

Access

Oral History Interview with [REDACTED]
Conducted by Alison Brennan on July 19, 2021

Alison Brennan [00:00:01] Okay. So, today is July 19th, 2021 and my name is Alison Brennan. I'm interviewing [REDACTED]-not remotely in her office and recording it via audio. So, this interview is being conducted as part of a project organized by the National Humanities Center in conjunction with the University of Washington. Our goal is to collect, preserve and share the stories and experiences of health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Okay. So, first, if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself and what you do professionally.

[REDACTED] [00:00:36] Okay. [REDACTED]-I have been a nurse for about 10 years, and I was primarily in the women's health clinic and then I got asked to be detailed in here into the public health nursing because one of the nurses were leaving for a different position. So, I agreed to it. I came in here kind of right during this spike for the Blackfeet reservation. So, it was, you know, just kind of hit the ground running. So, I've been in here since October, and it's a learning experience, you know, coming from taking care of women and pregnancy to the general population and then just educating on kind of how to reduce the spread of, you know, a contagious virus.

Alison Brennan [00:01:28] Yeah. Thanks for sharing that. I guess my next question is just why did you agree to be interviewed? What's kind of the motivation behind that?

[REDACTED] [00:01:36] I feel like the same kind of thing. Everybody has a story and I like to hear different experiences also. So, I think anything that I can share may or may not help someone, but everybody has a little bit of a piece of advice in their story, so hopefully somebody will get something out of it.

Alison Brennan [00:01:56] Absolutely. I'm sure they will. All right. So, what is work like for you, like in the last few weeks? Like, could you just take me through, like, a typical day? I'm sure it gets crazy, but, you know, just what's going on?

[REDACTED] [00:02:09] Yeah. So, the last few weeks, well, every day we come in and we do temperature checks on our refrigerators, we have a ultracold freezer for our Pfizer vaccine and then we have like just a normal freezer for other vaccines and then a refrigerator. And so, we come in, make sure that those are all checked out. We do check the lab because if there was any positive cases overnight. And so, we check that to make sure that we don't miss anybody. We also do just kind of get ready for the day. So, make sure that we do have like COVID vaccines out in the fridge in case somebody does come in. And then it just kind of boils down to checking our state websites if we have any other communicable diseases that we need to get in touch with. We have walk-ins all throughout the day. So, we give tons of immunizations. We give a lot of injections for people who come in with like testosterone or B12, that type of stuff. And then we just kind of get ready for our scheduled COVID vaccine days, which are Wednesdays and Thursdays. We also do some home visits. So, it's really a variety. Every day is a little different, but it's kind of the same in a sense. So, yeah.

Alison Brennan [00:03:32] Awesome. And I guess just kind of taking that and contrasting it before COVID, what was a typical day like?

[REDACTED] [00:03:41] Well, before COVID, I worked in the Women's Health Clinic and so I was managing 5 to 6 providers. And so, we, you know - I was very busy in there, so

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managing our high-risk OB [Obstetrics] population, doing the Pap registry, so any kind of women's health stuff, I'd entered into their chart, scheduling, faxing records, faxing referrals, setting up the rooms, ordering just tons and tons of stuff. So, it's a little different pace in here, but it's still the same kind of workload, I guess.

Alison Brennan [00:04:18] Yeah, that totally makes sense. Okay, so I know you kind of transitioned jobs like right as COVID was taking on full force, but is there like a particular activity or event that you remember participating in that has changed since the result of the pandemic?

[REDACTED] [00:04:33] I guess everything.

Alison Brennan [00:04:35] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:04:35] You know, I mean. So, for instance, we just had our celebration of healing, but it's usually called the Native American Indian Days. And it was this year, you know, it was pretty small, I would say in years past, it's probably triple the size of what it was this year. I guess even like basketball, like high school events, you know, my nephew was a senior this year and we missed out on the state wrestling. They started their program a little bit later in the year. Even the school, our kids did online learning up until April. And so, all of that was very different. And even when they got to go into school, it was only two days a week. So, that was, you know, that was significantly different and a big change for all of us to just kind of be confined to our home and to each other. And then even at work, you know, it was weird not having anybody come in. And I got to in women's health, we never did stop seeing patients as far as prenatal patients. And it just kind of was a case-by-case, you know, day. We'd go every day if the patient had an emergency, of course, get them in.

Alison Brennan [00:05:49] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:05:50] So, it's impacted quite a bit, I guess.

Alison Brennan [00:05:52] I know that's kind of like a tough question. It would be easier to say what stayed the same but -

[REDACTED] [00:05:57] Right.

Alison Brennan [00:05:58] Yeah. So, kind of getting a little more specific about how COVID has changed things, has it changed your relationships with, like, coworkers here at the hospital?

[REDACTED] [00:06:08] No, I guess not. You know, we all are pretty good about wearing our masks, washing hands and just kind of cleaning. Everybody did their part as far as in hospital and even out of the hospital, I think we may have and I can only speak for myself -

Alison Brennan [00:06:29] Of course.

[REDACTED] [00:06:29] I think we all kind of felt like, well, we all are possibly exposed in our workplace. We go home to our families like we can hang out with each other, you

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know, but it wasn't big gatherings, so it'd be like hanging out with your work bestie and their family. I feel like we all kind of had a sense, you know, some kind of sense of that. So, yeah.

Alison Brennan [00:06:54] Yeah, that totally makes sense.

[REDACTED] [00:06:55] Not that we hung out all the time anyway, but, you know, would get together outside and a lot of the activities were outside at like outside barbecue, that type of stuff. And, you know, we were all pretty smart. Like, No, I think I better not, you know. So, it was making your own call.

Alison Brennan [00:07:10] Yeah. No, that makes a lot of sense. And then I know you talked about kind of the hand washing and all those procedures. Have any of the protocols that have been sort of part of COVID changed the general ways that you interact with patients?

[REDACTED] [00:07:27] Not really. I think like wearing a mask is a barrier because some people, you know, it's like they can't hear without reading your lips when you talk or, you know, at a time we were all wearing face shields and gowns and I, you know, the face shields fogged up and everything. So, now that we're down to just masks, everybody has, you know, kind of gotten used to it, though. So, it's like, you know, if you have to speak a little louder, we still have an occasional patient that will take their masks down when they talk and then put it back up. And so, we've definitely navigated through that okay, I feel.

Alison Brennan [00:08:05] That's good. Anything that has kind of frightened or unsettled you at work during the pandemic?

[REDACTED] [00:08:14] There was a few times that we had thought we were exposed, and I remember the very first time I had one of the providers I was working with was like, I don't feel good, I have this and this going on. And it was like almost immediate panic. And so, we all had gotten tested. Thankfully, we were all negative. But you know, we have a lot of workers here, providers, nurses that come and go. You know, some will work seven days on, seven days off, some people commute from the West Side or Great Falls. So, I mean, there's always a chance of being exposed. And I guess just that very first time, it was pretty scary. I remember crying and my sister - like on the phone - and my sister was just trying to calm me down and I was like, you know, I just I think about that all the time how afraid I was.

Alison Brennan [00:09:10] Yeah. No, it was really scary. Yeah. Thanks for sharing that. So, yeah, talking about exposures, what have the safety measures and resources that the facility here has put in place around COVID?

[REDACTED] [00:09:26] You know, immediately we had kind of shut down, so it was only one person to each appointment. If there was a child, it was one parent. You know, in the beginning it was crazy. The hospital was - I mean, other than the ER [Emergency Room] being open - we were actually running meds to people. So, we were fully gowned up. They would drive through, we'd get their name, what medications they were looking for. We'd go in and get them and then bring them out to the car so nobody would be in the hospital. I mean, I think about that, you know, we did that for well, I only had to do it once. And then

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they were like, All right, [REDACTED] women's health is your priority. We can't have you being possibly exposed, taking care of prenatal women or pregnant women. And so, my coworkers did that for over eight weeks.

Alison Brennan [00:10:19] Wow.

[REDACTED] [00:10:19] And they worked very long hours. They worked their butts off. They put in a lot of miles each day. And not only on top of that, but the nurses were doing all of the drive through COVID testing.

Alison Brennan [00:10:31] Oh, yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:10:32] And so, you know, the Internet would go down. They didn't have a printer. They were handwriting every label, you know. But I feel like we kept COVID at bay for a while. You know, everybody was wearing like N95. We had strict contact precautions with every patient. And really, I think really a lot of the employees who got COVID, it was from outside entity like their own home, you know, they weren't at work. Like they weren't exposed from a patient at work. So, you know, we did really good, actually. I feel like we did really good. We have lost like a few coworkers. Yeah, but like I said, a lot of that was they were exposed from a family member at home, you know. So, as far as those measures, I feel like we did really well and we still are, you know, we still require masks even though the mask mandate is lifted on the reservation.

Alison Brennan [00:11:36] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:11:37] We at the hospital, we still wear all of them mask all the time.

Alison Brennan [00:11:42] Wow. Okay, that sounds like a lot.

[REDACTED] [00:11:43] Yeah.

Alison Brennan [00:11:44] But it seems like, I mean, I guess did you feel like you had a good level of support from the administration and institution?

[REDACTED] [00:11:52] Yes.

Alison Brennan [00:11:53] Okay.

[REDACTED] [00:11:53] I do. You know, and we had a I think the only thing that we could have done better was getting the N95 fit test. A lot of people were kind of behind on that. And then we didn't have a lot of the PAPRs [Powered Air Purifying Respirator], you know, for the -

Alison Brennan [00:12:10] Yes.

[REDACTED] [00:12:10] Yeah. So, they actually got all of those ordered. So, they support like dental, all of them with those kind of things. So.

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Alison Brennan [00:12:18] Oh, wow. Okay. So, yeah, so it does sound like they've kind of risen to the challenge.

[REDACTED] [00:12:23] Yeah.

Alison Brennan [00:12:24] This kind of a strange question. So, if you don't have anything to say, don't feel bad about that. But have your friends or colleagues like in other departments shared any noteworthy experiences or perspectives on working in the hospital at this time? Like kind of a collective feeling?

[REDACTED] [00:12:39] I think we all kind of feel it's chaotic at certain times.

Alison Brennan [00:12:44] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:12:45] So, especially, you know, recently they're doing some renovations to the women's health department, brought them to the North clinic and that was where, like the sick side was. So, I feel like we all kind of think like, What are you thinking? But one thing is all of my coworkers can work through anything. So, even in like the chaos, they're able to pull it together and get the patients seen and clean well. You know, they can organize something on their own and kind of work through a chaotic decision.

Alison Brennan [00:13:22] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:13:22] So.

Alison Brennan [00:13:24] Well, that's good. It sounds like you guys are a flexible team.

[REDACTED] [00:13:27] Yeah.

Alison Brennan [00:13:27] Which is good.

[REDACTED] [00:13:28] I think we complain a lot, but yeah, and like, when it comes down to it, we are very flexible.

Alison Brennan [00:13:34] Yeah, for sure. I know you kind of talked about like, you know, running drugs and that kind of thing out of the parking lot. But are there any other major events that stood out to you during the pandemic, either in the hospital or outside?

[REDACTED] [00:13:50] No. I think just that, you know, it was mainly outpatient, it was put on outpatient and we were kind of a skeleton crew anyway. So, I mean, it was outpatient. The eye clinic helped out. Our clinic, dental all helped out and I guess just kind of coming together as a team and making sure that you did your own, you know, you did what you were supposed to do and helped out as much as you can.

Alison Brennan [00:14:21] Sure. That makes total sense. Kind of shifting to maybe, perhaps a more positive note. Have you received the vaccine and what went into your decision and how did you feel about getting it?

[REDACTED] [00:14:34] Yeah, I'm fully vaccinated with Moderna. I am actually a type one diabetic.

Alison Brennan [00:14:40] Okay.

[REDACTED] [00:14:40] And so, by doing all of these contact tracing and talking to the positives, you know, reviewing patients' charts, it seemed like, well, diabetics, you know, people who had those comorbidities got hit really hard. And I have three young children at home. And so, I didn't really second guess it. I just as soon as I was able to, I did it. I was kind of afraid. But I'm like, well, you know.

Alison Brennan [00:15:10] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:15:10] It's better than getting COVID.

Alison Brennan [00:15:12] Yeah. Especially, I'm sure you've seen -

[REDACTED] [00:15:14] Yeah.

Alison Brennan [00:15:15] What COVID can do to people.

[REDACTED] [00:15:16] Exactly. I've seen, I've heard, I've talked to family members who have dealt with it. So, I definitely didn't second guess it once.

Alison Brennan [00:15:27] Yeah. Oh, no kidding. So, just kind of reflecting back on the pandemic, what do you think that the biggest impact of this pandemic will be for you personally? Like kind of in a long-term sense, like maybe thinking five or 10 years in the future.

[REDACTED] [00:15:43] I'm afraid for all of the kind of long haulers and just kind of what it's done to their bodies and what it's doing. You know, I have a few friends who had it. It's almost like they've I don't know how to say it, like relapsed, you know. And so, I worry about that. And so, like, with their taste and smell, you know, lost it and then it came back. Everything was great. And then boom, all of a sudden, it's like, Oh, my taste is funny again, you know, I have a few friends who had it who still kind of have that foggy brain type stuff. You know, my mom and my brother got it. And it's affected my mom. She has like no energy. She's, you know, I mean, I fear that it could only get worse.

Alison Brennan [00:16:31] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:16:32] Rather than making, like, a full recovery.

Alison Brennan [00:16:35] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:16:36] And, like, especially affecting respiratory. You know, what if we don't have enough, like, supplies to support what they need in the long run?

Alison Brennan [00:16:46] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:16:47] So, just yeah. Kind of those long hauler concerns.

Alison Brennan [00:16:52] That make sense. And then I mean, you kind of talked about this, but what do you think like in a global sense will be the biggest impact of this COVID pandemic?

[REDACTED] [00:17:02] You know, I feel we're still going to have people who don't believe in the vaccine or don't believe in the virus. That's always going to be a factor. So, I honestly don't know if we're ever going to fully defeat this virus.

Alison Brennan [00:17:16] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:17:17] Because, you know, as many people we have vaccinated, it seems that there's double people not vaccinated and they're still thinking about it or don't believe in it.

Alison Brennan [00:17:29] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:17:29] So, I really fear that we're never going to fully get rid of it.

Alison Brennan [00:17:35] Yeah, I think a lot of people probably share this fear. Another kind of diverging question, but a lot of people have called health care workers heroes for their work during the pandemic and do you feel comfortable with people referring to you as a hero and kind of why or why not?

[REDACTED] [00:17:52] I don't really look at myself as a hero because I feel like the ICU [Intensive Care Unit] workers, nurses, anybody who has done direct patient care to a COVID positive patient is the hero. Especially, you know, the nurses, the doctors and then our janitors, you know, anybody who was actual frontline like, yeah, we did testing and stuff, but we didn't have to lay hands on someone who was dying, you know?

Alison Brennan [00:18:26] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:18:26] We didn't have to try to fight for, like, a ventilator or the medication or, you know, kind of talk to family members through the death of their family member. So, you know, I totally respect all of those nurses because I don't think it's something that I could do, honestly. So, no, I don't really consider myself a health care hero. I mean, they are the frontline.

Alison Brennan [00:18:55] Okay. And then another quick question. Have you personally or one of your family members had COVID and what was that experience like?

[REDACTED] [00:19:04] Yeah, I haven't but my mom, my dad and my brother did.

Alison Brennan [00:19:08] Oh, wow.

[REDACTED] [00:19:09] And they had all pretty mild cases. But, you know, my mom, I talked to her like throughout the day, probably once an hour now.

Alison Brennan [00:19:17] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:19:19] And we all, you know, live close by and everything. So, her being isolated and although it was only ten days, it seemed like an eternity. And she even after she was off of isolation, she was so afraid to be around us because she didn't want to give it to us, you know? So, it was hard being away from my mom and dad and brother for that amount of time.

Alison Brennan [00:19:45] Absolutely. Yeah. Okay. So, if you could go back in time, pre-pandemic, and talk to yourself, what advice would you give yourself to surviving kind of this new world?

[REDACTED] [00:19:59] Oh. I don't know.

Alison Brennan [00:20:01] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:20:02] It's hard.

Alison Brennan [00:20:03] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:20:03] It's really hard. I just, I mean, I don't think we could have prepared for it, honestly.

Alison Brennan [00:20:08] Yeah. That's a good answer.

[REDACTED] [00:20:10] I guess just, you know, teaching my kids better hand hygiene.

Alison Brennan [00:20:15] Yeah.

[REDACTED] [00:20:15] And touching the face and everything, you know?

Alison Brennan [00:20:18] I know.

[REDACTED] [00:20:18] Which they're good at now. But it's like, you know, every kid is kind of -

Alison Brennan [00:20:22] Sure, yeah. They're kids.

[REDACTED] [00:20:24] Yeah, exactly.

Alison Brennan [00:20:25] Okay, well, I do want to respect your time, but just to kind of wrap up, are there any questions I didn't ask you that I should have asked?

[REDACTED] [00:20:34] I don't think so.

Alison Brennan [00:20:36] Okay.

[REDACTED] [00:20:36] Yeah, I think we covered everything.

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Alison Brennan [00:20:39] Yeah. And then so, any other thoughts or reflections that you'd like to discuss that we didn't cover?

[REDACTED] [00:20:44] No.

Alison Brennan [00:20:46] Okay, good. All right. Well, thank you so much.

[REDACTED] [00:20:49] Yeah.

Alison Brennan [00:20:49] This was really great.