Access
Oral History Interview with [redacted]
Conducted by Cody Abbott on August 1, 2021

Cody Abbott [00:00:08] Alright. This project is the first phase of a national initiative developed by the National Humanities Center that will partner with universities and health care systems across the country to capture and preserve the stories and experiences of frontline health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews will be organized and housed in a digital database administered by the National Humanities Center and may also be part of a university, state, or national archives, exhibits, or educational publications or events. Content from the interviews may be included in a documentary film project in the future. We are extremely grateful and excited to have the chance to speak with you today as part of this initiative. We know that your time is valuable. We believe it is important to share the complex experiences of health care workers. And if there are any questions do not feel or you do not feel comfortable answering questions during this interview, please let me know and we'll move on to a different topic. If at any time you'd like to rephrase your answer, just let me know and we can do that. You may ask me to delete, erase, or withhold any particular answers or comments. Your consent is of utmost importance and will remain in control of what we discuss. With that being said, would you mind giving us a little bit of introduction into who you are and what your job role is?

[redacted] [00:01:34] My name is [redacted]-My role is a medical lab technician at hospital.

Cody Abbott [00:01:43] OK. Awesome. Thank you. So can you tell me what kind of drew you to your profession?

[redacted] [00:01:52] I think it's fascinating what happens in your body and what. Basically, I find blood fascinating in a kind of crazy sense. It's something that no one really knows much about. It controls everything in your body. You can't live without it. And I think it's interesting to kind of be able to delve into something and give answers like you're a detective and you get to help the doctors without having to physically say anything to a patient, kind of be behind the scenes. I was always interested in, like CSI kind of thing. So just kind of made me interesting to see how things work.

Cody Abbott [00:02:30] Awesome. Yeah, I love it, too. You're kind of like the vampires of the hospital, which I think is pretty fun.

[redacted] [00:02:38] It's fun.

Cody Abbott [00:02:39] So can you tell me how how the pandemic kind of began for you and how it affected your role, right when they started implementing lockdown?

[redacted] [00:02:56] The pandemic. It wasn't as quick, as it looked like on social media and the news, as far as my lab and my hospital went, it was kind of a slower process of when it hit doctors were concerned and then it became a a more rapid event of doctors wanting to figure out a way to test people wanting to do as many tests as they could before COVID testing was out. It was different blood tests and everything they could do to kind of give them an edge up when the rapid testing came out from Abbott you know, it was on emergency release, no one was really quite sure it was kind of here's something to help you. And so we were given that

tool and it was it was difficult at first because the accuracy was a little subpar, so you were giving answers to a physician with the hopes that you were giving them a correct one. And then as things progressed, it was more people coming in that were sick. And so you would, you know, it was the chance of, are they positive or negative? And then slowly we had better testing equipment. Things were coming out easier. But then you also saw where you had the fear, I guess, of are you what, what was correct and what wasn't. And so you wanted to protect yourself and protect your doctors and physicians and nurses. But without the supplies, it was kind of a hard balance, it was almost like a double edged sword. It was here's something I can give you, but am I giving it correctly? It was hard.

Cody Abbott [00:05:02] Yeah, I. I can understand how difficult it would have been. You're in your position, it seems like you were kind of thrown right into the middle of everything. Blood was super important and all testing in general, obviously, because it was like, how do we figure out who has COVID and doesn't? So it's kind of interesting because I feel like the way we looked at it originally was, Oh, we have these frontline workers, the nurse. But it's actually kind of the flip side that was really, really dealing with a lot of the stress to. So just kind of going back to the beginning of the pandemic, what kind of made things harder for you than they were before? And I can reword that if you need.

[redacted] [00:05:59] I guess what made it hard was you were always constantly looking through like blurry goggles, like the drunken goggles it was, you couldn't quite say that you could walk into a room and know 100 percent that you were fine, but because everything was so new, every symptom was a symptom of COVID. You have abdominal pain, you have COVID, you have runny nose, you have COVID. It was there was no line to there were times when a person can come in and say, I have a broken ankle and they were getting tested there. And what was hard for me is every single patient was getting every single blood test they could. It was there was no line to where here's a patient that comes in, here's a chance for me to be like, that's just a broken leg, I'm fine. No, it was well, what caused that? So all of a sudden you're older people became full fledged everything. Let's just run the race on them. And so when for us, call is something that we deal with right after shift, it's a twenty four seven kind of deal having to be up for multiple hours, especially at the very beginning, without knowing you are very, very sleep deprived because you are running something to help someone. But at the same time, it's like it could be someone's pregnant and that's what it is, but you're running COVID on them. And so it was like all of a sudden everything was zebras instead of horses and so that was kind of difficult to remain empathetic and sympathetic to a person's plea. When in your mind you're like, it could just be this, when, in actuality, it could have been COVID. And so it was kind of hard to balance the scales on what you should treat very cautiously as something deadly and something that's as simple as I ate something too much, I should have taken a TUMS. It was, you know, it was kind of the balancing act.

Cody Abbott [00:08:10] Yeah, it's kind of that whole is my sore leg a COVID symptom or not? And it's still kind of is like that so. Can can you talk a little bit about the ways in which your institution kind of approached it? Did you feel like you had

necessary materials and you don't have to get too specific? Do you feel like different things made it easier or harder for you in that way?

[redacted] [00:08:40] So for our institution, it's more rural so getting supplies to us became difficult when we have such bigger institutions around us. So what we tried to do was manage our supplies correctly and order enough in time. But again with at the beginning when we first got the first machine to test COVID, which was the Abbott, supplies were something that you got in chunks. So telling your physician, here's how many I have, here's how many I can do. But then having to turn around and then send that also to a state or a CDC deemed lab to verify all of a sudden supplies became a it was a big deal and supplies still are a big deal. It's it's harder to collect something when the whole world is going through something so catastrophic. And, you know, before they closed the borders, it was a little bit easier and then slowly, as they closed the borders, it became harder because so many things are overseas. And so all of a sudden it was like, what do you tell? What do you say? Oh, I'm sorry, you don't get tested, but this person next to you does. So it was one of those things where we were very fortunate to have the supplies kind of in a way that we didn't run out. But we also were kind of knowing we need to be cautious of how much we use. And so it was kind of again, where do you say no and where do you say yes?

Cody Abbott [00:10:21] Yeah, I I get that it's it's very much and you've kind of said it over and over, it was like a very, very tight balancing act between what you can do and what you need to do and what you should do and kind of just making sure that all those things kind of came together. Yeah. So I'm going to jump a little bit and talk kind of about you and of course, feel free to say no or yes, but I'm just curious personally what kind of feelings came up for you during the pandemic? And you can you can talk about them in terms of your job, like what did it make you realize?

[redacted] [00:11:05] There was stress. Sleep deprivation.

Cody Abbott [00:11:12] OK, wait, can you just restate that because I like this question? So what kind of feelings came up for you during the pandemic, and you can talk about it in terms of your job?

[redacted] [00:11:29] My feelings toward this pandemic were. It was stressful. I was tired. There were times of, I guess you could say, jealousy in a way when frontline workers were were very well recognized and you saw more doctors and nurses doing it more than you saw, like the lab people in the radiology techs and even respiratory technicians who were, you know, getting in the guts and the glory of getting their hands dirty. But it was also some fear because with my job, I'm touching all matters of bodily fluid and yes, I might be gloved, gowned, and goggled, but there was still this sense of we don't know what exactly it is. And so sense of smell could have been triggering it. You know, it was kind of an up-in-the-air kind of situation and so, you know, personally, I was worried about my family and I was worried about myself and I think my dogs, even to a point because there was so much unknown and but there was also the I guess there was some pride to it because I was doing something that was helpful. I was doing something that mattered, and I was I was

able to give an answer to aid my physician in helping him be able to do his job. And it was, so it was kind of a mixture of emotions.

Cody Abbott [00:13:06] Ok. Kind of like a grab bag of today I feel or like right now I'm happy because I'm doing so much good. But it's also stressful because what the heck am I doing?

[redacted] [00:13:18] Yes.

Cody Abbott [00:13:18] I get that. If you could describe the pandemic in three words, what would they be? And remember to restate

[redacted] [00:13:41] Three words: stressful, tedious, and pain in the butt. That's four, but I'm like, you know, I'm I just throw that in for you.

Cody Abbott [00:14:15] I like that and I agree. Nothing was more pain in the butt than a pandemic. Gosh.

[redacted] [00:14:21] Yes.

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Cody Abbott [00:16:54] Was there a moment of time of specific intensity that you experienced that made you realize anything?

[redacted] [00:17:05] There were several moments that were hard and intense that had a lot of intensity to them, but I guess I picked them apart in chunks of just two categories basically, supplies and staff. I saw staff members who had in our facility, they'd have two to three COVID rooms by themselves. And it's hard when those people are having trouble breathing or they can't get up on their own or, you know, you have to constantly test them for something because any amount of things could be wrong with them. And I had to, you know, when you put that PAPR helmet on, it's a moment of clarity of going, oh my gosh, this is extremely scary. And then you walk in and you just see these poor patients who are just harmed, like they're hurt, and there's nothing you can do to fix it at that moment because something so horrible happened. And then when you have to tell a doctor or nurse, I'm out of that, that makes it even worse because then you're almost avoiding care and a sense of if something's that important, you cannot give it to your doctor. And it's hard. And so it's one of those things where you stop and it's like, there's not one singular moment. It's almost like a scenario of moments, pieces, almost a whole movie of moments where you just kind of went, wow. And it makes you take a deep breath and go, I'm glad that that peace is over and I'm really hopeful it doesn't happen again because a lot of people were hurt.

Cody Abbott [00:18:46] Thank you for sharing that. That's poignant. I really like the way that you separated them into those two categories. And I can't agree more. It is a big juxtaposition of like your feelings and then, you know, what you're supposed to do, and so you're kind of like stuck in between, so thank you for sharing that. Just kind of going forward. Can you compare in any way the way your job was before we knew about COVID and right now where things have hopefully maybe improved, but they might are they're obviously very different?

[redacted] [00:19:39] So my job before COVID was I guess not simpler, but less there weren't as many inflictions and infringements in place. Now it's every surgery, every pre-op you are COVID testing them. It's almost as up there with a MRSA swab or getting your INR checked to make sure you plot okay for surgery. It's up there with a CBC: complete blood count. It's just another normal thing, but it's hard because you could go a day with swabbing a two-month-old to a 65 year old, and some of them are, you know, they want to get tested and some of them are, you know, why do I have to do this? This doesn't make sense. And you know, you can have there's more ridicule behind it now. And I think before people were just kind of trying to live day to day and everything was fine. And now with it, it's you've added a step you've

added an a barrier into their life. Why is this here? And some people understand it's for their safety, and some people see it as, that's not important. And there's there's more of a juxtaposition about it, and also I've never seen more blood gone through, or like the need for blood products, has gotten really high. They want those COVID antibodies so badly and with lack of donation and everything like that, it does become difficult to help those people out. And so I I look back and with fondness of pre-COVID times, but also hope that going forward it becomes one of those just, you know, it's just another another test I have to do. It's not, it doesn't change me as a person. So.

Cody Abbott [00:21:48] Yeah, and I am glad that we're at least able to kind of supply facilities with at least some tests because I know at the beginning it was like, we don't have any for you and we can't even do anything. So. I think that's important. Do you think that or sorry was there ever a time where you were just out of tests?

[redacted] [00:22:19] Never out. I would get low, I would be praying for my next shipment, but I never, fortunately, knock on all the fake wood, I never ran out. It just became a more be careful who you test, be more cautious of how you do it. And as COVID progressed, you saw physicians who leaned on each other and were able to say, Actually, it's more this than this, you know, avoid, you know, maybe it's not the stomach, it's oh, it's the airway. And so it was able to kind of formulate a better opinion of how it should be tested and when, versus no holds barred let's just test. And so that also helped, too. But you know, as you as you go through things, you know, as a person who orders from my institution, I do have to watch them and I do my best to try and get them in advance so that I don't ever have to look and feel like you're down to two. You have a week, good luck. I kind of try and make it words easier. So, but no, I've never. I lucked out.

Cody Abbott [00:23:37] It sounds like you lucked out, and you were also the answer to that as well by working so hard to make sure that you had those adequate test, which is awesome. I'm proud of you for that. That's cool. So what about COVID and the whole pandemic and this whole change in your job are you ready to move on from?

[redacted] [00:24:02] From all of it. I'm ready to move on from. I'm ready to be able to hug family. I'm ready to be able to if I want to go travel the world, go do it without, well, this country is closed, but if you take a detour, I'm ready for it just to be like, let's just move on. Life's too short to be scared and holed up, and I want to be able to go explore. I want to see my friends and family and know that I'm still helpful, but it's just another another day, it's another thing. And also make it to where it's not the first thing a doctor suspects when someone walks in the door with a sneeze, it's actually the flu. I'll be really happy to have someone tell me it was the flu and not COVID, in four months.

Cody Abbott [00:25:00] I agree. I never thought I would say it, but I'm also at the point where I'm crossing my fingers that people have the flu not COVID.

[redacted] [00:25:10] Give me a case of strep throat.

Cody Abbott [00:25:12] Exactly. Yes, exactly. [redacted]-what what brought you comfort personally during the pandemic?

[redacted] [00:25:27] My husband, that man is a saint. He's put up with me for seven, eight years, eight years. But honestly, I would come home after the most stressful day in the world, or I was exhausted. He just everything, he just kept me sane. And I also have two dogs who are very much lovies, so they were they were kind of my stronghold in this moment of chaos. But my husband works at the hospital too. He kind of understood the measurements of everything and what to expect, and we just kind of walked in it and went whatever happens happens, I'll see you on the other side, and we just kind of kept each other up through it. So I'm very, very thankful for him.

Cody Abbott [00:26:16] I also can feel that so much you're really resonating with me in that my wife, I was in med school, so it was a little different, but she was always there just when we were in the hospital or I was trying to do clerkships or not clerkships, but shadowships and things and just being totally, totally there to support because you do see some, some people who are not, not super happy or not in the best state. So it's awesome to have support like that, and I'm glad you do. And some dogs, because you know

[redacted] [00:26:51] Everyone needs them.

Cody Abbott [00:26:53] We do. All right. What advice would you give to somebody going into your field right now?

[redacted] [00:27:08] Take it one day at a time. My advice would be take it one day at a time because you are going to meet frustrated physicians, you're going to meet upset patients, you're going to see nurses on the brink of having everything collapse and keeping it all together. It's a mixture of so many things, but at the end of the day, what we do is so important because statistically, 70 percent of all medical decisions are based off of laboratory tests. So without your lab tech, your doctors just guessing. So know that you're just as important as that man up there, but also know that you might be the one who found out that this patient was hurt. But the nice thing where at least I think is you don't have to be the poor soul who has to tell this poor patient what their diagnosis is. You get to be the interesting part who just takes that piece and says, here you go, you get to tell them the diagnosis, and it makes it nice to just know that you, although you might not tell them that they're having a baby, you also don't have to tell them, I'm sorry that you have syphilis, so it's kind of a it's kind of nice. So just one step at a time and know that you're important just as much as the doctors and nurses are.

Cody Abbott [00:28:31] Yeah, I love that so much. I think it's totally undersold how important the team aspect is in the hospital. It's kind of that whole front line thing, people come in and they only see, you know, they see a couple different different people and they don't realize what's actually going on. They're like, where's my blood work? But they they don't know. So I really appreciate that and I appreciate that sentiment too, because yeah. The job cannot be done by one person and takes a team, and everyone is equally important. So thank you for sharing that. Appreciate

that. All right. So just in terms of kind of the end of the pandemic, per se, do you think, which you know, with the Delta variant is questionable, but do you think that anything has improved or that you have seen anything in your job that's kind of turned for the better?

[redacted] [00:29:42] What I would say has turned for the better, for my job is the respect. There is a lot more respect for the clinical staff and respect to the team effort. I've had more physicians and nurses, and patients even, say thank you than I had before. And so it was, it's one of those where it almost took something horrible happening for people to realize, oh my gosh, I need them too. And as much as I would hate to ever have the people lost have to lose them again, it almost is a blessing in very, very slim terms, very gray terms that for my job, for people to see, oh wow, they're important too. They're the, you know, all of these people that helped me come to my diagnosis are important, and it's not just these pieces that magically show up, it's there are people making sure that I'm getting my correct answer. So it was one of those there was definitely a change in respect and I appreciated that very much.

Cody Abbott [00:31:11] I love that. I love that so much, because I even think in my role that that has changed because it's it is kind of that that sentiment out of sight, out of mind. And I think this has really illuminated that, that part of the eye that we can see. So I think that's super awesome, super important, and I hope that we just keep moving in that direction for the future. All right. So I mean, we're about out of time. I'm just going to ask one more question, and it's a question of a question. So are there any other questions that I did not ask you that could be important for me to ask anyone else? It's also designed to be our last question.

[redacted] [00:32:08] It's just. No, I don't think so. It was going to say you're you're pretty thorough, so I don't, can't think of anything.

Cody Abbott [00:32:15] Okay, so I do want an ending question, so I'm going to start over. I'm going to get five seconds and we'll go. OK. Can you share any particular hopes about the future as we go in to surviving this new world?

[redacted] [00:32:39] My hope is that we become reunited as a people. I feel like this pandemic has kind of put into accounts where we all kind of stand. It doesn't matter who we are, where we come from or what we eat for breakfast. It's kind of we're all one people and the pandemic doesn't have any sort of filters to determine who it attacks. And I think that if anything, it should show us that time is so, so precious, and the hope that we spend more time with our families and really kind of lean on each other and realize that without each other, we don't make it through anything. So just kind of more togetherness and a more of a united front toward, you know this horrible, horrible thing that happened and just kind of move on and be better.

Cody Abbott [00:33:45] I don't think that I could have come up with a better parting thought. We have been through so much as a society and I think it's obvious that we are not that different. We're all affected by the same diseases and illnesses, and if we don't help each other, then we can't survive. If we don't respect each other, then

we can't do a good job for our patients and we can't be a united helpful society, so I appreciate that, and with that, I'm going to end the recording.