

**Chapel Hill Public Archive  
Pandemic Stories Project  
recording with Hunter**

*Narrator: Hunter*

*Date: May 25, 2022*

*Location: Chapel Hill Public Library*

*Interviewer: Molly Luby*

**Molly Luby 00:04** ...trying to think if there's any... do you have any questions for me before we start?

**Hunter 00:11** Not really.

**Molly 00:12** Okay.

**Hunter 00:14** Not really. I mean I...

**Molly 00:16** So I'm going to set the stage. So these are the questions. I don't know if you've had a chance to look them over. They were on our...

**Hunter 00:21** I looked at them roughly the first time I saw them. But it's good to have them in print here.

**Molly 00:25** Great. They're exactly the same. No changes. I've turned the recorder on and I'm just going to put these headphones on so I can hear to make sure that I'm actually getting everything recorded and that the microphones are working. And I'll set us up as well. So I'm here. This is Molly Luby at Chapel Hill Public Library on May 25th, recording an interview for the Pandemic Stories Project with and would you like to introduce yourself?

**Hunter 00:57** I'm Hunter Levinsohn. I have lived in Chapel Hill for over 50 years now. I guess that's enough.

**Molly 01:07** Okay. And before we dive into these questions, is there anything right off the top that you'd like to share about your experiences with the pandemic that are top of mind for you?

**Hunter 01:24** Well, like everybody else probably on the planet, I'm really tired of this.

**Molly 01:37** Okay, let's dive into these questions, and you're welcome to pass on any of these questions that you don't want to answer. And you're also welcome to take as long as you like or explore... if something else comes to mind, it's okay if we go off topic, this is your interview. It's your space to share whatever you like about your experience. So how would you describe the different stages of the Pandemic as you experience them?

**Hunter 02:03** I thought about that because I sort of remember this question. I think at first we went to the Bahamas to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary and came back on the 14th of February. And on the 15th of February, I went to a funeral in Virginia of a dear friend. And was it very poignant, because it was a friend that I'd had, but I'd not been in touch with because I always thought there was plenty of time. And so that kind of set the stage. And I remember sort of not taking... I mean, I knew that it was not good, and we are fairly careful, but I remember my daughter and I had a conversation with my son. My daughter lives in Chapel Hill and my son lives in Asheville. And I remember that we were talking to Jacob and he said, "well, what are you doing to protect yourselves now?" And Anna sort of very flippily said, well, I'm not licking people. And we laughed, but he didn't, and he's a bartender. And so this was really affecting him a lot, even at that point. And then when the... I think it really sort of... when my granddaughter, who was in the fifth grade, they stopped school, it was sort of a wake up call. And I kept thinking, well, I kept thinking, well, you know, we'll be back. Like, I had my 55th college reunion that I was planning to go to the end of May. So I said, surely it'll be over by then. It wasn't. And I also had an art show that I was working on that was supposed to be in this small sort of alternative gallery in Hillsborough called the Skylight Gallery. That was being shown in... I guess it ended up being moved to the end of August and September. But I still thought, well, certainly by then this will all be over. And it wasn't. And I went ahead and did the show and I hung the show mainly because the work was so big I couldn't even see it in my studio. There were these huge there were 48 by 12 foot pieces of canvas that I was collaging on and painting on. I wanted to see what it looked like. My husband helped me and we went to the gallery and we put it up and I actually made a video of it and put it on my website so people could see the show. And then after that, I guess it gradually started. Well. At first our daughter was going to the grocery store for us and then we started going during senior hours and we would come home and we would put what we bought on a table on the

patio and I would get Lysol and all sorts of stuff and we were cleaning all of the groceries and Jay finally looked up at me one afternoon and he said, "are we having Lysol off for dinner tonight?" And so, I mean, it was like, what is this? And then the whole presidential election, the whole campaign. And I'm active in politics and so trying to figure out how to continue to be active and getting people to vote. And so that kept happening and we all got our absentee ballots and my brother lives in Hillsborough and we would interact with my brother and his daughter, I think, was in there at the time. And then my daughter and her family we would do outside. Strictly outside. And then in October so we're moving on and I'm sort of getting used to this. In October, I got a phone call that said someone giving you as an emergency contact is in the intensive care unit to the trauma unit in Greenville, South Carolina at Greenville Memorial Hospital. And I went... I turned to Jay, I said, "I don't even know anybody in Greenville, South Carolina." And he said, "Hunter, isn't your brother in Brevard?" This is my older brother who spent his 80th birthday in the hospital in Greensboro. He was at my sister has a mountain house and he was there and he was alone and he decided to cut a tree down and the tree fell on him. He was able to ascertain that he had not broken his back and got out from under the tree, happened to have his cell phone in his pocket, called 911. They said, we know exactly where you are. Stay on the line. Stay on the line. They came to him, they airlifted him to Greenville. So that following month.. so my sister and I both, I mean, we were frantic. So she went first because she said, "I just can't stand this." She lives in Charleston, South Carolina. She went first and then I met her up at the cabin and I went to see him on his 80th birthday in the hospital and he was gravely injured. His physician said to him afterwards, I did not know if you could survive these injuries. And he looked at me and he said, "Hunter, did you think I was going to die?" And I said, "Bartow, I don't think that way." So all of these things kept happening, but they were happening in the context of COVID. So there could be one visitor per day at the hospital. So my daughter drove me down there one time and I said, I'm sorry, Anna, but it can't even be one at a time. It's one. And she said, "mom, it is fine. I am going to sit in the car and I am going to read. Nobody is going to ask me to do anything. I won't have to answer to anybody. It's fine." So that... we brought him home in November and the following several weeks were probably the hardest weeks of my life because we spent the night with him. But the first night we thought he was fine. And then when I called him in the morning, he was obviously not fine. So we spent the next night with him. And then he had a friend who's a nurse who came and stayed with him. And she actually said, "you know, I can do this, you have to pay me something." And we both said, "No problem!" But she would come for the night. I would arrive when she needed me to come in the morning. So it was like seven in the morning. I would stay till 1:00 or 2:00. My husband would relieve me, I would

come back. And then a friend of mine who lived around the corner from me started coming in. So then the nurse came. This went on. This went on. And he did recover. He landed in Paris last night, so he's fine. So that was this huge impact that happened right as this thing was really beginning. I mean, I actually went down there with his absentee ballot because I would be damned if he wasn't going to vote. So I took his absentee ballot, I found it in his house and took it down to him. He came home... the election happened and the trauma of the election was this other whole... if all these other things weren't enough. So then, anyway, Joe Biden won the election, which was a great relief to me and he was actually, actually was inaugurated in spite of everything else and this whole political churning. It was such a pleasure after the 21st of January not to have to wake up in the morning to the news that we had been hearing for the past four years. Every day: crisis, something brought on, something trauma, something awful declared. I was not a fan of the previous administration. So... all of that. And then you start getting used to it. You start getting used to not ever seeing anybody. You start getting used to this. And finally I guess last summer we went to Santa Fe. This is the fun part. We went to Santa Fe and met really close friends and were there for a week and that was absolutely wonderful. It was absolutely wonderful going in the airport but on planes. I didn't like that. And that was an incredible amount of fun and a relief. And then when we came back, we sort of, you know, were having people, close friends come over and of course by this time we were getting vaccinated, we were double vaccinated. So there was not this incredible fear because both my husband and I have underlying conditions and we are old... you know, we're old as dirt. So that was good. That was really good. But then ya kept thinking, okay, it's going to get better. And then another variant would come up and we would sort of go back into our shells. And now as we keep going, what I found is I can think of so many incredible good reasons not to go any place. I would really like to buy some clothes but I have to go to a store to do that. It's really affected the way I think. But I continued... I'll go on to another one.

I did not take up any new hobbies because I have too many hobbies. The pandemic did not change my work life because I work in my own studio which is at my house. And so I try to go every day to the studio and have a project. It has been very difficult to find a project. I finally have found a project. I finished the thing that I was doing, which was a four volume graphic journal of the past administration. So it took me a while to finish it because it was really depressing and I don't know what in the world to do with it. I put it in the living room so people could look at it. Nobody wants to look at it because it's too depressing.

**Molly 13:53** So can you tell us... tell us... you're an artist?

**Hunter 13:54** Yes.

**Molly 13:55** Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**Hunter 13:57** Well, I do mixed-media art and I also... right now I'm painting. I really love to paint, but I have a real approach avoid with painting. So I'm trying to approach rather than avoid and my work is political. Although after the full volume journal, graphic journal was called *The River* and it was the four years of the Trump administration and I would wake up to the news, and I would jot down the most outstanding things that were happening or the things that I could remember and then do weekly panels. So I have a weekly panel starting... it started in April, because at first I was doing them on a scroll, but around... I did that from January to April. And in April, I just had been so dissatisfied with the way that was coming out that I said, no, I got to figure out something. So the panels were what I did, and I continued that for four years. And documenting it with a... the image of the river was a constant image. But what happened within the river changed, and the river because river water, you can't see it change, but it does. So I was discussing with somebody one time the Buddhist concept of the water in the river going on, going on. So I finished that, and I thought, I am not going to do any more political work. I am too tired. It's too depressing. So I said, I'm going to paint flowers. And so I started with poppies and then Afghanistan, that whole withdrawal and some hand and the opioid epidemic. And so my poppies became political too. And now I discovered... I started doing some paintings about the war in Ukraine and discovered that the sunflower is the national flower of Ukraine. So I got my new flower. I did a set with the poppies, and now I'm working on sunflower.

**Molly 16:32** That sounds really amazing. In the journal, the graphic journal that you created, I would imagine COVID came up in there.

**Hunter16:42** Oh, yeah.

**Molly 16:43** I don't know if you'd be open to it. I'll just put it out there as an idea if you ever wanted to take a picture of it and include it on the page that we create for you. Other people are sending in artifacts,

photographs of different things. A journalist is one of the people who interviewed, and she's sending in clippings of some of the work that she's done throughout the pandemic.

**Hunter 17:09** Oh, okay. Well, I could do that.

**Molly 17:13** Okay. Yeah. So if you want to describe the first moments when you became aware of the pandemic.

**Hunter 17:18** I do. It was after we came back, and it was like, wait a minute. And because I listen to the news and read newspapers, you couldn't get away from it. It was like, this is not happening. Yeah, this is happening. I mean, when the lockdown came, I was not... I was sort of aware of what we needed to do. Jay and I both — well, artists don't retire — but Jay is retired. And so I was thinking about... I live with this one person. We live in a big enough place so that we don't have to spend the day in the same room with each other. He's been retired long enough so that it was not... except that we weren't going out and people weren't coming in. It was very similar to what our lives are like. And I think that we're fortunate that financially we were fine and so we didn't have to worry about that. Although my son, who is a bartender, was out of work for two years, my son in law was able to work from home, so that was a whole different area. My daughter has been very clear that she really wants him to go back to work and she really likes to have her daughter in school. And I think that, you know, one of the things is my sister, who lives in Charleston, Thanksgiving is a really... time we gather and not being able to be together. Her daughter had, I guess, Thanksgiving of 2019, we left, we were in Charleston because Kate was just about to have her third child and he was born, we left on Saturday, and he was born Sunday. And this was a child I never got to hold. And now he's going to be three in December. And so those kind of family things which are so important to us, we were missing all of those kinds of things and watching this, being able to be with this child and her other two, and then she has a fourth one and we also barely got to meet Sam. So here are these darling children we're really missing out on. But we do stay in touch. We do stay in touch. And I think that there are certain losses that I will certainly remember very vividly. My husband's college roommate died, not of COVID, but he had been he had dementia for several years and died sort of suddenly, I think. And that was kind of a real life changing feeling. And then when another very close friend died, about maybe two months afterwards, it was... and no memorial service. We did get to go and... for each of these people, for Bill, they did have a small gathering. And for the other friend... he died,

I think, in maybe November. And last week we went to a memorial service for him with a whole lot of people. And I thought, well, those people vaccinated? But it was not being able to be together in that kind of time, particularly maybe an age related thing. But it seems to be very poignant and very alone.

**Molly 21:50** I feel like you've touched on so many of these, so I'm going to just skip halfway down to and I think you've talked about your interpersonal relationships, but I'm curious if you felt like they changed it all during the pandemic? Maybe they haven't.

**Hunter 22:07** Well, particularly with Jay, I would say we just are together. We depend on each other for socialization. I think that it's probably made us stronger. My daughter certainly opened up. I think she feels much more in tune with us, although we were always really... they were back and forth. And my granddaughter, who has become a teenager during this... So it's very interesting, I think, if you talk about interpersonal relationships. Nora and I have had an incredibly close relationship. And after being out of school for a full year and turning into a 12 and 13 year old and being, having access to her friends. I never see her anymore and I miss her dreadfully, but I think she'll be back. I've been lucky that the interpersonal relationships have been, if anything, more positive, I would say.

**Molly 23:22** In what ways has your mental and emotional health been affected by life in the pandemic?

**Hunter 23:28** I feel like there aren't any into it and sometimes it makes me very sort of down and I think the mental and emotional being down and not being able to really be out and do the kind of things that I'm normally doing. Which is not all that many things. But it seems like I'm just sort of tied and turned into myself so much and that really worries me. And I worry about my country, I worry about the things that are happening in my country and all of those things I feel less control over.

**Molly 24:20** In what way has your physical health been affected by life in the pandemic?

**Hunter 24:26** My physical health might even be better because I walk all the time now. I've always walked for exercise. That's the way I get my exercise. But I was doing it in a gym with a track and because of the — I didn't feel comfortable going to the track — I walk in the neighborhood and I have done that and the neighborhood is always there. I don't have to even get in the car and drive to the

neighborhood. So I walk every day. And I really have always liked walking and found it to be very positive way to sort of blow off steam, I guess. So it may even be that I'm healthier and I haven't gained I maybe gained two pounds.

**Molly 25:18** How do you think living in Chapel Hill shaped your experience of the pandemic?

**Hunter 25:22** Well, I think that people in Chapel Hill have tended to be more serious about the pandemic, and I think that I'm lucky that way. We are lucky that way. And probably the vaccination rate I know in Orange County is very high and I think that I'm very appreciative of that. That's what I feel like.

**Molly 25:49** How has the pandemic affected your relationship to your faith or spirituality?

**Hunter 25:52** Well, I'm an observant Jew, and it's really hard not being as active as part of my synagogue. But I still have a relationship. I have a friend who moved into The Cedars. She's in her nineties. And she moved into The Cedars the week of the lockdown. And this is an incredibly wonderful, vibrant human being and I have seen the isolation just be devastating for her. And she's a member of my synagogue and that makes me very sad.

**Molly 27:06** How was your thinking about risk changed over the course of the pandemic, or has it?

**Hunter 27:12** I think that I would say... I'm certainly more aware of the people, of being around people and risk taking in that because I also feel responsible for the people I live with and the people I see and continue to see. So I will decide not to take a risk because I might endanger somebody else.

**Molly 27:48** Is there anything you wish you had done differently earlier in the pandemic?

**Hunter 27:52** Not really. I didn't remember that question.

**Molly 28:00** Or is there anything you wish others had done differently?

**Hunter 28:06** I could have told a lot of people a lot better ways to act but they weren't asking me. I wish people would not be so politicized about it. I think that's been a crazy thing. I mean, just flat out crazy. When I read the other day when they published the piece in the Times about the million people having died from COVID and one of the statistics I read was that 319,000 of these people would not have died with more sensible behavior.

**Molly 28:59** What do you want to be sure future generations remember about COVID?

**Hunter 29:04** That what you do affects other people. Yeah.

**Molly 29:13** Is there anything that you hope we keep that has changed?

**Hunter 29:17** I think that people have been certainly on a person to person basis I've observed kindness and I hope that we'll be able to... and courtesy. When you walk in my neighborhood people are wonderful about making sure they are respectful of people's distance. It's not a neighborhood that's overly... you know, we don't throw block parties every week, but I know my next door neighbors and I think other neighbors have been more solicitous saying can we get something for you? Can we do something for you? And I think that's really positive.

**Molly 30:03** Is there anything else you'd like to share? I think I've talked an awful lot.

**Hunter 30:16** Well, this was really great.

**Molly 30:18** It was lovely to hear everything that you shared. If there's anything that comes up for you, you just let me know but I'm going to go ahead and turn off the recording.