

Interview with
JESSICA PALMISANO

April 10, 2021

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

Jessica Palmisano was interviewed by Connor Collins on April 10, 2021 via Zoom video call. Mrs. Palmisano was located in San Jose, California, while Mr. Collins was in St. George, Washington County, Utah. She talked about life as a medical assistant and mother during the pandemic years.

CC: Alright, so this is an oral [history] interview with Jessica Palmisano, and I'm here to document what it was like during the pandemic years of 2020, 2021, and how it's been for people throughout our time. My name is Connor Collins and I'm a history major here at Dixie State University. Today's date is April 8th, 2021, and I'm here to begin this interview.

So, if you could just state your full name, spell it out, and let me know where you're interviewing from? That would be great. Thank you.

JP: Alright. Hello, my name is Jessica Palmisano. It's J-E-S-S-I-C-A P-A-L-M-I-S-A-N-O, and I'm interviewing from San Jose, California.

CC: Awesome. So, first things first, I just want to ask you, like, what is your job? What do you do and what is your profession? Just talk a little bit about that.

JP: So, I'm a medical assistant and essentially what I do is back office and front office things, like checking in patients that come into the clinic and rooming them, getting their vitals, doing procedures on them that the doctors need us to do, like injections, ear washes, EKG's, a bunch of stuff we do. I float around to family medicine and adult medicine. So, I deal with babies and women's problems, and adult issues, kids problems. So, I really get a wide variety of things that we do.

CC: That's awesome. When did you find out that that's kind of what you wanted to get into as a professional field?

JP: Well, my mother is also a medical assistant, and when I was little, I would go to her work all the time and I've just always been in the setting. And I started, like, watching her and seeing how she does things, and eventually, I even got a medical assistant job through her. So that's where I kind of fell into the healthcare field. And ever since then, I went to school for it. And then I got a job in a big corporation doing medical assisting. So, it kind of just all started flowing together because of my mom.

CC: Nice. So being in the medical field, I'm sure these past two years have been crazy with the COVID Pandemic. Where were you when you first heard about the news of COVID breaking out?

JP: I was actually at work and we had to immediately start canceling appointments and rescheduling them as phone appointments and video appointments. The ones that we had patients there already, we, obviously, took care of them. And then, basically, the next day just started this whole new workflow of virtual healthcare. And since then, it's been, you know, a learning experience. And we're finally getting a grasp on the technical skills that you need for troubleshooting video visits, and managing all these messages and phone calls that are coming in. But, yeah, I was at work and it was a crazy day.

CC: Yeah, that's, so from an outsider looking in, it's so crazy to see how advanced the world has had to become in the past year to technology [stutters] technology-wise, because COVID, we can't be the way we want to be. We can't have family together. We can't have shopping, going out to eat. I mean, things are looking a little up now, but this past year, year and a half, it's been pretty crazy.

JP: Yeah, I think definitely for our patients as well. They had to learn a lot of tech skills, so, like, everybody living in this day and age right now has become way more tech savvy than we ever thought we would have been.

CC: Definitely, and I'm sure as a patient, there's a lot of older patients or younger patients who don't have technology to their, I guess you could say, full use, and that must have been a very transitional time for them, too. I mean, the whole pandemic and medical field is completely interesting to think about.

But let me get on to another question here. How about, what is it like being considered an essential worker during the pandemic years? So, being on standby or on call, knowing that you could be called in to go help out at any time?

JP: It's been very busy, stressful, frustrating. It's busy when you have staff calling out because they're either sick or they have to take care of somebody who is sick in their family. And then, you know, that makes us short-staffed, so we have a bigger workload. It's a little bit scary working full time during a pandemic, knowing that you, yourself, could be getting sick by going into work. So, it's nice to feel like you're needed and it being essential, but it's definitely just go, go, go; it's very busy, which can be very stressful.

CC: Yeah. So, do you ever feel like work has become more emotionally stressful for you? Do you think that sometimes the work, or not work itself, but just the environment, makes it harder for you?

JP: Yes, it definitely became more stressful. You know, we're in a clinic setting, like an office setting [audio distortion] not in a hospital, but we still have patients that, you know, come in and they don't feel good— [audio distortion] so, you know, the doctor will interview them and evaluate them and it turns out that they're a possible COVID case. So, that can be very emotional and stressful for us, the people who just roomed them. So, it's definitely, it's definitely stressful in that sense.

- CC: Yeah. Well, I know a lot of people are really proud of the things that you are able to do. I mean, it's not easy to work with this during this time. This is a year that for a long time people haven't experienced. I mean, we talk about it as this is, essentially, the next boom of the black plague. It's not as serious, technology is more advanced, but at the same time, this disease took off and it took off fast, and the way things shut down abruptly, it was pretty insane.
- JP: Yeah.
- CC: So, what about COVID itself? Have you ever gotten any close encounters with COVID and did you ever feel like there was a concern about it?
- JP: I definitely have had a close encounter. Several people in the department that I worked in had caught [intermittent audio distortion] it in 2020 and, you know, they were people that I sat right next to and I worked with closely, you know, throughout the days. It was very scary because some of 'em were fine, others were out for impact, but, you know, they had lasting effects. It's very scary knowing that this disease and thankfully some others, you know, had to fight it off a little harder. Thankfully, thank God, I've not caught it at all. But, you know, it's definitely every single day you go into work, you could have a close encounter.
- CC: Yeah. And that kind of wants to bring me to my next question. With putting that self at risk and having those close encounters every day, what was it like starting a family, being a mother, and getting your professional and adult life started during these years?
- JP: It was a little interesting. So, I had my daughter right before COVID, I had her in July of 2019, so we had a few months of normalcy. And then COVID happened and it was very scary because we didn't know if her daycare would shut down or, you know, if they were going to keep it open and keep doing the things that they were doing. Luckily, they are such a small daycare that they were able to stay open and are still open. We were very scared that she wasn't gonna have the social skills that a toddler needs, you know, with other people interacting and seeing the world. Thankfully, we've been making it work. We do a lot of outdoor activities, like fishing and boating and going out like that. And thankfully, some places are opening up now, so we can take her out to lunch. And, you know, we just try to follow all the guidelines, like good hand hygiene and wearing a mask when needed. She's not wearing a mask yet, 'cause she's not two. But, you know, we're trying to follow all the guidelines to keep all of us safe. But definitely as a mother, it's pretty scary to know that, you know—I don't really care if I get it or my husband gets it, but for her to get it, it would be a very scary thing for me, as a mother.
- CC: Yeah, and I completely understand that. It's crazy that we're gonna have to think that there's a generation of children who grew up living through this, and I feel that's something that maybe isn't talked about as much. A lot of people always talk about how, well, older people can get it and push it off, and if younger people get it, then they will probably pass away. And nobody thinks about, yeah, there's a life and death situation of the disease, but what about the long-lasting effects of the social of it, you know, how you

say you hope your daughter is able to get that social experience that a toddler deserves, playing with other kids at daycare. And I think that's a big part that goes unnoticed to a lot of people. So, I'm glad that you guys have everything going nice. I mean, definitely good to get outside, get some fresh air, and do some fishin', some boating, and stuff, and taking your daughter out. I'm sure she absolutely loves it. So, that's awesome.

Let's go over a little bit, what was it like trying to find a home during the pandemic years? What made you decide that this was the time to shop for a house?

JP: Well, we had been wanting to purchase a home for a couple years now. We've been really wanting to, and come, like, the beginning of January 2019, we started really becoming serious about it and looking around at what we can afford and what we could get approved for. And we started looking, and every time we would look, the prices were getting higher and higher, just by a little bit. And we were thinking in our minds, "Okay, we can— You know, COVID just happened, we could wait it out and see if a market crash happens and if we can find a good priced home at that time." But you also don't know if and when that's going to happen. And we had already been, like, in the mindset of, "Okay, let's buy a house." So then we started thinking, "Okay. Well, let's look around where we want to buy and let's see if we can find anything in our price range that we're not settling for." And we actually got a local realtor and she helped us make a list of what we wanted, what we didn't want, what we would compromise for, and that helped her pick out some houses really quickly that were good contenders.

And after that, that's when, actually that was like November of 2020. So, you know, we were still in our COVID shutdown phase and she helped us find, through her realtor friends, she helped us find a finance person. She helped us find a house through her friend who was a realtor, so the house didn't even have to go to market. So this all happened from November to us signing papers in December, and purchasing our home and moving in by Christmas of 2020. So, it all just worked out because we had a local realtor who helped us find a good priced home when we were looking, and she had her local friends who were in the realtor business have it just a really good, smooth experience. And I'm very happy we did that because now if you look around in San Jose, California, and the surrounding areas, prices have skyrocketed in the last three months, to where we would not have been able to afford a home. So, we really just played it by our gut feeling, and our realtor guiding us the right way. And it just all worked out, thankfully.

CC: Yeah. And I think you played your cards perfectly. It sounds like everything went just the way you could. And you found a local realtor who helped you and got you a nice deal. And especially here, in a time like this, getting a house is a big thing, but being able to say you got a house under a good financial deal is much, much better, because a lot of people, right now, economically are struggling. So, and that makes me want to ask you, how have these past two years been on you, financially? I mean, with COVID and jobs shutting down, has your family been okay? How are you guys able to support—? Just kind of let me hear a little bit about that.

- JP: Yeah, so thankfully, my husband and I both have essential jobs, so we're still a dual-income household. Even throughout COVID happening and throughout the shutdowns, we've still had a steady job and job security. So it's been, we really haven't had any issues, thank God. We also have, we both are part of the unions and our job, so our unions have fought to keep our positions available. So, during that first shutdown, when many people just got let go or fired or got their hours cut because there was no work to do, our union kept us our jobs and our forty-hour a week, even overtime, we still have overtime. So, I think we were just very lucky to have our essential jobs and that they were union jobs.
- CC: Yeah. So, how does it feel knowing that your guys' jobs are considered essential workers? Do you believe, like, that is a term that should be thrown around? Or, because I've had some people say, like, "Well, what makes a worker essential and what makes one not?" What is your opinion on that?
- JP: That's a good point. I think there's many jobs out there that are essential jobs that aren't really classified as essential. I think, when I think of essential, I think of, just because I'm in healthcare, I think, you know, you need essential things like food. You need to go to your grocery store and get food. You need healthcare, if you get hurt or sick, you need that. My husband works in water, so he works for the water company and that's something that you need. You know, I used to say in the beginning of this, like, "How are you going to wash your hands? You need your water. So thank your water workers because, you know, they're providing you that." There's so many things out there that are essential, and I think a lot are getting passed up. And that's unfortunate because we're over a year now and these people haven't been getting what they deserve, or they've been let go from their jobs. And it's not right because just, you know, like you're saying, who decides what's essential?
- CC: And we think about it as, "Oh, the government throws that term out there, so let's just say this, this and this." But it's interesting to hear a lot of people argue that, "Well, I'm at work, but I don't think I'm essential." And then people who aren't at work say, "Well, I should be essential." So, it's definitely going to be an ongoing discussion that will be talked about down the line with other people as well.
- JP: Yeah, definitely.
- CC: So, how do you feel about the vaccine? [Inaudible.] Do you have it? And do you plan on getting it? So, 'cause I personally only know so much about the vaccine.
- JP: Yeah. So, the vaccine is, you know, it's very, you know, people don't know, some people don't know what to think about it or if they should get it or not. I think definitely if you are a high-risk person for, you know, dying of COVID, because the symptoms are so severe, then a vaccine is definitely something you should get. The vaccine's gonna help, you know, not prevent you from getting COVID, but it'll prevent your symptoms for being so severe that you could die. So, definitely for those people who have asthma, who have breathing problems, it's, you know, smart to get because it's an extra added

protection for you. And yeah, I've gotten my COVID vaccine in February. We have a COVID clinic here at work and, you're basically, if needed, you could be put in it to work. And when I heard about that, this is, you know, I was like, "I'm not gonna mess around. I'm not gonna just trust my mask and shield and gloves, like I want to get an added protection." So, I did get the vaccine and now I feel less fearful, less anxious if I'm seeing a patient and it turns out that they're a COVID-possible. I can have a little bit more calmness about it because I have, you know, all my proper personal protective equipment on; I have my shield, my mask, my gloves, and then I have this vaccine that, you know, is an added personal protection. So, that's how I feel about it, at least in my case, you know, being that you can, I can get thrown into the emergency room if another surge happens, where I can be put in the COVID clinic to treat patients and assist doctors. So, in my case, in healthcare, that's why I chose to get the vaccine.

CC: Yeah, and I like the vaccine. I think it's really interesting. And what you bring up, that it doesn't guarantee you will never catch it, but what it does do is help your immune system battle it, if you do. And I think that that's something a lot of people don't understand. They say, "Oh, I got the vaccine, I'm free. I don't gotta worry." There's still a worry. But at the same time, it's not as severe as what it could be. I also agree that, you know, if you're really at high risk, if you're somebody with asthma or somebody with breathing and heart issues, then maybe you want to consider getting it. So, I think that's really insightful information.

JP: Yes.

CC: What is, what, are you optimistic about the future? You know what I mean? Like, we're gettin' around that two-year curve coming up. So, do you think that things are going to go back to normal? And if not, what do you think the new normal will be?

JP: I definitely think that things will get better from now, with this vaccine. I think when COVID first started, a lot of people were mainly just terrified and scared and anxious. And that's just been growing for a year and almost a half now. It's just been building up in people. And now that there's this vaccine out, I think it'll give a lot of people newfound hope and it'll calm their nerves and bring down their anxiety levels. And this, this in turn will help things to open back up. You know, we won't have a scared America anymore. I think a lot of people are gonna, you know, start opening up things. And I think things will get better, definitely. I do think that.

CC: Yeah, I'm very optimistic. I know, it's interesting 'cause we're actually in different places right now. In St. George, Utah, where I'm located, the mask mandate ends on April 10th. So, this Saturday it will be interesting to see how many people follow through with that, because, as of now, you have a lot of people out here who don't wear masks as much. But I know, when I go home to visit my family and see my friends, it's a lot different out in California. So, it's very mask-oriented, lockdown, keep your distance. So, it's interesting how in different parts of the country, different people are handling it.

JP: Yeah, I think definitely in different parts of the country, it's way more relaxed than California. I think we had a lot of high cases and like I said, I think people are very anxious and scared still. So hopefully, things will get better and their nerves will calm down. But, I think definitely, if you go around different places in California, it's so different. You know, you have your little small towns and no one really is following anything. And, you know, they're doing their best, but it's not like how it is in the city. Like, San Jose, like, it's very shut down. Like you said, everyone's still keeping six feet, masks, double masks are being worn. It's, and I think, again, I think that just, like, people are scared and, you know, and that makes them want to do everything they can. Which is great, but at the same time, I don't think it's always necessary.

CC: Yeah, you know, I think that's a perfect way to put it is, if there was one word you could attach to this pandemic, it would be fear. There's the fear of when it broke out, there's a fear it'll make it across seas, there's a fear of if we close down, the fear of everything gets cancelled, the fear of what life will be like after. I definitely think that you could say fear and scared are synonymous with pandemic years, so— And, you know, we're gettin' pretty close to wrapping it up here, so I just wanna ask you, what is one big thing that you think you took away, personally, from these pandemic years and your experiments [corrected self], experience?

JP: I think one life lesson that I've taken away, maybe, maybe two: I think the more realistic one is to, for those of you who are trying to find careers, paths and jobs, to consider finding something that's quote-quote essential, or something that definitely has a union because that will provide you your job security for situations like this.

But I think my more sentimental lesson that I've learned is to just stay close to your family. You know, we have all been torn apart from our families, where there's no goin' over for Easter and doing our big gatherings. So, I think, the best thing that I've learned is to just stay connected to your family, and especially your elderly people in your family, like your grandmothers and your grandfathers, or those aunts that live far away. I know in our family we do a happy hour every Thursday. And since the pandemic started, we started doing it online. So we just open up our video cameras on our Facebook portal or just like this, like a Zoom call. And we just talk with each other once a week, and we have our dinners in our own homes, and we have a drink, and we just catch up on each other's lives. And I know that that means the world to my grandmother. She is all alone in her home and this has been so difficult for her, and every other elderly person that's, you know, home and can't see their grandkids or their great grandkids. So I think, one big lesson that I took was to stay close and connected with your family as much as you can, even if it's virtually, just a phone call or a video chat.

CC: You know what, I think that's a beautiful and perfect way to end it. I agree. I'll tell you, I mean, livin' out here is great. I came out here for a new experience. I'm happy now and enjoying it, but— That family is definitely a big aspect of the pandemic years. And when you're far away, you know, you think about, "How is everybody doing? Are they okay without me?" I mean, even in my situation, I had caught COVID out here, and I was so worried about keeping my family safe, I didn't tell them. I just kind of waited till I was

able to handle it and then I told people. So, and it's like we talked about earlier, it's that word: it's fear. "Will I be judged if I catch COVID? Will people be afraid to be by me?" So, I think you had a great interview. And, you know, I feel comfortable. I think we can end it up in a second here. But if you could just say your name and where you're from one more time, and any final thoughts you may have.

JP: Alright, my name's Jessica Palmisano, medical assistant, and my final thoughts are just, again with the whole fear of COVID, we're gonna get through this. And another side note is just stay connected to your family members, even if it's a phone call, text messages, Facebook, whatever, just try to stay close to them. And we're almost out of this, I think. So everyone just stick in there and we'll get through this.

CC: Awesome. Alright Jessica, thank you for doing this, and I really appreciate it.

JP: No worries. Thank you, Con.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]