

**Oral history interview with Ira Revels, interviewed by Samariya Smith for the Connecticut Historical Society's Community History Project discussing her experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Interviewed on 2 June 2022 in Hartford, Connecticut.**

Samariya Smith: Today is June 2, 2022. I'm interviewing Ira -- this is Samariya Smith interviewing Ira Revels. We're at Semilla Café in Hartford, CT. Ira, can you tell us your name, your age, your occupation, and where you live.

Ira Revels: My name is Ira Revels. My age is 49. My occupation is I'm a management consultant. I live in West Hartford, CT.

Smith: Ira do you remember where you were when you first heard about Covid-19?

Revels: Yeah. I was at home and I had just returned from a trip to New York City on the 29<sup>th</sup> or 28<sup>th</sup> of February. So the very next day was going to be March, obviously, and it was probably a week later that we were on lockdown. However I knew something was happening because I had read about back in November-December of some type of cold or virus or sickness coming out of China. Then because I have a roommate, what happened was we had spent Hannukah together with her friends and family and she in January -- she in December after Hannukah -- had left to go spend the night with her boyfriend. About forty minutes away from Hartford. But she called me and said, or texted me and said he was sick. Probably like a week later and by then it's like early January she had texted me and said okay now I'm sick and I don't think I'm coming back to the house. [long pause, background noise] But anyway she wasn't coming back home. What that meant was that she was sick, he was sick, and so it made me wonder what exactly might have been going on. Especially because later I heard about some type of illness or sickness coming out of China.

Smith: What was the first disruption in your life due to Covid?

Revels: Lockdown and the fact that I think the first real disruption was that we were all told we couldn't go anywhere. But in my case I also ran across a Facebook post by a woman who was interested in having as people started commenting on her initial post about things that they need and things that they were going to need access to. Like personal things like food and whatnot because they couldn't go out and get these things. I responded to her message and said that I would put together a google form of needs and offers and that was the beginning of what we now know as Hartford Mutual Aid.

Smith: Sarana?

Revels: Sarana, yeah. Sarana Nia put that message out on Facebook. I responded to it. And then it was her, myself, I know I'm missing a name who I definitely ought to know. Hold on because I do want to get these names in there. I know that the Hartford Courant did an

article about it and let's see—[pause] It's now a Facebook group. It's Apoyo Mutuo. And it's Constanza Segovia and Sarana Nia and then myself. Who else? Jeniffer Caraballo was also a part of that group. We started meeting by phone until it got to a point where for me it just became overwhelming, so I decided to exit after building the form and helping to kind of online organize. Besides that, I wanted to be able to see my godson who was over in the South End of Hartford and so it was a decision for me to not simply just stay home. I was out. I got laptops from Trinity that they had decommissioned so I was able to give away like twenty laptops to single moms so that they could get their students into classes online. It was a combination of making sure that people had food, but those things disrupted, obviously, my day to day.

Smith: You mentioned some of this but getting back to the Spring of 2020, what do you remember the most about it?

Revels: I didn't feel afraid. Like I didn't feel afraid of Covid. I think that's the one thing I remember. Like I knew that I should be cautious because I have MS, I have other health complications, but I felt like if I'm going to -- I couldn't bring myself to just stay home. So for me lockdown was a bit different. I ended up -- I think I may have tried to stay home for like five days total. It may have ended up being three in a row, but all during that period of time I was also working with a client and we had a big project that was going to start. It was a big pipeline project for college undergrads and they needed to be able to get internships and so the biggest challenge was a lot of the corporations that we spent so many months cultivating those relationships would not honor the internships. Obviously. Because they didn't know how they could. We were able to kick the program off by May. So I kept explaining to my client, be aware that this Covid thing will probably persist for a couple of years. I remember telling her at that time because I was also looking at the Spanish flu and research that had come out of that. My grandmother who adopted me was born in -- her mother -- she was born in 1918. That is when the Spanish flu happened. So her mother was pregnant -- my great-grandmother was pregnant with her -- in January of 1918 when the Spanish flu began. She was born in August. So all of those things sort of began coming to me and I realized okay, we're going to survive. This is a major thing, but I've got to still live life and I've got to be in a different frame of mind to survive this.

Smith: What precautions did you take at the start of the pandemic?

Revels: At the start of the pandemic I did obviously the masks. I was heavily into hand-washing. This was something that of course we promoted with my godson and made sure that he was doing those things. I think I really tripled down on my alkaline diet and made sure that if I were in contact with this particular thing that I would be okay. Because I was making sure that I was healthy, eating right. I doubled down on exercising. I actually went to amazon and I ordered a backpack, kind of like a rucksack. I am a vet. I made sure that I created for myself, for him, and for his mom, I created these go bags. One thing that did change is initially I didn't go anywhere without my go bag. And so as you can imagine,

every day, because I'm bringing it in and out of the house. I'm literally moving around with this particular big ass rucksack. Because I wanted to make sure if anything went down because this is -- in everybody's mind this is worst dystopian movie you've ever seen. It's all now coming and everybody knows that this is now happening. So how do we prepare? So yeah I mean that's probably what it was for me.

Smith: What was your source of information? How did you find reliable information and what did you deduce from that information?

Revels: A lot of the information I got was from various news sources. So online was a place where I got a lot of information. Online news sources. I tend to read foreign news. I tend to read international news. And of course, Facebook was another place I got information. I got information from individuals as well. Friends and family. Local people. Particularly because early on, March, April, May – March and April primarily – I was really involved with Mutual Aid and attempting to find funding resources. So a lot of what I was doing was researching where people -- particularly with the mutual aid because we were wanting to connect people with money. People didn't have money. Particular creatives and artists were severely hard hit so I was looking for grants and funding resources to help them. I had a lot of people call me because I write grants. So a lot of that was the sources of the big nonprofits but then of course I learned that the big nonprofits couldn't move as agilely as needed for the street level. That's where efforts with mutual aid came into play and were significantly useful because with the small group that I've been a part of with the Hartford Mutual aid group, we were able to -- we ended up getting so many requests from all over the state until we had to really separate out. I separated out all of the different towns into this spreadsheet. At one point it went from just Hartford to New Haven to Tolland. There's probably twenty-seven towns in weeks that began -- people were like I can this is something I can do. And then of course people were like, this is something I need. So it was really the form was about needs and offers. So when I started compiling that it quickly became something I could not maintain with my own sanity. [laughs] So it was great to help pass that work along.

Smith: How do you feel about mask and vaccines and mandates?

Revels: I'm on the fence. Still on the fence on that one. I read an article, a study actually, that looked at -- and this was after a period of a couple months. There was an international study that came out where these doctors looked at blood type and they were focused on blood types and people who had Covid and who were recovering from Covid. They simply were determining which blood types had which experiences and what they found was people with the rare blood types had the least worst experiences with Covid. So even had they been hospitalized, they recovered faster. And there were all these other things. What helped me was the fact that I read that research and I really started talking to -- there's a nurse that lives across the street. A head nurse lives across the street from me. She's at St. Francis. There's a friend of mine who runs the evening hospital, Hartford Hospital, in

Middletown. I started talking to my doctor friends, and my nurse friends, my health care friends. Then I had appointments later and in one case, I had to get some blood work done and I asked the person who took my bloodwork. She was Latino. I said, are we – and she understood what I meant by that – getting the vaccines? I think I said, who’s getting the vaccines in the hospital the most? That’s what I asked. She basically said the white doctors. That’s who she referred to. So for me, I just knew that I’m a rare blood type. I do not believe I need the vaccine. I am not trusting of this vaccine because these different options that we have – Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson – I knew for a fact I wasn’t getting a Johnson & Johnson nothing because of the lawsuit about the baby powder. Those kinds of things. I’m aware of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. The fact that those men were not treated so they got to pass syphilis onto their families and their wives and their children. And so for me getting a vaccine that was unproven using MRNA – which is a technology that literally could change your DNA into any creature on the planet under certain circumstances. Because of what I know about technology and biotechnology and all of that, I was hesitant. However, and this is the line, had more people perhaps been vaccinated sooner and had measures been enacted sooner, fewer people would likely have died because the point is it’s the close contact, it’s bodily fluids and all of these things that create that. [crosstalk]

Smith: How do you view personal choice in a pandemic?

Revels: I’m a child of God. We all got free will. [laughs] But I mean in reference to the question you asked, though, I believe that we were pressured. I think that being in a position of policy making and being where the buck stops with you in certain ways, at least publicly as a President, I believe that’s not easy. Like I sincerely believe that we’re in a situation where – and I don’t think this is the last time. Because of course as we know Antarctica had, I think it was two days ago, over 70 degree weather. And the conversation about poles melting. The Earth magnetic poles shifting every eight hundred or eight million or eight hundred million, I don’t know. The sun also with various poles shifting taking place. I would say, this isn’t the last time in my lifetime this will likely happen. I’m not surprised. I’m not confused about that. We kind of all just here without fully understanding what’s deep in the oceans or what’s beyond the ionosphere.

Smith: Do you remember any other notable events from 2020?

Revels: Besides the Presidency and the whole traumatic experience of that.

Smith: Talk about that a little bit.

Revels: I think for everybody because there was something in the news every freaking day about how that President [Trump] simply was unreasonable, uncontrollable, or ultimately just ridiculous in some of the things that he either said or did. I think we were attuned and conditioned to – for our entire bodies – to literally experience constant trauma beyond the murders of Black people by the hands of white cops. And cops generally. All of that has

tempered us into who we are right now. And the one thing I do remember was the stress of that Presidency to the point where it was hard to even hear the news because it was sort of like in our lizard brain we're all attuned to and wanting to sort of play out these awful scenarios and listen to this awful stuff that this person would say. All of the things would have a ripple effect on the rest of the world. It made the world smaller to constantly be thrown into this negative vibe that this person was constantly putting out. That, for the most part, was really what I remember. But remember it was 2020. We knew that eventually the Presidency would end, thank God. But it was really for me it was trying to – it felt like it'll end. It'll end. It'll end soon. Even the conversation about is this person going to get reelected, I kind of felt like they wouldn't. Because it was so negative. There's only a point where you can spin that pendulum in one direction for so long. Obama made everybody feel good and then this person gets in and makes some people feel good, but it's the small people who you don't want to feel good anyway because they're small minded. [laughs] So it was like all the people who were like even on the fence people like, I'm a Republican but this is crazy. That kind of vibe. We all knew what it is. They still know what it is.

Smith: How do you think the pandemic ends?

Revels: Personally, I don't know. I don't think it does. I think it's a perpetual pandemic because I think we learn how – because humans are so resilient. We learn how to live with it. They said it took four years for the Spanish Flu to finally stop, I suppose. But if it's not this pandemic, because of the world keeps turning. We're learning new things and new things are happening all day. Like right now, I had some crazy fucking stomach virus. That just finished playing itself out this morning. [laughs] And I understand. A friend of mine called me. She's in Boston. She's like, I had it, my mother had it. I didn't even know that's what it was until she told me this morning. She said, my son who's down in Atlanta had it. I'm like, okay, now I can put a name to it.

Smith: How do you feel about the new normal?

Revels: I'm assuming for everybody the new normal is for everybody. I don't know. For me, in the last two months, I've been staying home. I don't go anywhere. Can't afford gas. Don't go anywhere. Food is crazy expensive. If this is the new normal, then what I feel is I have to make sure that I'm financially set. And this is the time to do it. I feel like we have a lot of opportunity. My focus of course my work involves blockchain. It involves education. Heavily tech involved. But we can't eat tech. We can't eat a computer. We have to be able to use what skills that we individually have to create the future and the world we want to see. So for me the new normal only impacts me to the extent in my mind that I can access, and that I do access, abundance in all the ways in which it exists. For making art and doing that. And being great at that. Finally putting that out there. Writing lots of grants and raising money to develop my dreams and goals and aspirations and other people. So it only affects me in as much as it's -- to me there's a lot of opportunity in this new normal, if that

makes sense. Not to get stuck in all these terrible things are happening. To me that's a conditioning and a mindset that's forced upon me. I have an actual choice not to buy into that.

Smith: So you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation about your roommate and her boyfriend got sick. Was it Covid?

Revels: They don't know, but I've heard more stories about people who got sick around the January-December time frame and many people think it is. Once I learned about Covid after the fact, I did pose that question to her. Do you think that it was Covid? She said, I don't know, but she said she had gone to the doctor and the doctor of course did not know. Just told her it was a flu or some shit like that.

Smith: Did you contract Covid at all?

Revels: Yes.

Smith: Can you talk a little bit about that?

Revels: I know at least once that it was definitely Covid. And then I know that the -- so I had gone for like at least a few years without a head cold. Because like I said I've been alkalining my body and eating right and getting rest and drinking tons of water. So I was super healthy from that perspective. But it was this particular day. I had been under a lot of stress and I decided this particular morning that I was going to go visit a friend of mine in Upstate New York. I was in Hartford. During that weekend, I think, it was when I had a really -- it started as a light cold, but then by the time I got there I had a head cold. It was awful. I was trying to stay away from her. I don't think that was Covid because she didn't end up getting sick at all. I think that was actually just a really bad head cold. But during December of 2021, I ended up getting sick and it started off as just really stuffiness and the tough places. Because of the MS the way that it manifests in me is I get a stuffy feeling in my face. And I thought, maybe I'm having a relapse. I don't take medication for MS. I've decided I don't want to do that. I was home. I wasn't around anybody. So that was what it was. But I ended up -- a couple of days passed and I got sicker and sicker, unlike any cold that I'd ever experienced in my life. So, I had not tested and so I do not know from a test standpoint, but I do know that it was likely Covid, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. I was probably sick for about, like I felt it for about seven days. But what I did though was like I had trouble sleeping so if I would try to sleep, I would just get up and exercise. Because I knew that by exercising, I would boost my immune system. I was drinking water and I was eating, of course, an alkaline diet. So, it didn't affect me as bad as it could have.

Smith: How was remote working for you? Or was it no change for you?

Revels: I work for myself, so it was no change.

Smith: All right. Did your relationships with your friends and any family members change?

Revels: Yeah I would say that the most significant relationship I had at the time was with my friend. We were co-parenting my godson, her son. Basically we had agreed, look, we're not going to stay locked down. I am going to come over because I know that if we don't continue to be around each other we can't sync up our immune systems, also. So that was important. But I think in that experience the thing that initially was hard was not being able to hug him because initially we did the social distancing. I ordered the suits online for both of us in case one of us got really sick. I ordered all the stuff, the gloves. I mean, he and I were making hand sanitizer as a little thing to do.

Smith: Did you pick up any new hobbies?

Revels: No. I think what happened was initially like I said, March through May was mainly, how do I make sure I get my needs met in this environment. I'm pretty much by myself in my house. My roommate hadn't come back so she's in and out. She'll come maybe for a couple days and then she'll go back with him because she's got health problems and needs a lot of care. But certainly being in the house alone I simply needed to be able to get food. That wasn't an issue. And then the things that I would do to help other people out of the house. Make sure I was doing that safely. What was the question again?

Smith: Did you pick up any new hobbies?

Revels: Oh yeah so I don't think I had time to because by May we had the actual grant and that was the insanity of including meetings, teaching online like four days a week or more. All online. All on zoom. I was probably doing like forty hours of zoom. And then there were people who would be like, I forgot that I could simply pick up the phone and talk to people. [laughs] Because everybody wanted to see you. I was like, I don't give a shit if you see me. I don't need to see people because I'm out anyway. I think for a lot of people who weren't out, having something like zoom, but I just -- I didn't have time for a hobby.

Smith: What did you lose during the pandemic?

Revels: [silence]

Smith: If you have some challenges answering that, we can move onto the next one.

Revels: No, I have to answer that one because that's a part of healing.

Smith: True.

Revels: Where I'm at now, September to March, I had at least four or five family members pass away. At least three of which succumbed to complications with Covid. The patriarch of my family, he just passed in, I think it was December. His son, his older son, he passed away from complications with Covid in probably August actually. I buried my birth mother in January. The day after my birthday. My godson. His mother and I were the only parents he knew and actually we had problems off and on over the years. He basically told us, sat us down and said, you are both my parents. And now we're separated. I'm trying now to

not call it loss. I'm calling it gratitude for having had these people in my life. So between them and my uncle who helped me plan my birth mom's memorial, his sister passed away in March. So for me, it's all of my immediate family and the love of my life, my little guy.

Smith: Thank you for sharing. What did you find during the pandemic?

Revels: Myself.

Smith: Can you describe the pandemic in one word?

Revels: What comes to my head immediately – awful.

Smith: Greatest lesson you learned during this pandemic?

Revels: Treat myself better.

Smith: Great segue into the next one. How did you change during the pandemic?

Revels: I'm in that process. [pause]

Smith: Take your time. This is heavy duty stuff.

Revels: I think I'm changing. I think I'm remembering myself. I've become more creative. I'm painting and making digital art and I'm enjoying that healing process. So, I've changed by putting myself first. Putting myself first and focusing on healing. That's how I changed. Stop putting other people first. [laughs] Cause at the end of the day, the things I'm dealing with right now are really -- there's some really awful negative shit that's happening. But I think that how I'm dealing with it and how I'm processing it – I feel like I'm brave and I'm courageous. And that I'm not allowing what my ex is doing and what has happened to define what I can do and who I am and what I can be. For me, it's just right now it's literally -- when literally everyone who I was close to is removed in one fell swoop from my life like right now. Trust me I'm having to look at myself and understand from my childhood to now who I've been in relation to. At least in the situation with my godson and my ex right now that's really where I'm doing a lot of the work. It's very important that I do that. I know that for him I know that it's painful and he continues to reach out to me and for me, but because of the circumstances I cannot communicate with him for my own safety. This person is literally -- my ex -- is trying to get me physically harmed. It's hard to explain this to people because it's so insidious and innocuous. It's sort of like if you know you know. She's posted stuff on social media. It's really horrible, actually. But fortunately all the people I've seen the comments and all the people who I know who respond with what they say and so I know that those are not my friends. And then the people, the less than five people, who literally call me and say this is crazy and I'm so sorry and I know he loves you and this is awful. All of that. From those few people. Those are my friends. For me, when I look at it as a big picture, what it says to me, especially all the other things that are positive that are going on in my life I am literally on the cusp of amazing greatness. And I feel good about that because I see it. I see -- like I literally see how this works. I didn't realize this is



how it actually works. When you are at that point in life where you are about to jump off on some amazing extra-awesome shit, you get shown. It is all revealed. It is all revealed. So, for that. For the fact that my little guy is like, don't worry, I will never forget you. He called crying and left a message and said, I will never forget you, I love you. You know what I mean? All of the things that he said that I know are true and the other things that he said, that I know would cause jealousy and envy. Because when someone else is at home with your child and you're out being awesome and then they get close to you and it's his whole life from birth, so the fact is I'm going to be okay and so is he and I know that. But yeah, so right now for my life it's like figuring out all the pieces. Who am I and how am I. Ten years have passed and now I'm living in this way and people are like, who are you? Where have you been? I've lived here for all this time and a lot of people don't know me because I've literally been the one that was called to come and watch the child. So now since last year, since I did the virtual summit all of the events I've done here at Semilla and pretty much since they opened. I've been here doing events and a lot of the people who come are people who were coming to her stuff. It's a small town. Hartford is a small town. We all try to live in peace, but you know.

Smith: What advice would you give someone who experiences future pandemics?

Revels: Future pandemics? Depending on what it is, maybe listen to the guidance and do what's right for you. [laughs]

Smith: What is your hope for the future?

Revels: My hope for the future is that I continue to heal and live God's plan for me.

Smith: Is there anything else you want people to know about your experience during the pandemic?

Revels: That I remained hopeful that it would end. And that my mom always told me, nothing lasts forever. I would tell that to my little guy. Nothing, whether you consider it good or bad, it's all subjective, everything changes. Everything is constantly changing. I felt at least that because again because I was aware that my mom survived as an infant the Spanish Flu, that it would not be so difficult for people to survive this and for me in particular. But the people who didn't survive along the way, I don't know. Our timelines eventually end in whatever the grand plan is, I guess.