

Interview with
JALEESA BUCHWITZ

December 9, 2020

**THE PANDEMIC YEARS: COVID-19
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

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Jaleesa Buchwitz was interviewed on December 9, 2020 by Chloe Wimmer. She related her experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CW: Okay, today's date is December 9th, 2020. I'm here with Jaleesa Buchwitz. So, give me a brief introduction of yourself, where you're from, how old you are, what you do in St. George, all that stuff?

JB: I am twenty-three years old. I have lived in Hurricane, Utah most of my life and I work in St. George, I have family that lives here. So yeah, I've lived in Washington County [Utah] since I was about eight years old.

CW: Awesome. So, as far as COVID things go, did you have a moment— 'cause I know I had a moment where I was like, "Oh, this is getting serious," like when things actually started shutting down— what did that look like for you?

JB: Well, it's actually really interesting because I got married on March 13th, 2020. And on March 12th, is when my boss was like, "Oh, we might have to close the museum on Monday." So, it was on a Friday that I got married, and we might have to close the museum next week. So, I got married thinking, "Oh, my job is probably gonna be closed when I get home." And so, I got married, and we went on our honeymoon to Arches National Park, Canyonlands National Park, and Capitol Reef National Park. And by the time we got home, Sunday night, and Monday my work closed; everything was closing. I saw on Facebook that Arches National Park closed. So, we were really fortunate that we were able to do our honeymoon before everything closed.

CW: Yeah, well, that's great. I was gonna ask you, I was gonna say, I know you got married, right when things were shutting down. I know you guys had a small wedding. Was that because of COVID? Or did you want to have a small one anyway?

JB: We were planning on having a small one anyway, just because I didn't want to plan a \$5,000 wedding.

CW: Totally, yeah. I'm really glad you went into that stuff. Did it affect your newly married life? Did you feel like it gave you guys any tension or were things kind of like as normal?

JB: Not too bad. And I think mostly just because I didn't lose my job. I didn't get laid off. My hours were reduced, but I didn't completely lose my job, which really helped.

CW: Yeah, that's good. And another question I was gonna ask: So, how did you feel when you had to be a part of closing the museum down, because you are the assistant manager at the St. George Dinosaur Discovery Site? How did you feel when you had to close things down and lay off your employees? What was that like for you?

JB: It was actually really sad. I'm friends with all of the employees. So, it was really hard to see that all my friends were being laid off and having to figure out unemployment and I got to stay at the museum. So, it was really, it was also awkward because some employees probably wouldn't have been happy if they had known that I didn't get laid off and they did. So, it was difficult. But also, I tried my very best to be there for people if they needed help with their unemployment and I was really excited when everyone came back [laughter].

CW: Yep. So, since the museum was closed down to the public at this time, what kind of work would you be doing?

JB: So, one of the things I did is I wrote an employee handbook. It's crazy, we didn't have an employee handbook before quarantine. So that's something I worked on and wrote. Diana [Jaleesa's boss] and I, we worked on some strategic plan kind of stuff, writing grants, learning as much as we could about what it's going to look like when we reopen, what kind of procedures and protocols we'll have to put in place when we reopen, stuff like that.

CW: Something I wasn't originally going to ask but I thought would be interesting: So, when it did come time to open again, late May, mid-May, were you very confident in opening again, or did you feel a little scared, like, "What if someone gets sick"?

JB: Oh, I was freaking out.

CW: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JB: So, one of my main jobs is running the gift shop. And so, one of my biggest worries was people touching things in the gift shop. So, part of the reopen procedure was rearranging the gift shop so that people could socially distance and trying to figure out what kind of spacing and procedures we'd have to put in place so that we could responsibly reopen. I took a lot of things off display because they were highly touchable items. Another thing we figured out was we had to measure out through our exhibit, so that groups could social distance in the exhibit and go one way, and stuff like that. So, that was a big part of reopening. But yeah, I was really nervous. I didn't really want to reopen.

CW: That's hard for sure. Because, at the same time, everything else in St. George was starting to open. So, I get it, financially, it kind of just had to happen.

JB: Yeah.

CW: Going back to health things, did you or do you feel scared for your own health? Or did you have certain family members or friends that you felt like you needed to protect? Or were you, kind of, not too worried?

JB: So, my husband recently found out that he has severe asthma and very severe allergies, so

I'm worried for him. And my in-laws, there are little kids, babies, in my family, and those are the people I'm most concerned for. And then my grandparents, but mostly my husband. I'm not worried for myself. Yeah.

CW: What did your daily life look like during this initial shutdown? I know you were still working, but did you ever deal with mental toughness, boredom, stuff like that?

JB: Not too much. My boss was very generous and she allowed me plenty of time to work from home. If I was working from home, she allowed me to do much lighter work, listening to podcasts that relate to my job, and stuff like that. My biggest stressor was, I felt guilty that I was still working, and all of the employees got laid off. But no, I wasn't sad or upset or anything for myself.

CW: Yeah, for sure. I can see that coming with a lot of guilt. That's super hard. In the beginning, how long did you think we were gonna be shut down for [laughter]? Were you like, "Oh, this is two weeks" or like, "We're screwed forever"?

JB: I was worried that we weren't going to be— it depends, 'cause it went in waves. So, when we closed in March, I thought it was maybe going to be for a month, maybe three months tops, maybe reopen June at the latest. And then, as everything was progressing and getting worse, I was all, "Oh, if we do reopen for summer, which that's our busiest time, we'll probably have to close again in the Fall because of flu season and just kids going back to school." So, I was not positive that we were going to stay open.

CW: [Laughter.] It definitely seemed like it was going in waves, so hard to know.

JB: We were getting information at uneven times.

CW: For sure. What's the hardest thing now that the museum is open, and there's different procedures, such as masks being required, and contact tracing. What's the hardest part about all of that?

JB: The hardest part is keeping the visitors safe. We get plenty of visitors that think that COVID is fake, and that they don't have to wear a mask and that we are violating their rights for asking them to leave contact information. And in those instances, I just say, "Well, um, you have to wear a mask to come in. So, if you're not going to wear a mask, you can leave." And so, that's one of the biggest [laughter] issues, is just visitors unwilling to work with us. But for the most part, most visitors are perfectly happy to wear a mask, and give their contact information, and social distance, and all that good stuff. And then, obviously, keeping the staff safe. So, if we have visitors not wearing masks, then that puts the staff at risk and [exhales] then we have to deal with trying to quarantine the staff if one of us gets sick.

CW: [Laughter.] Yep, it be like that. [Both laughing.] Oh boy! Tell us about that.

JB: So, just today, I found out that one of the staff members tested positive for COVID. So,

the last couple hours have been us scrambling to figure out what we're going to do with scheduling testing appointments. All the staff is getting tested and the museum is going to be closed the next couple of days.

CW: It's kind of crazy because this has not happened since we opened and here we are. It just seems like there's a huge outbreak going on right now.

JB: I don't know how quarantine has been going on for eight months, and I haven't had to be tested yet.

CW: Seriously. These few weeks have been absolutely insane.

JB: Which makes sense, because the kids are in school and holidays and Thanksgiving. And families are gathering and everyone in Utah is just acting like we're hunky dory, perfectly fine. But our numbers keep rising and we are not in a good place.

CW: We definitely aren't [laughter].

JB: And it doesn't look like we're gonna be closing anytime soon.

CW: I know. It's crazy. It truly is crazy.

Kind of going along with that, do you feel safer now than you did in March? 'Cause I think all of us do things we weren't doing in March. We're going out, we're eating [in restaurants]. But the cases are on the rise. It's crazy.

JB: Yes. I think part of it is people are so jaded by the fear that they have decided that they would rather get sick and risk it than live in quarantine any longer. And it kind of sucks because I've felt like I haven't been as careful lately. I have been hanging out with my co-workers and not wearing a mask around my co-workers. And that's obviously really stupid, because now we might all be sick.

CW: It's so easy to let your guard down when you feel like you're safe.

JB: Yeah. I feel like I'm responsible when I'm out in public. I always wear a mask everywhere I go. And yeah, I feel like I am not nearly as scared now as I was in March, which is really crappy.

CW: Well, as we get new information, I think people became less scared as in the beginning. You know, I think the idea was if you get this, you're dying. And as that's not necessarily true, I think people have stopped caring at all, which is also not very good because people are dying.

JB: Yeah, they are.

CW: Especially, our elderly people or immunocompromised people. So, I think we owe it to

them to keep being safe, you know.

And just some final thoughts. How has this pandemic affected you long term? Does this make you more aware of your health and other diseases that may be out there?

JB: Not personally, but it does— I'm afraid to go out in public. I mean, I know I just said that I'm not afraid for myself, but having a lot of people I love that are sensitive to getting sick, it makes me afraid to bring something home, because I am around the public all the time. I mean, working at a museum, I see people I don't know all the time. So, it's— I don't know. I'm scared, but I'm not scared [laughter].

CW: I guess going along with the future, like, what do you think next year will look like [laughter]? 'Cause I have no idea where this thing is going.

JB: Yeah, I'm hoping, with a vaccine, that things start to lighten up a little bit and our numbers start to go down. But—

CW: For the next few months, it doesn't seem like there will be much change.

JB: It's so hard because we live in a state where people are not taking this seriously and they think it's all fake. And especially, with our election and all the drama going on with that, [exhales] it—

CW: It's so hard [laughter].

JB: Yeah, I feel like a vaccine mandate would just piss off a lot of people but also placate a lot of people that want to actually get back to normal. But what does normal even look like after this? I don't know.

CW: That's a good thought. I like that. I think that's how a lot of us are feeling.

Well, good stuff. That's the end of our interview!

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]