

Interviewer: Emily Martinsen

Interviewee: Dr. Joanne Jahnke-Wegner

Date of Interview: November 20th, 2020

Format: Video recording, Zoom

Location of Interview: Pepin County

Transcriber: Emily Martinsen

Additional Transcription Equipment Used: Otter.ai

Project in association with: University of Wisconsin Eau Claire

Abstract:

Dr. Joanne Jahnke-Wegner is a historian and tenure-track professor who works at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. Dr. Jahnke lives in Pepin County with her husband and son. In this interview, Dr. Jahnke discusses a multitude of topics. She touches on COVID in her hometown and the toll the virus has on her family and those around her. She reflects on her experiences quarantining, and what it's like teaching from her home. Dr. Jahnke talks about political views, mental health, and the well-being of her students. Dr. Jahnke spends ample time touching on what it's like being a professor during a global pandemic, and concludes the interview with her thoughts about the future.

EM: It's recording.

[Pause]

JJW: You did it.

EM: Okay, cool. Yep, because it says recording and the top, does it say anything for you that it's recording?

JJW: Yes, I can see that it is.

EM: Okay, perfect. [Sigh of relief] Thank you for being patient with me.

JJW: No worries.

[EM laughs]

EM: All right, so now we can get started. So, my name is Emily Martinsen, and I'm conducting an oral history interview as part of an effort to archive the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and communities in the Midwest for both the Chippewa Valley COVID-19 archive, and the Journal of the Plague Year COVID-19 archive. So, today's date is November 20th. And the time is now officially

10:28. As of now, there are sadly 55.6 million COVID cases worldwide. And there have been 1.3 more million deaths. And in Wisconsin, there are currently 358,000 COVID cases, and there have been 3,021 deaths. And today I am here with Dr. Joanne Jahnke. So, thank you for being here today.

JJW: Sure, no problem.

[EM laughs]

EM: So, um, one of the things that we start with is just a little bit of demographic info. So basic stuff like your age, race, ethnicity and gender.

JJW: Oh, okay. Oh, Lord, I have to admit that? No, I'm just kidding. I am 50 years old. I turned 50 in the pandemic. I am white, a white, a 50-year-old white woman I guess you would say. I'll just say it that way.

EM: That works, that works. Where do you live currently?

JJW: I currently live in Durand, Wisconsin.

EM: Okay, and what is COVID like in your town? Do you know what the COVID cases are, currently?

JJW: I have that pulled up so that I could tell you the totals for Pepin County. So for a long time, Pepin County was one of those counties where we didn't have a lot of COVID. That has exploded after, it's really exploded since children resumed school in person in the fall. So, in October, Pepin County made a huge leap from about 100 active cases. And now on November 20, we're up to 413 total cases, there are 105 active cases. One person is in the hospital. Two people have died of COVID in our county, and 306 are recovered.

EM: Okay. How big is the county itself like roughly or how big is Durand?

JJW: Durand is about 1900 people. There's, in the county, in Pepin County, there's another village Pepin, that's where I grew up, that has about 800 people then there's, there are two other small villages, Stockholm has about 80. I think Arkansas has probably about 50 or 60. And then there's a rural population. So we're not a very big county. At all, actually. Here, let me see if I can find it here.

EM: Yeah.

JJW: 7200 people in Pepin County.

EM: And then you said there's currently 400 cases?

JJW: There, ope, let me see.

EM: Give or take.

JJW: There are currently, there have been 413 positive cases, there are 105 active cases right now.

EM: So, for the county and your town to be as small of a population as it is, and to have a very substantial number. That's pretty -

JJW: Yeah, well, um, a lot of people here have not since COVID began, most people here have not taken it very seriously. Even, you know, even after Governor Evers issued a series of orders about mask mandates in public spaces, people don't wear them. I mean, some people do, obviously, and they care about it. A lot of people don't. So, I'm not surprised that is escalating as it is right now.

EM: Mm hmm, yeah. Why do you think people like, not refuse to wear masks, but why do you think people didn't take it as seriously?

JJW: Well, I think there are a couple of reasons. This is Trump country, first of all. And I, I think there are a lot of people who buy into the President's narratives that this isn't serious. You know, that you won't - if you get it, you won't get very sick. I think a lot of people [indecipherable] to that. So the politics, the politics of dealing with the plague has absolutely affected where I live. I think for other folks, you know, people are like, oh, it's like the flu, they don't see it, they see it as something survivable, and not very bad. We haven't had a substantial number of people die here. So it seems very far removed from Pepin County, and I think a lot of people don't feel any particular urgency to treat it seriously.

EM: That seems like that'd be very frustrating.

[Both laugh]

JJW: It's hard, because my household has taken it very seriously. And, you know, we've tried to, we've tried to do the right thing from - from the start, that hasn't kept COVID out of my house, however, [laughs] because my husband works in an elementary school in Menominee, Wisconsin and contracted COVID at work. And then when my son was home from college for a visit, spread it to my son. So we've had an experience of COVID in my house where they were both quarantining for an overlapping period of time, and I was living upstairs in two rooms to stay away from them, because I have not come down with COVID and I have remained healthy. So it's been really difficult to know that we're, we're trying to do all the things that we can and other people aren't, which makes all of us collectively more susceptible to COVID. It's very frustrating.

EM: Mm hmm, it sounds like it too. How was quarantining? [JJW laughs] Or, how is quarantining?

JJW: I, yeah, I'm not done yet. So I think Marty and my husband and son, were actually okay, they got to be in the main level of the house with the living room and the TV and everything. So I think they were, you know, they were alright, neither of them got especially sick for which I'm incredibly grateful. But for my part, to keep, and we all wear masks the whole time at home, and even in the house. So, for my part, I was upstairs, in my bedroom, in my very tiny home office, [laughs] doing, you know, doing the work of - of teaching and social distancing, I would come down to cook and clean and, you know, do things that they needed. But, I don't really know if I've come to a conclusion about the experience yet, it was very surreal, for sure. I just did a lot of work during that time to distract myself, I think from thinking too much about what could happen with Marty and Isaac. So I guess work was helpful that way. But it's, it's you know, I mean, isolation is - the isolation is really intense at a time when I was already doing a lot of isolation from my family, and friends, I have family I haven't really seen since, you know, some since Christmas, some since February, briefly, maybe in, you know, outside with masks on. So I, I haven't seen my family. I haven't seen my friends since last year at this time. So I was already feeling the effects of that kind of isolation when I had to retreat to an even smaller space. So it's been really hard. I mean, I would talk to Marty and Isaac by calling downstairs [laughs] from cell phone to cell phone just because I didn't want to sit in the common space of the house and visit when they were both infectious. So yeah, the - the physical isolation is difficult and the social isolation has been difficult. And then, the thing about COVID that nobody knows is that if you contract COVID your isolation period is 14 days, but they backdate your start because of when they figure you're contagious, so Marty and Isaac were able to resume their lives after 10 days of isolation. I however, have - am still in quarantine, because my 14 days of quarantine do not start until after the last one of them is sort of out of the house and moving more freely and considered non contagious. So my son returned to college Monday and that means my 14 days started Monday, so I'll be in quarantine probably a total of nearly a month, between having - because I live in a COVID house and the constant risk of exposure. And then with Isaac gone now we can see if I have COVID if I'm going to come down with it, so my quarantine will be about a month from the start of Marty's to the end of mine.

[EM makes noise in disbelief]

JJW: So, so I haven't been anywhere in a while [laughs].

EM: Well, I'm sure you know, before everything happened too, it's not like you went a lot of places.

JJW: Nope, I didn't.

EM: But I think now that you know that you can't even do that.

JJW: [Laughs] Yeah.

EM: You know, you're – you're stuck.

JJW: I'm super, I'm so stuck. It's, it's been nice because I am allowed to be outside and exercise. And we've been so fortunate that November has been lovely. So I've spent a lot of time outside or working in my gardens. Or you know, upstairs doing my teaching but - but yeah, just not doing regular things, like a trip to the grocery store is really strange for someone who enjoys you know, cooking and stuff. So -

EM: Right.

JJW: CO - COVID life, man, I - you know, and so, I guess [pauses] I'm navigate - I would say I'm navigating it pretty well. I'm not too stressed out or freaked out. Well, that's probably not true. I probably am. I haven't, I guess dealt with it yet. [laughs] But, well, you gotta laugh. But yeah, I think that's probably another reason why people don't want to stay home and do the social distancing. Because it's really hard. Right? We're, it's - looking out for each other's best interest right now demands a level of sacrifice that Americans historically have prided themselves on. But in the current era do not have. They can't, they can't carry through with the hard things that need to be done. And I think that explains why the illness has skyrocketed and why so many people are suffering. It's like, there's a grand, I'm a historian, so you're going to get the history like there's a grand narrative right of American sacrifice. during hard times, like from the Depression and World War Two. That is not happening. No one wants to give up. No one wants to give up a little bit of their own self interests for the greater good. And, you know, that got visited at my home and, and on me, and I find that really disturbing, and infuriating and frustrating.

EM: All of the things. [Laughs]

JJW: Yeah. Right. And, you know, I follow a lot of historians on Twitter who are like, “I've been doing this for months, come on now”, you know, like, we - we also want to do things. I want to go see my friends. I was not able to travel this past year to do my usual summer research for my own scholarship. Like, we've all lost things. But it's better to lose those things in the short term, than people, and no amount of talk or science can - can make that legible. I don't – I, like I can't wrap my brain around it.

EM: It's baffling to me.

JJW: Well, you know, I know that more right – right - leaning people talk about masks and social distancing as an infringement on freedom. But [scoffs] spreading contagion infringes on a lot of other people's freedom, right? Like there's - there's just such a misplaced narrative of what freedom is, that it just - it just makes me sad for Americans, we've - we've lost some things that I don't know if we'll get back.

EM: We've definitely I think, for me, what I've noticed is that we say we make all of this progress, but I mean, with this, it's - we're taking so many steps back. And it's - it's sad.

JJW: It's - it's pathetic and aggravating, right? And infuriating. I work on a COVID and caregiving task for or not, well, I should say, I am part of a COVID ta - or caregiving task force at the university system level. And then I'm working with another faculty, Theresa Sanislo, on campus to try to raise some of these issues. But, one of the thing that we're - one of the things that we're learning from the way that COVID - the way that COVID affects employment is the disproportionate effect on women. Because - because right, women are traditionally the caregivers. And so a lot of the, you know, the child, the extra child care from closed, daycares, or closed schools, falls disproportionately on women and I have read more than one article that talks about how much women are set back in terms of their professional careers. By this - I mean, that's just professional women. That's you know, that's not to say anything about women, women of color, people who have to go to work, right, who don't have the luxury of working at home, like I do. Like there are some serious intersectional and equity issues that are emerging from this both like in an academic setting, but just generally in society that I find deeply disturbing too like, I'm so mad that in the short run, we can't figure out how to wear a mask and social distance. And we haven't even started to fully reckon with the long term consequences of this both in terms of illness, stress on, you know, the medical system over time, the long term consequences of living with COVID, which we have no idea about, right, we have scratched the surface of that. And then the broader social and cultural consequences, economic, political, the whole nine yards, it's like, this is something we're going to have to deal with a fallout of for decades. And our poor response in the short run, just dealing with keeping it from exploding does not bode well for the future, [chuckles] I'm afraid, I worry about that. I'm like, what - what is going to happen here?

EM: Yeah, I think at tha - this point, for me, at least, it's a lot of fear and uncertainty of the unknown.

JJW: Mm hmm. And people don't like that, right. Human beings are not comfortable with living - living in uncertainty. And that's too bad. Because there's a lot to be learned, I think from living - living in that headspace. But we don't seem to be learning many very good lessons.

EM: No, and you would hope with, you know, something so serious. And so, you know, impactful to everyone, you know, not just like a small group of people, that people would want to do everything in their power to make things okay for other people.

JJW: You'd think so, right? Like, I think kindness and compassion might be the things we need, but they seem to be the things in shortest supply.

EM: Mm hmm. Which is sad to me.

JJW: Oh, it's - it's sad. And it is – [ugh] it makes me furious. I spent most of my time being incandescent with rage, although I don't think a lot of people can tell. But I am.

EM: It's just, it's all -

JJW: Because it's all, it's like so wrongheaded, so much of the response, like what is - what is happening here? We have this thing called science, which tells us how this disease works. And there are these really simple steps that you can do to contain it. We - we collectively can't seem to manage it. I mean, individuals, yes, families, some families do the work right-minded, that do matter, because other people don't. And we all pay the price. So people talk about all this infringes on my freedom. Well, what about the freedom of my husband and son who had COVID, have recovered, and we have no idea what's happening in the future with them? I don't know within a month or two months, they will have a complication from this and become seriously ill I have no idea. I live in constant fear of that. [Pauses] And that that is unconscionable to me and unforgivable -

EM: Right.

JJW: For people who do not take this seriously.

EM: And I think too, it goes back to people who don't think it's that big of a deal until it affects them personally.

JJW: But even then, they don't seem to think it's a big deal. Right. We've had stories the last couple of weeks coming from nurses who will say they are - as they are intubating people who are probably going to die of COVID, these people are adamant that they don't have COVID, that this is a hoax, that they're - that they're not that sick, like, there is such, yeah, the stories, the stories from nurses are incredible, that they just - they continue to live in the delusion that they are not dying of COVID when they are.

[Pause]

EM: See, that's my - that's hard to wrap my head around too.

JJW: Well, my sister works - one of my sisters is a nurse, she is on the front lines of COVID. She works in a local hospital. And she has talked about what the COVID unit is like and it is truly - it is truly terrifying for what happens to people who get COVID and get serious complications from COVID. You know, so I worry about her too. But yeah, people - people persist in their delusions that they don't have it that they're not got sick even as they're dying.

EM: Do you think that's almost like a coping mechanism for themselves?

JJW: Well, denial is, you know, denial is one human response to overwhelming, you know, to news that I think is devastating. But I, again, I think part of this goes back to a political discourse of, you know, that has dismissed the seriousness of this disease, and they have fully, they - you know, they're fully immersed in believing that it's not real, that it's a hoax that, you know, it's maybe [stammers] this is just made up or whatever, you know, self delusion, and denial. Really powerful.

EM: Mm hmm. Do you think if we had different political leadership, that we'd be in a different position [JJW laughs] that we're in now?

JJW: That's such a loaded question. But the – there, it has a really simple answer to me. And that answer is yes. I think if we had a coordinated national response that actively supported state and local government, to put in place a mask mandate, to make people able economically to stay home, if we had a different political narrative, I think much of the suffering and the dying, right, I think a lot of that could have been avoided. But that's not what we have.

EM: Right.

JJW: So this is, so this is the world that we live in, right? A world where COVID has swamped the US and where, you know, professionals like Fauci and Michael Osterholm, who is that - the big epidemiologist from the U of M, they're like, we're in for two months of living hell. That's what they're saying. And they're very clear about - about it and why and - Sorry, science, it's a thing. It's not - it's not like they weren't telling the truth all along. But, you know, our political responses responded, our political response is directly responsible and accountable for what's happening to people now. There's no way around that.

EM: No, there's so not.

JJW: Yep.

EM: There's not.

JJW: Yeah. So, you know, here we are.

EM: Unfortunately. Here we are.

JJW: Here we are. Yeah.

EM: And, like thinking from a historical standpoint, again, because you're historian and I'm a practicing historian, I guess.

JJW: Right.

EM: [Pauses, sighs] Has there been a situation like this? Because I know what the Influenza Pandemic in 1918 I just wonder if [pauses] it was like, similar to how we are now, do you know?

JJW: I, you know, so I'm an Early Americanist. I'm not 100% sure. But I have seen a little bit that - I know, during the 1918 Pandemic, there were still people who were like, I'm not wearing a mask. There were still anti - maskers there were you know, there were still people who weren't taking it seriously. But that was, you know, a lot more people died in that pan - well, let me say this, there were people who did not take it seriously. And I know that the United States after the initial wave of that influenza, slowly tried to reopen things. And they were swamped with a second wave of influenza that killed more Americans than the first. So [scoffs] apparently, Americans had tried, you know, a similar thing of a lockdown and masking that, you know, did work temporarily. And then as they reopened, got overwhelmed with a second wave of influenza. So there was some, you know, disbelief and anti mask sentiment and things at those - at that time, too. But I don't, I, you know, I don't really know if it was to the degree of insanity that we see now. Although, Americans, I think in 1918, had a problematic response too.

EM: Mm hmm.

JJW: And that was, that was a disease that killed you. Once you can contracted it could kill you very rapidly. You know, there were stories of people catching it and being dead within the day and the way that people died was like, physically dis - more physically disfiguring. I think people would suffocate so they would turn you know, like a purplish color. It was really horrible to see. Although I have to say the photographs that we see of COVID patients in intensive care units look pretty awful too. So. [Pauses] Yeah, Americans, we do not have a stellar record of dealing with global pandemic, historically or now.

EM: No. And you know, my hope, too, is, you know, we found, you know, a vaccine for the flu, you know, and I don't know how long it took, you know, from the time that pandemic was, you know, like, over, you know, in 1918, to having, you know, that sort of, I don't even know what to call it, but having that vaccine, so my hope, and maybe I'm naive is that, you know, if we can get through it then, maybe we can get through it again?

JJW: Well, I mean, we got through it then. That's the thing of history, right? Like, that's what history teaches us, things always change. And as bad as things are now, things will change. I don't know if they'll get worse or better. That's kind of always the kick, right is like, is it gonna improve or not, I don't really know, I guess, improvement really depends on your point of view. But, you know, it took a long time to develop an Influenza vaccine, that's a relatively recent development. The big breakthrough in the early 20th century was the Polio vaccine, which again, people did not want to take. But that's one vaccine. You know, we don't we didn't know as much about vaccination. I mean, we're fortunate that

people were working on like SARS, and MERS, which are also Corona viruses. So there was a lot of research ahead about how to deal with this. And we do have right now, what, three possible vaccines? But my concern is, I mean, one very fragile more than others. But my concern is that because of the failure of the national response, there will also be difficulties in distribution. It's like if we had taken this seriously, a lockdown combined with future planning for rapid distribution when a vaccine was available, could nip this in the bud in ways that probably aren't going to happen, where it's probably going to be, you know, and given what's going on now, after the election with the refusal of the Trump administration to allow the Biden administration to advance and plan is also going to throw a wrench into access to or widespread and ready access to a vaccine that would allow us to get back to normal more quickly. So the fact that this has become a political football. Is this going to work against all of us?

EM: Mm hmm. Yeah, I agree. And again, just, you know, when did caring about people's health and well being and when did that turn political? Why does that have to turn political?

[JJW laughs]

JJW: That's, that's the question I ask myself all the time. Because if there's an ethos at the center of Trumpism, it's cruelty, right? I mean, I can't. I mean, I'm a historian and I am a citizen. And I have studied for a long time, how Americans are and I struggle to wrap my brain around what I see as an ethos of cruelty from, from Trump supporters, right, who - who don't bat an eye at - at the politicization of health at the fact that 250,000 Americans have died, at the fact that there are children and current separated from their families and incarcerated in cages. At the fact, you know, that sexism and misogyny and racism are used to motivate a base. I'm - I'm deeply disturbed by the cruelty and violence, and their response to Coronavirus is just one iteration of that. To my - to me, I see them all of a piece. Mm hmm. Yeah. It's -

EM: Mm hmm. Yeah. It's - it's unfortunate, and it's scary.

JJW: It's infuriating.

EM: It is.

JJW: I don't understand the hatred and cruelty. Because that's not how I try to relate to people and live my life.

EM: I don't think that's how anybody should.

JJW: Well, they shouldn't but they do. [Scoffs] Right? I mean, I'm sorry, but when I see a person without a mask, I do wonder what goes through their head. I'm like, What is so hard about wearing a layer of cloth for a temporary trip into the store? Like what does that say about you and what you value.

I don't know the answer to that. I have some theories, but I think – I'm thinking I'll keep those to myself. But I just, I don't get. It's like, it's such a simple thing. It can save so many lives. Right? Why not?

EM: Right. And, you know, it's such a small thing, but you know, make it, you know, enjoyable, I guess, is maybe a kind of a weird word. But like, you can make the masks a fun pattern, or you can, you know so many stores, you know, make those now and you can, like, I have quite a few because I'm like, Okay, if I, you know, wear a lot and if I'm going on campus, and just to wash them all, I'm like, okay, I can match it to my outfit. If I want. There you go, you know, and it's just, again, like you said, it's such a simple thing to do. So why wouldn't you do it?

JJW: Yeah, I yeah. [Laughs]

EM: That's the million-dollar question.

JJW: Well, there are people have a lot of reasons. That are probably fairly selfish. I'll just leave it there.

EM: That's fair. That's fair.

[JJW laughs]

EM: I, no, I agree with you too, because I think the majority of people that I've seen, and especially around Eau Claire, when I'm going into like Festival Foods, or Target people wear masks, I feel safe. You know, I wear a mask, because they tell you to, and I want to care about other people and the health of myself. Simple. And I remember when I was walking in the store, and you know, I saw a woman without a mask. And I just think to myself, don't you feel unsafe?

JJW: Right.

EM: And she actually, I was like getting avocados or something. And you know, you pick the right ones, whatever. And I guess I was taking too long. Because she was like, standing right behind me waiting for me, and I just, I can't believe it. You know, there's no concept of personal space. There's no concept of, you know, other people and like their lives. [Stammers]

JJW: Well, but right, I mean, that's the ethos of Americans. So like this radical notion of individualism, that I should be able to do what I want, when I want, with whoever I want, how I want without any caring for the community. And I think that's really one of the things that we see, one of the things we see with COVID is a breakdown of community, although I'm not sure Americans have had a very good sense of that for a really long time. Right, a notion of there is a greater good to be mindful of, and with the anti maskers, I think we - we see probably the clearest iteration of what this radical belief in a certain

type of individualism looks like that is - that is destructive, instead of - instead of formative or a representation of American values, so [pauses] yeah. Anti-maskers, man.

EM: [Sighs, laughs] You know, and it's just I feel like the anti maskers probably, I don't know, maybe this is a loaded thing to say myself, but I feel like they're on the same level as the anti vaxxers.

JJW: Well, I imagine there's some overlap there.

EM: Right. Right. But who knows?

JJW: Yeah.

EM: I sure don't. [Laughs]

JJW: I - I don't either.

EM: Yeah, but we can switch gears a little bit, because we're still going to be on the topic of COVID. But you are a professor at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. So would you like to talk a little bit about how being a professor during a pandemic has been for you?

JJW: Sure, I would be glad to talk about that. Because, I don't think my - my professor experience is very standard to professor experience at this point, right? So this is a very strange time. So I'm new faculty at Eau Claire, in terms of being a tenure track hire, but I'm not new to higher education. I started teaching as an adjunct in 2006, at UW Stout, and then in 2009, I started a Ph. D program at the University of Minnesota and during that time, so I'm older obviously, I started it when I was older. During that time, I was, you know, raising my family and I continued to teach all through graduate school, which I don't recommend, but it needed to happen, you know, because I was older and had a family and responsibilities. So it took me a while to finish my dissertation. So I had been teaching as an adjunct for a long time at Stout, I taught at Eau Claire, as an adjunct I taught as a graduate instructor at the University of Minnesota. And I finished and defended my dissertation this year in the middle of a pandemic. Also something I don't recommend. I had a Zoom defense and you know, have - have a beautiful diploma with my name on it, but did not get to do any of the rituals that go with finishing something that took me 10 years of my life. So you know, no celebration after the defense, no graduation, I have not been hooded, which is one of the things that happens at a doctoral graduation, you - you know, you are - you are hooded. So it's hard for me sometimes to believe that I actually achieved one of the most important goals in my life, because there have been no rituals to mark it. And then - so I have a lot of background in academia. And then I was hired by Eau Claire last year and joined the faculty as tenure track, in the middle of a pandemic. [Laughs] So none of - none of this is okay. I mean, it's okay, and that I've achieved a lot of my goals, but just trying to navigate as sort of a change in my position, in the middle of a pandemic is really hard. And fortunately for me, I'm part of the history

department, which is fabulous. I have the best colleagues. But yeah, so I started my official tenure track career teaching in person in a pandemic, right? So I did the high flex model, which means that part of my class was with me in person, and part of my class was simultaneously online. So I was teaching in two classrooms at once. I also don't recommend that, [both laugh] Emily was in the online classroom as my graduate assistant, so she would have to speak to how well I did or not, but it was very much a challenge to pay attention to all my students, regardless of where they were, and we're just trying to make it through, right, it was like, I'm trying to keep up what I like to - what I like students to do and learn and how I like them to, you know, and how I like to help them think. So, I did the high flex until my husband and son were diagnosed with COVID. And then I switched to a synchronous classroom. And that's where I've been since, and that's where we'll stay now that Eau Claire is going online after Thanksgiving, which I think is an important and necessary change. So I'm, I'm glad for that. But I really feel bad for students. Because I feel like they have been, especially incoming freshmen who don't know any different. I feel like they've been deprived of a really formative experience because of the way that social distancing creates a sense of isolation and really interferes with the creation of community. So I think a lot about students. I feel really bad. I try in as much as I can in my teaching in the time that I see them to, to make sure that they're getting the best of me as an instructor. But that's hard to do. Because how I am in the classroom has also had to change, I have a big personality in the classroom, I have a big presence. [Laughs] And the fact that not I have to now social distance and can't move through the classroom, when I lecture and discuss and can't see their faces because of the mask has really interfered. I think with it's certainly been an impediment for, for my ability to make connections with my students. And, you know, I didn't know what COVID teaching would bring, I knew it would be difficult and it is. But there were sort of these unforeseen consequences right of how the masking and the six foot distancing infected my style of teaching, and the fact that I have to stay in front of a camera all the time so my synchronous students can see me, this locks me in a place up front where I'm not used to being, and one of my classrooms was a makeshift classroom in the library breezeway. So, the acoustics and the - the sight line in that room are terrible. I'm just gonna say that right now. But we just we - every day do our best, but I find that teaching has presented unique challenges that I hope I've risen to. I've really, I've tried very hard. I'll also say that teaching in a pandemic takes a lot more time, than - than usual, because, I mean, I prepare the same material, and that's fine. But you know, it's extra steps to prepare for an in person and a synchronous classroom. That's, that takes extra time. And I also, because students can't see me, and I think they need to, so I give the lecture in the classroom, or we do discussion, then I post a video lecture where students can see my face for accessibility purposes. **Because** I think that's really important for me, for students. And then I also do closed captioning of the videos for accessibility purposes. So I basically give the lecture three times.

EM: Wow.

JJW: Between the classroom, and then a lecture at home where people can see me, and then I have to edit the closed captioning so that the machine generates. So teaching is much more labor intensive, but I feel it's really important to guarantee accessibility for students. And to make sure that students, whether

they're healthy and can come to class, or if they're in quarantine, because of their exposure, or if they have COVID or, and are in isolation, I set up the class in such a way that it's accessible for everybody, regardless of their health and situation. And I don't know if that's too much, or if that's excessive, but I feel like that's the only way to make things fair for my students. So it's a lot of extra work. And I'm not complaining, I'm stating a fact that COVID you know, COVID exacts a really heavy toll. And then as far as the rest of my experience as a new professor, COVID has absolutely affected that part of my department, half of the people in my department teach solely online, for their own reasons. And I'm really glad that our department makes that possible, because I want my colleagues to be healthy and safe. But what that means is that being part of a community in the department is very difficult. I you know, there are weeks on campus where I wouldn't talk to another colleague or see people, because we have opposite schedules, because people are largely at home to stay safe. So as a new faculty, I found it very difficult to, to start to build relationships in my department. So that's tough, I do do service on campus. That's another part of what we do. And I'm, I probably am doing too much, because that's how I roll. But I'm glad to be doing that because we are working on caregiving and COVID. And I think that's an important issue for all employees on campus, not just faculty, but also staff and academic staff. Because we all have caregiving issues, regardless of gender. Although, you know, it does fall disproportionately on women, this is an intersectional issue. This is an issue of equity in terms of long term tenure or promotion and pay. So I'm glad to be doing that kind of work. But again, it's all online. So making connections to people in person, I've really lost and then as far as my own research goes, which is the third part of what I do. [Laughs] Good luck with all of that. [Laughs] Because there just are not enough hours in the day. [Stammers] I have been working on my own, like a book proposal for my own research and trying to get out an article, because these are things I have to do on the tenure track, but COVID has made being a new faculty really hard and that is, you know, in spite of the support I feel for my department, because I do feel supported. But yeah, it's just - it is difficult. It is difficult in ways that, you know, I have experienced - I have not experienced in the rest of my academic career, which is much longer than just becoming a tenure track person. So boy, COVID in academia, man.

[Both indecipherable]

EM: Yeah, yeah. Well, and one thing that you do in your classes that I really like, are those polls.

JJW: Yeah.

EM: No, I really like that.

JJW: Oh, good!

[EM giggles]

EM: And, you know, I know I'm your TA and everything, but, you know, I think it's safe to say that your students appreciate that.

JJW: Yeah.

EM: Because there's that empathy there. And I think that's - that's really important.

JJW: Yeah, I wish I - I wish I would have started doing them earlier in the semester, but then I was just, you know, we were just going along and trying to get our bearings. And then, yeah, it was just like one day, I'm like, I'm just gonna do this today and see what happens. Now I do them every week, right? We do the Thursday check in and students do appreciate it. And I also - I mean, I just like posting some of the sort of silly responses that I do, right? Because, because they, they need the humor, I need the humor. But it's just a way to get a really informal bead on how people are doing. And, you know, sometimes they're okay, and a lot of times they're not. And I have had students who emailed me after and thanked me for the poll. They're like, thanks for doing that poll. I was really - it's really nice to know, I'm not alone and feeling, you know, isolated or struggling or whatever. And it just gives students a space to blow off some steam too about housing issues, or quarantine, or food, the food situation on campus, which they are not happy about. I have to say. So yeah, it just gives them space to make their voices - they feel like someone hears them and someone cares. And that's, I mean, that's my teaching style. It's who I am as a person. And so, I'm glad they found it helpful. Do you do them, Emily, when I do the poll? I hope you do.

EM: [Laughs] I do.

JJW: Like I hope Emily's doing this too. I mean, because I'm writing the poll, I can't. But I always do say yeah, well, I feel all these things, or whatever. I mean, I - I put my response in there too, because [pauses] it's hard on everybody. And I think it's okay for students to see the struggles of faculty. They know where I'm at. And I think that builds trust and community in the class in ways that me keeping a distance wouldn't. I also don't feel it's productive too. I mean, they know I'm their instructor, and no one pulls shenanigans, because that's how I roll. But they do also still feel like safe that they can express their frustration and their fears, as they do in the chat like that. One day, the chat blew up about the food situation. I'm like, what is going on here? But - but otherwise, as a faculty, I wouldn't know. So I'm glad to know that students - I appreciate knowing their struggles, and then, you know, just encourage them to talk to faculty or their student senators, and to try to get some help for stuff.

EM: Yeah.

JJW: Yeah, they seem to appreciate it.

EM: I know they do. And I know if I was in that position, if I had a professor that would do something like that, it would make all of the difference. It would. And like you said earlier, I can't even imagine being a freshman, or even just being an undergrad right now.

JJW: Yup.

EM: I mean –

JJW: I, yeah. I don't know, I think they just they need to feel seen. And that's, that's what I do, you know, with the, with the polls and stuff. So I think it - I think it helps them emotionally.

EM: Definitely.

JJW: But you know, the other - the other part of being a faculty right now, is the emotional labor that goes into this. And this isn't something that faculty talk about a lot, and some faculty would dismiss me, or poopoo it, or say it was bullshit. But there, there is emotional labor, like when I ask those polls, I'm not just doing it as a - as a teaching tool. I'm doing it because I am sincerely concerned about students and, you know, their response, their responses do weigh on me, I do think about what they're going through. And you know, how this is going to affect their, their physical and mental health long term like, we - we have to reckon with this on campus as instructors and staff and stuff and yeah, I [stammers] feel - I feel very deeply for students and what they're going through and for, well, the entire campus community, it's, it's a really difficult situation. But so yeah, so there's emotional labor that is involved with, you know, dealing with - with sitting with student frustrations with sitting with my own frustrations, what my colleagues are going through, all of it is, is emotionally very tough.

EM: Mm hmm. Because -

JJW: And I think –

EM: Go ahead.

JJW: I was just going to say, I think we should just acknowledge that that's part of, you know, being an employee and, and a faculty person during this time.

EM: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. You know, and I'm sure there's times where you wish you could do more during this time.

JJW: Oh, man, that's - that's the hardest thing because I can see you know, as much as I can, in as much as I can tell, through the interactions that I have, I can see that some students are really suffering. And it's really hard for me not to be able to do more as the mother of a college-age student myself, I'm like,

oh, I just want to mother all you poor people. And, you know, I try in my limited ability in the classroom, at least to acknowledge their suffering and give them some comfort that way, but oh, yeah, I would just say, God, I wish - I wish there were things I could do that [pauses] I can't.

EM: Right.

JJW: And that's hard.

EM: It is. It is. I can imagine that it is, you know, and I just, you know, after they were talking about their food situations, I – [scoffs]

JJW: I know, I was like, some of you are hungry every day. I'm like, what is happening here? I was sad about that.

EM: It is

JJW: Yes. I was pissed off about that, actually.

EM: I would have been too. I mean, that's, you know, you pay, you know, and your room and board for food. In a meal plan. That's the least students deserve is food.

JJW: Is - is enough food.

EM: Right. [Indecipherable]

JJW: Yeah, that that one caught me off guard. I did not know what the situation was. I was like, whoa, that was like 30 people talking about food right there in the chat.

EM: Yeah. You know, and I'm sure for some students, it's the case where that's all they have.

JJW: Yeah, it's – it's their food. Yep.

EM: It's just all around very, I don't even know what word to use anymore.

JJW: It is just so deeply distressing, right?

EM: Yes.

JJW: I feel like everyone's going to have a massive case of PTSD after this. I'm not even joking about that. I'm dead serious about that, that this is - this is traumatic, in ways that are going to take a long time to understand.

EM: Yeah, yeah, I know. I've seen so many, like statistics and things that mental health right now, is at an all time low. Which makes sense.

JJW: That does, right? When there are so many contradictory behaviors that are not conducive to the general good, that's really distressing and you know, just the stresses of home life and school and work and caregiving, and yeah, all of it is just very messy. Very messy moment.

EM: Very messy indeed. Yes. Yeah. Okay. Now, we probably have time for a couple more questions.

JJW: Sure.

EM: I'm just trying to think what I want to ask.

[JJW laughs]

EM: Those were like my big things that I wanted to cover was, you know, your personal experiences and you know, being a faculty member on campus. [Pauses] Mmm, lemme think, no, but the bigger [stumbles over words], you've seen [laughs] the list of questions. Was there anything else on your mind that you -

JJW: Let me go look.

[EM laughs, pauses]

JJW: Or do we have to do informed consent stuff, too?

EM: That was all in the forums that I sent.

JJW: Oh, and I need to send those back to you, right?

EM: Mm hmm. Yeah.

JJW: Okay.

EM: No worries.

JJW: [Quietly] Community, health, information, government.

EM: I think we kind of touched on –

JJW: We talked about a lot of this stuff already.

EM: [Laughs] Yes.

JJW: We haven't talked about information too much.

EM: So like –

JJW: The terms - in terms of what my sources of news and things are.

EM: Okay. [Indecipherable]

JJW: Legitimate ones. How's that? [Laughs]

EM: How do you get, you know, your information and your sources of news? What do you do?

JJW: Okay, so I have my Twitter and Facebook feed set up in such a way that I - well, the Twitter is a lot of historians so you know, that's always just good, great fun. There's always shenanigans that I appreciate so much. Most of my news is the New York Times, The Atlantic. I do - I don't watch any television news. I'll occasionally read articles from CNN, or MSNBC or NPR. So I try to read, and I try to use news sources that are vetted and legitimate. [Laughs] Not the - I'm just gonna leave it there, right? I try to use things that I know are factually accurate and based in, you know, based in research and careful vetting. So I try to stay informed as best I can. There are days that when I do what I call a media diet, where I don't look at much news, because I need a break from the onslaught of constant fuckery that is going on in the world. So I do take breaks. I don't do a lot of podcasts and things like that, my time is so I'm like I'm so strapped for time just to navigate, just to negotiate teaching and you know, my other responsibilities that I don't spend a ton of time in the in the news rabbit hole. I think it's dangerous to do that, actually, right now, because it can make you it can compound - compound feelings of anxiety and anger that I don't think are healthy. So I try - I try to stay, stay somewhat informed on the things that are particularly - I'm particularly concerned about like COVID, health care, scientific advancements, the - I have a general sense of what's going on politically, in terms of like the transition after the presidential election, some state and local politics in Wisconsin, and then I just leave it at that. I think that's - I try to find a healthy balance between being informed and being obsessed, right? Like no doom scrolling in my house, that is not - not healthy. Yeah, that's, that's how I try to think about that. And then the other question, the other series of questions that we didn't talk about were the future, and it - so you have two on here about how the experiences has - has transformed about how I think about family, friends and

community? And what do I think individuals, communities and governments need to keep in mind for the future? So this is the - this is the funny thing about being historians, students love to ask me these questions like, what do you think would have happened if this - if they did this? Or what do you think would happen if this happened? I am not a big fan of what ifs and counterfactuals.

EM: Mm hmm.

JJW: And I know that people love that. But I think it lends itself to magical thinking, and conspiracy thinking –

EM: Yes.

JJW: That I think are unhelpful at best, and dangerous, you know, dangerous at the other extreme. But as far as you know, what I hope to see in the future [laughs] I really, really do think, or one of the things that I hope, is that [pauses] people take the time to sit with their experiences of the COVID - of COVID days, right? Whatever those experiences were, I hope people take the time to sit with those experiences, and maybe, reconceptualize the possibilities for what their life can be, right? A lot of people talk about, oh, we need things to get back to normal. Well, I don't want things to go back to normal. My normal is a life that is really busy. With my son being in college and being a college runner, it involves a lot of running around myself to attend meets, to always be on the go. And my life was far less than most people I know that way, like I was more of a homebody, but I just hope that people use this time to think about how their life can be different and less stressed, and connected at a deeper level than the superficial connections I think we have now, right? People do a lot of stuff. They say they have a lot of friends, they're on the go. But I - I wonder how much of those connections are deep and meaningful and considerate in considered. And I just think of this as a time where maybe Americans can also think about the other forces that impact their lives, in terms of politics, and being a citizen, and holding government accountable. I think that might be a new direction. I think another thing Americans can think about is our impact on the environment. Right? Like the COVID slow down can be a moment when we can reconceptualize what our life can look like in terms of resource use and travel. And the fact that some of us have chosen for a smaller footprint during COVID maybe means that we can continue with that. I think the possibilities for connections, I think about my academic life, like, I have been accepted for two conferences, that I'm not going - I'm not traveling to because we're going online. And I think that might be good, right? Because I can still do my paper, we can still have a conversation about it, I can still feel connected to my intellectual community while red - reducing my environmental footprint. And I'm actually kind of excited to think about other ways I can do that. This past week, I was able to attend a webinar from a group in Washington DC, that if I - if they would have held it in person, I would have missed it. It was on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, which is an interest of mine. So I was able to go and hear these really powerful, like legal scholars, artists, and tech people talk about how to address this issue, I could do that from the comfort of my home, I never would have had that opportunity. So I'm really excited about the possibilities of digital community building.

And this is one example of it, right? This archive is an example of that. So I think future wise, there are real possibilities for intellectual and community connection, if we're creative in how we conceptualize that. And the like, the third thing that I've been thinking a lot about because of, even though I'm an early Americanist, a lot of my thought is about capitalism, and the ways that economic arrangements have set up this discourse of COVID as an economic crisis and a failure, when perhaps this is a time when we can consider how things like consumer capitalism, right, have really demoralized American lives. And that's been a long process, right? But I think this lays bare the fail - the failures of capitalism in the United States. And I wonder if this is an opportunity, if we're willing to - to rethink some of that, and at least on an individual level, to rethink our engagement in that. So I have been thinking about these issues. And these aren't counterfactuals or the what ifs, right, I'm just like, there are possibilities for a deep, intellectual, personal, and I think psychological and emotional reconsidering of what being an American can look like, that I hope people take the time to consider. Now, I'll leave it there.

EM: Sounds good.

JJW: I mean, there is space to recreate meaningful life in a different way that the election helps us to see right, that the protests over the summer after the murder of George Floyd, help us to see that people talking about police and prison reform, concerns over women's economic opportunities, like there are opportunities for different ways of doing things. That if we take the space provided by COVID to consider, might - might improve things in really important ways. I'm just not sure Americans are up for the task.

EM: Maybe not now.

JJW: Right? Maybe in the future? I don't know. I just - it's hard to be hopeful, because things are so hard. But there are possibilities if I guess there are possibilities right, if people have courage. That's, that's hard to - that's hard to see sometimes.

EM: It is.

JJW: So yeah. This – this is the COVID life. [Laughs]

EM: Well, perfect. Well, thank you for sharing your thoughts and your feelings and everything in between with me.

JJW: Absolutely.

EM: Yeah, I really appreciate it. And yeah, that's all I have. So. [laughs] Alright, so I will just stop recording this. Pause and stop recording. Alright, perfect. So I don't really know what's going to happen when I stopped this.

JJW: Okay.

EM: Stop recording.