

Interview with
MCKEL YNN BARBER

April 7, 2021

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

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Mckelynn Barber was interviewed by Taylor Giles on April 7, 2021 over a Zoom meeting. She talked about her experiences during the “Pandemic Years” of 2020-2021.

[First minute of recording was a reading of the interview disclaimer and has been cut.]

TG: So, I’m just going to ask you a couple of questions and that’s pretty much all there is to it [laughter]. My first question is, how did you first hear about COVID-19 and what were your first thoughts, feelings, and what was your reaction?

MB: I remember hearing about it probably last year. [Inaudible] Oh, sorry. Okay. [Weak audio connection.]

TG: I don’t know. [Weak audio connection.]

MB: Oh, no, I’m using my phone as a hotspot. [Weak audio connection.]

TG: No, you’re the— It might be me also, because I still live at Red Mountain and wifi is still awful— [Weak audio connection].

MB: So hopefully I don’t cut out anymore. I was so— Yeah, so I think I heard about it in February, maybe January of last year, but it seemed to be very contained to Wuhan [China]. And then I heard about it more in February when it came to the U.S. and when it was really big in Italy. But when it really hit me was we had a dance conference in Spokane [Washington] the week that pretty much the entire country shut down. And I remember watching the news and then being, yeah, international travel’s done, domestic travel may be done, and we were like, “Oh my gosh, we’re gonna have to drive back to St. George [Utah] from Washington [state].” That was the first time it was like, “Oh, my gosh!”

And then, we weren’t here when the school told us that we weren’t coming back and that we would have an extended spring break. So then we started kind of freaking out because we were like, “We’re not there. We don’t know what our professors are doing. We don’t even really know what’s going on.” And then it was just a lot of sadness because we were supposed to be enjoying this conference and then we were told we can’t do contact anymore, this would probably be our last time performing this semester. So it was kind of just— I don’t really remember a lot about the buildup up to it, but I remember the peak of it for me and just how fast things just seemed like they happened. And then, just feeling like I didn’t know what to do.

But when we had our spring break last year, I was working at the HPC [Human Performance Center] and I remember how stressed out I was about sanitation and being like, “Oh my gosh, I have to sanitize all these balls.” I’m like, “How are people not going

to get sick?” and just being very anxious about the situation. So, I guess in short, I don’t really remember a lot about when I first heard it, but when it really hit home, that’s when I really remember what I felt ‘n stuff.

TG: That sucks that you were already in Washington when all that happened. That’s a bummer.

MB: Yeah, and it was crazy because my professors told us to get our flu shots before we left because they had heard that it would help us not get COVID, or not be able to spread COVID or something like that. And so, even then there were, you know, claims being made about how to prevent it or how to slow the spread, but we had no idea what we were doing at that time, and we didn’t [have m]asks. And it was crazy because when we flew out, it was before, you know, things really hit the fan, and so we just were able to ride a plane like normal. But then afterwards was crazy because people just had wipes and were wiping everything down, and it was completely different than when we first left and it was pretty wild.

TG: That is crazy. So were you able to fly back or did you have to drive back?

MB: Yeah. We were able to fly back.

TG: Oh, that’s good. Sorry, you cut out. I heard; it was just slow.

Okay, so the next question is, how has the pandemic affected your life? This could be both your surroundings, and your day to day, and then maybe also it’s affected you emotionally, or character development, or anything like that.

MB: I think the pandemic, more than anything, has just given me an opportunity to prioritize myself. And before— pre-pandemic, I was always busy and I thought that I liked that. I thought that I liked having these unattainable to-do lists and being like, “Oh, yeah, I have to run here and there, there, there,” and then with the pandemic, I couldn’t do that anymore. And so, then I had to take a step back and reevaluate the things I actually want to do. And it’s helped me recognize that there are more important things than school and work, and so, I mean, it’s been good. I don’t think I’ve necessarily been stressed, it didn’t necessarily change my [inaudible]. But it was a little bit of just— I don’t know, I think there were times where I was worried about family members, people coming into contact with people that have COVID, or not knowing what’s right. Like at dance, people don’t want to wear masks when they dance, and so when I would go and take classes in other places. It’s like, “So, do I wear a mask knowing that that’s helping slow the spread or do I not wear one and not alienate myself and, you know, not fit in?” but not— I don’t know, just not be the odd one out. So that was kind of tricky. And just kind of knowing what’s the best thing to do, I guess, has been, has been hard and just kind of figuring out how to navigate this time. I guess that’s been the hardest thing. And staying informed; that’s been hard [laughter].

TG: It’s kind of hard not to be informed sometimes, when you have a phone.

MB: Yeah.

TG: Um, okay. The next question is, what have your experiences been with the Black Lives Matter movement?

MB: Um.

TG: This could be both—

MG: I mean, it's something that I—.

TG: Sorry. I was going to say this could be in your community, what you felt like in the online space, just however you interpret that.

MB: I feel like it's not really something I could avoid. And it is just a part of my life always [laughter]. And I think it was hard to see, like, such a lack of understanding for not even just, like, rights for Black people, but just people in general, and not being able to comprehend why it was hard for people to grasp things were wrong. And I think it's been hard, too, because I think— I think as someone that is a part of the Black community, it is, it's not that it's a job, but it's just— it's an all the time thing. Like, I am always Black and it's not just a movement. It's not a moment, and I have family members that have treated it like a moment and that's been discouraging. Or even having friends that just don't understand the severity of needing to advocate for the Black community has been difficult. And I don't know. I think— I think also part of it is that during the Black Lives Matter movement, I felt so uncomfortable, just being out in public. I'm like, I kind of felt, like, just unsafe and like the only place I wanted to be was at home [laughter]. So I don't know. It's, I mean—

I think it also increased my sense of Blackness, because that was something that for a really long time I tried to deny, when it's clear as day. I can't really be anything else, but I think it, like, increased my Black identity. And it makes me feel— it kind of gives me a sense of community. And it sounds kind of silly, but, like whenever I'd see a Black person, I'd get so excited because I'm like, "Yeah!" like, "Yeah, you get it!" Especially feeling like other people didn't, it was exciting.

But then I also had these experiences where— I was at work and kids would say things like, "I would go to the protests but I don't want to get shot." And I'm like, "So then you don't want to go, I guess is what you're trying to say." I don't know. This isn't like a funny, "Oh, I'm going to go get pictures or something." This is real life, and so there's things like that. Then, I also had a cousin join the police academy, a White cousin joined the police academy in the middle of the height of the racial tensions this summer. So that was hard, and having family members not understand why— It's not necessarily that my family is against it, but why that's a little bit of a hard pill to swallow.

So I think, I think it's just been a lot of— a lot of learning with the Black Lives Matter

movement and reflecting on the way that I react to things. And then also recognizing that it's okay for me to be upset and getting to a point where it's like, "You know what? I don't have to keep being the nice Black girl to make people feel comfortable." It's okay if I'm like, "No, you know what? You're not worth my time and the things you're saying are wrong," or, "I don't like that you're using this movement as an Instagram post and only using it as that. You have not displayed, in any other aspect of your life, that this is actually something that you are serious about." And so, I don't know. It's been a lot of just learning and growing and reflecting, I guess, more than anything.

TG: Okay, so you're in MISA [Multicultural Inclusion Student Association], is that correct?

MB: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TG: Okay, I thought you were, I didn't know if you were just involved in that. But my first question I have about that is, what is the work that you do in that organization?

MB: So, the biggest thing that we do is we make sure that we do activities that promote minority groups on campus. So we have events that are centered around Native Americans and Asian-Americans. But also outside of that, I think in general, we just are very aware of the needs of others, and willing to extend an olive branch to people, and an advocate for just, like, random things. Like our president advocated for, oh, what was it? Oh, for ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] accessibility into buildings, because he was like, "Some of these buildings don't have ramps and that's not okay." And it's, so it's just random stuff like that. Or like, I— all of us do stuff like that. One member, his parents are from Mexico and he understands the process of immigration. So what he does is, in Hurricane [Utah], he helps people read their documents to help them get their identification numbers, or something like that, that usually people charge for. But his plan is that people shouldn't be— people shouldn't take advantage of people not knowing the system. And so he just helps these people do these things. Or like, one girl, her dad is a lawyer for Native Americans. So, I guess, all that's to say, all of us do a lot of random things, but— and it doesn't even necessarily have to do with race a lot of the time. But it's just— we just advocate for inclusion and diversity.

TG: That's awesome; that's so cool. Okay, so my next question is, what are your thoughts on the Dixie name change?

MB: I think that it's— it's a step in the right direction. I think the community has some educating to do. I'm still a little confused as to why there's still so much backlash, considering what people have said in regards to it. And I think it's disheartening to see people object to the name change, because to me, that either communicates that you don't understand why people want to change the name, or you do understand and you don't care. And to me, neither of those are satisfying options [laughter] of people's intelligence and knowledge. So, I think it's good. I think the thing that's worrisome to me is— it just, it just worries me that it's not actually gonna happen. And I know that the bill passed and I know that they're, you know, putting up things for potential names, but I don't know. I'm still a little apprehensive if it is something that will take place, especially considering

the kind of power that this population has. There are the sponsors of the university, and it's like we can say, "Oh, it doesn't matter if they withdraw their sponsorships," but it does, and you need the community support. And so, I don't know. I think I'll believe it when that happens [laughter], because right now, I just don't know if it will.

And it's been super frustrating, seeing protests on campus, and even just reading what people have had to say, how mean people are about it, and it's just frustrating all around [laughter]. I think it's good that the legislation could see the reasons behind changing it and can back that, so I hope that it actually is brought to fruition, because I'd love to get a new degree [laughter] and not have to tote that around because it is hard—I got a job out of the state and it's in a place where slavery was alive and well, and so I feel like I can't talk about the school that I go to. And maybe I can, but also, I don't know what other people know and I don't want them to make judgments on me based off of the university. And so it sucks, because you want to be like, "Yeah, I graduated from the school!" but I don't have that. And so, hopefully one day when the name changes, I can disclose where I attended school. But it's just a, it's a very unique situation to be in for sure.

TG: Yeah. So, you kind of touched on these things, but my next question is, how do you think that the Black Lives Matter movement, also in conjunction with the other side of the elections and the capital siege, how do you think that that has affected the political culture of St. George and Dixie State University with the name change and caused divisiveness or maybe awareness?

MB: I think there's a huge misconception about why the name is being changed and the timeliness of it. People think that it's because of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, and that's not true because in 2013, the NAACP brought it up to the university and they didn't do anything. And that's when they conducted their first thing to change the name and so it's like, it's been a work in progress. I feel like the only reason why it's gone to the point that it has is because of the press that's been on it right now, and I think part of that does have to do with the Black Lives Matter movement. But I think people are a little confused and [laughter] just unaware that this is not a brand-new thing. This has been, you know, talked about. And I think part of the community's response is that they feel—I don't wanna say threatened. I feel like that is such a juvenile thing to say—but they feel like their control is not as strong as they thought it was, and that their influence isn't as impactful as they want it to be. And so, I think that's kind of part of why they're reacting the way they're reacting.

I also think the elections, to me, showed the true colors of St. Georgian's. And it was a signal to me that this is just not a place for me to live; it's a little too much. And it sucks because leading up to the elections, I remember just being so scared. I was like, "Okay, if Trump loses, what's going to happen? Will I be able to go to school the next day? Will I, like, be able to keep, like, going on walks?" Because I remember I would go on walks and there would be Trump rallies. I didn't know about them and so I just stumbled across them and be like, "I'm going back to my apartment; this is terrifying." And I remember one time I was on a walk and there was someone just waving a huge Confederate flag behind them. And, I'm not saying that you're racist, but I feel like you probably don't

feel great things towards me. And I don't think that they're out to get me or anything, but it does make you feel a type of way and it does kind of make you put your defense up because you have to look out for yourself. And so, I think the election most definitely taught me that and that the political leanings of this community are just, don't— don't align with my own. And even the way that they handled Black Lives Matter movement, it's— so they would have a Black Lives Matter protest, but then right across the street, they'd also have a Blue Lives Matter counter-protest. And so, it is just frustrating and it's hard to understand how you could live that way. I view people here to be kind of combative and I just, I don't understand that. And so, but it makes sense why, you know, they've reacted a certain way with masks and the pandemic and the elections and the name change. It all kind of makes sense. And at least they're consistent; I'll give them that. But yeah, I think it's just, I think the community here, in a very, very general sense, it's kind of just stuck in very, like, traditional ways, I guess.

TG: Yeah, I completely agree. So, are you currently living in St. George, or where are you at right now?

MB: Yeah, I'm still in St. George.

TG: So you just had a summer job in the south, just, or did you move for a little bit?

MB: I just got hired to work in the south, so I'm going there. Well, I'm going to North Carolina after I graduate.

TG: Oh, Okay. Okay, that's exciting!

MB: So it's— Yes. So luckily, I haven't had to have those conversations yet. But we were doing this introduction thing, people were saying you know, "I'm graduating from Wesleyan! [Inaudible, weak audio connection] in Chicago!" I'm like, "I'm not telling any of you where I'm graduating from," because I just I'd rather not. I just said, "I'm getting a dance degree. Can't wait to meet you all," you know. And it just sucks, [laughter] but it's just not worth it.

TG: Yeah, I get that. So, when do you graduate? Is there hope that, like, when your diploma is printed, if things do go through, it will be from not from Dixie State University, or do you know?

MB: So, I'll have a degree from Dixie State because I graduated in May. So, I'll have a degree from Dixie State and then we'll hopefully get another. If the name changes, I'll get another one after that happens. But that's what will be on my resume and on everything I do for the next little while.

TG: Well, congratulations on graduating and moving. That's going to be really fun to get out of here and go have some new experiences.

MB: Very excited.

TG: I mean, this is kind of maybe a redundant question, but is there anything about the years 2020— the pandemic years we could say started 2020, to now, having to do with the pandemic, anything political, or local, personally, that have affected your life that we haven't touched on, that you want to mention?

MB: I think something that people don't talk about as much during this time is how much humanity there's been. It's very easy to be like, "Oh, life has sucked. We've had to wear masks, things have shut down," but it's also— I remember being so happy at the beginning of the pandemic, as awful as it sounds. But in Italy, there were people that were just, like, singing to each other from their balconies and people would— people found new ways to engage with one another. And that was so exciting to me, and it was like, "You know, I thought we were not on a very good road. You know, we were losing touch with each other," but I think the pandemic has kind of— It's kind of almost been a little bit of a reset button. And I think we're starting to slip back into, like, our normal and it's not as, you know, centered on relationships with each other. But even that little chunk of time was so refreshing to me, and I think, I think there's something to be said about that.

And then, also seeing global rallies about Black Lives Matter. I— that is insane to me. When do we do things on a global scale, besides a pandemic and the Olympics? And so it was crazy to see people in Italy, and I think they had one in Egypt, or somewhere like that. It was so insane, and to feel the support of people in other countries, even when your own country doesn't support you [laughter]; it's a very crazy, like, feeling. So, I think something that I won't forget about this time is, it's just like humanity still exists and there's a potential for us to tap into that.

TG: That's awesome. Well, thank you so much. I seriously loved interviewing you and you're such an eloquent speaker, and it was so fun to talk to you.

MB: It was good talking to you, too!

[Last thirty seconds of recording was logistical and has been cut.]

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]