

Interview with
ONEATA ROSIE MELODY SOI

December 10, 2020

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

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ONEATA SOI

Oneata Rosie Melody Soi was interviewed by Anasitasia “Ana” Vaitele on December 10, 2020 via Zoom. Oneata was speaking from her home in Satala, American Samoa. Due to American Samoa having no positive COVID-19 cases, Oneata was able to talk about her experience and the changes that she experienced as American Samoa’s borders were shut down from everyone outside.

AV: Hi, this is Anasitasia Vaitele and it is December 9, 2020. We are having this interview via Zoom. First, I would like to thank Ms. Soi for giving me the opportunity to interview her for this project.

Can I please get your full name and spell it out for me?

OS: Hi, thank you Ana. I’m honored to be interviewed with your project and this is an Oneata Rosie Melody Soi, O-N-E-A-T-A R-O-S-I-E M-E-L-O-D-Y S-O-I.

AV: Thank you. Where is your location right now?

OS: I am actually in Pago Pago, American Samoa. Last I checked, this is the only territory of the United States south of the equator.

AV: Okay, and where and when were you born?

OS: I was born in August of the year 1990, in the independent state of Samoa. Which, it’s just a 25-minute flight from here.

AV: Thank you. Alrighty, so Miss Soi, when I say “coronavirus,” what are some of the things that come to mind and what are your thoughts on the virus?

OS: Coronavirus. 2020 as a whole, it’s going to be an unforgettable year because there was just so much going on from the beginning and even up to now. I mean, we miss our freedom to do things and the norm. But it’s life, and we just hope and pray that the vaccine is available soon for all and coronavirus is eliminated from the face of the earth. And it’s heartbreaking to see we’ve lost so many lives around the world from this virus. But then again, it’s inevitable when people choose to not practice safety precautions, such as wearing masks, and washing hands, sanitizing, and, you know, things like that.

AV: Thank you. So, Miss Rosie, what do you do professionally? Like, what is your job right now?

OS: I’m a health educator at a nonprofit organization called Intersections Inc. We implement abstinence education and life-skills curriculums in schools, and churches, and the community as a whole. And we also run youth leadership programs that are federally funded, so— Most of our work we have to interact with the kids and the youth, so— Or when the schools were closed because of the virus, that also meant we couldn’t go into

the schools, and I couldn't continue the job that I'm very passionate about, which was interacting with the young people and empowering them to become positive influence.

AV: And how long have you been working there?

OS: For about two years. I started working there before I graduated from college, so it's about a solid two years now.

AV: That's awesome. Before the pandemic started what, was your, like, usual day like? What was your usual day like?

OS: Before the pandemic?

AV: Yeah, before the pandemic started.

OS: My usual day. Well, like I said, there was just so much freedom. Of course, in this small island, I commute to work by bus everyday working from nine to five. But since I have to travel some distance, it's on the other end of the island, I have to be on my way about a couple of hours early. And so, I was always used to riding a bus without a mask and things like that, just inhaling the fresh sea breeze. And I always look forward to going into the schools to engage with my students, you know. And also, the teachers are facilitators, wonderful facilitators of each school that will, site that we're involved with.

And also, love to come home and gather with all my relatives. But now, there's hardly any of that. And just family time we used to do around the TV, it's like, you know, we try not to do that because, like, for example watching the TV is just a reminder of the sad reality what our world is in right now, with all the news coverage and, you know, the sad stuff, and yeah—

AV: Alrighty, so those are some of the changes that you experience. But what is, like, the main change in your life since the pandemic started? And what are some of the difficulties you are facing right now with the pandemic?

OS: The biggest change. Well, I think one of the biggest change that happened in my life, or like with everyone else—

AV: Well, you can talk about your life and what happened in the community [inaudible], what changes you see in the community, as well.

OS: Okay. I think for me, one of the biggest change that really affected us in American Samoa, was perhaps the restriction of religious gatherings or churches. I mean, I know why they said no more gatherings of more than ten people, so of course, church was out of the picture. But I mean, like 98 percent of our population are devout Christians and church is like your second family, and people were desperate and longing to be at church where you find comfort and hope during tough times. So, it was really tough at first. People who are really strong in their faith and having been told that they can't gather anymore for church. And so, like, for instance, for me in our church, we had a church service over Facebook Live at the same time of our services on Sunday. So, we'd be

doing our own family worship and service at home and then tune into Facebook Live to our pastor preaching. And it felt very different and weird at first, but it went well as we continued and got used to it.

But I must say that at that same time, at the same period of time, not all families were peaceful and perfect, though. There have been a number of domestic violence cases and different forms of abuse as people were at home most of the time with their kids. And I just hope that people keep speaking up to report it because it's not okay and justice needs to be served, you know, just saying. With the virus, you know, it doesn't justify their actions, like, of being home alone together and then they start to do other things that are inappropriate.

But I still like to think that more positive things took place. So, for instance, like, quality time with families. They're spending more time together playing sports or activities in their backyard, reminded of cultural values and practices, as well as speaking our native tongue, you know, the Samoan language, at home with their parents because most of the young people here would spend more time at school with their friends and they'd be speaking English, and only speak Samoan when they're at home. So, I think it's great. If they're spending more time at home, that means they're speaking our native tongue more often.

And in terms of changes in the environment, I think the days are just super busy and hectic, and people were— At the beginning of this pandemic, people were trying to get things done before the evening and then the nights were always so serene. Less pollution, too, as there weren't any more gatherings of groups of people anywhere, like parties and celebrations and church services or, yeah, or weddings and funerals, which are a big deal here. Yeah, but for me, something that a realization that I had, was always like just accepting the new reality that this virus is gonna be here for a while, it won't just go away overnight, and, you know, claiming the lives of so many people around the world. And it really made me cherish my time with my loved ones and also my elderly relatives and friends. I mean, we live on this tiny island with a population of just a little over 50,000 and you don't want to imagine what would happen if the virus reaches our shores. So, I just thank God we're safe, even up to now, and yeah—

AV: Thank you. What are some of the laws the government passed during the time of the shutdown and the lock down within the island? What are some of the laws passed to make sure everyone was safe when the pandemic first started?

OS: Oh man. Well, there's so much to say. The government had set new regulations, of course, to be followed. And one of them was, of course, enforcing social distances or six feet apart. If not, then, if not most, in all businesses had marked like six feet apart spots for clients or customers to stand on, you know, when you had to stand in line. For example, at the bank or the post office, where they put, like, marks on the floor six feet apart for people to stand on, so—

And also, like I said, I go to work and I go everywhere by bus. So, it was really difficult for people like me when there were no more buses or taxis on the road after six p.m. And

also, all stores, they would close at six p.m. This was at the beginning of the pandemic. So, you know, it was a tough adjustment as that meant everyone had to get off work early, make it to the stores and buy food for their families, or anything that you may need over the course of the evening, you know. And then you rush to catch a bus or taxi home if you don't own a car. So, most buses, most but— Oh, or even the gas stations close at that same time at six p.m. So, most buses would make their last trip from, like, east to west or west to east at like four p.m. and that meant for me, that meant I wanted to get off around three-thirty. Which is like an hour early from my usual, the usual five that I used to get off. So, that meant I had to get off around three-thirty so I can run to the store or make stops that, some stops that I needed to do, and before I wait for a bus to go home.

Public gatherings were banned, of course. And that meant, you know, no more fun things to do with your friends in public. You can do other fun things at home. No more movies in the weekend. No more eating with families and friends at a restaurant. So, those were just some of the few changes we had to adjust to in the beginning of the pandemic. And also, the schools had to close, of course, and when it closed in the last school year, like around March, we all just had to adjust, even as a health educator, and teachers and parents and students alike had to adjust big time. I mean, there were homework packages that had to be picked up by parents, as well as the kids' school lunch from the cafeteria. They were packed in, they were packed in boxes and plastic bags for parents to pick up and to take it, you know, to take it home. And also, the teachers would do Zoom classes, yet a lot of families here do not have access to the Internet. And most families don't even own a laptop or computer, so it was not easy to get the work done for both the teacher and students. The teachers also had to be faced with challenges. And the parents, the parents also had to be faced with challenges, such as having some of their kids go to school while the other stay home at school. And also, because school days were different for certain grades, yeah. And then so, like, the parents had to drop off the other to school and make it to work, and then pick them up as most schools finished early.

So, as a new school year began in September, the schools reopened, yes, but the grades alternate on days of the week. So, for instance, for high schools, freshmen and sophomores come in on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday; and juniors and seniors on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And then the next week, it's Monday, Wednesday, Friday for the juniors and seniors. Well, you know, yeah, so those high school teachers also faced with many challenges, and one of them is the fact that it's taking longer to complete a lesson. And I've experienced this in the new school year, you know, repeating the same lesson to the one class that is now divided in two because of the different grade levels. And then, times that by six, so if there are six periods, that's like repeating the same lesson twelve times at the most, instead of six. So, those were just some of the, some of the laws that the government has passed to make sure everyone was safe when the pandemic first started. Oh, and another one was, of course, the closing of their borders, but—

AV: [Inaudible.] And were you— And everyone was still wearing masks and everything, right, even though there was no cases back home?

OS: Yes, at the beginning, must I add. At the beginning of the pandemic, yes.

- AV: How about now, is everyone wearing masks or—?
- OS: I think right now, at this point, it's only enforced within schools and several other government departments. But I wouldn't say that I'd see someone wearing a mask and they're on the bus, or just going shopping and they're wearing a mask. It's just very few, I think.
- AV: Okay. How are you staying connected to family, friends, work, or school while you were social-distancing? How were you staying connected with families, like, off-island or within the island?
- OS: Social media, of course. You know, Facebook and Messenger, video chat, or FaceTime with families, and Zoom for work, for homework, and more. And you know, since our borders have been closed though, we have slowly lifted some bans and restrictions that were implemented before. And we have more freedom than the beginning of the pandemic, you know. And to be honest, I think at this point, there is little to no social-distancing going on here right now, because with our borders closed to traveling, no one from outside of the island is traveling here. You know, cargo ships, both land and air, are strictly monitored and set protocols are being followed to make sure that non-threatening interactions are made with pilots and captains of ships. And people are now eating in restaurants, and standing in line closely together at the bank, or just going places without masks because we feel or we think that we're safe for the time being, for the time being, with the actions that the governor and his administration are making. We do feel that with us being an island, the people on-island are safe to have that freedom, for now.
- AV: Thank you. I wanna know, was there ever a time, like, an airplane landed in, like, American Samoa and then everyone on the flight was not able to, like, go off the plane?
- OS: No, I don't think so. That would have made some headlines. But, I do think back to one time when we had someone from, originally from, American Samoa, but was serving in the military. But his mother had passed away and apparently, he had gone through, he had followed protocol and did everything he could, contacting our Congress, Congresswoman Amata's office to be able to come home. Like, he did a proposal and everything and they accepted it and let him come. But when the plane got here, it was a miscommunication. Well, to correct myself, there was no communication at all. They said the governor's office said they did, they were not aware of the plane coming in to bring this soldier. So, what happened was, it was very sad, the plane got here and he could not get off the plane. And his fiancée and his family were at the airport. The plane just turned back and took off and went back to Hawaii because he could not get off that plane.
- AV: Well, that is really sad.
- OS: Yeah, yeah, it was very sad.
- AV: So, closed borders. I wanna hear your thoughts on the issue of American Samoa closing their borders to outsiders. What about, like, some Samoans stranded here? Do you agree with it? Why or why not? I wanna hear your thoughts about that.

OS: Well, our borders have been closed since March. But we've had about two charter flights for medical referrals, and those returning to the mainland. But we didn't have those until, like, later. It was, like, so if we close the borders in March, I think the first charter flight was in July. We've only, we haven't been open to bringing in all the American Samoan citizens who are stranded and stuck out there. I'll say that our higher-ups have made that decision and stating that it's a safety precaution to make sure that the virus does not reach our shore. And I personally think that we've had enough time to prepare for repatriation flights. I mean, there's the fourteen-day quarantine process and the facilities for it, and that we can do, you know. We also have to test. But, I feel like one reason why, for some reason, the higher-ups may be, may not be prepared yet, because I feel like perhaps the manpower and the resources we need to pull all of that off successfully is somewhat questioned as we have never done anything like it before and it's— that's a big, big risk. But, I strongly believe that it's a risk that we can take for the sake of its stranded residents. And it's time for these families to reunite with their loved ones. It's been too long. And we already had received all the COVID funding to prepare, and all this time, you know, to have drills and just to be able to continue on with the process and just, you know, repatriate and bring our American Samoa resident home, and, you know, pray and hope for the best.

AV: Well, so you want the borders back home to be open, is that correct?

OS: Well, I think the most important thing right now is to— I think the most important thing right now are the repatriation flights. You know, those people who have been fighting to come home, trying to come home, they've been stranded out there. I think they need to come home before we open up our borders and just allow anyone to just book a flight if you wanna come, you know. I feel like it's more important to bring home those 500-plus residents who've been stuck over there. Through that process of bringing them home, would be determined our ability to be able to successfully monitor and put them in quarantine facilities and do the testing, with those 500 people. And then we'll see from there how we'd be able to open flights again. And just, you know, the regular flights that we used to have bringing in perhaps thousands of people a week. So, I think— Like, do you get what I'm saying?

AV: Yeah, exactly. Well, I do know that American Samoa only has one hospital. Do you think our hospital will ever be ready to serve the island if the governor decides to open up the borders?

OS: To answer that question truthfully, I don't know. I don't know. I mean, sure we can be ready when, if COVID funds were used correctly, you know. By correctly, I mean, you know, purchasing beds and build, I don't know, isolation rooms, or something. And because I don't know if we can expect the vaccine anytime soon, you know. So, I'm saying sure. Sure, we might be able to. But, if half of me is leaning on to say no, then it's probably, it's probably because we would not be ready. But then again, that's kind of unfair as it sounds like I'm not putting enough trust in our beloved doctors and nurses here, who I'm sure will give their all to help our people. But you know, it's a really small hospital, it's a really small hospital that we have here. And you know, like I mentioned before, the governor and his administration really are the ones that make the call. So, I

hope and pray for the best and if they ever— [cough]. Excuse me. If they ever make that decision to finally open up the borders, I hope and pray that all goes well, and yeah—

AV: Yeah. Oh, well comparing nine months ago and now, what are your feelings about the virus? Like, nine months ago, when it first came out? And what are your feelings about it right now?

OS: Oh, well. At the beginning, there was just so much fear, you know. And in part of that too was— Excuse me [cough]. Part of that, too, was because there was a measles outbreak in the neighboring state of Samoa, which claimed the lives of 80-plus people, which is a lot for a small Pacific Island. And most of those, and most of them were children under the age of five. And this was around September to December 2019. And so, we closed all transportation between here and Samoa, which affected businesses who export crops and other goods to American Samoa, and also affected holiday plans for most. And then the measles got here, like, in December, but luckily, the very few cases we had, they recovered. So, when the news of coronavirus surfaced in January, we were still in that state of fear from measles, you know, except there was a vaccine for measles and not corona. And so, I was in Hawaii early January, and a couple of days after I returned back home, and then they started reporting about the outbreak in China. So, at first, I was going kind of paranoid in the first few days because I was thinking maybe I had gotten a virus while I was in Hawaii. But just after that, I was so grateful that our training I went to was done and was done much, much earlier before things started to be so hectic. Now so, that's how I felt with when I first heard of the virus, like the beginning of the pandemic.

But I think for now, I feel that, you know, I don't have that fear anymore with the virus. Of course, it's very real and claiming the lives of so many people around the world, but I think I'm putting my trust in the people of our island that, you know, with these repatriation flights that we're planning to have, I think, mid-January. And I'm just hoping that all goes well and families will reunite. That, you know, we can't close our borders forever. This is, if Corona is gonna be around for three years, we can't close our borders for three years. You know, it's part of life. It's a risk that you have to take and move on with, we need to move on with our lives with this virus, and just— As a Christian nation and as a Christian myself, I feel like, with moving faith, do things with faith, that our lives are in God's hands.

AV: Thank you. Well, Western Samoa has confirmed a positive case from them. How do you feel about that? Do you have any relatives in Western Samoa that you are worried about?

OS: Yes, they have confirmed case in Samoa. I think Samoa have had, like, three or more successful repatriation flights for its citizens who were stranded in New Zealand and Australia, but I think they took that risk and they've gotten a case. But I have been following that issue and so far, I think they have prepared for the situation that they're in right now, and it is well-monitored and contained and taken care of, to make sure that there is no outbreak and make sure that history doesn't repeat itself, like the 1918 influenza, Spanish flu. So yes, I have many relatives there and Samoans are all related, so the whole villages from there, I consider family. And of course, I worry about them, but

it's out of my control. It's out of our control, and we can only pray and hope and trust that those responsible and preventing the virus from spreading, will continue to do a good job as they have, as they are doing so far.

AV: Thank you. Well, do you have any final thoughts about or anything you want to say about the coronavirus, or anything at all before we close this interview?

OS: Well, I want to thank you, Ana, for this interview. I've enjoyed it very much, surprisingly [laughter]. And also, just to be able to sit back and really reflect on this unbelievable year we've had. We've had so many losses, so many things thrown at us, but still I believe a lot of positive things to be proud of, you know. And I just hope and pray for more of it. Now there's, I mean, this year is unforgettable. So many things and it really goes to show how humanity is so resilient, that whatever happens, they get back up and just, you know, move forward, do better, improve in every aspect of our lives, and so— I just hope that the new year, 2021, will be a much better year [laughter]. But thank you again, and God bless, and happy holidays.

AV: Well, thank you for allowing me to interview you, Miss Soi. Happy holidays to you, too. Thank you.

OS: Thank you.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]