

Oral history interview with Mayor Justin Elicker, interviewed by Samariya Smith for the Connecticut Historical Society's Community History Project discussing his experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Interviewed on 5 April 2023 in New Haven, Connecticut.

Samariya Smith: I'm going to say my name, the date, and where we are, and then you give us your name, your age, your occupation, and where you live.

My name is Samariya Smith, today is April 5th, 2023, we're at City Hall in New Haven, Connecticut.

Justin Elicker: My name is Justin Elicker, I'm 47 years old, I'm the mayor of New Haven and I live on Orange Street, New Haven.

Smith: Awesome. Mayor Elicker, do you remember where and when you were when you first heard about Covid?

Elicker: Not the specific location, but I sure remember a lot of the increase in awareness as we realized that it was going to become a major challenge that we were facing. I remember in January of 2020 there was a Chinese New Year's celebration in New Haven on Whitney Avenue and we were all outside in the cold. And all of the speakers, including myself, acknowledged the challenges that our friends in Wuhan, China were going through at the time. That time I had no idea that it would be coming to land in the United States. And I remember some emails I had with our director of community services that oversees the health department and other groups saying that after that it was only a matter of time before we got a case. I remember when we got our first case, I was having pizza and I got a call from our health director saying we had our first case from someone traveling from the UK and was staying at the Marriott and was isolated at the Marriott, so, there's specific memories of these instances where we all realized that it was getting to be a real challenge.

Smith: A real challenge.

Elicker: I remember sitting in my office and saying, "We have to cancel schools, we have to close schools." And that was a big one as well.

Smith: Wow. So that goes into your first disruption of your life as it relates to Covid, I can't imagine. How did you keep yourself safe at the start of the pandemic?

Elicker: At the very – when we started to see a couple cases here, we had all-staff meetings and I was sitting in this chair and this room was full of staff and halfway through the meetings, one of the meetings, I remember saying, "This is probably not the safest thing for us." Because imagine if one of...and we were all learning about Covid at the time, there weren't a lot of cases, but if one of us had Covid in this room, the entire leadership group

in this city would be out. So quite quickly we moved to Zoom communications. And I think that was initially the main thing to keep us safe. We worked very hard to...we closed a lot of offices at City Hall, moved a lot of people to remote, relied heavily on our IT department to equip people with computers, and you know, the ability to work from home. And we worked frantically to get PPE [personal protective equipment] to ensure our first responders were safe. And frankly, that was a struggle because at the time no one was able to find adequate PPE. I remember emailing neighbors, looking in my own house. You know because I do some work on my house I had some n95 masks that I bought at Home Depot back in the day that I gave to the fire department. You know, we were kind of scrounging together every last piece, so that we could make sure we kept each other safe.

Smith: Did you or someone you know get Covid?

Elicker: I finally did, two months ago.

Smith: Really!

Elicker: But I survived the whole time up until then without getting Covid. Yeah, I was very, very diligent about wearing masks and isolating as much as possible. I came to work pretty much every day. But no one else, you know, this place was empty. My chief of staff was working here and then there were a handful of other staff in other offices that were working here but we had press conferences outside, we had press conferences on Zoom at first and then we did them outside. Once people started to realize masks were important, we were very dedicated to doing the right thing, both to keep ourselves safe because it's important to keep ourselves healthy but also to be a good example. Because if we were asking the community, and in many cases requiring the community to wear masks, I felt it was really important for me to do the same.

Smith: So I guess it's safe to assume you agree with mask mandates, you agreed with it.

Elicker: Yeah, so New Haven was one of the...I think the city that was the most aggressive about mask mandates. We had mask requirements in basically every public institution, every store, for quite some time. And there was some growing pains and some challenges there, but when you compare how our community accepted that guidance and rules compared to a lot of other communities, I'm quite proud of New Haven as a whole. People really by and large tried to do the right thing. And we didn't have the kind of tension or protests of rhetoric against science that we saw as a nation in many other communities. And I think that's something we can look back on and feel really proud of ourselves for coming together by and large to confront the pandemic.

Smith: When did you first hear about a vaccine and did you agree with the vaccine mandates?

Elicker: It's all a blur, right, it's hard to remember at what point we heard about the vaccine, but we were very excited to receive the vaccine. I remember in the beginning there was a

concern about who would and would not receive the vaccine. Because there were a lot of people that understandably wanted that vaccine. And there just weren't enough. So, we were number one concerned about ensuring that there was equity in that process. The state by and large regulated who was eligible for the vaccine. But we worked hard to make sure that we were notifying people because a lot of people don't necessarily look at the news, don't follow what's going on. And we wanted to make sure that in particular that people who might not be likely to hear about the vaccine or have access to a site or have access to the signup forms, because the signup forms were online, all that we wanted to make sure that everyone in New Haven had access to the vaccine. And the second thing is we wanted to make sure that people understood the science behind the vaccine and felt a comfort level. And given the history of medicine and pilots, and new medical technology and such, there's understandably an apprehension, in particular in places like New Haven, we have a large Black community that has a pretty difficult history with medicine. And we wanted to make sure that we built that trust. We actually worked with a lot of religious leaders to do press events where they were getting the vaccine in front of the cameras to show that they were enthusiastic about protecting themselves and opting to get the vaccine in order for other people to see that it's not just me saying it's a great idea, but religious and other community leaders that are as well.

Smith: Where did you find reliable information and how did you use the internet during the pandemic?

Elicker: That's a good question. So like a lot of people I was reading a lot of the news that was coming out, but at the same time we have a pretty good team, throughout the pandemic had a good health team. We have a medical doctor, Dr. Mehuh Delal that leads our community services administration, he oversees the director of the health department, Maritza Bond, and both of them were very keyed in with a lot of the research that was being developed. In addition, we had significant communication with our partners out there and our partners were the commissioner of health at the state, health directors of other cities, there would be regular meetings with all those different groups. And in New Haven we were fortunate to have experts in particular from Yale University in the public health sector. So, there were a group of health leaders that doctors and other public health experts that regularly met once a week on Zoom, our team would sit in with them. And in addition to hearing what was going on with the research, we would discuss with them what policy changes we were considering to keep people safe and we would get feedback. And one final thing on this, you know we're fortunate enough to have Yale-New Haven Hospital here as well. And I was regularly in communication with some of the lead doctors there that were responding to Covid to get their advice about what kind of policies we should implement to help keep everyone safe.

Smith: Wow, that's cool. You talked about earlier about how work was like during the pandemic, but how would you say the New Haven community has changed since 2020?

Elicker: That's a great question. It's interesting because I communicate regularly with other mayors of other cities and often times, I'm surprised by some of the challenges that we have faced and then when I discuss with other mayors, I realize they're going through almost the same thing. And it's everything from significant challenges on the increase in violence, to the struggles we're having with the drop in literacy and math achievement in our schools, to other unusual phenomena. For example, in the summer of 2021 we had all kinds of problems with people setting off fireworks all over the city. And you know that's— at first it seemed like an odd thing that was New Haven specific but then I was talking to other people in other cities and everyone's setting off fireworks in all cities across America. I still don't understand why that happened, but it was something we all experiences and we had, not just from a quality-of-life perspective, but you know we have vets that when they hear fireworks it's very traumatic to them. So, we struggled through that as well. And so many of the challenges that we saw throughout the pandemic and the aftermath as things settled down a little bit, although you know we're still facing challenges surrounding Covid, but those challenges are similar in many cities around the nation. And that is everything from we continue to confront challenges around violence. It will take us many, many years to address the drop in literacy and math achievement in our schools, and I think on top of all that there's an element of trauma or mental health that so many people during Covid experienced that will require much more support moving forward.

Smith: Was your mental health impacted by the pandemic in any way and did your approach to mental health change?

Elicker: My personal mental health?

Smith: Mhm.

Elicker: I'm fortunate that I did A-OK throughout the – you know, it was, I think the main reason there was a lot of pressure for us to make the right decision at the right time. But I was fortunate in that unlike a lot of people, every day was interacting with a group of people, had a strong sense of purpose every day. Had a team that supported each other. And don't get me wrong, it was busy, it was intense, it was stressful. But I think a lot of the mental health challenges that people in our community faced was because of social isolation. Because of an extreme loss of multiple loved ones because of the other significant challenges that we talked about of, you know, violence and unsafe environments that people were living in. For example, because of the general social isolation for a child that is in a home that may have some form of abuse they have much less of an ability to escape that when they're not going to school every day interacting with others, don't have that safe space. For a child that doesn't have access to regular food. And they rely on New Haven Public Schools for that full belly every day. I think those are challenges that so many people in our community have experienced and throughout the pandemic it's been very, very difficult for people. And I personally was very fortunate to

have a group of people and a sense of purpose that I think not everyone was fortunate to have.

Smith: What do you remember about Black Lives Matter?

Elicker: A lot. A lot. You know, I remember a lot of protests, I remember struggling myself with what the right decision was on policing and public safety. Whether to remove money from the police department to invest in the many other things that need support. I remember protesters coming out and protesting outside my home multiple times, I remember removing, making the decision to remove the Columbus statue and very tense protests on both sides around that issue. It was a very intense time and I think an important time for us to go through, we're obviously still going through that. And as a society there's so much more divisiveness unfortunately. I think in New Haven by and large we haven't seen that kind of divisiveness, most people in New Haven tend to lean left, and tend to by and large agree on the importance of welcoming everyone. That the definition of being an American is not about race or ethnicity or economic status or culture it's about the values that we share. And the Black Lives Matter protests were challenging for every mayor to deal with and I think there were some things I would have done slightly differently about how to engage people. For example, I've changed my general approach to protests since then, but I tried to speak with the protesters and there was a lot of yelling at me. And I said, "If you don't want to speak with me, so be it." And I left. In hindsight I think it's important for people to have the opportunity to just unload, to vent. It's not about me, it's about what I represent as an institution, right. And so, since then I have really made an effort to show up to every protest that I can and listen and listen and listen. And almost every protest when people at first are unloading their anger and frustration and after an hour, after an hour and a half, we start to have real conversations about how to address the challenges. I think people realize that the city is working very hard, and overall we generally share our values. And that we need to do a lot more as well and we should work together to confront those things. And it doesn't always end perfectly, not everyone is always happy with the policies that we have, and we may not 100% agree but, being able to listen and I think find the space to have a conversation with each other to really understand better each other I think is an important thing.

Smith: I'm certain you did but I have to ask, but did you follow the election of 2020? Of course, I'm certain.

Elicker: A little bit. Just a little bit.

Smith: Just a little bit. And it's okay if you're not, are you comfortable sharing who you voted for and why?

Elicker: [laughs]. Of course, I voted for Joe Biden. Yes, I mean I have strong opinions that I'm sure because of things I've already said about what it means to be an American that Donald Trump was and continues to be so divisive and promoting inaccuracies that

unfortunately people tend to believe and rhetoric that divides us as a nation. And I think in many ways we're at a really sad point in our nation where we can't talk to each other, people don't listen to each other. People don't step back and see that overwhelmingly we share each other's values. And that people that may look different, people that may have different customs, people that may wear different clothing or from economic backgrounds are really not that different from each other. And we need to seek out more opportunities to talk with people and live alongside people that are different from us, rather than gathering together with our own little group of like-minded – quote unquote, “like-minded individuals,” because we realize, that I think we will realize if we live together and engage with each other, that we're actually much more like-minded than some of those out there would try to push us to believe.

Smith: What do you remember about the events of January 6, 2021?

Elicker: I remember sitting in my office watching the TV with my jaw open and just shocked that in this nation that could happen. That evening we gathered together with pastors, elected leaders, right out next to the Amistad statue in front of City Hall and had a gathering where we spoke about the values of our nation and our city, and called out the awful rhetoric and attacks that we saw on the capitol.

Smith: Okay these last few questions are what we call our “big questions,” and these are open-ended –

Elicker: -- We've already covered some pretty big questions here.

Smith: [laughs] These are more open-ended questions, and I'll go ahead – you answer them however you feel necessary, I know we're on a time limit. What did you lose during the pandemic?

Elicker: That group out there is where I need to be.

Smith: Okay. What time is it, where are we on time.

Elicker: Ten thirty.

Smith: Okay. What did you lose during the pandemic?

Elicker: Like, physically or emotionally?

Smith: However you see that question.

Elicker: So, you know, I would say that I lost a little bit of my naivety, if you will. And that was concurrent with a lot of things that were going on nationally that weren't directly associated with the pandemic. About people attacking each other, totally undermining the science, and the fact that so many people that I think are ultimately good people, believed the lies. I lost a little bit of my feeling that if you just talk to people enough you'll be able to

convince them of something. At the same time, I gained a lot during the pandemic. And I know that's not your question –

Smith: No that's the next question, that's okay.

Elicker: That's the next question, I gained more than I lost because there were so many examples in our community of people that helped each other out. Like just, the list goes on, and on, and on. We had food distributions, we just had tons – we always had more volunteers than we knew what to do with –

Smith: Wow –

Elicker: -- Because people wanted to help out. People were shopping for a senior neighbor because that person was more vulnerable than they were. People were coming together to have demonstrations about some of the instances of hate. The eleven people that were shot in Pittsburg at the synagogue, we had a gathering like the one we have organized today to condemn attacks on Americans. Gatherings, we had another gathering against the attacks we saw on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, we saw so many people come together as a community and really try to help out others. And what's most beautiful about it is that often times it was people that they didn't even know. It wasn't their friend or, it wasn't their family member, it was people that they didn't know because they just needed to come together and help one another.

Smith: Can you describe the pandemic in one word?

Elicker: No. [laughs]. That's not my word. No, I don't think I could. You know, I could think for a long while, the pandemic was many, many words.

Smith: Greatest lesson you learned?

Elicker: So many lessons, right. I learned the importance of team. You know, we didn't talk about our – the leadership of City Hall, there were maybe 15-20 people every day that were on a Zoom call. That team worked every single day of the week, Saturday and Sunday too for months and months. It was to the point that we were talking about each other's mental health because people were working unbelievable hours to keep our community safe. And in addition to the fact that so many people in our community helped each other out, the team that we had was working around the clock because they understood the severity of what we were facing. And their personal role in helping literally save lives. And oftentimes I think people throw that around, "We're saving lives," but the decisions that were being made were literally saving people's lives. And the weight of that was significant, but you saw in our team's response that people got it and rose to the challenge.

Smith: Did you change in any way during the pandemic personally?

Elicker: Yes, a lot. I became a lot closer to our family. I valued my two daughters even more than I already did. I think because we were, aside from working at City Hall, the only social

interaction that we had, we became very, very close as a family. And at the same time that I lost some of my naivety about certain people, I also gained a lot of hope from so many of the things that I saw.

Can this be our last one?

Smith: Yes, this is our last question, cause it goes into what is your hope for the future?

Elicker: We face so many challenges as a city that many other cities face that are rooted in income inequality. And I think we saw a lot of movement by some people in their view on how we address income inequality that's based in the structures that exist, that's based in structural racism, that's based in a history where people that oftentimes have things want to understandably perpetuate what they have, but that isn't inconsistent with the ability to support others as well. And it is so important for our society to address income inequality and have meaningful change from everything from housing, to education, and we've made progress but we need to make so much more progress there and I'm hopeful that many people will realize more and more just how important this issue is for everyone to embrace and confront and work on together.

Smith: Awesome.