

*Pandemic Perspectives: Jeffersonville Residents Recount Their Lives During the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic. Interview with Dr. Eric Yazel*

Jen Weidner 0:03: Today is May, the 11th 2021, I'm Jen Weidner with the Jeffersonville Township Public Library conducting interviews for *Pandemic Perspectives: Jeffersonville Residents Recount Their Lives During The 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic*. This project was made possible with a grant from the Indiana Genealogical Society. I'm here today with Dr. Yazel, emergency room doctor and Health Department officer. Dr. Yazel, how long have you been a doctor?

Dr. Eric Yazel 0:28: I graduated medical school in '03 and residency in '06. I've been a doctor here in the county since then, first real job I had.

Jen Weidner 0:36: Did you go to school around here?

Dr. Eric Yazel 0:37: I went to, I'm from Northern Indiana and then high school in Indianapolis, and then went to Indiana for undergrad, Louisville for medicine, so kind of got the whole state from north to south covered.

Jen Weidner 0:48: Do you remember your first reaction when you heard about the COVID-19 Pandemic virus itself?

Dr. Eric Yazel 0:54: I do. It was in December, before the virus hit, and there was, you know, we saw some of the news stories about Wuhan, China, and I was kind of a little bit curious, so I remember I actually looked up the city of Wuhan to see how big it was, because I think it kind of the way the news presented almost like it was like a little village where there was an outbreak. When I looked it up and saw, I think, there were 6 million people that live there, I knew we're in some trouble because, in a city of that size, there's going to be enough people coming and going and commerce and things like that that I knew at least get out of that local area. Obviously, I didn't know it would be the pandemic that it was, but there are definitely some red flags.

Jen Weidner 1:33: You knew about it, well before the general public has really any inkling that it was going to be?

Dr. Eric Yazel 1:38: That's correct, yeah.

Jen Weidner 1:40: So, you did believe that it will become an issue in the United States and Indiana?

Dr. Eric Yazel 1:45: As soon as we got to some of the other cities in China, and then especially once it hit Italy. It was inevitable that we get our starting cases in the United States and all over the United States and locally. I remember when it first hit the, the West Coast, actually, I had a contact in public health in the Seattle area. I said “Hey, so you guys had your first days, what advice do you have for me, you know, a little small-town Indiana guy who hasn't seen it yet”, and he put in all caps, shut it down, shut it down now, and I was like—

Jen Weidner 2:16: Oh, WOW.

Dr. Eric Yazel 2:16: —I was like, well this escalated fast, so yeah that that really hit me that you know this is very real. So we prepared accordingly.

Jen Weidner 2:26: You moved pretty quickly once the first cases were reported in Clark County. Did you guys have any kind of plan in place for a pandemic?

Dr. Eric Yazel 2:36: Yeah, I think, honestly, our first. I think we had our first planning meeting back in January, when it really was hitting Italy. We started thinking about, you know, it was almost like a full fledged battle plan, to be honest with you. Like we, we knew our frontline forces were going to be like our first responders, our police, fire, EMS. We actually anticipated right off the bat that we probably lose about a third of them to either illness or quarantine. When it first hit and so, you know, we just were worried about basic public services, you know, maintaining social order, things like that, that we realized that might be an issue right off the bat. And then we started looking at, you know, what are our areas that are most vulnerable, and, you know, we identified jobs at our nursing homes which panned out our ER's or ICU's, our jails, our homeless shelters, and then on a smaller level just our big businesses, you know, our group homes. Basically anywhere in the county that was a lot of people under one roof, we started putting together management plans more because we knew that that was, that was where that was going. I think at one point we went over north of 10 potential sites for field hospitals, we thought it might go to that, so we had areas all over the county identified. We had some prelim discussions with the National Guard, and you know already we're trying to buff up our PPE and our ventilators and some of those things that ended up becoming issues, but some of the stuff were just, you know, was out of our local control, so we definitely had some plans together that's for sure.

Jen Weidner 4:05: How did our first responders fare?

Dr. Eric Yazel 4:07: Much better than we thought we were able to. Despite some real challenges PPE wise, we were able to protect them. We did have some outages. I know some, especially fire, because, you know, a fire station you've got, you know, different shifts and you've got a lot of guys under one roof that are together for long periods of time. So, if you had one exposure, you've lost that whole crew. So, you definitely, I think they definitely got their hours in there and COVID-19. Police held up pretty well, they did some things amongst themselves to kind of just basically, as much as they could, limit unnecessary exposures. So, they did a great job with that. EMS was very cautious. We actually fared much better in that area than I anticipated earlier.

Jen Weidner 4:50: You were on the very front lines at ER at Clark Memorial Hospital, what was that like?

Dr. Eric Yazel 4:57: Yeah it was, it was I'll be really honest, it was really scary especially at first because, you know, well, our exposure to it were news clips of things in Italy where you got people coding in the hallways and running out of ventilators and stuff like that. You know, we didn't know how it was going to be. I think I was the first one to intubate, put a patient on the ventilator that had COVID in the area, really in our hospital at least. You know, scary, you know, you don't know, am I going to get sick, is the patient going to do well, you know, then you're worried about other people that are in the room; your respiratory therapist, nurses, you know, get them sick you know by putting, you know, exposing them to procedure. If you need some help and so you really have to balance, you know, doing the right thing for the patient, but also protecting your staff. If we are out doctors and nurses, I mean, everybody's in a bad way, so you really have to think about what you're doing and it was just a scary time. You know, we kept, we were never sure, you know, we saw the first batch of cases coming in and we're like, you know it's just a matter of time before the other shoe drops and we're in a, you know, crisis situation, or where is it gonna go.

Jen Weidner 6:05: Did we ever come close in Clark County to running out of ventilators or bed spaces?

Dr. Eric Yazel 6:09: Yeah, yeah we did. So, hospital-wise, one thing that people—a lot of people—don't know is the ER size of Clark Memorial Hospital compared to the inpatient volume it can take is completely disproportionate. We actually see more people per year in Clark Memorial Hospital than, like, Jewish Hospital downtown or Norton Hospital downtown, which are big, you know, 500 to 1,000-bed facilities. We have a couple of hundred beds so we did really, really get tight on ICU beds and, more importantly, actually really tight on ICU staff to man those beds. We had trouble making sure we had enough people to take care of the critically ill. The respiratory—one of the respiratory therapists would actually text me every morning with how many vents, how many people we had on the vents, how many leftover vents we had. And there were a couple of days we were down to a couple to where, if we had to, you know, had a bad day, we're gonna have to get creative fast, got some backup plans and things in place, but I

think that was more than just temporary. So, when it, you know, and that hit about the same time that some of the really nasty PPE shortages hit. It was, if there was a time that was my low point, it was that. I wasn't sure we'd have enough PPE to have our nurses safe taking care of people. Wasn't sure we have enough vents to take care of the population. There were a lot of sleepless nights here.

Jen Weidner 7:30L What is a PPE?

Dr. Eric Yazel 7:33L Personal Protective Equipment. So basically, you know, if you wear a gown, a face mask, eye protection, gloves, those kinds of things when you take care of COVID-19. That prevents, essentially, as long as you do that pretty religiously, your chances to get infections are very small. Unfortunately, you know the amount of that, that we have that we use on a normal day is miniscule compared to what we needed during COVID-19 and so, shortages were extremely profound. That's one time I knew we were in trouble. They've played up, we're gonna get a big shipment of PPE's from the government. When it showed up, it was all leftover stuff from H1N1 and was like 10 years old. As soon as we put the mask on like tear and things like that. This is the best to have, they have to send us right now, we're in a lot of trouble. I've ever, you know, we kept hearing about the federal stockpile that'll come in and save the day, when there was one day when the Dr. Box, our health officer, basically let us know there was no federal stockpile, you kind of hear voice shaking a little bit and I was like this is gonna get real bad. So, we had our ER group buy about 1,000 Clear ponchos off of Amazon, because we thought it was gonna come to that. You know, tons of awesome community members, making masks. There was one guy, and I still to this day I don't know if he was legit or not, but he was trying to figure out how to make rudimentary ventilators in his barn, and would send me pictures of things.

Jen Weidner 8:58: I guess you get creative when a pandemic strikes.

Dr. Eric Yazel 9:00: You do, you do what you got to do.

Jen Weidner 9:02: Is it true that you lived in a trailer in your driveway?

Dr. Eric Yazel 9:08: That is a little bit over dramatic I will say is, so basically I have a two story house, well really I have a basement. That was kind of my condo. But there were some times. There was one of our state representatives that actually has an Airbnb in town—and obviously those were not in hot demand during COVID-19—said anytime you need to use it, it's yours. And I did take her up on it.

Jen Weidner 9:33: Was that Dr. Fleming?

Dr. Eric Yazel 9:34: It was Dr. Fleming. And I can't thank her enough for that, because for a couple of reasons. Number one, you know, I didn't, we didn't know at that time how it affected children. I have a 9 and 11 year old and my wife's a nurse, you know, and I didn't want to expose them but also, you know, we're talking meetings, they're probably 8, 10, 12 hours of planning meetings a day. So you know, a lot of times I'd get off from the ER two or three in the morning and have to be back up at seven. I live – it's about an hour long round trip to get home from work for me – I live out in the far northwest part of Clark County, and so a lot of times I'd stay there just to get a nap in before I started my day the next day. So, you know, there were, there were stretches where I wasn't home for several days at a time, and especially if I had some high risk encounters every once in a while we have a code that was COVID Positive necessarily sure that you could have time to put it all PPE's on and precautions on in time so if I felt like I was at higher risk, a lot of times I would stay.

Jen Weidner 10:33: You said your wife is a nurse; does she work at the same hospital as you?

Dr. Eric Yazel 10:38: She's over at University of Louisville Hospital. She's a sexual assault nurse and they have their own obviously unique challenges during COVID-19. Also, you know, she does. If there's a sexual assault evidence collection in the Louisville metropolitan area, there's probably about an 80% chance that she's going to be one that does it. And so, if she was in quarantine and things, you know, that was, that was a big detriment, so. .

Jen Weidner 11:04: Obviously those things didn't stop during quarantine.

Dr. Eric Yazel 11:08: No, no in fact some of the, you know, some of the violence and some of the substance use disorder, some of the things that, you know, are a result of, you know, psychological health stress, actually became more common.

Jen Weidner 11:25: Social media post titled Daily Dose of Calm helped many of us stay updated and reassured many of us that everything was going to be okay. What made you want to do those?

Dr. Eric Yazel 11:34: Actually it wasn't planned at all. What happened was, when we first, first actually like Washington state, they declared a public health emergency, where they only had a couple of cases, and a lot of the general public was like 'this is just ridiculous'. Why would you declare an emergency if it's not even here yet or not? And I put out a post because I knew that it was probably going to come to the point where we're gonna have to do the exact thing.

Jen Weidner 11:57: Of course, of course.

Dr. Eric Yazel 11:59: I say here, about two weeks or so, declare an emergency in our county. I want people to understand why in advance, and so I just posted something saying 'hey, you know the reason they do that makes them eligible for federal support' and things like that. Even though you aren't in crisis, you want to do that immediately, just so you're prepared, and I think I said, like, I think we all need to step back and have a moment to calm or, or something. And then, the next day there was – I don't remember what the second day was – but there was another issue where I felt like I just had to send out like a clarification to kind of help the public understand why we're doing what we're doing. The next day, I got a couple of messages like 'hey man, where's our, where's our dose of calm today?' I was like, all right, you know, I guess so. And then it just really took off from there. I would do, essentially, Sunday through Thursday or Friday. I think I stopped at the 50th, if it was just the information of trying to keep it fair and balanced. People seem to, people seem to respond to, it helps keep everybody together as a community, so it really was a really cool moment to connect with the community.

Jen Weidner 13:05: It really helped me and my mom to be calmer, because I would, like, wake up, first thing I would do was look for it. I was like, okay, okay, then go tell mom I'm like 'okay, it's not good, but we're gonna be okay'.

Dr. Eric Yazel 13:18: So, we tried to just be transparent, because if things just didn't look good we tell you 'they didn't look good', if they did, we did. A lot of times, if you spread good news people like, we can't tell people that because they won't follow your rules. It's like, you've got to be honest about things. So, we just tried to be as transparent as possible, so, here's what's going on, here's what this means for us. You know, we try to put a lot of numbers out there so people can get a real feel for what's happened in our community. There's just so much information out there, both well sourced and poorly sourced. We just tried to get through it and help people make their own decisions and it took off from there.

Jen Weidner 13:52: So, were you one of the first in the county to get your vaccine, Covid-19 vaccine?

Dr. Eric Yazel 13:54: Yeah, I think so. Our county was Clark Memorial Hospital, one of the first sites in the state to start vaccinating. We're lucky because a lot of the supply lines are over in Louisville, and so they come, they come right over to Clark Memorial and so we're, we have the storage capacity for Pfizer, which a lot of places didn't have the ability to, so we were going to be one of, I think, four or five places in the state to start vaccinating. I remember it was supposed to start after lunch on a Monday, and we had everything together, and everybody was ready, and so I think our hospital CEO called the state and asked 'can we go ahead and go'? I think they did, a few of the hospital people and I got the call of, you know, hey are you ready, we got it right now and I think about 10:00 am that first day, so I would guess I was one of the first 50 or so in the state to get it.

Jen Weidner 14:46: How are we looking vaccine-wise in our county?

Dr. Eric Yazel 14:46: It's kind of interesting how those things progress. Testing was this way, PPE was this way, of vaccines for this way, where initially just very, very hard to come back and you really have to think about your resource allocation, and that makes – it was hard to get it out to everybody. The vaccine was that same way, I mean we literally, I probably owe every state department of health official dinner because I was harassing them so much to get the vaccine down our way. You know, I, we always joke around here, but everything's very like, very Indy-centric.

Jen Weidner 15:19: Oh yeah, of course.

Dr. Eric Yazel 15:20: So, I really was advocating to get a vaccine down here and I can finally say, you know, for the last two or three weeks, that everyone in our county who wants to get vaccinated has had that opportunity. That's exciting, you know, I thought we'd probably be saying that in late June, early July, so we're two or three months ahead of schedule. That's because the health department folks, I mean, have just really stepped up over and over again, you know nights, weekends, pop-up clinics, they've really gone above and beyond to get it out to our citizens.

Jen Weidner 15:34: The age groups keep lowering as well.

Dr. Eric Yazel 15:53: And I think the faster we get it to our age groups this, you know, through those age groups that's let us move into the next one. And I think one thing I'm really proud of, is we were able to get it to our most vulnerable populations, and prioritize some of those when that wasn't always the easiest thing to do, you know, we'd have, our jail has absolutely been a model for the entire state. Some of the jails in the state have an 80 to 90 percent positivity rate, and we have four cases. And they really worked hard with us to do that, which was awesome; our homeless shelters, we've got the vaccine out there, the state came through the other day and they only had, out of 70 people, only two that hadn't been vaccinated. So, we're really proud of that and reaching out to some folks who may not have had a voice for themselves to protect them as well.

Jen Weidner 16:40: What have you learned from the pandemic?

Dr. Eric Yazel 16:43: Oh man!

Jen Weidner 16:45: Whether medically or personally or, you know, just in general?

Dr. Eric Yazel 16:51: Yeah, I mean, that's, that I could probably do an interview all day just about that. I think, personally, I just learned a lot about people like just interacting with people, just the importance of being transparent. It's important to have a thick skin. I'm a pretty sensitive guy, to be honest with you, and so initially with, you know, we did a lot of threats and, you know, angry emails and things like that. At first, you know, I just really would, would struggle with that. You realize, at the end of the day, that you're just looking to do something to try to do the best for, you know, for everybody. And so, you know, yeah a lot of people thought either you're not doing enough, you don't need to be more aggressive. Greater Clark Schools were the first school corporations, major school corporations to go back to school, in-person school, and I mean I had somebody that messaged me and said that they hope my children die of COVID, going back to school. On the flip side of things, I've had people come threaten me, say they're gonna come to my house and take care of me, because we were doing too much.

Jen Weidner 17:56: Let's be clear, parents had a choice to send our kids back or not, there weren't – children were not forced.

Dr. Eric Yazel 18:03: There were other alternatives, absolutely. We just want to give them that option. From a social interaction and intellectual development, emotional development is really important that our kids at least have that option, and so there was an option, but a lot of people didn't, didn't take it, take it that way, that's for sure, so I just learned about dealing with people. I learned a lot medically, obviously. I think that the one thing I've said is, if we don't come out of this whole new way of dealing with, you know, major disasters and pandemics. We really let everybody down because we learned a lot about, you know, our local infrastructure, our state infrastructure, our federal infrastructure. And then, this, I think, on a personal level, you just learn what's important. I think a lot of us who, you know, healthy ways of coping during the pandemic, realize the importance of family and and, you know, put the electronics down, you know, just, just enjoy each other and kind of slow down and enjoy life, because you know the restaurants and stores you know a lot of those other distractions. You know so much, so many of us were around there for a while, so just kind of let you refocus on that.

Jen Weidner 19:13: So, what will you continue to do after the pandemic is over and life gets back to whatever our new normal is?

Dr. Eric Yazel 19:22: Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, number one, just figured out, you know, what the new normal is. You know, there are a lot of things, I'm not gonna say neglected, but there's a lot of things, you know, the health department, ER, are busy before the pandemic. There's a lot of things that have been put on the back burner but haven't been as much of a priority that we need to get back to business on some of the things that we've talked about, you know, basic stuff, medical screening tests, colonoscopy, mammograms, things like that we are way behind, because of, you know, just a lot of routine things weren't done during Covid. So, we need to get out to our populations and, especially, you know, some of our populations that are,



you know, that haven't, that have some barriers to those to get out there and get people screened. You know, substance use disorder, overdoses are extremely high during the pandemic, to get out and, you know, do some outreach there, so I'm just catching up on a lot of things that, you know, that we've done in the past. And, you know, I think that COVID-19 exposed a lot of the kind of warts in our healthcare system. And so, now that we recognize those, you know, it's we don't want to have them kind of fade back into the back again, we need to recognize those and address those, so they're much more resilient, you know, when this happens again. Do I think there'll be another pandemic in the next two years? Who knows. There's always something. And so, I want to make sure that, you know, here Clark County was prepared as we possibly can be for any eventuality that's going to head our way.

Jen Weidner 20:48: There may not be another pandemic in the next two years. There could be, in the next 10, 20,30 years, and we can look back and say 'this is what they did during this pandemic'.

Dr. Eric Yazel 20:58: Yeah, our county emergency management agencies are excellent. That's one thing I've heard them say at a meeting just recently is that one of their new kind of, you know, they have their bullet points of focus on their new ones was basically resiliency. What can we do to make sure that our schools stay open, that our restaurants stay open, major businesses stay open, you know, in the eventuality of any natural disaster or medical issue. I think that was a really important idea that we can learn from this is just to kind of troubleshoot, say okay, where are weak points as far as structure of society, and make sure that we do all we can to shore those up.

Jen Weidner 21:37: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experiences?

Dr. Eric Yazel 21:39: Oh, just this, I thank you for having me. You know, it's something to always remember to, you know, to experience, both from the frontline side of things in the ER and the public health side of things. You know, I was able, at least, to make decisions based on what I was directly seeing in the emergency department. One thing that was really important for me to try to convey to people is, you know. I know everybody had their different ideas about, you know, how serious it was and this and that, you know, I was seeing things firsthand and able to make those decisions accordingly. That's something I'll never forget. I'll never forget the way the community came together. You know, whether it's bringing dinner to the frontline staff, or the first responders doing a parade around the hospital. There's so many cool events and I'm really proud about the way that Clark County came together as a whole, especially during some of those, those lift each other up and look out for our more vulnerable citizens and that's, I think that says a lot about the people that live.

Jen Weidner 22:39: Thank you very much.