably- what half the people were mastering those meetings, half from weren't some people were further away. So I think that they encouraged us to do the six feet apart, but it's just kind of hard when you are working with a small group of people for an extended period of time. I was down there for 30 days, and we worked 12 hour days, seven days a week. So it was hard to just always in a mask, and it was hard to always keep six feet apart from people. And even just trying to navigate like, okay, how can I still be social? Well, maintaining distance and not, and not having it be like a controversial thing, because I also knew that that we had people down there who, you know, weren't into masks that were into social distinct that weren't into the idea of this being a problem. COVID being a problem. So it was a lot of just doing things for myself, or if people got too close on kind of step back and like tried to make it not such a big deal. Or even noticeable if I could, because I didn't want to, I didn't want to have to have that talk of "this is what I'm doing. I'm not comfortable with what you're doing" because for the most part, my interactions were on a super surface social level. And like, just didn't want to go there. Basically.

MS 47:56

Did you notice that socializing became a big priority during pandemic, if you could?

AK 48:06

Yeah, and, you know, in general, we got pretty creative. You know, not on deployment at home. We we did zoom conversations with you know, some friends that even normally we wouldn't talk to that are longer distance because it was just so much more normal to be on a computer screen and chatting about things. We started doing trivia every week, online with a group of friends, just to have some normalcy of like; what we're doing things to look forward to, like, "oh, Tuesday,

we had trivia.” Because normally in our normal life, pre-pandemic, we have things that we would always do every week, and that just came to a screeching halt. Um, so yeah, social thing became really important, but also really touchy, just not knowing exactly how to do it. Or, you know, some people are great to talk to you and other people, unless you're like in person, it's kind of hard to just have casual conversation. And then I would say on deployment, it depended for people. For me, I am a social person so I like to have interaction with other people. Since we're living in a hotel, and I'm away from my husband and daughter, you know, I wanted some form of interaction with people and I definitely wanted to, you know, be near people. I'm trying to figure out how to do that, you know, we would get dinners to go and then go sit outside, things like that. It was it was just a lot harder than it would normally be when I travel for work because we would normally organize dinners and go out and just be very social. And we were encouraged to be social but to do so very carefully. Okay.

MS 49:59

So still kind of with a hesitancy? Okay, so Well, is there anything else you would like to add to, that you can think of that was important to you during this time, before we go ahead and, and, and conclude the In-

AK 50:18

Sure! Um, you know now that we're almost two years into this, this is our new normal right now, I would say the first six months of the whole pandemic was really difficult. Honestly, like probably months two through six, are the most difficult, because that's when we started getting some of the state mandates of stay at home, and stuff like that. And I remember after our first 30 days, stay at home got extended, that's when I realized that it was going to be over my birthday and my daughter's birthday, and that one of my major trips for work that I was really looking forward to, was going to be canceled. And so I had a really hard time for several weeks of just like, accepting that we all have to do this. And another it's not just like, some mean thing someone's doing to me. Um, yeah, so I would say just emotionally mentally, that was probably the hardest time and then after that we kind of gotten to the flow of things.

MS 51:23

Okay. Well, I think that was really wonderful to hear from you about your experiences. And I'm glad you definitely took me up on the interview. So thank you for your addition to our archives. And it's good to meet you for the first time, actually. So I hope you- I hope you have a wonderful rest of the year if I don't talk to you again. But thank you and I hope you have a wonderful day.

AK 51:50

Yes, thank you. You too. Melanie. Have a good one. Good bye.

MS 51:57

Bye.