

## Merrimack College COVID-19 Oral History Project

Interview Subject: Katherine Donell

Interviewer: Alexander Moore

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Transcript edited by: Alexander Moore

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AM: I am Alexander more calling in from Danvers, Massachusetts. Today's date is 11/30/2021. I am here with Katherine Donell, right? Sorry.

KD: Yeah. [Laughing]

AM: I wanted to make sure I said your last name right.

KD: Yeah.

AM: So, I guess, we can get right into it.

KD: Sure I can introduce my--do you want me to introduce myself?

AM: Yeah, sure, sorry I'm sorry. [Laugh]

KD: No, that's fine. I'm Katie Donell, today is 11/30 and I'm coming—I'm located right now in Lunenburg, Massachusetts.

AM: Okay, alright. First time for everything, kind of getting the nerves out I guess.

KD: Oh yeah, absolutely.

AM: So I guess, I'll start with this one. Could you describe your general role at the college?

KD: Sure. So, I've worked at Merrimack for the past 13 years. I started, initially, as a program coordinator or coordinator position. Now I am the assistant director. I work—I manage the Lawrence Math and Science Partnerships, specifically, but I also, like many of my colleagues in my office, we work with a wide variety of community partners in the greater Merrimack Valley placing our students to do service learning. Service learning is the connection of your coursework back to the service in the community. So it's a little bit more intentional than just general volunteering or one-off volunteering times and—yeah, that's kind of what I've been doing for the past 13 years at Merrimack.

AM: And what was going on in your life just prior to the pandemic?

KD: Prior to the pandemic? Just kind of the day to day of managing the student volunteers, managing the van drivers, that was another big component of my—of my position and then personally, we were selling our house right before the pandemic happened.

AM: Oh!

KD: Yeah. So, from that perspective I can definitely, depending upon the questions I have an interesting—probably home story—

AM:—Yeah

KD: —of what kind of happened throughout the pandemic, but I mean all of a sudden, for us, we were in—you guys were about to go on to spring break and when we weren't sure what was going to happen. It was kind of a normal semester with—Christmas came and it was like, “Oh this the pandemic” or it's starting to spread in China, we're like, “Okay, whatever we're keeping an eye on it,” and then we got the email from administration thinking, “Oh we'll just close for a little bit,” and then lo and behold, we were stuck at home for—up until, I think, what, mid-summer. For us as employees, we came back in the middle of the summer to kind of get the semester going again.

AM: You said you had a good anecdote about selling your home at the beginning of the pandemic, would you like to explain that?

KD: So yeah, we sold our house. We put our house on the market kind of right before—we had people in our house. Kind of pre-COVID or not even really understanding what it is, I mean we had, I would say about 10 to 15 showings in one week—it was showing after showing. This is before masks and all that kind of stuff so we

didn't even think about it, and then we sold our house in the middle of the pandemic and moved around Easter time. Kind of right in the thick of not really sure what to do, kind of moving forward with masks, or you should stay home, or even wear gloves in the grocery store. I saw people all PP, what is it, PPE? Wearing all kinds of stuff to the grocery store, so yeah it was definitely an interesting time because, we had all those people through our house without even knowing about it so that was definitely interesting for our family. And now, we're still in the process, we had a flood at our house but we're still in the process--we're building a new house and with all of the—because the pandemic is still going on, there's a lot of supply chain issues as well. It's still 18ish months later and we're kind of still trying to figure it out with the supply chain issues and trying to hire people, so I think it's an ongoing problem.

AM: Circling back to early on in the pandemic, do remember the first time you heard of it? I know you said that you had heard about it when it was still seen as a regional problem in China, but—

KD: I mean, I think it was kind of at Christmas time, was when we---like when it kind of first like came to the United States, there was that man in Seattle that kind of contracted it and then. Like I said—my sister in law had a baby right before the pandemic happened and then she decided to go back to work. And that's kind of when I knew it was getting bad because she actually was like, "There's not enough protective gear. I don't feel safe." Because at the time she worked in intensive care, so I was like, "Okay, so this is really getting serious." Towards, I would say, the middle of February, and then it was kind of limiting where you go, what are you doing, and then all of a sudden, we got that kind of shut down notice in March for everybody that kind of like, "Oh my God, what is this? How's this going to go?" And I know, specifically my husband and my two kids, we would just take turns we would—we wouldn't bring—we used to go grocery shopping as a family but that's something we stopped doing. We would each take turns going into the stores, sanitizing our hands, wearing the mask and just, I mean, for a lot of people, I think we just went to the grocery store each week, and that was really it and just tried to stay home. I will say it was a little bit more difficult as the weather got nicer because, at the time when it first started, our kids were three and four, and so their childcare shut down and because of that we were all home together in one household trying to work from home in a lot of the pandemic—my husband actually works at a bank and he did those PPP loans for companies that were struggling to keep employees on the books, so it was a lot of me—at the beginning of the pandemic, it was it was okay, because the kids were just not in childcare but because it progressed so long, we actually had our daughter do kindergarten through the pandemic and now she's in the first grade. And then, I have a son that's in kindergarten and the experience is completely different right now, because they're in person, but it was a lot of very

similar, probably, to what you guys experienced as college students, a lot of, “Here’s the assignment, here’s the Google classroom, complete the work, you get a check, and kind of move on to the next thing.” I felt it was a lot of at the kindergarten level as well, so I think it definitely—it was tiring and a lot of people, but in a way, it was a little bit easier because you knew what was expected of you, and what you needed to do to kind of get that check and they think that seems to be what some students are struggling with now, kind of maybe being a little bit more accountable at times. But it is—I mean it’s been a long time, of having to do these things remotely.

AM: Talking about the change to doing things remotely, how did the pandemic change your role in the Stevens Center?

KD: For us, we were just trying our best to reinvent I would say, like we went online for service, and I think what was really difficult from our end is we worked with the partners, we tried to understand what they wanted to provide to their students and I think because of the pandemic kind of extended so long that towards that it was difficult—the virtual programming that we offered, was hard to get students to log on. So as much as it was great to have a book club or arts and crafts, it was at the end of the day—or the one on one tutoring—it was at the end of the day and students were tired of being on the computer. Because I think it’s like anything else, if you have too much of it, it’s like “Oh, I just want to get rid of this.” So, that was a little tricky and I think sometimes, with some of the partner sites, I think everyone’s intentions were good but just themselves trying to manage so much. I think sometimes it was tricky at times to get the participation of our students, as well as the site students to kind of everyone log on.

AM: I know you, you talked about how—a little bit about your experience with lockdown. What was—I know that you said that you had a life going on with your family then. What were the hardest parts for you?

KD: For our family in general, or just I think the hardest part was like, I always had a separation of work and home life that just didn’t exist anymore. I drive roughly about an hour to get to work each day and it’s like you didn’t have that time to decompress and it had to be a little bit more inventive, especially at the beginning with two young kids. I’d wake up super early, try to get two hours of work in, try to tend to their needs, dress them, feed them, all that, and then try to log on and make meetings kind of around their schedule and then trying to manage—over time I had to also manage my daughter on the kindergarten thing so that was a little tricky. I mean there was a few times we woke up and said, “Oh my God we forgot to do this,” and I really just tried to use my calendar as much as I could. I just started putting everything into my Google calendar, so I wouldn’t forget it. But I think, progressively, like most people, I think you just got used to

it but initially it was like, “How long are we going to have to stay?” and it was nice when the weather got nicer, but I think for my perspective and my family, it was harder to manage because the kids were like, “Why are you working? It’s so nice out?” or we don’t have any—so personally, I was really excited last April, when they allowed the students to go back, K-12 in person, because that made it a little bit easier on our family because we just had one child home a couple days a week, so that was a little bit easier and I think like I said, unfortunately with our our family situation when everyone was locked down and only essential employees were working, my husband was an essential employee so trying to get all of that—that was a little bit tricky I mean I know they took turns, but it was more—he was required to be at work more than we were, we didn’t go back to the office until last summer.

AM: Were there any positives to lockdown for you?

KD: I mean, we definitely got to do more things as a family. I mean we also realized it gave us a lot of opportunities to go through things and organize things from our move. It just made me personally, kind of, reorder like my time and decide what I give time to and same with work and stuff. Prioritizing things, the really the need for that made it easier. As the pandemic progressed, it was much easier to prioritize things. And I think that, for me, that pandemic it’s kind of like, “Oh this isn’t really important to me anymore,” for a lot of different things. I would say that one of the harder things which I didn’t mention earlier was, we love to travel as a family, or just go places. I think, for us, we used to travel a lot to see the Merrimack sports teams and things like that. And not having our kids be able to come on campus and things like that. That was a little difficult at first, but I think now they’re starting to get that—both of my kids have the first shot, so I think slowly things are coming back to normal.

AM: That’s good to hear.

KD: Yeah.

AM: Do you remember the first time you wore a mask?

KD: I think it was sometime in March, just to go into the grocery store. I know we just bought a bunch of them. We never did, we really never did the paper ones that much, but I mean, I think I just bought a whole pack at Old Navy because we’re like I think we’re going to need these for a while—and we still have our original ones, we’ve gotten a few extras. Obviously I think everyone—some are better than others. The paper ones are good, I think, for adults, the kids’ ones are a little trickier for sure, to keep them on but there’s lots of inventive ways to keep them up. And I think—I haven’t struggled

wearing a mask but I know some people have been. I don't mind, I personally don't really mind wearing them.

AM: I know you said that, at least until this last summer, you said that you were remote. Were there any—on top of, you know, trying to get students engaged in the service learning—were there any unique challenges outside of that realm for you?

KD: Well, for us it was, as a whole, it was really odd not to run the vans. I mean we have always had a very large student employment group of students driving the vans, we always have about 20 to 30 students a semester, and that was kind of disappointing, especially when everything shut down. So when everything did shut down, we had, I think one student, in particular, that was a graduate student, he was driving to pay his rent and things like that so, it was really nice to see that Merrimack made that emergency fund so that was helpful, but yeah for not running the vans for almost a year—was really just different. Not good or bad, but it was just odd not to have that student employment connection in our office.

AM: Somewhat related to that, were there any other particular challenges than the two that we've already gone through that were—[Inaudible] Sorry, go ahead—

KD: Sorry, no, I think what—once we got back to campus, it was just trying to figure out the scheduling. I think everyone kind of went through those growing pains. We just kind of came up with a schedule that worked for the three of us in our office and made it work. I mean, obviously I—my daughter was exposed, so I had to stay home, we had an exposure in the office we all had to stay home—I think that just came and went, but it was nice to know, “Okay, today I'm going to be in the office or today I'm going to be home.” But I personally just didn't—it was nice to have us all together, it was hard like—I mean the Zoom is an okay technology but just remembering to Zoom in, like if you're home we we did like a check in, and then it was like work from home, let us know if you have any problems, so it was definitely different. But one thing, though, that we all kind of—in place of van drivers—that we did is we we hired virtual monitors, tutoring monitors, and those were those students were very helpful because they were able to check in on like the later stuff that because we couldn't be in all these Zoom rooms ourselves. So that was helpful to have those students but, yeah, I just— it was hard, especially having such a small office to kind of—everyone be at home and then kind of figuring a schedule that kind of worked for everyone.

AM: I know that you'd said that you're able to do a kind of, like a spring cleaning of sorts. Where are there any opportunities that opened up for you through the pandemic?

KD: I think what was nice for us, is we—not kind of reinvented the wheel, but we were a little bit—it was a little bit easier to lay out expectations of if you were if you were going to be a student doing service learning in a classroom. I think kind of like a fresh start, kind of these are the expectations and we kind of were able to review things that— did this really work? And that kind of stuff and I think throughout the pandemic, I think all of the offices at Merrimack were kind of able to do that and that was nice and I mean we're always we're always open to suggestions, but it was—it is it's good to always get feedback, too. I think that the virtual stuff had mixed reviews, I think it was a great idea. I'm just not sure when the best time would have been to do it. And maybe it would have been more successful if every school had the same kind of requirements for school. So like I know in Lawrence, school was from like eight to one, and they were required to be online the whole time. Other schools had, you need it to do one Google Meet and then you did the individual work yourself, so I think if it was a little bit more of the same, I think, maybe that those virtual activities could have worked a little bit better but I know that it was—it even stumped some of the partners, they're like, “Well, the parents said that they wanted this and then we provided it and then no one showed up,” so it was kind of like that balancing act.

AM: All right, just to push on right along, in the summer of 2020 with the state's reopening plan starting up, was there something that you were really excited about opening up again?

KD: Not in particular, I just—I think for just us it was just nice to have the opportunity to kind of resume some of the normal activities, like going, like I said earlier, going to work, dropping the kids off at school, having it like, those daily routines. I mean we haven't done a lot of traveling—we still haven't gotten on an airplane or anything like that, so we're still kind of in that cautious mode just because, like I said, our kids are just half [vaccinated]. My daughter got her first shot today, and my son got his last week so our hope for our family is to go on a trip in April on an airplane, but I think, for us, in particular, at that time it was just kind of getting back to normal routines.

AM: Was there any point that you felt that there was a new normal of sorts?

KD: Yeah, I think when we came back in September, it—just with the daily, the weekly testing and the mask wearing, I think that's really—I think that's where we're going to stand until we have a good majority of people vaccinated. I mean, I think that's what Merrimack has been able to do. I think the world hasn't been able to do it, but I think we've been able to get—meet those numbers that it seems like is somewhat safe, enough for people to not wear the mask or if they don't feel comfortable they can wear the mask where I think, as a general population, I don't think we're quite there yet.

AM: I know you touched on this a little bit, but are there any more specific difficulties that you've had with work life balance, during the pandemic?

KD: No, like I said, I think it's—for us, it was a more unique situation when we said that we were going to sell our house—we're like, "Oh, we'll see what this pandemic is," and then just kind of what has transpired the past 18 months, trying to continue to move in and having problems with hiring people and things like that to kind of complete the work. I think that that is our unique situation but, yeah it's just—Yeah it was just definitely something I wasn't expecting. I honestly can say I really wasn't expecting it to be continuing the way it has been. Especially with all the new variants and things like that, I know at some—I know they're trying especially in K-12, they're trying to increase the vaccination, so that they can kind of relax the masks wearing like we have at Merrimack but I think only a few schools have gotten there so it'll be interesting to kind of see what the spring brings for us. I'm interested to see if we'll do the weekly testing, I know that that has been good, it's been helpful to know almost instantly if you have—within two days if you've been exposed to it so I think, for a lot of people that has—I know it's, it is a lot of money to be spending, but I know that I think especially with everyone being back on the campus I think that that has—I think I was very happy that they instilled that again because it sounded like at first when this when September happened that it wasn't a potential that they were going to do it.

AM: I know you talked about traveling and even just something as mundane as going to the grocery store as a family, but is there anything that you personally on top of that, miss from pre-pandemic life?

KD: Well, I will say this this past August my husband and I were married for 10 years and we had talked about going on—we were going to go to Portugal and we got our kids passports and we were super excited. A couple years ago, we brought them to Canada, and were like "Oh we'll be able to use this in a couple of years." They've had—the kids, their passports will probably expire without us actually leaving the country because of the pandemic. I don't know if, I haven't even looked into it, if it's going to, if they're going to extend it, but that was a little for us, that was a little bit of a disappointment.

AM: How did you stay connected with people during the pandemic?

KD: We just—a lot of texting, emailing, Facetiming, we did a lot of Facetime with our friends because—or like if we saw our family, we would just visit outside. But yeah a lot of that. My sister, one of my sisters, had a baby at the beginning of the pandemic in

April, and we have pictures of her showing the baby in front of her front door, we couldn't go in, couldn't hold them until much later so some of that stuff was a little bit tricky but I think everyone in our family kind of just navigated on what they felt most safest to do. But it's hard, because I feel like a lot of that stuff is easily judged by a lot of people so I think that's what makes it a little tricky because everyone's willing to judge others before they judge themselves on this whole thing. And I think that it's some of that—I think there's just ways to reinvent new memories with those types of life events.

AM: Is there anything that, or was there anything that had been routine to you before that had become strange during the pandemic?

KD: I think, not really. I think like maybe like, for me it was like, “Oh, my God, where did I”—I went to go drop off my son at school, like when school came back and I forgot my mask and I was just like, “Oh, my God, I forgot my mask,” like ran back to the car and was like “so sorry” try—starting to have a conversation with someone, and I was like, “Oh my God, I don't have a mask on.” So just, I think just things like that, but now I feel like it's almost second nature. You always have one in your pocket, or in your office, or on your desk, or in your car so they're just everywhere now.

AM: But were you or anyone close to you affected by the virus?

KD: Yeah, so we had a couple family members get it. More recently, I would say, like more of that summer. The summertime, my sister actually that I was just speaking about, had a baby at the beginning of the pandemic, but she just had another baby and her husband, herself, and my nephew, and my sister who watched my nephew got it. But thank God, she was vac—they were all vaccinated, except for my nephew and were able to come out with no hospitalizations or anything like that. I knew a couple coworkers that caught it, I think everyone knew a little bit of—a couple at least a few people. I think initially the people that we knew that got it were people that were out and about, going to restaurants and things like that. But more recently, it was just people, I think, maybe exposed to it at work, so. But, again, like we just never know where it could come from.

AM: [Cough] Sorry, um.

KD: That's ok.

AM: Was there a particular moment where you felt that there was a light at the end of the tunnel?

KD: I think, kind of, two things for me, is like when they announced that we could go back to work and when they said that they have the vaccine and that they were in the works, not only for adults, that they were in the works for kids because—I think, like I said, I really it's—I don't know how else we'll get over this without vaccinating a lot of people. That seems—the science seems to lead that way so I would be very interested if the virus just disappears, like so many people originally thought that it would or that it wouldn't spread as quickly and warmer places and all of those types of things. I think the light at the end of the tunnel was, I think, the vaccination but it's still in other countries where the vaccination rate isn't as great, there still seems to be a lot of havoc, I think, so I don't know.

AM: What is a memory you have of the pandemic that stands out to you as memorable that you would like to share?

KD: That is a hard one. I don't really—I don't know—I don't think there's really any memorable things I just, I feel like—well, I mean, I think like for our family and getting back to things—like them being able to do things like our town had—like my daughter is a girl scout, so we were able to do like the homecoming parade this year, because it was outside. That was a fun memorable thing or even trick or treating with our kids this year. It was nice to be able to be outside and get back to a little bit of normal. Yeah, I would say, those two things that—there are everyday, there seems to be a little bit more of a glimmer like, “Oh, I was able to do this, that I wasn't able to do before.”

AM: Would you say that you've changed at all during the pandemic?

KD: I think, like, maybe attitude wise is that maybe we can, a little bit more,—I mean, I've always been optimistic, but like “Okay just what's the problem? How can we solve it?” That kind of move on type thing, it's not, to me it's not worth it to kind of beat around the bush it's kind of like, what's going on? How can we solve the problem together and kind of move forward? I'm—not that I'm—obviously, things come up but it's just kind of, address the situation and let's move forward. It's much easier to kind of be upfront about things, and then to kind of dance around it.

AM: Alright, do you have any lessons or advice that you'd want people from maybe future generations to know?

KD: What I think that this whole pandemic, in my mind, has made me realize that it's important to kind of do your part. It's not—I know we live in a more individualized society than we ever have, but I think that, part of the reason why we've been successful as a college has been the the sense of community. I think that has been to our benefit and I

think taking that a step further, is trying to do your part for the greater good of people. In my mind, has always been really important.

AM: That is the end of the questions that are like preset up. Are you willing to expand on the more recent challenges like your challenges with trying to find people to work on a house?

KD: Yes, so we were about to move into our house this past May and we had a major flood. And so we've been trying to piece our house back together but trying the supply chain issues and things like that. We've asked a few people at this point, we're trying to find a new plumber currently and we've asked a few people and everyone is just busy. And it's one of those situations where, I mean, they're saying it right now about Christmas. It's like if you don't order your Christmas stuff yesterday, you're not going to have it by Christmas. Something—It just seems that there is just odd supply chain issues, I mean, I can—like from a personal thing I've been struggling to find juice boxes for my kids. Who would have thought it would be juice boxes? Next week, it might be—at the beginning of the pandemic, it was chicken. So it's—there's certain things that you just go—. Like I remember also, at the beginning of the pandemic, going to the grocery store, be like, “Okay, so I made a list and I thought we were eating this stuff but we're not eating any of it.” I've noticed that the supply chain issue seems to be everywhere, like you, or even like people working at places, it takes much longer to do a lot of the things that used to be quicker.

AM: You talked earlier about was it your sister or your sister in law, who had just had a baby and she was working in, was it urgent care?

KD: Yep, so my sister in law actually worked in a hospital so she had my niece right before the pandemic, or right before the pandemic was really identified in the United States, which I guess, now we know that it was around at that time. So on that, and then she went back to work after her maternity leave and ended up leaving her job because it was just so chaotic, and I don't she's the only—I have a few other family members that have become nurses, but she's the only one that like had the direct, I think she worked at, like I said at the time in intensive care so she had the direct care with patients and she just didn't feel safe or protected so she just ended up leaving her job. And then eventually, I think she became something related to COVID, but it was like a home job because, similar to everyone else, there was that childcare issue. and I'm lucky enough not to currently have that problem, because I have two kids in school, but I do know that that is still—my kids do before and after school and that there's a huge waitlist in our town and they think they can't, they currently can't hire enough staff to take all the kids off the waitlist.

AM: Not to pry too much, but do you know anyone else who is affected in that way, someone who made a decision to either change jobs or move based on very the circumstances of the pandemic?

KD: So my sister who had the baby in April and just had another baby. She became the remote teacher for the year. Her district had this— the schools sign up for the year so you had to make your choices as a parent for the entire year. She did lose some students in April, when they allowed them to go back and they reasked the parents, but she had a good amount of kids. I think she had about 20 kids that she was teaching remotely, full time. I'm the oldest of six kids, one of my brothers is is a police officer, so he had to—he and his wife were both vaccinated—they were one of the first to be vaccinated and then we kind of all waited. Just trying to think of— my sister, I have three sisters, one of my sisters before the pandemic moved to Florida and she worked remotely from home, so that was helpful for her, especially with the number of cases in Florida rising. Some of my siblings did a ton of traveling because it was so cheap and they were like, "Oh." I have three younger siblings at the time they were all under 30 so they were like 25 to 30 they're like, "They say young kids don't really get it," so they went to St. John's, they went to Arizona, they took advantage of that, but that's just something I just wasn't willing to do. I think that, for me, the like kind of what sums up this whole thing is like the level of risk. I feel like I'm evaluating each thing, like what's the level of risk. Hey all of our friends want to get together, we're all vaccinated, that might be okay, same with my—all of my family is vaccinated, which is great, but now we have nieces and nephews that are too young to be vaccinated and I've heard the arguments of not being vaccinated I just— it's I don't know that—that's a tricky one.

AM: I think that's about all I have.

KD: Okay

AM: If there's anything else that you'd like to bring up about life during the pandemic just for posterity reasons, anything I hadn't gone over?

KD:No, I mean, I think your questions were good, yeah I think they covered everything.

AM: All right, um.