

Pandemic Perspectives: Jeffersonville Residents Recount Their Lives During the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic. Interview with Jason Sharp

Jen Weidner 0:05 : Today is May the 18th, 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 Geological Society. I'm here today with Jason Sharp, Deputy Fire Chief for Jeffersonville Fire Department. Jason, how long have you been with the department?

Jason Sharp 0:29: 21 years.

Jen Weidner 0:31: Do you remember when you first heard about the pandemic and what was your reaction?

Jason Sharp 0:38: Yeah, I guess we started kind of hearing a little bit more about it towards the end of 2019, beginning to 2020. At first we just kind of thought it was going to be another one of those bird flu SARS scenarios where they kind of built something up and it would end up really not taking hold, and they would get control of it before it became a real problem. Little did we know it would become what it became.

Jen Weidner 1:08: So, did you think that it would come to the US, let alone Indiana?

Jason Sharp 1:13: Ah no, I really didn't at first. But as you know, some cases started coming into the United States. I started seeing that it started kind of moving a little quicker than what they thought it was and, to be quite honest with you, I had wondered if it had already made itself here; we just didn't know about it yet.

Jen Weidner 1:40: I've heard other people say that same thing, but I thought it was here way before.

Jason Sharp 1:43: What I do know that there was – before COVID really kind of took over here – there was an unknown, they were saying it was a known respiratory virus that was making itself, this way around. And we had some members here, including me, they got sick and they just really didn't know what it was. So, but nobody had any real major issues with it.

Jen Weidner 2:12: When the pandemic started, were you the Deputy Fire Chief?

Jason Sharp 2:15: No, when the pandemic started as I was still serving online. I was running one of our companies at a station house. So myself and my firefighters were actually on the front line.

Jen Weidner 2:29: Which Station House were you at?

Jason Sharp 2:30: Station Five there on Allison Lane.

Jen Weidner 2:37: Things moved pretty fast when the first positive cases were reported in our area. How did the department responded, how did your firefighters respond?

Jason Sharp 2:45: Oh well, we set up, essentially, the incident management team and created an action plan on how we would handle this incident when it really kind of started moving forward and more positive cases were happening. Our job is really “just prepare for the worst”, and we had worked out, pretty much as a department, how we would mitigate these style runs, we set up an isolation area, we even looked into what would happen if we had to quarantine large groups of firefighters at one time, and, you know, how we would, you know, be able to still provide service for the citizens here in Jeffersonville.

Jen Weidner 3:30: So did you all – obviously you didn't stop responding to calls – but did you do things differently for medical, especially for medical calls?

Jason Sharp 3:39: Yeah, absolutely, so we did modify some of our responses. And we set it up where we were able to obtain some PPE to make sure that our firefighters were properly protected. We set up decontamination procedures on how we would handle, because you just didn't, you didn't know who you were coming in contact with, if they were not positive, and so–

Jen Weidner 4:07: In the earliest stages testing wasn't readily available.

Jason Sharp 4:09: Absolutely, yeah, so, you know, we took every precaution that we could to ensure that not only our firefighters remain safe, but the last thing we wanted to do was bring this home to our families. So we set up these procedures, we modified our response protocols, and, but we never stopped responding, you know, and we, and we never will. You know when people need us, they call 911, they're going to get Jeffersonville Fire Department.

Jen Weidner 4:37: Right, I mean that's what guys are set up to do, I mean 150 years you've been doing this. Why would, why would a pandemic stop you from doing anything?

Jason Sharp 4:44: We don't close it, if you think about the grand scheme of things, I mean this, obviously, it's not the first pandemic that the Jeffersonville Fire Department has had.

Jen Weidner 4:52: No it is not!

Jason Sharp 4:52: So, you know, we made it through the last one, we're gonna make it through this one, and hopefully there won't be anymore. But if there are, Jeffersonville firefighters will respond.

Jen Weidner 5:02: And how did the firefighters themselves, were they on edge, were they just used to, like, things changing so rapidly?

Jason Sharp 5:09: Yeah, it was very stressful, you know, you know, firefighters are usually very adaptable. You give them something, they'll find a way to make their way through it, but, you know, there was so much unknowns, there was a lot of changing information, it really, it was really hard to stay on top of what was current practices, and that really did make it,

Jen Weidner 5:38: Because, I mean, that changed, like, I don't want to say daily, but weekly, at least, what we shouldn't shouldn't be doing

Jason Sharp 5:44: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we went from "this is not a big deal" to "this a big deal" to "don't wear masks" that to "do wear masks", I mean, it was – things were all over the place, and, you know, I'd like to give credit to our firefighters who were really able to step up to the plate and they mitigated it to the best of their ability, but yeah, I know it was very stressful, not only for them but for their families too, you know, I mean, you can't help but to wonder, you know, what your, your loved one is bringing home to the family.

Jen Weidner 6:16: I mean, being the family of a firefighter is stressful enough.

Jason Sharp 6:19: Absolutely!

Jen Weidner 6:19: Day to day, when they go into the firehouse, but then to have all these unknowns. So, once the stay-at-home order was enacted in, the state basically shut down. I'm assuming nothing really changed for you all?

Jason Sharp 6:34 No, we, we still, we still had to come to work, you know, you know, the drive to work was a little, little more lonely, you know. I mean, there wasn't as many vehicles on the road. I think people took the stay-at-home motor order, for the most part, pretty seriously, You know, getting your supplies for the firehouse–

Jen Weidner 6:56: That was my next question. How hard was it to get what you normal supplies your food and everything?

Jason Sharp 7:01: Yes, so, you know, our firefighters worked 24 hour shifts, you know, they start at seven in the morning, they end at seven o'clock next morning and, you know. For a lot of our firefighters, that the trip to work, usually there's a stop in at the grocery store for getting, you know, everybody's supplies for the day. That was, you know, one of the things that I do with my crew is that, you know, I like to make sure my firefighters were fed, so I stopped in the mornings to get food for breakfast, as we usually do breakfast and dinner. If you did lunch you usually brought something of your own in, but we would generally do breakfast and dinner and go into the store, you know, thankfully, you know, when I was going to the store I'd stop in about six in the morning. So, there still wasn't a whole lot of people out, but, you know, there was so much

hoarding going on, there was, you know, you just kind of got what you got, so breakfasts and dinners were kind of interesting for a few weeks but it ended up letting up a little bit.

Jen Weidner 7:24: Did you all ever do any of the food delivery services or anything like that?

Jason Sharp 8:08: We really tried to stay away from that. Maybe order a pizza or something, that would be about it, but we, we really tried to just mitigate our exposures to other people, so I would go to the store, I would, you know.

Jen Weidner 8:25: Like, one person designated to do those things instead of the whole.

Jason Sharp 8:28: Yeah, yeah I kind of seen that as, you know, since I was the, you know, Captain, you know, you know company officer who was in charge, that, you know, it was, it was my duty to make sure my guys were taken care of.

Jen Weidner 8:40: So, you all have plenty of toilet paper?

Jason Sharp 8:42: We did, we never ran out of toilet paper, thank goodness, but you know, you know, we bow our stuff and pretty large quantities we had, we had quite the supply.

Jen Weidner 8:52: And it was, like, the main thing that people were hoarding it.

Jason Sharp 8:54: I still can't, I still don't understand why people were hoarding toilet paper for a respiratory virus.

Jen Weidner 9:00: Well, you know—

Jason Sharp 9:00: Yeah, people just do what they do, I don't understand.

Jen Weidner 9:04: What are some of the things you've learned from the pandemic?

Jason Sharp 9:13: I would say that, I don't know if I would say learn, but it made me reflect a little bit about how some people conduct themselves, you know. There was obviously some times where people were hoarding and they were wanting to make sure that they were, you know, kind of taking care of their families, but I really also see neighbors checking on their neighbors. I see people who are willing to come in and face the unknown, to make sure that you know the citizens of this community was adequately, you know, provided and cared for. So, you know, I, there are some things in the pandemic that I've seen that, you know, I guess was not so good, and then some that have really just reminded me, you know, why some of these people do what they do.

Jen Weidner 10:04: So, what things will you continue to do after the pandemic is, you know, once we're back to whatever our normal is?

Jason Sharp 10:11: Um, I think people are a little more cautious now on, like, sanitizing and cleaning their hands and stuff like, you know what, when all this kind of first started, I really, I got ahold of some hand – and – hand sanitizer, and, you know, I told, I told my wife, I'm like, "Hey, one of the places that people really fail to not clean their hands is, like, when you go to a store and you touch a handle or you go and get gas." Anytime you get gas, are you going so you need to make sure you clean your hands, so that's something that I hope people still kind of do. I wish, I think some people have kind of become a little unsanitary with their masks. I can walk through parking lots and see masks all over the place, so I would hope that people would recognize, "Hey let's, let's be sanitary, clean up our own mess and especially when it comes to masks," nobody wants to pick up your mask.

Jen Weidner 11:11: No, that's just gross. I see them all over the place right. It's one thing to pick up other litter, but not something that's been on someone's face.

Jason Sharp 11:17: Right. So, you know, I just hope that people weren't, you know, continue to use, you know, good hand washing techniques, you know, using hand sanitizer keep your hands clean and stuff. I think they'll, even after the pandemic, that'll help reduce some other infections and stuff.

Jen Weidner 11:36: Like, I know flu cases were way down this year, so I mean, masks work. Cleaning your hands all the time works. So, you've had an opportunity to go out in the community and help administer the COVID-19 vaccine. Why was that important to you and how successful has that been?

Jason Sharp 11:52: Well, when the, when the vaccine was, was first released, Indiana really kind of went out of their way to protect their emergency responders as as part of their infrastructure. They realized that, you know, hospital workers, first responders such as police fire and EMS, you really kind of need those people out there to take care of others who are sick, too. So, when I was given the opportunity to get the vaccine, I had some conversations with some people that I trusted in the medical realm to really kind of understand the vaccine, and I did my own reading, I did my own research, I don't like – I don't like, I don't trust other people's research, you know, I don't need the media to tell me, you know, how I'm supposed to think about something I want. I want to, I want to do my own research on stuff and after doing my own research and talking to some people that I trust very much in the medical field. I felt like the vaccine was a good thing. I wanted to show my personnel here that I had faith in it, and if I was willing to take it, then you know,

Jen Weidner 13:00: Then you thought it was safe

Jason Sharp 13:03: So, I would never ask my personnel to do something I wouldn't do.

Jen Weidner 13:06: You wouldn't do, right.

Jason Sharp 13:07: So, I wanted to make sure that I got the vaccine, and as, as I got the vaccine I didn't have any real side effects to it, you know, it's not uncommon for people to, to feel, get some body aches, maybe run a low grade fever, and the truth is is that's just your body's way to know the vaccine is working.

Jen Weidner 13:30: That's with any vaccine.

Jason Sharp 13:31: Absolutely.

Jen Weidner 13:31: You got the vaccine, like, earlier in 2021?

Jason Sharp 13:35: Yeah, so actually I got my first dose in December of, 2020.

Jen Weidner 13:38: Ok!

Jason Sharp 13:38: I got my second dose in early January, so I've been fully—

Jen Weidner 13:45: You all were really some of the first ones in the state to get it.

Jason Sharp 13:47: Yep. And it's because, you know, one of our main job functions here is to provide medical aid to people. So, protecting us so we can go out and treat people was essential. But no, I thought the vaccine was a good vaccine, I still do. I think all three of them that has been approved at this point, have all shown that, you know, they work really well against the virus, so it definitely beats the alternative.

Jen Weidner 14:19: Most definitely!

Jason Sharp 14:21: But, I think I also believe in people's individual freedoms.

Jen Weidner 14:25: Right.

Jason Sharp 14:25: I think that people need to do what they feel is best for them, you know, and we have some firefighters here that have different mixed feelings about it and everything. And I think that some of the reasons are legitimate, and I'm okay with that but—

Jen Weidner 14:42: They know the risks, they've been into this for a year, they've seen what COVID can do to you, so they've had the opportunity.

Jason Sharp 14:49: But I think all in all, I think the state did a pretty good job on rolling out the vaccine. You know, I check the numbers every day. They're better than, than what they've been in a long time, so I think what the plan that they rolled out with was overall pretty good, you know, I think they got the shots in the arms and that other people who were the most susceptible pretty quick.

Jen Weidner 15:14: I know there was some controversy about why you give the shots to the elderly people when teachers and frontline workers need it.

Jason Sharp 15:21: Sure. The thing about it is, I believe around 95% of all the fatalities involved with COVID, were basically 65 and above, and if those – that was what was overwhelming, or potentially overwhelming, our system. So, getting shots in the arms of the people who needed it the most. I thought was a good approach but, you know, I'm glad we're to the point now where you don't even have to schedule an appointment to get your vaccine, you know, I mean that's, that's almost unheard of. If you asked me, you know, here we are in May of 2021, just a little over a year since we've been dealing with this virus and vaccines are readily available.

Jen Weidner 16:04: Yeah, I mean, things moved really fast.

Jason Sharp 16:04: It really did.

Jen Weidner 16:06: I mean, once the vaccine got here to now, yeah. So, you were out in the community and giving vaccines; what was that like, what was the response and reaction?

Jason Sharp 16:16: You know, it was pretty mixed, and I tell you, we came across some people who were–

Jen Weidner 16:23: You were at the mobile site you drove around?

Jason Sharp 16:36: Homebound Hoosier program, our local health department had taken the initiative of thinking a little outside the box and and trying to develop a way that we can get shots into the arms of some of the most vulnerable people out there. And so we came up with the Homebound Hoosier program, and we would actually allow people to sign up for the shots, and we would actually come out and give them to them, and we will go some, some of these people's houses who really haven't left the comforts of their home for almost a year.

Jen Weidner 17:17: They didn't feel safe.

Jason Sharp 17:18: No, they didn't I mean, some people, they cried, you know when we showed up, they were in tears. They felt like they were starting to kind of, have started to have the opportunity to get their life back, I mean, they hadn't seen family members.

Jen Weidner 17:33: They felt like they mattered, like they weren't just being left, you know, on the wayside.

Jason Sharp 17:38: And they do, you know, I mean we want we want to, you know, if you want a shot, we want to be able to get one, you put one in your arm. So, at first it was kind of difficult because, you know, the two, the two shots that were first released was the Pfizer and the Moderna shots, which are both two shot systems, and going through all these houses, not once but twice, really took a lot of time. So, when the Johnson and Johnson shot came out, you know, that was pretty helpful too because you know some of the people we dealt with, you know, could be very sick people, I mean we had with some people that we gave shots to that wasn't available for their second shot, because they were in the hospital or, you know, something that happened, you know, that they had some sort of issue pop up so.

Jen Weidner 18:31: Then you get concerned they're only half vaccinated and—

Jason Sharp 18:33: Correct.

Jen Weidner 18:34: You know that does offer you some protection, it's definitely not as good as being fully vaccinated.

Jason Sharp 18:38: Absolutely! So, the Johnson Johnson shot for the homebound program was almost a game changer, because that we could get it in and we can move on to the next people and the Johnson Johnson shot, you know, said like it's a pretty good shot, you know.

Jen Weidner 18:51: You all had no problems getting vaccines?

Jason Sharp 18:54: No, it seemed like we didn't have any issues with getting the vaccines and giving the vaccines and while we were out giving the shots, we never encountered any adverse reactions.

Jen Weidner 19:09: So let's say 50, 100 years from now, what do you hope people will remember about this, or have, you know, heard stories about what do you hope is, like, the main theme that they, that is carried forward? Like, when someone listens to this interview, say 50 years from now.

Jason Sharp 19:33: So, there's a couple things. First of all, never underestimate American ingenuity. You know, when the American people are, are put up with a difficult task. They seem to find a way to rise above. And this is one of those cases, you know, to be able to develop this type of vaccine, get it out, and it had the success that it's had, I think that's—

Jen Weidner 20:03: A safe and effective vaccine, too.

Jason Sharp 20:05: Pretty,pretty awesome. Yeah, so I think that's a great thing. The one of the things that I really hope, and I know we're not done yet, but I really think there's been so much disinformation, when it's come to this, not just this vaccine but, you know, this whole pandemic, and that makes our job very hard, you know, I sit here and I think about. And I've had this conversation with several different people, and I think this is actually one that mean you may have had in the past where, you know, I look at, you know, my 21 years in the fire service and all the different things that's happened during that time, you know, I – I've been a firefighter here since before 9/11 .

Jen Weidner 20:52: I was gonna ask you, you came in like right around, yeah.

Jason Sharp 20:54: So, I think about all the different things that I've experienced. I have changed the way I do my job. 9/11was a big one. You know, Hurricane Katrina, and even though these things did not happen in Jeffersonville, they affected the way that we do our job. You know, when I first got hired, you know, our job was pretty much to put out fires and make a medical call once a while. Well, you know, after 9/11, you know, we started had to take terrorism and the fact we started dabbling a little bit more with hazardous materials, and, you know, collapse, rescue, confined space rescue. You know, after Hurricane Katrina came in, you know, we dealt with, like, you know, operability so we can, like, radios, so we could talk to each other, they developed, you know, the NASA National Incident Management System that we still, you know, use today and, I mean, they're constantly building off of, you know, water rescue, I mean, all these different things like 9/11 Katrina, Hurricane Sandy, you know, all these things have have changed the way that I've done my job. And, you know, when these big incidents happen we like to critique ourselves. We like to look at the way that we respond to things, so that way we can make ourselves better in the future, but what concerns me is some of this information has become so muddy. I don't know how well we're going to be able to do that.

Jen Weidner 22:21: How are you, how are you gonna be able to go and be like, “No, this is, this is the real information.” Yeah and that's unfortunate that we live in a time of the internet, and I'm sure there's always been false information but now it's just right you know you can have an instant–

Jason Sharp 22:36: Oh yeah, I tell you,

Jen Weidner 22:38: People don't–

Jason Sharp 22:39: It makes our job–

Jen Weidner 22:41: People don't fact check.

Jason Sharp 22:42: Right, right, it makes our job hard, and makes us be able to go back and look at some of this stuff and and really make changes that need to be made for future responses. So, if you want to make our job easier, let's, let's try and reduce pollution and get the factual information.

Jen Weidner 23:01: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Jason Sharp 23:06: Oh, no, I'll be glad when it's over.

Jen Weidner 23:10: Amen, thank you for your time today.

Jason Sharp 23:12: Thank you.