

Interview with
PATRICIA COLLINS

November 21, 2020

**THE PANDEMIC YEARS: COVID-19
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PATRICIA COLLINS

Patricia Collins was interviewed virtually via Zoom on November 21, 2020 by Callie Hunter. Patricia was located at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport [Detroit, Michigan] at the time of the interview, while Callie was located at home in St. George, Utah. The interview mainly covers the effects of COVID-19 on the airline industry, as well as some minor discussion of the civil unrest of 2020.

[The first four minutes and eleven seconds of technical difficulties were cut from the audio.]

CH: For the record, can you just state and spell your name?

PC: It's Patricia G. Collins, P-A-T-R-I-C-I-A G C-O-L-L-I-N-S.

CH: Thank you. And how long have you worked for Delta?

PC: Almost ten years. 2004 was when I started.

CH: What do you do for Delta?

PC: My title is senior gate coordinator. I actually run gate plots, OSM duties, coordinate activities to and from aircraft, and coordinate activities to and from the different carriers.

CH: Alright. So, COVID-19 really had a massive change on the airline industry. What are some of the biggest changes you've seen personally in your position?

PC: My position has to take on, has had to take on double the duty. What normally would have been run by two or three people, is now being run by one or two people. We experienced a cut in hours, despite what we told the government, and a cut to our paycheck, but not necessarily the amount of dollars we make per hour.

CH: That's really frustrating.

PC: Yes. Yes, it is, very—

CH: You work in Detroit, which is a major hub. What were the travel changes that you saw, as far as load factors go?

PC: Well, we went from a 95 to 105 percent load factor every day. In March, we were hitting at 20 percent. July saw us go up to a steady 35 to 40 percent. And now we run anywhere from 40 to 65 percent load factors today. But don't let those load factors fool you. For Delta Airlines, we are still observing COVID restrictions with our center row seating block for passengers. So what was once a fifty-seat aircraft has now become a twenty-five-seat aircraft, despite how many people are booked for the flight.

CH: Oh yeah, that has been frustrating as well. So you've worked there for ten years. Did you have any previous airline experience before you started working for Delta?

PC: I worked with Mesaba Airlines, the start date [was in] 2002. So yeah, that's just about almost hitting the twenty-year mark.

CH: One of the questions that I've been asking is how does this pandemic compare to post-9/11?

PC: I came into the airline industry just after most of the 9/11 restrictions were lifted, so not seeing the very scary national guardsmen in the terminal. We do come in to an almost empty terminal. In March, Detroit was like a ghost town. If you saw a passenger every fifty steps, you were lucky. Hardly anyone was flying. Barely anyone, and that includes employees, were at the airport. It was heartbreaking.

CH: Have you guys been having anybody work remotely?

PC: No, not at this station.

CH: What are some other comments you'd like to add that maybe I'm not asking the right question for?

PC: Well, Delta asked a lot of people to take a hiatus from the airline. They offered voluntary leaves. In recompense for your voluntary leave, you were offered two free round-trip tickets anywhere on the globe, with no expiration date. They paid your medical while you were on leave. In July, when you came back to work, you came back to a full forty hours. Whereas the people who had been working through COVID got no free airline tickets, paid their own medical and were restricted to thirty-two hours. Now, at the end of July, everybody went to thirty-two hours and we're probably going to be that way through January. I think the focus has been with Delta to thank the people who've made the sacrifices of their time and their work. But those [who] remained behind who have supported the operation got nothing.

CH: Really frustrating.

PC: Extremely frustrating.

CH: How many people in your department took VTO [Voluntary Time Off]?

PC: I couldn't tell you because I don't know exactly how many people we have. In August, they offered a voluntary retirement— voluntary separation from the company, and I want to say that we lost a good forty-three people between leave of absence and retirements.

CH: That's a good chunk. I heard the Delta retirement packages were a bit better than maybe some others. What was the retirement packages at Delta like?

PC: Retirement packages were all dependent on your years of service, whether or not you were of age to retire, and basically what kind of a nest egg you had put away in your 401k. I can't tell you what everybody got. I can tell you that I was offered a leave package, a payout of \$19,000, and two years' flight benefits, two years' payment on my health benefits. And that was it.

CH: There's been some departmental reshuffling in your department, I've noticed as well. I know one of your coworkers was moved to aircraft towing. What other reorganization have you seen in your department?

PC: Well, Delta has done a whole reorganization of their management teams. So, you've seen people step down from higher positions into lower positions, and we're still seeing people who are accepting a retirement package or taking a, for lack of better word, demotion in order to maintain their job.

CH: So, generally it seems like Delta has not been the most employee-friendly at handling the COVID stuff.

PC: It's not that they've been unfriendly. It's just that their aim has been to get cooperation in reducing the payroll and not necessarily treating the people who they need— they desperately need— to run the operation in the same manner.

CH: Yeah.

PC: It kind of makes those who have worked from day one feel undervalued. And that's just my opinion.

CH: Yeah. Kind of taking a side note, kind of a change, slightly, in topic: one of the other major things that been going on in 2020 has been a lot of social unrest with a lot of racial tensions.

PC: We've had some minor protesting here at the airport, nothing significant that has been socially destructive, but yeah, people are unhappy. We've seen folks come up and protest the Black Lives Matter situation. I don't think that we experienced any protests in this area over the presidential election. Although again, that's not finalized still.

CH: Yeah. So, that didn't have any huge impact on your operation then?

PC: No, we're far enough away from the downtown Detroit area that it's not something you normally see up at the airport itself. The protesters are pretty contained. They have an area that they're allowed to work in. They have to apply for a permit to do so. And so far, everybody's cooperated and behaved like grown adults.

CH: That's always nice, as well.

PC: Yeah, it's very nice.

CH: One of the other big changes going back to COVID-19 has been that there have been several airlines that have gone out of business. Compass Airlines, Trans States has gone out of business. Did that have any major—because a lot of those were Delta partners before COVID and—

PC: Compass was a partner with Delta, but they had already ended their partnership before COVID struck.

CH: Okay.

PC: Which had probably lead to their downfall when the COVID restrictions came through, because they were no longer under the umbrella with a very large, you know, legacy carrier.

CH: I agree.

PC: I have seen some of these smaller airlines that were working with us, that we have slowly but surely edged out, suffer consequences. Your own airline, SkyWest, doesn't have the same representation in Detroit that it had maybe eighteen months ago.

CH: Yeah, that's true. I think that the focus has shifted here at the moment.

PC: Well, they're trying to get rid of the smaller regional jets. That day and age of the regional jets making all the money is slowly coming to a halt, especially as planes like the 717s and 221s come in and are able to cover those regions that we were paying regional carriers to cover for us.

CH: That is true. They did announce with this COVID that the CRJ 200s were going to be gotten rid of.

PC: Yeah. I thought they were going to be done already, but we still see them. The essential service airports still can't support the bigger planes, so I imagine they'll be here for a few years more.

CH: What are your predictions? How do you think that aviation is going to be changed in one year, in five years? What are your predictions?

PC: I think that the situation with COVID is going to affect the airlines for at least the next seven years. It's going to take three years to recover just from the losses of this year. If we don't get a handle on COVID soon, I would not be surprised to see even legacy carriers go under and the government have to take over.

CH: And as we kind of come to a close here, is there anything else that you've thought of that maybe you'd like to say?

PC: I feel that the recent rise in COVID cases is not necessarily folks who have COVID. It's the testing availability. In March and April, getting tested was very hard. They weren't prepared for it. July saw a surge in people's availability to get the test, and through the last two months, just for my own example, I've been able to get tested three times, all three times have come back negative. But other folks who are experiencing false positives, which the government is not necessarily treating as it should, they're treating them as COVID positive and going forth with that. I think that's the rise of numbers. I think there's no accuracy or responsibility to report accurately in the whole COVID situation.

CH: Just one more question that I kind of thought of as this was going on, too, is you mentioned that Delta has been blocking out the middle seats in aircraft. How've the sanitation procedures affected the airport operations side of things?

PC: Well you know, everybody takes pride in their airline. We have been fogging planes since March when the virus first came out; we're still fogging planes, we're still fogging our offices and the entire airport on a nightly basis. If someone tests positive and arrives into Detroit, that aircraft is immediately cleaned thoroughly and fogged. Again, the crews are taken for testing, put on a quarantine for a duration of fourteen days, and we've had some folks who have tested positive and had a real positive test who have also been quarantined for fourteen days until they either A) test negative or B) run the course of the disease. I don't see being able to lift the restrictions in January of the middle seats as we're projected to do right now happening. I think it's going to be extended through spring.

CH: One of the other things that has been going on with this is that passengers who are refusing to wear masks have been banned from airlines. Have you seen a lot of that? And how is that handled from your guy's end?

PC: Not only have I seen a lot of that, I've had to be the person to send out the message to get it handled. I think Delta took a forward step with that handling. They have over 400 people on the no-fly list now because they refused to comply with mask issues. It's a pain in the butt, not gonna lie. You get four or five instances a day of passengers who are on the airplane, take their mask off, don't want to put it back on. And I get it. It's more prevalent in the afternoon. You're tired. You've been in an airport all day wearing a mask. It's hot, it's bothersome, but it's for the protection of others. Whether you believe the virus is real or not, this is what we're asking you to do. Just like any other company would ask you to, you know, not go behind the scenes of Disneyland, you're going to get hurt, stay out of there. Delta asks that you wear your mask the entire flight—time that you're on the airplane. It's not just for you, it's for others, please obey, or comply, however you want to put it. People are just crazy! I see more of an incidence of the west coast passengers and passengers from New York failing to follow the guidelines than I do anywhere else.

CH: That's kind of crazy.

PC: It's an interesting observation. I think the west coast mentality is, "I'm a free spirit and I'll do what I want and you can't make me." And I can't explain New Yorkers, nobody can.

CH: I have run out of questions at this point. I'm less familiar with your side of the operation, so I obviously need to come out and visit sometime,

PC: You don't want to come right now. It's gonna be freaking cold.

CH: Yeah, I'll wait until spring. Well, thank you so much, "Trish."

PC: Oh, no problem!

[Approximately the last thirty seconds of audio was not part of the actual interview and has been cut.]

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]