

*Pandemic Perspectives: Jeffersonville Residents Recount Their Lives During the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic. Interview with Travis Vasconcelos*

Jen Weidner 0:04: Today is May the 12th 2021, I'm Jen Weidner with the Jeffersonville Township Public Library, conducting interviews for "Pandemic Perspectives: Jeffersonville Residents Recount Their Lives During 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic". This project was made possible with a grant from the Indiana Geological Society. I am here today with Travis. Please pronounce your last name for me.

Travis Vasconcelos 0:27: Yes, that's Vasconcelos.

Jen Weidner 0:29: Travis is the director of the Howard Steamboat Museum. Travis, How long have you been with the museum?

Travis Vasconcelos 0:36: Since 2014

Jen Weidner 0:39: And when did you become the director?

Travis Vasconcelos 0:41: On January the 18th, 2020.

Jen Weidner 0:45: So, right before the pandemic started?

Travis Vasconcelos 0:47: Yes, it was the first gift of my new career.

Jen Weidner 0:53: Do you remember what your first reaction was when you heard about the Coronavirus?

Travis Vasconcelos 0:59: I have to go back. I remember, prior to Christmas, hearing on NPR, a lot of things, talking about a virus in China, and it couldn't get outside of China. It was not something that sounded like it was ever going to affect the United States, but I remember hearing about it. And my first reaction was "oh, we're better prepared in America, that won't come here".

Jen Weidner 1:36: So, when it did hit the United States and Indiana, what did you think, how bad did you think it would be?

Travis Vasconcelos 1:45: The first things I remember hearing were that it was showing up on the West Coast, I think that around Seattle is where it initially kind of made landfall, if you will. I thought "well this is going to get nipped in the bud pretty quick, and it isn't going to be a problem in this country". I just, I just never thought it would get to the point that it could get here. So, I kind of discounted it – it was until early February, that's when I started to think this is going to become a real issue.

Jen Weidner 2:24: I know that things move pretty fast when the first positive case or cases were reported in our area. How long did it take for the museum to change its ways of operating?

Travis Vasconcelos 2:35: Well, initially we started having our staff wear masks, we started doing a lot of sanitisation, I believe that's the way it said, we were sanitizing hand rails, commonly touched areas, things like that. I have to say going, this started in very late February, when we started putting out hand sanitizer, encouraging people to use it. We didn't know what to do. Initially it was kind of a, "oops, how do you handle this type thing?" So, we were ultimately closed, three weeks after we started doing these things, not because of the, not because of anything we had done but because of the pandemic itself, but it definitely changed the way we looked at how we give tours. We try to keep people at a distance, things of that nature.

Jen Weidner 3:31: So, once Indiana had to stay at home order which came, I believe in late March, early April. How did you feel about that and then what happened at the museum?

Travis Vasconcelos 3:43: We closed. Matter of fact, wish I could say the date, off the top of my head, I can't. Myself and two employees were at the Red Yeti having lunch. When the word came down that they had to close, and it was while we were eating and they said, "finish eating, and then we're closed". And we had heard that this was a possibility, and they had heard it was a possibility, but we got the official word from a newspaper reporter that came in to interview us.

Jen Weidner 4:14: I mean, one never thinks the state's going to completely shut down.

Travis Vasconcelos 4:18: Exactly, we never thought this was gonna happen. I had already made plans while we were eating lunch, as a matter of fact, with two of our employees of what we were going to do the next day and that, of course, didn't happen. Well, I continued to work in the museum. Throughout the entire pandemic, I did not have any staff members in until late May. And then, it was very strict masking, Lysol spray, and things of that nature, just to complete a project that we had started before the pandemic, which was a total renovation of the gift shop, which when this happened, the gift shop was literally the million pieces and half the furniture wasn't there yet, so.

Jen Weidner 5:08: So your employees were still able to work some and get paid?

Travis Vasconcelos 5:12: Well, they didn't for the two months we were closed. We didn't have anybody come in. Luckily, due to the PPP grants – well, loans that became grants – we were able to pay them, nobody missed a paycheck, we made them regular hours the entire time they were off. I still went in and still got things done. Was that the right thing to do? Maybe, maybe not, but I was able to achieve a lot during that period in getting things taken care of in the museum, so I spent a lot of time there, but I was the only person there. And, as the director, I felt like I needed to at least check on the place daily and I did have to say my recollection, it was a very calm time. And it was really good, because I just became director so didn't have time to

really go through in great detail – paperwork and things that – I needed to know to take the position. So, in some ways, that there was a blessing in how it played out.

Jen Weidner 6:18: And how long did it take for you out to reopen to the public?

Travis Vasconcelos 6:21: We actually reopened two days after we could have legally reopened. We opened up on the 16th of June; we could have opened up on the 14th. And we decided because that would have been the middle of a weekend, it just didn't make any sense, we thought we'd start a new week on Tuesday, go right back to our original schedule. I brought everybody in the week before, and we had several breakout meetings about how we were going to handle things. We didn't know what to expect. You didn't know where were people going to come in and refuse to wear masks were they going to–

Jen Weidner 6:59: Because at that point there was a mask mandate in the state of Indiana.

Travis Vasconcelos 7:02: There was, and we didn't know if we were gonna have problems with people refusing to wear masks, if people were going to be put off by how we were going to structure our tours going forward, to be much different than what we had done before. I have to admit, it was a little bit scary, too, because when you've gone that much time away from everybody and you created your own little social bubbles either online or in person, or what have you. And then all of a sudden, it's like, okay, now you've just got to open up the doors, it's like, what do you do, you know, do you stand there with a crucifix at the door and you're trying to ward off evil spirits, you really don't know. So it was a very strange, was a very strange reopening.

Jen Weidner 7:47: So you had obviously masks were required and you had hand sanitizer and you cleaned more often obviously, right?

Travis Vasconcelos 7:55: We, we did. And a lot of that we still do. We're still doing the mask requirement. We're not as focused on having the guests stand six feet away from us. And that was a unique situation, when we first reopened, because I had to set the stage to give the guests the idea of what was permissible and what wasn't. We'd actually put tape on the floor at the base of the grand staircase where we start our tours, and we had marked off six feet, and we asked them to use that. What they saw there, as the idea of what to do from that point on, how far to stay away from our docents. It was hard because you're used to being close to the person and interacting with them. You know it's, I think, standard they say three feet is what people generally do. And in this case, we were asking them to go three feet beyond that. And a lot of people had a problem with it, and there were several times we would have to explain. We need you to step back for your safety and ours, and we always made a point of saying, your safety first, so that it was more of a diffusion statement, because we put yourself first, then the person's like, "well, what about me?"

Jen Weidner 9:13: Did you have any problems with people not wanting to wear a mask or not wanting to follow your rules?

Travis Vasconcelos 9:18: No major problems, and I was really surprised – I'm still pleasantly surprised that that's the case. I think, in a museum setting, people were more understanding, and I think when they came in and realize that, especially the first reopen, the majority of our docents are the most vulnerable population. And at that point we didn't have any kind of vaccine or any kind of protections whatsoever. I think people were more understanding. Now that we have a vaccine, people are not combative about it, and nor have they been, but I get more people come in with that one and say, "oh we're supposed to have it on?", and then they put it on once in a while you have to remind them and, but they never not had one person yet get cross because of that request.

Jen Weidner 10:04: Oh, good. So, what are some things you learned from the pandemic, or are learning from the pandemic as the pandemic persists?

Travis Vasconcelos 10:15: Are learning, because, really an ongoing, I mean, everything is still in a state of flux. I've definitely learned that keeping things cleaner than normal, washing surfaces, touchpoints is very important. One of the things that we definitely learned, and I say we because I think everybody learned this during the pandemic, is we had no flu season. And maybe what we're doing now is what we should have been doing all along. While I personally believe that the idea of wearing a mask in flu season is a great idea, will this be something we do moving forward, but if not, because we are now more in tune with the idea of using hand sanitizer, cleaning common touch surfaces on a regular basis. Will this eventually help us in flus moving forward and even additional pandemics? I think it has, and I'm going to be really strict with keeping that kind of thing going in the museum. I think it's very important.

Jen Weidner 11:16: If you're sick, don't come to work.

Travis Vasconcelos 11:18: Exactly, and that's something today, well actually yesterday, we decided, because we're not required to. And we haven't been for quite a while, but we've kept to that, we were taking the temperature and logging the temperature of employees. We've decided to stop doing that at this point. However, we've told everyone, if you're sick, let me know. Don't come in. I don't want you in there. I'm hoping that that becomes the norm. Moving forward, I really am, because there again, that's another thing that will stop things like influenza.

Jen Weidner 11:49: Oh and it's such a, such a United States thing, whereas you just struggle, you just, even if you're sick you go to work because you're scared to lose your job, you're scared to look weak, and I think that this has proved, like, there's no sense of going to work if you don't feel well.

Travis Vasconcelos 12:05: I think you're 100% right. And I think we'd have pushed people so hard in the past. That is a United States – it isn't a local problem, it's a United States thing. We're expected to show up to work unless you're in the hospital. And I know that sounds

dramatic, but it's so true. I remember in past employment, and I won't mention the name of the company, but we had rule if you were, if you were ill and you physically couldn't work, then you were allowed 24 hours downtime, if not you got sent home, and I say home, I was working in a situation where you work a month on a month off. And so, you did you try to work through anything you had, and you didn't care about the customer, because you would lose pay. We were union so, if you weren't there, you weren't paid period. And I'm not saying that union was bad, please don't take it, I meant that. But, it was one of those situations and that was very common before COVID, very common before COVID. That's the way people did things.

Jen Weidner 13:14: Is there anything that you personally or, at the museum, would have done differently, or will, will do differently as we continue with this pandemic?

Travis Vasconcelos 13:28: I'm still not confident and comfortable with the idea of going back to tours, the way we did before. I want to encourage people to keep space. I know, eventually, we will stop wearing masks. I think that'll become something that will become normal. And I think there'll be some anxiety, for some people, when that becomes normal. That will eventually become normal. And people will do that. However, in the past, had I seen somebody come in with a mask on, I would have panicked, thinking, "what could they give me", and now I know that, in fact, they're protecting me. So now, I'm not going to look at a mask that way again. That's actually going to be a positive thing. You know, we've seen for years, and I know we've all seen in the media, in Asian countries during flu season, they normally wear a mask. It's just what they do, and we've always laughed and thought, "Oh, we've got the shot, this is nothing."

Jen Weidner 14:32: Even if they just have a cold, they wear masks.

Travis Vasconcelos 14:35: Now we know this. And I think the mask will become something that we're not scared of in the future. I know I won't. If anything, when I see that I think, "wow, somebody's actually doing the right thing" and wishing well on them instead of, okay, wait for me.

Jen Weidner 14:52: So, when early 2021 you contracted the virus, what was that like and how long did it take for you to feel better?

Travis Vasconcelos 15:01: I have to say, when I first got it, I had no clue I had it. I was with a friend. We had been very close, as far as being in a bubble that we felt safe in. Unfortunately, he went back to work the week before and was interacting with people for the first time, and this was back in February. We were together that Saturday evening. We went out to dinner and we were in the car probably for a good part of an hour, going around doing things, and what ultimately happened was he wasn't feeling good that night and we just instantly thought that this must be allergies. You know, it's getting to be that time of year, and discounted it, and then he called me up on Monday – and I'd seen him Sunday – and he said "you know, you might want to go get tested. I'm going to go get a tested because this isn't feeling like allergies anymore." So okay, good idea. So, he went got a test. I had also gone over to the Clark County Health Department, called – no, I didn't call – I went online got so I could go in. His test turned up

positive, mine turned negative so, oh good, I'm, I'm in the clear. I explained where I got the test, you know, what my situation was that I had been exposed. And we had to wait two days before we got the response. By Wednesday, I was starting to have some things. What's going on here? You know, nose running, what have you. So I went over and arranged for another test, and they – because I said I've been exposed and I wasn't feeling right – they did a PCR test, which is the instant one, and they came out and that was so strange. It was the strangest thing, they came out, they handed me a sheet, basically telling you to quarantine. And they said, “you have COVID, drink a lot of fluids, quarantine, if your oxygen level gets below 90 go to the emergency room, and just don't go around to anybody for two weeks,” and that was it. They also handed me a slip of paper that explained how I was supposed to quarantine and, you know, do not pass go do, not collect \$200. Just go lock yourself away for two weeks, and that's all I got. The first reaction I had was panic, because I thought “oh my god where am I going to get food?” Because at this point I didn't feel bad, I just didn't feel right. So I thought, “where am I going to get – how am I going to get food?” I can't go in stores, I can't do this, you know. So, I reached out to a couple of friends, and people delivered stuff for – matter of fact, I found the Kroger ClickList which I've never done before. And I would order that, and then have somebody go pick it up and just drop it in my door. So, that worked out good. I live in an apartment, so I felt obliged to let my neighbor upstairs know that, you know, I'm here and I have this, and you should be okay. I'm not going to come outside. And he was really nice. He always delivered my mail to the door, knocking, telling your mail, which I thought was wonderful. So, people did help. But here's what it felt like to me. This has nothing at all to do with COVID. And this may not have anything at all, you may not want this. I don't know. In 2001, I was diagnosed with HIV. And at that point, there was quite a stigma for HIV, and I felt the exact same I felt, “oh my god, I'm ostracized from society.” And that was the instant reaction. And I thought, “oh my God, how do you work through this?” I call my friend who had it, also had COVID, who I pretty much know I got it from but we'll never know for sure.

Jen Weidner 18:49: Right, right.

Travis Vasconcelos 18:52: I said “how do you feel, what, what's your reaction to this?” And at this point he was pretty sick. And he was telling me, symptoms, you know, that having trouble breathing, fever, all that. That's it. Nope, how do you feel mentally about this and he said, “I feel like I'm forgotten.” He said, “I mean people are calling. I feel like I'm forgotten because I can't participate.” And so that was, that was the first feeling that I got from it. Wow, for two weeks

Jen Weidner 19:25: Isolation.

Travis Vasconcelos 19:26: Two weeks, I'm completely isolated. I'm here, but I'm not.

Jen Weidner 19:30: Because even with a stay at home order, you could still go, you could still go to the museum, you could still go for walks, you could still participate, somewhat in society but–

Travis Vasconcelos 19:44: You could participate in the world, but this, you can't participate in the world. Now, strangely, the symptoms did not come on. For me, initially, that really bad stuff didn't happen for three days after I was diagnosed with it. But when it hit, that was a wake up call, it really was. I mean, I went from feeling pretty good but a very low grade fever, to I can barely stay awake long enough to get from the bed to the couch. And then I turn on the TV and wake up into another show two hours later.

Jen Weidner 20:18: Wow!

Travis Vasconcelos 20:19: And then a fever for a whole week with 101 fever, and I called my doctor. I guess I'm pretty fortunate. My brother-in-law was a retired physician. My doctor's a family friend, my niece and just in January become a nurse practitioner.

Jen Weidner 20:39: You had your whole arsenal if you, if you had any questions or felt like you needed. Yeah, reassurance, you had people.

Travis Vasconcelos 20:46: I'd call them "what's this, what do I do here, what do I do there?", but still, you know, it's isolation. They can't come to you and offer anything other than what they do on the phone. My brother-in-law told me, he said, "get a pulse oximeter and check your oxygen, if it does go, go below 90, call me. Don't panic. Just call me." Of course, they told me the health department 90 go to the hospital. I woke up one day – is about three days after I became symptomatic – and put that thing pinches a finger on my finger. And it came up 88. Oh no, something is wrong! So, call my brother-in-law. He says get up, stay on the phone, walk from your bedroom to your living room twice. So I did, he said "now put it on your finger." It was 94. He said "okay," he said, "anytime you rest for a long period of time, it's going to go down, you've got to get up. If you can get up and get it back up above 88, you're fine, don't worry about—" that was the lowest it got. And of course, after that I was putting on my finger every hour.

Jen Weidner 21:55: Like, okay, time to check, but it's just that idea that–

Travis Vasconcelos 22:00: Yeah, because you don't know.

Jen Weidner 22:01: You don't know.

Travis Vasconcelos 22:02: And I can tell you, having had this, I know why people died. I exactly know why. I am very lucky, health-wise I am in excellent health for everything I'm doing, I am in excellent health, and I'm lucky there I'm a little bit overweight. Yeah, I did have a diabetes scare last year, but I've dieted and gotten past that. But, all in all, pretty good. The thing is, the way this comes on, you aren't aware of it. And if you're normally a more sedentary person, it'll go into pneumonia, I'll tell you right now. I know it would, because it does. And having felt it, it scared me, and I've had pneumonia before, so I know what that is and it felt like it. And I remember being told that, you know, when you have pneumonia, which I did years ago, that you were supposed to get that thing you blow into the little thing go up and didn't have one of those –

almost bought one on Amazon – and then I remembered that hiding in a closet. I had a melodica, which is basically a – you blow through it and you place sounds like a harmonica.

Jen Weidner 23:10: Okay, yeah.

Travis Vasconcelos 23:11: If I can do that I'm good. I know I had to have driven my neighbors nuts, and that's not a bad thing, because I play it every day for like, you know, 20 minutes here, 20 minutes there, and it was hard.

Jen Weidner 23:20: But your lungs weren't compromised.

Travis Vasconcelos 23:25: I couldn't do that, there was, there was a problem so. I've always been wanting to come up with unique solutions to problems, but they weren't.

Jen Weidner 23:33: I mean you do what you got to do when there's a pandemic.

Travis Vasconcelos 23:36: Yeah, definitely.

Jen Weidner 23:37: We're very glad that you are all better and you're here with us. So, at the time of this interview, how's the museum doing?

Travis Vasconcelos 23:43: I'm amazed. I'm really amazed. We have had probably the best April we've had in years. As far as attendance, as far as people coming in, gift shops sales, things have been amazing, and I'm going to say the reason that happened is people are getting the shots. The majority of the people we're getting in, though, are people who have gotten their shots that are traveling to visit family they haven't been able to see in over a year. And that's where they've come from. Today, for instance here we are in May. The only tour we had today – which, for the last few weeks, having only one tour on Wednesday is a surprise – but yet, today we only have one. Maybe we're slowing back down, I don't know. Because there's no trend to go by.

Jen Weidner 24:33: Right.

Travis Vasconcelos 24:34: Because of COVID. But today, we had an older couple. They said they were from Texas, they were here to visit family up in Scottsburg, and they have the family where at work so they were looking for something to do during the day, and they found us online. Same story though, they've had their shots and now they're here to see family.

Jen Weidner 24:54: Well good!

Travis Vasconcelos 24:56: Is it doing well? Yes, we're doing well right now. However, we're not out of the woods yet.

Jen Weidner 25:03: I don't think anybody is out of the woods yet.



Travis Vasconcelos 25:05: Now we have to find the new normal.

Jen Weidner 25:05: Yeah, that's the thing is—

Travis Vasconcelos 25:07: Then we base on the new normal as to how we do business.

Jen Weidner 25:11: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience or about the museum or...?

Travis Vasconcelos 25:16: I will say this, going through COVID. It is not easy to recover from. It really isn't you feel better, but you don't realize until you exert yourself, what you're up against. My thing would be, the memory that I take away from COVID, is not how bad it was, but how hard it was to come back from it. It takes a lot out of you, and I had pneumonia back in 1997. I was pretty much back on my feet in two weeks. COVID was not the same, you would still get tired very quickly. Naps become your new friend, you have trouble breathing, not, not everybody does, but I know I did so, and that was scary and, like, get back to work at the museum and travel to the third floor it's like, oh, Lord, what am I done to myself, and it's still not as good as it was, but it's getting there, and you know, here I am, almost two months after the fact. I guess it is, yeah, because I came back to work on the 12th of March.

Jen Weidner 26:29: Thank you for your time today.

Travis Vasconcelos 26:31: You're very welcome.