

Merrimack College COVID-19 Oral History Project

Interview Subject: Nikala Tuffanelli

Interviewer: Ryan Cayton

Date: 11/30/21

Location/s: Merrimack College, North Andover, MA

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RC: It is Monday November 19 at 8:32pm in North Andover. Ryan Cayton here with Nikala Tuffanelli. And Nikala, where are you from?

NT: I'm from Rocklin, California.

RC: Rocklin, California. Far away, huh?

NT: Yeah.

RC: So what was life like for you, prior to the pandemic?

NT: Let's see—it was very busy and everything was super crowded and people were just out and about—no one really like—I don't know, it was just different. No one wore a mask, no one had to distance from each other. School was like all these events: prom, homecoming, stuff like that.

RC: Right, yeah. And do you remember the first time you heard about COVID. What did you think was gonna happen, what did you think of it?

NT: Yeah, so the first time I heard about it—it was actually, I was out eating fro-yo with my friends for one of my friend's birthdays and this officer came up to us, and he was like, "Just so you guys know"—because I'd heard about it like on social media and stuff—but he was like, "Just so you guys know, our county's going into shutdown tomorrow." Like, "You guys won't be able to really do much and leave your houses and there's going to be like a mandate," and, yeah, so that was where I was. And we kind of didn't really believe it at the time we were like, this is crazy. Like is this really going to happen?

RC: Right, yeah, and that was probably like the particular moment where the pandemic became real, like I mean—was there a moment maybe right when lockdown first started where you were like, wow, this is a real thing that's going to happen in the world, and I have to get used to it?

NT: Yeah I remember I wanted to go out with my friends and my parents were kind of like, "No you probably shouldn't—you should probably stay in." And I remember it just like kind of set in, and then we started getting emails from my high school—because I was a senior when this happened—and our principal was like, "You know, classes are cancelled, we have an extended spring break, we'll follow up afterwards," and that was when all my friends and I were like, wow, this is really real, and we didn't know when we're going to see each other next. We didn't know how dangerous it was going to be and what was going to come of it, so it was kind of like a mystery time.

RC: Right, yeah. I know—I'm from Massachusetts—I know that the lockdown started in March here, but when did they start for you guys in California?

NT: I believe it was like March 12th or 13th was when they shut down officially.

RC: Right, and what was locked down for you like? What were the hardest parts? And were there any positives that you took out of it?

NT: Yeah so my family—my dad's a sergeant my mom's a nurse—so they kept working so that was definitely weird because all my friends were like, “Oh my gosh, our parents are like worried about their jobs,” and all that so that was like a positive factor that I didn't have to worry about and my parents didn't have to worry about. But definitely it was really weird. It was just weird—I was home all the time, my family was home most of the time and I was nervous about my mom working at the hospitals and stuff like that so it was definitely weird but I mean some positives did come out of it. I felt like my family and I hung out more and we saw each other more which was nice. After things kind of loosened up I did start to see my friends a little bit, and so it was nice.

Rc: Right yeah. Do you remember the first time you wore a mask?

NT: Ooh—probably like a week after shutdowns, maybe like March 20 because when stores—I know that grocery stores were still open for essential shopping and all that. And food stores, gas stations, but I remember going into Target with my mom and everyone was wearing masks and we weren't, and—there wasn't an official rule yet, it was just kind of like an unspoken rule—so I remember us ordering on Amazon and being like—all the toilet paper was off the shelves like masks were off the shelves—it was really weird.

RC: Right yeah, so in the summer 2020 the you know reopening plan comes out in most states and kind of you know, trying to get back to normal life—what was that like for you right when the beginning of the reopening kind of started?

NT: I mean it at first seemed promising, but like I'm sure you remember there were so many times where it was like we're going to open we're not going to open and stuff like that. So it was definitely just uncertain times, I would say, and then when it first started, the world started opening again in the summer, I remember I started going out more—like my friends and I would go to the beach or just the lake, like places that were open. I remember sports and gyms started opening back up. I remember going to the gym—like I didn't have to do working out at home anymore and stuff like that. I could start playing tennis again—stuff like that so mainly outdoor things from what I remember.

RC: Right yeah, and is there anything you miss from the pandemic life?

NT: I honestly miss online classes and online exams. That was really nice. I miss—just it was like more quality time, I think, people kind of realized family was important through it which I think was a positive, and I mean I'm sure families fought. I know my family did because we saw each other so much, but it was really nice.

RC: Yeah and I know some things now that are kind of back to normal have become like routine again, but what has been strange to say has become routine again like going to classes in person kind of?

NT: Yeah so I remember because last year at Merrimack you had to wear a mask everywhere—like the only time you could take your mask off was inside your dorm room. So it was really interesting. I remember move-in day—like no one was wearing masks and the dining hall, which was crazy to me because we weren't allowed to do that. I had a feeling classes were going to keep masks—that wasn't really a shocker—but just that environment and then with my work at the testing center we didn't have to wear the N-95 masks anymore and we didn't have the plexiglass anymore. That was nice. It felt like life was kind of going back to normal, but it was a weird routine getting back into it.

RC: Yeah and was anyone close to you affected by the virus?

NT: Oh, no not really. I had some friends that had gotten it, but no one got super sick. Luckily my family never got it and I never got it. I'm trying to think if there was—I had a couple cousins that got it, but like I said, no one got severely ill luckily everyone was young and healthy so.

RC: That's good yeah. So now that we're kind of moving on past the pandemic, I mean it's still kind of in it, but what is a memory that you have with the pandemic that stands out that was maybe a particular low moment or a particular high?

NT: I remember the whole car meetups thing in the parking lot with your friends—that was definitely a weird moment. We would just sit in the back of our cars and sit in a circle and just talk, we'd like to go when drive throughs opened up for food, we'd get food. I don't know—it was just weird like it was definitely a standout moment. I never

thought I'd have to do that with my friends or I couldn't see my friends, or I couldn't really leave the house—it was definitely weird.

RC: Right yeah, no, I mean I was definitely a huge fan of the drive thru parking lot moments during the pandemic—you cherish those. How have you changed, and have you learned any lessons from the pandemic? And any advice?

NT: Any advice I've kind of learned—I've learned like don't always go off of social media, because I know there was a lot of things that came out with that and the news and all that. So I kind of just stopped watching the news. I would say that was my best decision. I stopped watching news and stopped following it, because I was just like, you know, as long as the world's not going into shambles—and for a while there, it seemed like it was—but that's kind of something I took out of it was just like—the thing with social media, I feel like that was a big part with COVID and all of that.

RC: Right, yeah. So now—obviously you're from California and transitioning back to last year—what was it like moving from California to move in during the pandemic last summer going into your freshman year of college?

NT: It was actually a really hard experience, because I remember landing in Mass and immediately they asked for COVID test results. I remember I got a rapid test before I flew to move and then I had to submit my rapid tests to Merrimack but they didn't approve of it, so I remember they put me in Royal, the apartments across the street, for a night. I couldn't even—once I moved in, I had two hours to move in and then they took me out of the dorms and put me in Royal—I was all alone in there, and then they said I had to quarantine until my results on campus came back so that was really weird and like kind of scary and Merrimack at first really didn't feel like home because I just felt—this doesn't quite feel right and I remember the transition was hard because we couldn't leave our dorm room or our dorm hall—that was our cohort—and it was kind of hard to meet people and especially because I don't know anyone here obviously, so that was a really big transition. And I felt like I had a hard time making those connections, because it's a small thing, but like you want to see people's faces and you want to see people's emotions and all that and I felt like everyone was just kind of head down mask on type of thing, so it was definitely a big transition.

RC: Yeah, yeah, no doubt. And being from California, what factored into your decision to come to campus in the fall last year? You know a lot of students going remote—was your decision—you just wanted to come here?

NT: Yeah, so I had committed for tennis and I had reached out to my coach and I was like, “Are we still having a season?” And she was like, “Yeah, we're looking to have a preseason in the fall. We'll just have to wear masks and take certain precautions. We won't have any overnights, but I'd love for you still to come.” And I didn't want to lose that motivation to go to college by staying at home longer. With the time change, I had a couple 8am classes so it would have been 5am back in California, so that would have been a drastic change and then I'm also in the nursing program so I knew we were going to have in-person labs and I didn't want to miss out on those opportunities. That kind of factored into it and I knew I was ready to go—the circumstances weren't great, but like you got to work with what you have—and I knew everyone was going to be kind of in the same boat for the students that were living on campus so I you know I kind of found support in that.

RC: Right, yeah. And I'm sure, you know, new school, you don't really know anyone that must have been really hard. What was the most difficult thing last year? You know, playing tennis during the pandemic and trying to meet new friends and learn a new school and you're moving across the country—like what was so difficult during the pandemic? What made all that difficult?

NT: I feel like it was super difficult because I felt like every week we knew someone that had COVID or we were getting exposed and then I obviously couldn't fly home if I had been exposed so then I'd have to—like I stayed with my roommate for a couple weeks and I remember our building shut down—so that was really difficult it just felt like we were constantly being uprooted last year and kind of like moved out and moved in. And I don't know, for a while in first semester it didn't really like quite feel like home in the dorms and I felt like we were honestly never really there. It was honestly, I mean, it was a little scary, too, since I was on the tennis team and I'd see my teammates like if I got exposed, I'd be nervous to even tell them because I didn't want them to be upset or my coach to be upset so it was a really challenging time for a little bit.

RC: Right, yeah, and more like last semester, what was your day to day, you know, in the dorms, classes, and around campus you know the testing process—what was that like for you?

NT: So I remember I got tested on Fridays. I think they did it like by last name or something. So I got tested on Fridays. I remember that Friday morning said go get tested and then they upped it to like two weeks, so I think I did Wednesday and Friday. Then I had classes pretty early in the morning, sometimes I had like 7am lift so I'd go to lift and then most of my classes were online. I had like two in person—my important nursing classes were in person. That was kind of my routine and then I usually get lunch around campus and then—yeah, but most of my classes I did in my dorm room or in the library or in the nursing building, so that was definitely weird because—I mean some of the people in my class, I never even knew—I never even saw their full face or anything like that. Like there's been people I've met this year, and they were like, “Oh, I was in your anatomy class last year,” and I'm like I would have never known—like we never saw each other in person, so it was weird.

RC: Right, yeah. And I know you mentioned living in Monican with the outbreak last year, what was that like for you? Obviously because you weren't allowed—you didn't go home back to California—so I mean most people went back to their houses in quarantine—but what was that like for you?

NC: It was honestly really scary. I remember I tried to call my parents when we first found out that we had gotten exposed, and then we found out Monican shut down, so I remember, I tried to call my parents, but the time change—they were at work, so they didn't answer. So I called my coach and I was like, “I'm not really sure what to do,” and she offered me to stay with her, but I didn't want to put her at risk, so I remember both of my roommates were like, “You can come home with one of us. Our parents said that was okay because if one of us has it the other one has it,” so they were really understanding. So I lived in my roommate Emma's basement for a while and her family was awesome—they're super welcoming so that was really nice. Her mom would cook food for us and go grocery shopping. We would drive around in her car and just kind of—just to get out of the house, and that kind of thing—before we got our test results back, so that was nice. You know they made it as much home as it could be, but it was definitely hard being away from my family like going through all that.

RC: Right, yeah, no definitely, personally having been a part of that—it was a very difficult process. So obviously you have a very busy life here at school, so what did you do to maintain a good school life basis and balance?

NT: I tried to time manage, I guess, in a way. I would try to plan out my week and kind of see what days were my more busy days and what days were my more free days when I can get homework done. It was also a struggle too if I needed any like TA hours or office hours with professors because remember that was all online—you couldn't go meet your professor in person, so it was really hard not to have a face to face conversation with your professors. It was definitely busy but I felt like I balanced it the best that I could. I was still able to maintain and make good relationships on campus which was awesome, that was you know the reason I stayed because I debated not coming back second semester if it was going to be the same thing, but I had formed really good relationships with people in my hall and stuff like that, so it was nice.

RC: Right, yeah. Back to, you know, the tennis and sports aspect, was it difficult staying in shape with the team? You know, practicing—obviously like schedule probably changing all the time due to all the—who has COVID, or positive tests or close contacts—what was that like?

NT: That was definitely difficult. I remember we would have matches scheduled and they'd get cancelled because someone on the other team got COVID or someone on our team. I remember we were actually practicing at North Andover High School—that's where we had practices in the beginning—and when our cases started to go up on campus Andover High School cut the contract with us and said that we weren't allowed to use their courts anymore, because they were nervous that we would spread it to their campus. That was hard. We had to find new courts and kind of reevaluate everything so it was definitely a challenge but it was good to stay in shape with the team. Since it was outdoors we would go on runs or do team workouts at the gym on campus because that was open. We still had lift in the athletic center. So we would do that and that never really shut down, which was really nice. All the athletic trainers were always there for us and we had really good resources for that so that was always nice.

RC: Yeah, yeah, and did the competition change at all? I mean obviously you probably played tennis your whole life. What was the biggest differences between a normal season that you're used to compared to last year?

NT: Last year was definitely difficult. I remember we had to wear masks during our doubles matches, and I remember that being very weird having that on my face while I was trying to play tennis and that being a curveball that I'd never really experienced. And I remember we first—so we were indoors first and then we would switch to outdoors when the weather got better and we still had to wear a mask which I thought was weird and then the NCAA had to reassess all that because there was people that are having asthma attacks and trouble breathing and it just kind of became this thing where it was more harm than it was good, which was interesting.

RC: Right. Did the pandemic ever make you want to opt out maybe for the year, or did you ever have any thoughts of maybe taking the year off playing the sport, just because of how difficult it was this year last year?

NT: Yeah I remember kind of being like, is this really what I want? Is this what my next four years are gonna be like? I mean I'm sure you remember it was super unknown. The school—it's not their fault they really couldn't give us any answers, the world couldn't give us any answers—I remember everyone just hoping like, oh there's gonna be a vaccine soon there's going to be something. It's gonna end. I remember me being kind of like, if this keeps going on, I don't know how much longer I can do it. Because it was very hard, and it almost felt like everyone was kind of isolated in their own way and—I feel like everyone had some sort of feel of like, I'm alone in this. I feel like—at some points I know all of us were like we really don't feel like we're at college. It was just kind of this weird situation and all these like new learning curves and we were in our first year of college, which you know, should be this whole new exciting thing and then sometimes it wasn't. But what opted me to stay was that I knew like it would get better from there and I knew it wouldn't always be like that eventually and the school did really good job of like updating us, and I remember, they would send weekly emails and they would kind of be like, “Okay, this is our situation it's getting a little bit better we can loosen up a little bit.” I remember in the second semester we were allowed to go to other dorms with a certain number—we could up the number in our dorms. So I remember that being nice, we could actually dine in at Sparky's which was nice—our dining hall—so that kind of brought me to stay and I fell in love with the campus. It's a great campus and no one could really help the situation, so—

RC: No, 100%. And you mentioned that you worked in the testing Center last year and this year. So what was that like? I mean obviously must have been really busy last year,

with all the challenges you just described, I mean like what did you do on a daily basis for your job?

NT: Yeah, so last year was crazy. This year has been a lot easier with the testing center. Last year we'd have six lanes going at a time and basically the students would work the computers and then we'd register everyone in so we asked for their last name and their date of birth and then they would show us their Mack Card part and we just kind of confirm their phone number, their email, just so they could get their results. It was super organized, which was nice. On our schedule, we always knew what lane we were working and what times you were working, but I remember being—there was one point where we were super short staffed because a couple of our workers got COVID or their family members got COVID or whatever, so I remember, there was many times last year where the line would be out the door and there'd be someone checking temperatures at the door. I would roll the test tubes and just kind of register people in, and then the people who did the swabbing would come out. They'd swab the students but a big difference from this year to last year is, like I said, they cut the lanes down and then also now we swab our—like the students swab themselves. Which I think—it's kind of nice. I remember last year at first it was really weird—like students were kind of off put by it. They're like, "Oh someone's sticking a tissue—or a Q-tip up my nose every couple of days." Over last year we had to get tested so much more, so work was very busy. It was nice, though, they let us work on our homework there. I hated wearing the N95 mask. It never fit right and it was always super uncomfortable, it was hard to breathe. And, yeah, it just felt like really unconnected with the students. It was just very—but it was something we all got routine and accustomed to. I mean everyone at the school got tested weekly and the difference this year, I think, is it's loosened up a little bit, since a big portion of our students are vaccinated and we're not seeing the numbers rise, but I remember at work it was always kind of scary because our boss would come in and tell us you know how many people had tested positive that week. I remember always being worried, I'm like, are we going to get kicked out again? Are we this, are we that? But this year I haven't really had that concern and this year it's been a lot more low key and just very—more relaxed, and it's just more like, okay, we're just going to do this and we're going to prevent it, more than, like, it's taking over—which was last year.

RC: Right, yeah, and obviously working in the testing center comes with its risks, being around positive people all day long. Were you ever—were you worried about that all times last year? Was that like a stressful thing for you?

NT: I wasn't super stressed about it just because of the precautions they took. I mean everyone used hand sanitizer. I remember after every time we switched shifts for the keyboards we'd have to wipe them down with clorox wipes and we had the N95s on and we had the plexiglass so I wasn't always concerned. I was more worried for like the people that were doing the actual swabbing, because I know that they were more hands on and in direct contact with people. There were a couple times where people that I knew or people at my work had tested positive, so that was definitely more nerve wracking so it's like, oh I just worked a shift with them, I hope we didn't share water or something crazy like that.

RC: And you're saying you're still working that job this year?

NT: Yeah like a couple times a week about two times a week, which has been nice. Last year I worked like four to five times a week, they were really short staffed last year.

RC: Right and this year's just been a lot easier, you know.

NT: A lot easier yeah.

RC: So transitioning to this year, what do you think are the biggest changes or most notable changes with Merrimack and the campus? What do you feel are the differences between this year and last year?

NT: Yeah, I remember the very first move-in. It was so awesome to me how much more lively campus was because I have a friend on the tennis team who's a senior and she had been here a couple more years than me. She'd always told me, "It's such a lively campus. You always see students on a skateboard or on a scooter riding around." And I remember that was just not the case last year. And this year it was so cool to see like people were actually outside playing basketball or, like, for example, the guys next door to us, they have a hockey net, like a little net, so they'd kick a soccer ball or throw a ball into that and it was so nice that you could actually see people's faces around campus and we could go sit at our dining hall and like actually have dinner. You didn't have to worry about any of that stuff and so that's honestly been a really positive change from last year.

RC: Right, yeah, no 100%. Being in nursing major, how has that impacted the way you look at COVID on campus? Because obviously you're probably way more into it than other majors would be because that's gonna be your job for the rest of your life—what's kind of been what you've noticed from that?

NT: I remember last year I had a couple professors that actually volunteered at like testing centers or things like that because they had nursing licenses, so I remember that was like a really cool thing that they were kind of giving back to the community and helping out during the pandemic. But I remember, mostly—how do I say this right—we would study it in a way, but like I said, it was so new so it was like you couldn't really—no one really knew anything about it. But I remember all of us nursing majors were kind of like, okay, well, we believe in medicine so hopefully there's going to be a medicine or something. This year I've actually studied a lot more. I have a microbiology class and we study viruses and bacterias all the time and we actually did like a good solid unit on COVID and the strains and how it was developed and that kind of thing. So it was actually really eye opening and interesting. It was like oh wow and we saw similarities to other viruses like the flu and the bird flu and different things like that, but yeah I definitely was in close quarters with it last year, especially when we started doing clinical and we started working at the hospitals and the nursing homes. I remember, we had to wear all the PPE gear which is like a gown, gloves, a mask, goggles, and just kind of like taking all these really drastic precautions and that kind of thing, so I definitely had a lot of hands-on experience and with working at the testing center, I learned a lot which was kind of cool.

RC: Right, yeah, like, as you said, how's it been—obviously most nursing students when they start their clinicals don't have to deal with the extra like wearing masks doing all this, taking all these precautions—how's that been now that you're starting to work in the nursing homes and go into the nursing homes and hospitals and you're seeing this. pandemic in like its real world environment?

NT: Yeah, so this year has actually been a lot looser. We still wear masks—at my clinical we wear the face shields that come down to here—so that's kind of the precaution we're taking. We don't have to wear gloves anymore. We're allowed to be pretty hands-on with our patients. We have to do rapid swabs at the clinical site. On Friday mornings I go at 7am, so we get swabbed before and they take like 15 minutes to have the results and then we're good to go, so they kind of have trusted that and so that process has

been nicer because last year there wasn't—I remember there wasn't a lot of testing options like you could get tested on campus but a lot of sites didn't have access to testing and all the supplies were so limited. So I remember that was kind of a scary thing. The patients didn't always trust us because they didn't know if we were sick or if they were sick, so that was definitely an adjustment, but this year has been a lot better. And I've definitely—in my whole clinical rotation this semester, there's only been one positive COVID case as far as patients go, and the person tested positive when we weren't there, so—and you know it was just, I think they got it from like a family member or something so it's been pretty minimal in my clinical site at least.

RC: Right and like overall, I mean obviously Merrimack had to do what they had to do to—they had to put the rules in place. What were your thoughts overall about Merrimack's handling of the whole pandemic and last year and then this year—how do you think they've done overall?

NT: Yeah I think they really did the best they could. It was hard to work with and it's hard to manage a campus. I think they took on the responsibility of keeping our campus open, which a lot of schools didn't—a lot of schools were fully online. They didn't give the students the opportunity to even live on campus, so I think that was like their best effort to really try to give students a really good experience. There was definitely times where I was like, okay, I don't really agree with what they're saying or I don't agree with this or I shouldn't be sent home for this. Things like that or like we had that Co-Verified app and there were times where they wouldn't let us on campus and I'm like, okay we just tested negative a couple days ago. That was that was, you know, hard, but I mean they were really just trying to keep the spread down and I realized that and I know a lot of students respected that because for me I probably—I don't know if I would have deferred from Merrimack if I wasn't able to come just because of the time change and I might have taken a semester off, so I'm glad I was able to come and get my credits and get my experiences and be in person the best that I could and get to know the campus. And I know for a lot of people—I've talked to people that didn't come—I have two roommates that didn't come to school last year. They were all online and they were like, “Yeah we feel like we kind of missed out,” because there was things that we were able to do, and there was things the school helped us out with, and we had I remember, we had a lot of access to—with our Mack Card, we had a lot of access to money on there and we could go, you know to Panera or to other places, so I remember they really did the best that they could. It was definitely hard at times and I know there's times where none of us agreed with what they were saying was true and everyone was just kind of like hands in the air we don't know what to do, and there was uncertain times, but I think they

handled it well, and for the size of our school, I think we had a pretty solid number of cases and kept the spread down for the most part.

RC: Right. Now looking, I mean we're almost there, hopefully. There's still you know some rules in place here—it's obviously lightened up—but what are you looking forward to most when life's back to normal, hopefully, and you know there's no rules, no more masks in the classroom—what are you most looking forward to?

NT: I'm looking forward to just getting to travel more, especially with tennis and I know we have a lot of travel plans next year, so everything for the most part is getting pretty much back to normal. I'm looking forward to not wearing masks in the classroom. I think at times it kind of takes away from things, I think professors have a hard time connecting with our students and students will go up to them and they're like, oh wait, we have to put our masks on, and I think that's that's going to be really nice, one day, hopefully soon when we don't have to do that. Honestly, I know the workers at the testing center that do the swabbing now—I know they're looking forward to that being over and kind of moving forward and moving past all that and just Merrimack being you know more about Merrimack and the students and getting to do more. I'm looking forward to the bigger groups and hopefully we can have you know those concerts on campus and different things like that—just more of a lively campus I think.

RC: Right, yeah, well, thank you very much for your time. This interview—I thought it went well.

NT : Yes, it went very well, thank you.