

**Chapel Hill Public Archive  
Pandemic Stories Project  
recording with Robyn Wilson**

*Narrator: Robyn Wilson*

*Date: June 2, 2022*

*Location: Chapel Hill Public Library*

*Interviewer: Mandella Younge*

**Mandella Younge [00:01]** Okay, so we're here for the Chapel Hill Pandemic Stories project. I'm Mandella Younge. Today is June 2, 2022, and the time is about 12:35 [laughs]. So why don't you just tell us your name and who you have here?

**Robyn Wilson [00:21]** Okay, my name is Robyn Wilson, and I have brought along my son Craig, or Craig Wilson. I brought along my son Craig Wilson with us today, and he is quite happily throwing everything off the table.

**Mandella [00:38]** [Laughs] And so I guess before we get started, I just wanted to say, like, if you have any, anything you've been thinking about a lot recently in regards to the pandemic that you wanted to share before we jump into it.

**Robyn [00:57]** It's interesting, because when I signed up, I was--I thought, oh, well, I've got lots of memories about the pandemic, and they're at the forefront of my memory. And then I went actually back and I kept, like, a very brief diary right at the start of lockdown until it got repetitive and it was just the same things every day because I wasn't leaving the house. And I realized just like, little things that I had forgotten that I was reading about again. And I was like, oh, yes, I remember this conversation. I remember these parts. So, yeah, it was just, it was really interesting. Such as, I'd taken a note of a conversation my husband and I had. It was about a few weeks before lockdown, and we started getting all of these emails about--they were all from shops, just saying things like, "What we're doing to protect you from COVID." And they always

started with the phrase, "In these unprecedented times." And it was exactly the same thing. We've got hand sanitizer, we're encouraging people to wear masks. And it had become this joke for weeks and weeks where anything that had happened, my husband would go, "Well, in these unprecedented times." And so it's just little things like that that brought back a smile at quite a stressful point, I think, for everybody. Wave bye-bye Craig. Wave bye-bye.

**Mandella [02:27]** And I guess thinking about the pandemic, what I guess are the different stages of the pandemic as you experience them? If you had to break it up.

**Robyn [02:37]** If I had to break it up, I think the first time I ever heard about the pandemic, it was just before New Year. And so we'd come back from Iceland. My family had decided to meet in Iceland for Christmas. So Steven, my husband, and I flew over to Reykjavík. My parents, my eldest sister and her family, and my younger brother flew over to Reykjavík. And we rented a house, Airbnb, and we spent Christmas week together. And it was wonderful. It was incredibly expensive, as Iceland is very expensive. But I was s- had a wonderful time. We came back and we were staying with my parents-in-law just before New Year. And I remember NPR saying, Oh, there's a virus in China. And me being like, Oh, it's a little bit like the movie *Contagion*, because for some reason, I'd watched it like six months before. And then it sort of just became background noise, like that was the next stage. And then it gradually seems to become more and more apparent and more and more regular and just becoming more and more something. It was almost like it was coming over the horizon. So it suddenly became--like, I'd been listening to the news and they'd be like, Oh, well, it's spread in Europe. And then it became, Oh it's now spread to the US. And then now it's spread to this state and now it's spread to this state and now it's in North Carolina, and now we're starting to have shops and places start going, Oh, this is what we're going to do to keep you safe. And then just more and more time was being--I'm trying to think of the word--just more and more time on the news was being talked about it. And then I was working. I kind of would pay attention to the news stories, but it was something I had on when I was doing other things.

**[04:48]** And then it was about three weeks before lockdown, my husband came home from law school. He'd been in lectures and it was his last week of lectures before spring break. And his lecturer was married to an immunologist. And he was a very, very nice man and he was very, very careful and precise about everything he said. And he turned around to the lecture theater and he went, "I honestly think this might be the last week we're going to be meeting. I wouldn't be surprised if we're all going to be meeting from home. And I think next term it's going to be a lot of working from home." And Steven came home and was like, "Can you believe this? Surely they're not going to stop lectures or exams or anything because of this, are they?" My sun glasses are lovely, aren't they? [Laughter] And that was the first point that both of us were like, Okay, this could be more significant. And then we started talking about it. I worked at Chapel Hill library at that time and we started having staff meetings about it. And then my parents started saying, "Oh, well, Scott now can't travel down to come and see us." All of my siblings live in London. They couldn't travel down to see my parents. And then all of my siblings were like, "Oh, now we're working from home." And I remember thinking that the UK was about three weeks ahead of the US. So I thought, Well, if they're going to start working from home, that's going to be our situation in the next few months. Are you okay there buddy? [Laughter]

**[06:36]** So, yeah, it just seemed to gradually, gradually build up. And then suddenly it was like a wave that just came crashing down. And then we woke up in the morning one morning for spring break, we'd gone to the beach with my parents-in-law, having a lovely day, and we were doing one of those murder box games. I remember it very clearly, where they send you a thing in the post and you've got to solve a mystery. And so we're all solving it together. And then Steven looks up and he goes, "Oh, they're extending spring break by a week." And then I have a look at my phone and I go, "Oh, the library is closing to the public." And then my parents are ringing, going, "So we've just gone into lockdown" and it just all suddenly happened all at once. And it was very, very strange because I've literally gone away on holiday and then I was coming back and like the entire world changed immediately. And it was just a very, very surreal

experience. It wasn't even scary. It just didn't feel real at all. And it didn't feel real for a very long time. It was only really when I started working back at the library again and there was no members of the public and you weren't seeing everybody because so many people were working from home. And it didn't really hit me until I came back to work. What everyone was going through, I'd say.

**Mandella [08:03]** How long was it in between that moment that you just described and when you came back to work in person?

**Robyn [08:13]** I was kind of in shock when the library said that we were closing. I suspected it was going to happen because so many other places seemed to be closing. And so I remember texting Meeghan, who's one of our managers, and just being like, "I can come back to work." And I think Steven needed to come back to Chapel Hill anyway. So I think lockdown was announced and I think it was like a day or so later I was actually back at work and it felt like the aftermath of a really good party that had ended in a pillaging. It was crazy. Like, I came in through the staff entrance and I came upstairs and all of the new books were gone. And like all of these different places, there were entire shelves of books that were just gone. The children section didn't even look like the children's section anymore. There was just nothing there. We had put up curtains in what we call the circulation room. That's where the bookie monster lives. So staff members could work, but people wouldn't think, oh, well, staff are here, so we are open. And so the room was really dark and usually it's bathed in sunlight. There were like pieces of paper lying everywhere because the cleaners hadn't quite come in yet. It was silent. And I'd never known the library to be silent before. And I was just texting my husband, going, "This is really weird." And so I came back relatively quickly. I worked from home a lot of the time, but I tried to come in at least once or twice a week so I could--as that coming in felt like normality to me when nothing else was normal. So I tried to come in whenever they asked me to, which was about twice a week, I'd say. Yes. Yes, you agree with me? [Laughs] I might just put him down on the floor if that's all right.

**Mandella [10:22]** Oh, yeah, of course.

**Robyn [10:26]** So the sounds everyone can hear in the background is my son, Craig. He is nine months old, so he doesn't remember the pandemic at all, really, but he is with me today and he's currently playing on the floor, so the squeals are his, not mine. [Laughter] Yeah so I'll just let him--he's quite happy down there now.

**Mandella [10:49]** How has it been becoming a new first-time mother, or during this time? He's only nine months old.

**Robyn [10:57]** He's only nine months old. So I discovered I was pregnant with him. It was December 2020. To be honest, he's my first, so I've got nothing really to compare it to. I can only compare it to other people I know who were pregnant in a non-pandemic era. What was--in some ways, socially, it's been easy because particularly in the first and second trimester and things, I spent a lot of the time just wanting to lie in bed and so turning around to people and being like, "Oh, no, sorry, I can't meet, I'm pregnant." And they'd be like, "Oh, of course, in COVID. No, stay at home, stay safe." It was quite a lonely experience in many ways. Steven couldn't come along to a lot of the scans because the OBGYN office wouldn't allow him to. They had a very strict policy that he could basically be there only for the scan that says, yeah, you're pregnant, and then the second check of, yeah, the baby's fine, and then for the final check of where they just check all the fingers and toes and everything is normal. So I think he found that quite disappointing because he really wanted to be there and often he would actually wait in the car so he could just be, like, the first to hear the news. It was also kind of lonely because my parents couldn't be here. The first thing that happened with lockdown was about a week later, I think. The US government stopped all transatlantic flights and the UK did similar. And I really, really wanted my parents there and they could not be here. It was very difficult. I'm very lucky, I hasten to add. I've got a mother-in-law and a father-in-law who I adore. Pam and Big Craig, I

suppose [laughter] it's probably the best way to describe them. But Papa Craig and Gigi were- are wonderful grandparents and they really stepped up, they really helped us out. But it was things I didn't appreciate until I had a baby. Like early morning, you're trying to soothe your child. He's upset about something. I couldn't call my parents. My parents weren't there for me to go, "What do I do?" They couldn't be there to help the nursery, they couldn't be there to buy him outfits, they couldn't be there to help him take him to the doctor, they couldn't help. They could only watch from the UK. So they spent six months watching their grandson grow up on FaceTime and emails and photos. And it's not like the 70s, where people would move to the other side of the world and you weren't going to be able to speak to them again. And my parents are very, very English and very British in that we're not very emotive people. But I remember, like, my parents sent over, they overnighted a package. It must have cost them a fortune with an outfit that I put him in as we're going out to meet friends, and my dad just said, "We miss you terribly." And for my dad to say that was just, it broke my heart. When they met him for the first time, I mean, they came over in March, they spent a month. They absolutely adore Craig. Craig absolutely adores them. But it was so difficult for the first part. Even with Steven's parents, it was still hard. But it's better now. They're coming over again and I've told them that they can't spend two and a half years between visits. They've got to come over at least two or three times a year now and hopefully they will be able to keep that up.

**Mandella [15:14]** Yeah. What were some of the ways that you stayed in touch with loved ones?

**Robyn [15:19]** My family WhatsApp-ed a lot. So we have a group WhatsApp and that was what we kind of used for updates. And so we sent each other pictures a lot of the time. I became quite strict about calling my parents more often. Generally, we'll call two, three times a week and I really started calling them every other day. My parents live in a very, very quiet area of the UK. I wasn't particularly worried about them getting sick, but I was worried that if they got sick because of just like, various things, they're healthy, but if they did get sick and there was no vaccine and things, I was really worried they were going to end up in hospital. So I called them a

lot just to make sure, "Are you well? Are you actually well? Are you going to the supermarket? Are you staying away from other people?" And must have driven them mad, because they had my siblings and me calling them all the time, just going, "Are you washing your hands? Are you maintaining social distance?" So we did that a lot, we did a few zoom chats as well with Steven's family. We were texting a lot, we were calling a lot. My husband speaks to his parents fairly regularly. My sister-in-law had just given birth, so she gave birth before locked down. To Meredith, who was a delight. She's such a sweet little girl. So they gave birth in January, and Stacey was very big on sending us lots of photos and things, so we saw lots of photos and we kept in touch that way. But it was very difficult because we go over to his parents house probably once a week or so and suddenly that was gone. So I think we all struggled with that. We did try a few zoom chats with my family and it was fun, but I don't know what my parents have done with technology, but we'd ring them and then everyone else could be- was on screen and we're all waving at each other and all having a great time. And then there was one time when my mum appeared and all you could see was a letter box around her eyes. You could see her eyes and nothing else. [Laughter] The entire screen was black and she said, "I don't know what setting I'm on." So we came on to have my brother trying to figure out what on earth setting she put it on. She had to join us and the third time it worked and she was on screen, so that was difficult. So it kind of worked, but it also kind of didn't. But I tried to keep in contact with my family a lot. The only thing I asked was for them to be mindful of the time change. There were a few times where I think family members were sending each other pictures of, say, like, Oh, this is a funny meme I did, and it would arrive for me at 2:00 a.m., and if I get a message at two in the morning, I'm automatically going to assume immediately you're going to hospital. So after a while I was like, "Just make sure, just be mindful, maybe send it at noon for you, so I wake up to it," because there were a few nights of very little sleep after receiving something that someone had seen on Instagram and just like, that didn't do me very good at all.

**Mandella [19:06]** Yeah. With how much you're talking about your family abroad, I'm thinking too about what do you think it was like for you experiencing--or I guess, how do you think living in Chapel Hill shaped your experience of the pandemic?

**Robyn [19:21]** I felt very fortunate to be in Chapel Hill. I've always loved Chapel Hill, ever since we moved here. I loved my job at the library. Honestly, if you ever see a job here, just apply for it, it's the best. I've always loved Chapel Hill's community, I've always loved its location, I've always loved the restaurants and things. I felt very fortunate because my job was taking COVID extremely seriously. Actually I felt very privileged. I'm one of those people where I didn't have to do a COVID test throughout most of the pandemic. I still had my job and my job allowed me to work at home. My husband was studying for law school and studying exams and then he studied for the bar. But we were able to contain ourselves in a bubble. We didn't have to worry about kids and their schooling, we didn't have to worry about--my job was secure, so we didn't have to worry about income streams. I felt incredibly fortunate to be in Chapel Hill, and I felt incredibly privileged and fortunate to have the kind of job that I did. I was also very thankful as well that Chapel Hill--there was a lot going on. There seemed from what I could see, there seemed to be a lot of support for people within Chapel Hill. And I really liked the way that there were lots of amenities and lots of restaurants and lots of places that suddenly started doing things like delivery, so you didn't have to go out. And I was able to say, like, get our shopping delivered, which is an incredible privilege when you're considering that there were people who had to go out and had to work and had to be potentially exposed to a pretty nasty virus. So I felt very, very fortunate to be there. I felt very lucky, especially when you consider my younger brother. He lives in the center of London. He's a TV critic and you'd think, oh, center of London surrounded by amenities. The flat he lives in is relatively small, and there was only one supermarket, and--that's my son playing with my keys. [Laughter] There was only one supermarket and he couldn't go outside. And when there was ever, like, an exposure and things, he was locked in a tiny little room. One of my sisters lived in London, but she's got a tiny backyard, so her kids couldn't go out and play. It was difficult for them. My parents live in a tiny

little village in the middle of nowhere, so they really had no worry about, like, COVID exposure or anything at all. We were worried for them, but they were safe. So I felt like out of everyone's experience in my family, I was in the best place I could have been. Definitely.

**Mandella [22:39]** And I think you talked about this a little bit, but how has the pandemic changed your work life?

**Robyn [22:46]** Well, there were a lot of changes within the library when the pandemic happened. We were provided with face masks--which was incredibly useful because I'd entirely forgotten the shortages of face masks until I actually went back through my Amazon orders and I was looking at what I was trying to order and how I had all of these refunds where I'd order masks and they wouldn't arrive. So we were very lucky to kind of, like, get masks and things provided for us at work. There were a lot of people I didn't see. Because they were working from home and also because we limited how many people could be in the building at any one time. My husband--I felt really kind of bad for my husband just because the end of law school is supposed to be a bit more of an event. You go out to parties. You have graduation. You go to restaurants. You see your friends. And then you cram for the bar. And then after you've done the bar exams, you go out with your friends again. And he had none of that. He was just studying in our front room for a lot of the time, and that was very isolating for him. And as lockdown eased, he was able to kind of, like, study in different places, but he was very, very isolated. I think it kind of eased down over time. Once more people were able to come back into the building, and once more people were able to kind of, like, be in the same place, it got a little bit more normal again. Once we were able to put in- allow people to check out.

[Interruption]

**Robyn [24:51]** So I think at the moment, now, I have left work now. My son was born, and I took one look at him just after he was born, and I was like, I'm not going back to work. And I'm very

privileged to be in that position. And it was wonderful to kind of, like, be in that position and know that's what we wanted to do. So there was a lot of change. There hasn't been very much change now. I think the only real difference as a mom is that you can't--it doesn't feel safe to kind of take your baby out as much as I would like. When my niece was born--hey, buddy. When my niece was born, she was a little social butterfly. She went to a cafes. She did the mom-and-me group. She went out everywhere with us. At the moment, it doesn't really feel safe to kind of take Craig to the places where I'd like to go. I feel perfectly safe in this library. But the other day, we ran out of something, and it was the weekend, and I was like, I really don't want to go to Target on the weekend to go and pick up extra things for him. I don't want to be surrounded by those kind of--by a lot of people at the moment. So Craig just doesn't go out as much as he--as I would like him to. I'd like him to start doing, like, baby swimming and do various things, and it doesn't quite feel safe enough to do that yet, but I think that will come. He loves the water, so I'm sure he'll be taking off soon. Hey buddy. Yes. That's my son. That's not me. [Laughter].

**Mandella [26:44]** And that kind of leads into the question, too, about how your idea of risk has changed throughout the course of the pandemic.

**Robyn [26:51]** It's been fascinating to me how my idea of risk has changed. As things that I'd never think about are now, like, at the forefront of my mind. There were a lot of things where I was very privileged in that I was able to order a lot of our shopping, particularly during lockdown and particularly during the pandemic. Sorry, I'm picking you up again. There were a lot of things that I was able to do and I was able to order shopping. I've entirely forgotten the question I am so sorry.

**Mandella [27:28]** Oh just [laughs] that's okay. How your idea of risk has changed? Yeah.

**Robyn [27:33]** Yes. So I was able to order food and things because I was like, I do not want to go in the supermarket and be around people who potentially have a virus and they're maybe not wearing a mask or they're not using hand sanitizer. And so my level of risk was that I wasn't actually worried about myself, but I was worried about my family. My husband has severe asthma that's very well controlled, but the moment he gets a cold, it comes straight back and he is very, very sick. And now my level of risk is I really don't want to do anything that's going to kind of, like, affect my family. So there was a--just a quick PSA. If you ever have a friend and they have a baby and you're just like, Why haven't I seen the baby? And they're only about five weeks old, it's generally because they're waiting for the two month vaccinations. And there's a lot of things it was only really when my parents came in March that I was suddenly like, yes, I am happy to go with them and Craig to a supermarket, because I could have one of my parents, like, take Craig for a walk outside if it was too busy. There was a lot of things that I wasn't willing to do with him because it meant that I could be inside. And if I was inside, someone who has COVID-19 could get very close to him and he could get sick. Now I have been vaccinated. Craig has not been vaccinated yet, but hopefully this month there might be something for babies, which would be wonderful at this point. But I just really--my level of risk at the moment is that I double check everything. Am I going for a haircut? Yes. Is there a mask policy? Maybe. Can I bring Craig along or will he wait at home? Fantastic. Okay, so who can look after him for me? Great. I'm not willing to take Craig places where I don't trust that other people will not be healthy. And it's harsh, but it's true. I've got another friend and their baby has never been to the supermarket with them, has never been inside a place that isn't their home or the doctor's office, because that is not a level of risk that they are comfortable with at the moment.

**Mandella [30:10]** Is he getting sleepy?

**Robyn [30:12]** He's getting a wee bit sleepy. He's done very, very well--

**Mandella [30:17]** Yeah.

**Robyn [30:17]** --I was expecting him to do his pterodactyl cry. [Laughter]

**Mandella [30:24]** Well, I'm thinking now, too, about him and his life coming up and I guess what are your hopes for him being born in this time and growing up?

**Robyn [30:41]** My hopes for him? I really hope for a vaccine for people under the age of five. I could rant about this all the time, but we have been--the moment he gets vaccinated is the moment where I feel like we can actually properly take part in society again and I'll be properly able to take him wherever I want without actually thinking about it. I cannot wait. And honestly, all you're going to hear is a scream from all of the parents who have kids under the age of five when that happens. I like to think--my hope is for the future, I don't want him to remember this. I want him to study it at school, but I don't want him to remember it. I don't think he will. But the people I feel for are like, the kids who I feel very sorry for anyone who was at high school or started college during the pandemic as they've missed out on so many of the little things that makes college college, or makes high school high school. I feel very, very sorry for anyone who is going to remember this. I feel very sorry for, say--my nieces and nephews in the UK are lovely people, but I worry about how their life was suddenly like, Oh, you've got friends, but no, you can't play with them, no, you can't see them anymore. They might be sick and we can't have them in our house. I feel for those kids because I feel that there's things that they have experienced that maybe in five or ten years will kind of realize that aspects of their personality or how they see the world is from that, from those experiences. I just want him to grow up and be happy and healthy. I want him to be able to access any medicines, and I just want people to realize that the very, very small things you do can make a tremendous difference to other people, such as people wearing masks. I realize it has become an entirely political ground, but for me, I always take it as a sign of respect now. I take it as a sign of, I might be sick, I do not know. But I do not want to make you sick with anything that I have. And I choose to be like--I am very thankful that people do that. I'm very thankful that people are now sitting there going,

maybe I've got something and I could pass it to someone and it could make someone sick. I just want him to also grow up in a world where he can travel and see his family again. He's missed out on seeing the grandparents when he was a newborn, and he hasn't seen a lot of my family in the UK yet. I know that will change. He has not had, like, the traditional baby experiences of mummy-and-me groups and Storytimes at the library and things, and I don't think it's going to affect him, but I don't know if that will affect him. I don't know if he's--there's always going to be a bit of an element, particularly if he's a slightly introverted of is it because he didn't, like, go out and have this experience as a child? Or is this just an aspect of his personality? And I don't think we'll ever know. But I just want him to be happy, healthy and safe. And I just want if we do have another experience like this within his lifetime, I just don't want him to go through the similar experiences that other people have had. I came out of it relatively scot-free, but I don't want him to say, be in a job and there's a pandemic and then people aren't following health protocols and he gets sick. Those are the kind of things that worry me.

**Mandella [34:51]** On the flip side, is there anything that you hope we keep from this time?

**Robyn [34:56]** I really hope--one thing I loved during the pandemic, and lots of people did this, but we used to get during lockdown, you'd get a lot of our patrons would ring the library and it was essentially for a chat. They were bored, and so they'd ring up with a question that I sometimes suspected they knew the answer, but they just wanted to have a chat with someone and interact with someone that wasn't on TV. And I used to love it when you'd get people who would just turn around and just say, "Oh, stay safe." Just as instead of saying goodbye. I loved that because it was just--in some ways you could take it as, Oh, it's a bit like saying "Thoughts and prayers" after a tragedy. But to me, it meant a lot to have other people going, I'm concerned about you, I hope you're all right. And I always used to try and say it to people as well. I really hope we kind of keep the understanding that everything we do is interconnected.

Everything--hello buddy. Everything we do as a society, as an individual, as a community, has an effect on another person. [Squeaks baby toy] [Laughter] I really hope that--so say, for example, if you're sick and working, you might pass it on to someone else, who will pass it on to someone else, who will pass it on to a family member who maybe really shouldn't have gotten sick and they're now going to get into hospital for those actions. I really hope that people realize

that if you're--that everything has a consequence. I think that's probably the one thing that I hope people miss. And I actually, in an odd way, I hope people kind of keep face masks. I know they have become, again, a symbol for division, but I really like actually having one. If we have hay fever and things like that, I actually really kind of like mine. I've got a few that are kind of trendy and nice. And so I hope that if I ever--once Craig gets a little bit older and say there's some very harsh winters with flu and things, I hope I still have the confidence to wear one. Yes, that's my face mask.

**Mandella [37:20]** [Laughs] He knows what we're talking about.

**Robyn [37:22]** Yeah. [Laughter] He's used to them.

**Mandella [37:24]** He's like, "Show them, mom. Show them."

**Robyn [37:27]** I hope you don't mind.

**Mandella [37:27]** No, you're fine.

**Robyn [37:28]** He's actually--he's been okay with them. I think he's kind of grown up with them, so I think he sort of sees it like Mummy's keys--

**Mandella [37:37]** Yeah.

**Robyn [37:37]** --now. It's now just something that we've got in the car and we put on. I haven't ever tried to put one on him because he'd throw it off immediately.

**Mandella [37:45]** [Laughs] Yeah, I think that's probably right. [Laughter] Well, I know we started a little bit late, so we're about ten past one [o'clock] right now and have around like five or ten minutes left on the interview, if you have time.

**Robyn [38:06]** Yeah, that's fine. I'll take him out afterwards and I'll give him some food, so we'll be all good. Yeah.

**Mandella [38:13]** Well, I did go through a lot of the questions, but is there anything that you want to make sure to talk about or anything that I should have asked you about?

**Robyn [38:24]** I'll just have a quick look. The only thing that--I think I touched on what I remember most vividly through the pandemic, but what I also just remember is how lucky I felt all the time. And I know I've kind of talked about how privileged I was through the pandemic. There was like a moment just when I discovered I was pregnant, COVID was really heating up again in the UK. I remember just like being pregnant and you're at that stage where you don't tell anyone as a just in case measure. And I felt so sick. I'm surprised no one here commented about, like, "Oh, Robyn, you seem to be sleeping a lot, or just like, hiding downstairs in the staff room," because I just felt terrible. And I just remember that my parents were planning to have my siblings over for Christmas, and my parents had barely seen my siblings and it was becoming a really, really big deal to them. And then suddenly, it must have been about the 19th of December, the government decided that instead of doing its original plan, which was that they were just going to let all restrictions down for five days, you could do whatever you wanted and then everyone would go back. They just went, No, sorry, it's going to be a lockdown. And I--it was awful because I'm at work and everyone's talking about Christmas and everyone's, like, getting ready for the holidays and a lot of people here had--were going to see family members for the first time and things. And I'm literally like dealing with patrons and I'm having to console my mum by text message. And she is, like, going, "Well, it doesn't matter that no one can be here for Christmas as long as we're all safe, that's all what matters." And I'm like talking to patrons and I just want to walk into a bathroom and sob, because Christmas for my family is a really big deal, just having everyone under one roof. And I felt so guilty because I was in a place where we were going to announce to my in laws that I was pregnant at Christmas. And I couldn't tell my family that. And all of my family were literally at home in lockdown. All of my friends were

just like, wailing, just going--one of my friends had recently had an illness in her family and she's like, "I can't spend this time and it might be the last Christmas I get with this relative because of COVID." There's no vaccine yet, you don't know what's going to happen. And it was just an awful experience because I'd see everybody being very happy be here and then I'm kind of like, I'm really happy that I'm able to celebrate with other people, but a lot of my family can't be together and we're all separate. And it just felt like cold water was being poured on everything. And that was horrible. It was wonderful, though, because I was able to make my parents' Christmas. It was actually like the real thing. As I had struggled for a while to get pregnant, it hadn't been--everyone thinks, Oh, it's going to be easy, and it really isn't. And I basically told my parents on Christmas Day, and I was like, "Oh, your Christmas present is going to be here in August," expecting it to get it. And my mom is sitting there like, "Well, don't worry. If it's a preorder, we don't need anything to open on Christmas. Just hearing your voice is enough." And I'm like, "No, mum. Mum, your present is *due* in August." And then my dad goes, "Well, that's okay, I don't mind." And I ended up just turning around and going, "Dad, I'm pregnant. I'm six weeks pregnant and I'm as sick as a dog, so I think everything is fine." And then they just go, "Oh, oh" and I just hear all these cheering. And then my mom started crying as they were looking out over the garden and a robin had actually flown--they've got two robins that fight over territory in their backyard and one of them landed and was looking through the window. And my mom was like, "The robin is here! Yes, it's good news!" And so they were absolutely thrilled. And it was wonderful to kind of make--they were like, "Oh, that was the best Christmas present." And it was lovely to be able to do that for them, but I really wish I hadn't had to do that for them. I really wish I could have just--I didn't have to save something like that as good news, because they were having such a bad time.

**Robyn [43:34]** So I think I came out of it relatively unscathed. I got my jabs, Craig will eventually get his jabs, and I only hope that things get better from here. But it's fascinating, you kind of listen about, like, 1920s pandemic and you realize that the more things change, the more things stay the same. There were the same arguments about mask wearing, about people getting together about the people it's affected. I mean, it must be fascinating going back through

everything and seeing that. Has that been the case? The more things change, the more things stay the same? Or was it a very different experience to Chapel Hill back then?

**Mandella [44:17]** Well, you know what's funny about that is it feels like so long ago that we were doing that that I feel like I can't remember anything. [Laughter] You know? And not to mention, I do think many people have commented on how time has just totally warped.

**Robyn [44:37]** Yes.

**Mandella [44:39]** But that particular time when we were going back into the archives was really very much at the start of the pandemic--

**Robyn [44:47]** Yes it was.

**Mandella [44:48]** --like after lockdown, but very, very early. And just everything from that time feels like such--I don't know, it's like a dream. Kind of.

**Robyn [44:58]** Yeah, it really does. That was the thing. At the time, I was kind of like--it was literally like, you know when you see something like *Cool Hand Luke* or *The Great Escape* and they're carving the digits into the wall for how many days go on? March 2020 seemed to go on for like six months. And then suddenly, at some point, time kind of came back relatively to normal again. I don't know whether it was when I was pregnant, or when Craig was born, I don't know. But yeah, honestly, I just remember finding all of these things when we were moving, all of these lists and things I'd created, because I really felt during lockdown, the importance of having a schedule and kind of like trying to do the same things every day so you didn't go mad. And now it's kind of like, yeah, I don't need that anymore. Now everything's fine. Or at least it's getting better.

**Mandella [45:52]** Yeah. When you look back on the lists and the journal entries that you found, like, is there any-or what do you feel or remember from that?

**Robyn [46:03]** I just remember the sheer panic. I remember a lot of panic. Because I've never done a lockdown before. No one had done a lockdown before, so I didn't know quite what to expect. And so everyone was just like, Oh, it's only going to be a few weeks. And I remember driving up to the library on the first day that I went back to work and we had a sign saying, the library is closed indefinitely. And having to remind myself that all it means is that when the town tells us to open again, it doesn't mean that we are closed forever and ever and ever and ever. But it felt like that. And so I think there was a lot of journal entries where I'm panicking about, like, I wanted to keep a schedule, I wanted to keep a routine, but then a friend would message me and just say, "Oh, no, this has happened. My daughter's nursery or preschool has closed." And that would cause me to have a panic, like, Will they ever go back again?

**Mandella [47:04]** If you don't mind, I have one more question.

**Robyn [47:06]** Of course. Of course.

**Mandella [47:07]** So you mentioned the lists and the routines that you made, that really connected with me, because I know I fell deep into very disciplined routines during those early months.

**Robyn [47:21]** Yes. Yes.

**Mandella [47:22]** So my question is, how did your routine change? What was your routine like when you were doing that?

**Robyn [47:30]** So my routine was I tried to keep us on a similar schedule each day. And the only thing that I--so what we would do is that the only thing that I didn't really follow was that originally I wanted us to kind of, like, get out of our pajamas. And then after a while, it's like, why am I dressing into more pajamas? I ended up with the most amazing pajamas collection out of this. [Laughter] So we just kind of stayed in our pajamas. But particularly for Steven. Steven was doing a lot of his exam prep online with Zoom and things like that. So they were turning around and he had his own schedule to follow of, like, certain lectures and things. But what we would do is that we would change where we were sitting. We lived in Glen Lennox in the old building, so it was quite a small place, and our love seat was incredibly uncomfortable. So sometimes Steven needed to be on screen, so he would sit in the love seat. So he had, like, a nice background behind him. And I would sit on the chair that was usually used by the cat by the front door. So we were continually swapping. And then I tried to make sure that lunch was always at the same time each day. I always tried to make sure that we had a dinner to look forward to. There was a point in Easter where it was wonderful because all of the supermarkets had bought in all of their big joints of meat for Easter, and then no one was meeting, so we ate like kings [laughter] for three weeks. Lots of beautiful lamb shoulders and things like that. And so we ate very well. My only rule was that when--I say rules. When I had a schedule--but the one thing I was very strict on was that at the end of the day, we had to put away all of our work equipment. So the laptops went away, the TV went on, just so we had some demarcation between work and home. Which--and that worked very well for us. Steven and I have always loved each other's company. We've always got on very, very well, and I was very, very thankful that we didn't really argue about things, that we didn't really get stressed at each other. We both had our things to do and we kept on doing them, and it went well. And so we got on very well together. We were on lockdown together, but we didn't feel confined, and that's all I wanted. I just wanted our mental health not to suffer. And I don't think it did. I think we did quite well to that really. [To Craig] What do you think? Do you think we did quite well?

**Mandella [50:24]** He'll be the judge of that. [Laughter] Alright, well, thank you so much, Robyn. It made me emotional [laughter] to be honest.

**Robyn [50:35]** Oh bless you. I'm really glad I got have to chat with someone about that. It's like free therapy. [Laughter].