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July 2021

Oral History with Shaylyn Heitzman

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Recommended Citation

Ruybal, Zachary Kevin and Heitzman, Shaylyn, "Oral History with Shaylyn Heitzman" (2021). *Humboldt in the Time of COVID - Digital Archive*. 76.

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Who I am:

My name is Shaylyn Heitzman. Currently, I am a 30 year old woman, I have been married for two and a half years, and I work in healthcare as a receptionist in a doctor's office. I am telling this story as an individual.

Day to day life:

My day-to-day life has been ever evolving in the time of COVID. Just before the pandemic, I was a student at HSU and employed part-time at a local fabric store, working retail/teaching sewing on weekends and doing sewing machine repair and service evenings. I remember asking my professors early on what they thought might come and how the pandemic might affect classes, and I distinctly remember their reactions being a mixture of uncertainty (which matched my own), indifference, or even ignorance. The semester drew to a close, and then there was a brief period of just waiting and watching the news, often wondering if anything would change in our sheltered corner of the country. Obviously, it has changed everything.

At first, I switched to online classes when the new semester started. My husband worked at the hospital, as did one housemate. The other worked in a doctor's office as well. I would hear a lot of rumors and theories about how things would progress from them. Then one of the housemates was instructed to work from home (he works in clinical data analytics for the hospital administration) but my husband continued to go to work supporting healthcare offices and the hospital, and the other was sent home for some time on orders by her doctor because she has complications with her immune system. From then on, for months and months, the three of us were home all day every day except the occasional shopping trip or walking the dog at the park every day.

I became unemployed when the fabric store had to close. I tried finding work doing transcription of videos and captioning from home, and it helped supplement my unemployment, but it wasn't a lot, and it wasn't enough to get off of unemployment either. Many people were trying to do the same thing and so it got very competitive to land those gigs.

I started a vegetable garden outside, we were worried about the supply chain in our remote area. I grew lettuce, herbs, vegetables of all kinds. Not always the largest crop, but it supplemented a lot of our meals. I also got more practice canning and drying food to preserve it. I used my sewing skills and made over 600 masks for a combination of friends and family as well as a local senior resource center. Online classes were weird and sterile, but flexible.

What has been hardest:

In May, my father passed away from cancer. I hadn't seen him in a few months because of the pandemic, and he hadn't been doing well but wouldn't come to terms with being terminal and was still undergoing treatments regularly. Thankfully, he died at home when preparing to go to a treatment after another big seizure. I was grateful he didn't die alone in a hospital somewhere

surrounded by only strangers, or getting sick with COVID on top of the cancer which had metastasized into his brain causing him to have significant personality and memory changes. It was a gamble whenever I would talk on the phone if it would really be him or the cancer talking. A few days after he passed my husband and I travelled to see my mom. We didn't hug, we wore masks. We slept outside in a tent instead of in the guest room, and we ate meals outside at a plastic table under an eave.

I was already struggling between my dad's illness and the shutdown, but his death really pushed me into a deeper state of depression. I dropped out of my classes, which there were only two, and one was the last I needed to actually complete my degree. I focused on just making it through each day where I worked on house chores, the garden, cooking for the four of us, and sewing when I felt motivated though I was sick of masks and wore out my iron from too much use.

August and September of 2020, things were turning back around a little. Being unemployed crippled our efforts to save for a house, but we were pinching every penny to keep trying to have enough for a down payment. I started interviewing (by zoom) for jobs, and had a little luck in healthcare. It was scary, because of the risks involved. Then something else happened that changed my life forever. The Creek fire in the Sierra National Forest started. My sister, mother, and niece all packed their cars with about twelve hours notice and were evacuated from the house just outside of Shaver Lake. My sister and niece left as soon as they could, but my mother stayed as long as possible trying to shut off propane tanks and secure the house and make it as safe as possible with the time she had. When she finally joined my sister, they said she had ash in her hair and smelled of a campfire even after a few showers.

Then it was the waiting. Days of it... Watching and reading every news source. Following every local journalist or firefighter we knew of on twitter hoping to get a glimpse of our childhood home, and knowing very little. It was making all of us crazy. I talked to people I haven't seen or heard from since high school and they all had the same feelings. So I started a map and began geotagging all the posts I had collected showing videos and images, hoping to help people that had the same questions of what had become of their homes. The elementary school I went to was fine, but the playground had melted and was severely deformed. Then, I saw it... a journalist filmed a clip of the damage in the driveway. The driveway of MY family home. Everything was gone, my dad's work truck, his shop, the garden, there was nothing left except the windmill. I continued to geotag for a while, but then the fire was more under control and we were getting more locals who knew the mountain and geography better than any valley journalist that were able to share with others what had become of their homes.

I heard, Zachary, that you want to work in environmental law, so I imagine this particular story might hit home for you a bit.

Before the fire: My father was finally retired when he passed, but he worked the majority of his career as a heavy equipment mechanic for logging companies. Their companies were not clear cutters, they were harvesters. He had friends in forest service, and he worked tirelessly every

spring to manage the four acres we lived on. He treated our home, and the forest, as a garden. He had seen beetle infestations take out the beautiful sugar pines, he saw drought take his yellow pines. Little was left when I reached adulthood, oaks, cedars, and manzanita was all that was really left. Prescribed fires were a yearly neighborhood sight. Then the last few years PG&E would come through and cut anything remotely close, making the locals angry because sometimes it looked like laziness as they overreached and overcut what wasn't necessary to maintain safety to the lines and homes. CalFire would ticket homeowners for not adhering to safety standards, but not offer resources to those who wanted to correct the problems but were too elderly to do it all themselves. Even if homeowners passed calfire inspections, insurance companies cancelled policies, like my mom's, who had been customers for four decades. Thankfully she had been able to find new coverage but she could barely afford it. She was trying so hard to protect the home she and my dad built when I was about 13, we struggled when I was younger and lived in a travel trailer before that. My dad would come home from work and spend every spare hour of daylight helping with the construction himself, too. His hobbies included working on and collecting historical logging tools and equipment. He helped rebuild a steam donkey which was regularly fired up and demonstrated at their local museum at Shaver Lake and he had been working on another of his own at the property, the boiler still sits just past where the garden was. The steam donkey was invented by John Dolbeer, along with the Carson lumber company up here in Humboldt, by the way.

After the fire: my sister had to shelter her animals, and my sister in law has taken them in since for her. Because of COVID rather than staying in large shelters together with other displaced families, the red cross put them in individual hotel rooms. There was still restricted guidance on travelling, so I couldn't go see them. I started my job in healthcare, but we were so scared that we would catch COVID at work and spread it, we didn't dare go down there, even though that's when they needed us most. When the red cross ended their temporary housing program, they moved into a donated travel trailer on a friend's property for now until they figure out what is next for the property. They are actually supposed to start rubble removal tomorrow, so I was on the phone with her a bit tonight. My mom is being given a grant of saplings to plant on the property soon, and she wants to finally hold a memorial for my dad, which we were robbed of for COVID thus far, when that happens, and replant a dogwood tree that was one of his treasured features there.

Back to the main questions asked for this interview:

Essential. Challenges:

My husband and I have since finally found our own house at the very end of 2020, and it was bittersweet. I couldn't host Christmas for my family because case counts were so bad. We didn't get our vaccines until late January, but we still go nowhere except work and the store and to walk the dog. I am a receptionist, and for so long I would have many calls a day of patients asking for vaccines that we didn't have to give them, often angry and scared. Then when we did

have them, it was a mad dash to schedule appointments. When we discontinued our program, I was met by even more anger and confusion by patients, and I had no power over the situation. Finally now supplies are growing but it's slow progress. Calling patients to tell them they could get their vaccine often elicited joy and excitement, which helped keep me afloat emotionally at work.

Not being able to grieve or mourn in the more traditional ways with my family has been hard. I miss my friends but not seeing them in person hardly compares to this. I feel for the elderly who have had to isolate without the same technologies or access that we younger generations have available to us connecting us socially. I loved seeing birthday parades where people would decorate their cars and drive by the home of a child who was celebrating a birthday.

I feel so deeply for retail workers that have to deal with those that refuse to wear masks, it seems to be a little better now but we have occasionally had people who belligerently refused and were thus turned away at the door, missing their doctor's appointment. I think essential means different things to different people, and the local/state guidelines often had their own differences too. But those working in food, safety, shelter, public works, we all obviously essential. Education became a battleground for many people, and I think that's where the grey areas really started.

Change, Possibilities & Opportunity:

What I do love though about this time is the acceptance of telehealth and it becoming normal. It's not appropriate for everything, but it helps patients access their doctor more easily if they do not have transportation or are struggling with mobility problems. I think COVID has helped us on a path to perhaps a future with universal healthcare, which I fully support and believe in equal access for all. Insurance companies often hinder patient care more than they help, and even with insurance so many people go into significant debt from medical bills. I know my dad's treatment was a burden on my parents even with medicare.

The end of the pandemic?

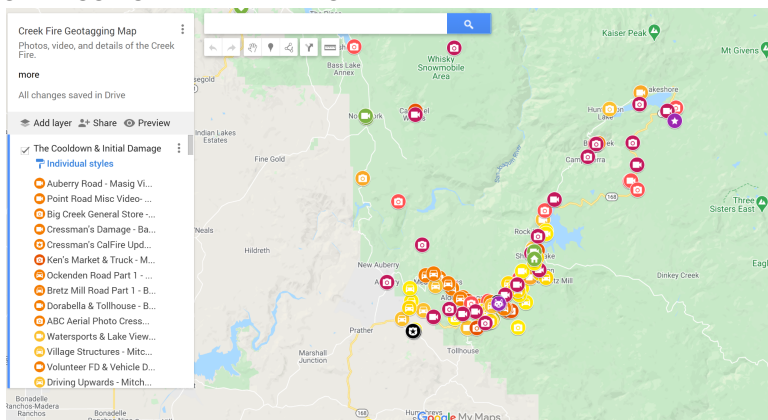
I don't think things will ever be 100% the way they were, I think many people will be more scared or cautious and still use masks, and I think masks will become a common sight during flu season. I think there will be a big push to "return to normal" but there will be small influences everywhere. One thing I am kind of looking forward to is larger influence on environmental protections and green initiatives because of what we observed during the shutdowns worldwide; such as the canals in Venice, air quality, etc showed us what we are capable of- that the collective influence of all people is greater than the sum of its parts. I kind of hope that more "Green New Deal" policies will help pull us out of the consequences as a society like what happened following the great depression, but also benefit the environment. I think seeing what really is essential will hopefully help us be less consumerist and focus on what we need, and identify that which we do not.

I am trying to find joy in building my new home with my husband. I am gardening some more, and working hard to improve and restore our 90 year old house. I am trying to be a protective factor to those patients that I encounter at work who are hit hard by the pandemic, and reminding myself about that influence when I am down or feeling burnt out there.

some of the masks I made



geotagging the fire damage pictures



the below pictures are of our family's property, but I also tried to attach pictures of the view from before (below their property) and the google street view so you have an idea of what the house was like... I also included pictures of the smoke from the fire(s) that had reached all the way up here in Humboldt, which was a bizzare, surreal experience, especially when I was trying to not worry about the fire damage and dangers and yet I was constantly surrounded by the smoke from it.

I also have some gardening pictures, because that was one thing that really held me together through the pandemic and the loss of my work and my father and my childhood home.

I am hoping to go see my mom soon, I haven't seen her since just after dad passed and I have only seen pictures of the fire damage.