Access
Oral History Interview with Jo Anne [redacted]
Conducted by Joseph Keating on August 22, 2021
Part 1 of 2

Joseph Keating [00:00:02] Today is August 22nd and my name is Joseph Keating. I am interviewing Jo Anne [redacted] remotely - not remotely - in-person via audio recording. This interview is being conducted as a 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. Jo Anne, thanks so much for being here. Can you start just by telling me a little bit about yourself and what you do professionally?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:00:33] Sure. So, I'm a paramedic with the Sundance Hospital. I've been a paramedic since 2009. I just came up here less than a year ago. So, I worked with the same agency in another state for 20 years and in the same position.

Joseph Keating [00:00:55] Yeah.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:00:56] Immediate paramedic and I'm also a flight paramedic.

Joseph Keating [00:01:00] Oh, very cool. How long have you been involved in pre-hospital medicine for?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:01:04] 24 years.

Joseph Keating [00:01:05] 24 years? What got you into that?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:01:09] I lived out in a rural area with my family, and they had a fire rescue completely volunteer agency. We got a coffee cup at Christmas and I thought, I want to see what that's like. And I loved it. So, I did Volunteer Fire Rescue for six years, and then I got hired out professionally with the ambulance district. That was strictly EMS [Emergency Medical Services]. So, I've done fire for a long time.

Joseph Keating [00:01:38] Awesome. My dad was a firefighter for 20 years.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:01:40] Really?

Joseph Keating [00:01:40] So, when I think back about my childhood, like, he has a different job now, but I always picture him as a firefighter.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:01:46] Yeah.

Joseph Keating [00:01:46] Yes, I respect that immensely. Thanks for doing that.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:01:48] Sure.

Joseph Keating [00:01:50] So, can you walk me through what a typical workday has looked like for you the past couple of weeks or months?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:01:57] Well, it's pretty slow here. Here we work in the ER [Emergency Room] until we get a 911 call. Where I came from for 20 years was strictly ambulance. We could go work in the E.R. if we wanted to just for something to do, but we usually hung out at the ambulance barn. It was far busier at the other service I worked for:

7 to 10 calls a day average. Here is maybe one, maybe. I'll go six days and not get a call, but I also worked for about four or five other agencies. So, I've worked in a variety of places. I'm also a paramedic up in North Dakota on a reservation up there. And in fact, I'll be going up next month. I go about every once every other month then go for a week.

Joseph Keating [00:02:47] And has the pandemic affected what your job looks like there as opposed to how it does here?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:02:53] Yes, they were a lot more strict up there. The families on the res were not allowed to leave their homes. So, they were brought food, drink, whatever they needed. And then they couldn't come outside, basically. In the state I came from and here, the pandemic has not been that restricted where the people were kept in their homes. I did end up getting deployed by FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] to the state of Texas last summer because they were having so many people, basically, they said dropping dead on the streets like they lose 20 people a day. So, we got to go out there and a lot of people were really sick. Some stayed home if they could manage their own issues. But otherwise, many went into the hospital.

Joseph Keating [00:03:55] Wow. And can you tell me what is FEMA? I'm not familiar.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:03:59] It's a government agency. Response, federal agency. So, they respond to big disasters.

Joseph Keating [00:04:08] I see.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:04:10] Something like COVID, hurricanes, fires. Our agency where I came from was hooked up with FEMA. So, we would respond to wildfires and to stand by. So, we'd go to medical emergencies to stand by or hurricanes or earthquakes or whatever we got sent to.

Joseph Keating [00:04:29] I see.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:04:30] So, it's kind of fun.

Joseph Keating [00:04:31] Yeah, that's sounds awesome. So what was a typical workday like before COVID?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:04:39] You didn't have to wear a mask.

Joseph Keating [00:04:41] Yeah.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:04:43] Yeah. We didn't have to gown up and everything, but calls were probably increased just because people thought because they were short of breath or they had a temperature or some other COVID symptom, I think calls increased for that reason because they were afraid they had COVID, but we didn't test them like on the ambulance. They had to go into a site where they do that.

Joseph Keating [00:05:10] Interesting.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:05:11] Mostly clinics. I think the ones that were testing.

Joseph Keating [00:05:15] Gotcha. Do you remember the first activity or event that you remember participating in that changed because of COVID?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:05:26] I think it's just when it really got kicked off in March of 2020. When we were sent all the PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] that we were supposed to be wearing. It was full, full on everything and we even had fancy respirators. We had the tanks on the back. So, we were completely self-enclosed in our own oxygen. We had all of it: down from top, head the bottom. We had the, I forget what the suits are called, but there's doffing and donning and there's certain ways to put it on, take it off. You had to zip it up, put it on and put the hood over your head and you got your big mask on. It was very hot.

Joseph Keating [00:06:06] Yeah that must have been really uncomfortable.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:06:07] It was. It was very hard to move around. You looked like a great big Pillsbury Doughboy.

Joseph Keating [00:06:14] Did you have to wear that all day or could you take it off in between calls?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:06:17] You had take it off because that was off that patient.

Joseph Keating [00:06:20] Oh, I see.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:06:20] You get called to the other one that had similar symptoms. But every day you get dressed back at the station, and then you go on the call. So, it delayed calls. Like a complaint of shortness of breath, the dispatch would say, you know, possible COVID symptoms, that we would have to stay at the station to put all this on. Which I thought was, I don't know, far different to what we normally do. I mean, someone's shortness of breath, chest pain, you jump in the rig and you go. So, I felt really odd taking all this time to do that but that's what we had to do.

Joseph Keating [00:07:03] Yeah, definitely. Did your relationship with your coworkers in the health care system change as a result of the pandemic?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:07:12] No. I don't think so.

Joseph Keating [00:07:22] Can you describe how the new protocols might have changed how you interact with patients?

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:07:52] Yeah. Well, it would just be that the delay of care is my biggest issue with it. When we were responding by ambulance, here in the hospital, limiting visitors or even no visitors for the most part was pretty sad for the families. Because they would really want to see their family member. They had to talk to them. You'd have to tell them, I'm sorry, but you can't go in. You can call them but that's it. I've been with some families that have passed away from COVID and they could only say goodbye to their significant other by phone. That was it.

Joseph Keating [00:08:37] Yeah, that must have been really tough.

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:08:38] It was. Yeah.

Joseph Keating [00:08:43] Can you tell me any of the things that frightened or unsettled you about working during the pandemic? Did you ever feel afraid?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:08:54] No. I didn't feel afraid. The all the equipment we had to wear was all to protect us. We had the lights afterwards that we had to hang in the rig. Our stethoscope, our sunglasses and all of our personal gear all went into the ambulance. So, the whole thing got, I forget what that thing's called, but some kind of radiation light.

Joseph Keating [00:09:18] Oh, right. Okay. Did you feel like you were well supported by the institutions that you worked for?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:09:23] Oh, yeah.

Joseph Keating [00:09:24] You did?

Jo Anne [redacted] [00:09:25] Oh, yeah.

Joseph Keating [00:09:26] Okay. Good. So, one thing that everyone I've talked to that works in health care has had an opinion about this so far is the word hero was thrown around a lot and I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about that?