

Oral history interview with Anne Mercer and Taki Tanaka, interviewed by Alex Duben for the Connecticut Historical Society's Community History Project discussing their experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Interviewed on 8 June 2023 in West Hartford, Connecticut.

Transcript created by TheirStory and edited by Kasey Calnan.

Alex Duben: And we're set. Okay, this is Alex Duben interviewing. It is June 8, 2023. I am here at J. Rene in West Hartford, and if you both can just say your name, your age, your occupation, and where you're from.

Anne Mercer: Okay. My name is Anne Mercer. I am currently 30 years old. I am from New Milford, Connecticut, currently reside in the New Haven County area of Connecticut. My profession, I guess you could just say a coffee professional. I do it all from bar work to behind the scenes stuff as well as I am a freelance writer for the specialty coffee industry.

Taki Tanaka: My name is Taki Tanaka. I live in West End of Hartford. My occupation is barista/manager of J. Rene. What else was that?

Alex Duben: Age.

Taki Tanaka: Age, 49. What else?

Anne Mercer: I think that was it.

Alex Duben: So, do you remember where and when you first heard about COVID-19?

Taki Tanaka: I read about it in the New York Times.

Anne Mercer: I think my husband told me about it when we were in Nashville on a trip visiting our friends in February 2020. That's where we first started kind of talking about it.

Alex Duben: So, what was the first disruption to your life due to COVID?

Anne Mercer: I think the biggest one for me, because this is such like a seared memory in my mind, I was on my way to Coffee Fest in New York, which was happening that week in March 2020, get down to the convention center. And our conference was still on, but everything else in the Javits Center was closing down. There were like giant apocalyptic signs saying like "convention closed, convention postponed." So that was kind of the first time that it was like, oh, something's really happening. And then when we got back from the convention, that week was kind of when everything shut down here at the cafe. Shut down is kind of a loose term because we never actually closed, but it radically transformed how we did things.

Taki Tanaka: Kind of similar, I wasn't traveling or anything, but I was running, I was managing a restaurant in West Hartford and we got notices from the state and whatnot.

And we were forced to, I think we did close for when we first learned it. And then we tried to figure out how to run a business without totally shutting down. But I do remember, I think it was the first Friday after we were trying to shut down, I actually walked around West Hartford around 8 p.m., which when we are usually bustling with people, I went around taking pictures. I can give you those pictures too, those are eerie pictures.

Anne Mercer: Just like empty?

Taki Tanaka: Empty. Everything was empty Friday night.

Alex Duben: So, J. Rene never quite closed?

Anne Mercer: No, we never closed. The inside, obviously it was all takeaway only, you couldn't sit down. We had to take away the porcelain cups. We drastically reduced the menu to make sure it was quick, fast service. And yeah, it was kind of like night and day from what we were. We're known as a spot where you sit down, you enjoy your coffee, I mean you do it every day. We know people who come here and to go from being able to have a cup of coffee with Taki for example and just sit here and chat to just masks on, take a coffee and go, hi by, it was crazy different.

Alex Duben: I mean how, you said you guys shut down initially, the restaurant, was that just for a week or so?

Taki Tanaka: Yeah, I think so. It was a short time and then we tried to do takeout only. I think we closed for two weeks or so and then we did takeout only. It was just myself and my chef.

Anne Mercer: No way, I did not know that.

Alex Duben: So, you were working just shorter hours and just the two of you were packing everything up?

Taki Tanaka: Yeah, we were taking orders by phones and emails or whatever and then we were just packing everything, just the two of us.

Alex Duben: And then it was just the people coming in, people had to order in advance, come in?

Taki Tanaka: Yup, and we had the window, one window where we were passing the food through or like placing and having people pick them up and that was it. We had boxes ready to go.

Alex Duben: But it was all mostly phone, you guys didn't have, you didn't have an app, you didn't have, you weren't part of a chain, so you were just-

Taki Tanaka: No, it was an independent, well independent enough restaurant group and so yeah, no, it was more via I think email and phone.

Alex Duben: And J. Rene, now you guys have an app?

Anne Mercer: Yeah, well that was why we started using it

Alex Duben: That was, that was what-

Anne Mercer: Because we were like, all right, we need something. You know, some people were afraid to come into coffee shops and rightfully so. And so, we said, you know, where we are, you can't do like a drive-thru situation. It's very dangerous to have baristas running out there with coffees. So, we're like, let's find a, you know, kind of an app solution. And being such a small business, the like Uber Eats and DoorDashes of the world kind of didn't make sense for us. Because they're marketplace apps, but plus like the fees were just outrageous. So, we went with the Joe app because they're meant for coffee businesses. So, they were actually running a promotion at the time that no fee, like no upfront fees, no setup fees. It was just like; I think it was either transaction or service. It was like one of those fees were the only fees because they realized, you know, how dire the situation was for everybody.

Alex Duben: And everyone's margins at that point kind of shrunk.

Anne Mercer: To nothing, practically.

Alex Duben: So, back then it was pretty much just people coming in and not wanting to wait. I mean, I remember coming in now and then and getting coffee, but it was, you know, you don't want to sit around and wait for five minutes while they'll make a pour over.

Anne Mercer: Yeah. I mean, we didn't even, we actually took away the pour overs and stuff because it was just not feasible. And there were like, you know, sanitary concerns. It was, you know, early on people were still like washing groceries and everything. So, we were like, there's no way we can do, you know, a manual pour over without somebody being cautious. And so, we were like, let's just take it away.

Alex Duben: I mean, you kind of talked about this, but how did you, how did you keep yourself safe? I mean, both at work and just outside of work, at the start especially.

Taki Tanaka: I mean, we did get all the instructions from the government. So, we followed everything, you know, to the T, you know, gloves, masks, hand washing, all the precautionary things that were advice were followed. I mean, it was, we didn't know how, you know, I couldn't underestimate how bad it may be because we had no idea.

Anne Mercer: Yeah.

Taki Tanaka: So yeah, we, and again we minimized, I mean, we did not have staff. We just said, you know, we had to, we had to lay people off. And then of course the

government stepped up and helped and then New York too. So, we were able to, and it was just myself and the chef and we had to just be careful of each other and that was it. You know, so that kind of minimized a lot of risks.

Anne Mercer: Yeah. For us, we definitely lost a lot of staff too as part of it. Like I technically lost my job as a barista, but you know, we're still a roastery. We still have to keep up with that. And one of the things that we kind of odd silver lining to say that we saw as a result of people not being able to come here and enjoy their coffee is our online program just exploded. People shipping coffee to their house, to their loved ones, even businesses shipping it out to employees and stuff. So, rather than being on bar, I switched over to more behind the scenes stuff and was helping with production and getting those orders out the door. So, in terms of safety, you know, our baristas had, like you mentioned, all the different precautions that the state required, gloves, masks, et cetera. But we also did a lot of our roasting on hours that weren't necessarily like peak hours for us because those shifted. So, it was a lot of like, all right, how do we manage being both technically like a manufacturing facility and a coffee shop and customer health? So, a lot of it was just pivoting.

Alex Duben: And food service, you're kind of used to washing your hands 50 times in the course of a shift.

Anne Mercer: Oh, yes. It's a necessity.

Alex Duben: Like there are certain things that kind of just worked out.

Anne Mercer: Right.

Alex Duben: So, did you or someone you know get COVID?

Anne Mercer: Mhmm. Do you want me to just elaborate on that?

Alex Duben: I mean, if you want, if you feel comfortable.

Anne Mercer: I didn't actually get COVID at the beginning. I didn't get it until like 2022. It was that like very last big wave we had. And that was, again, after being vaccinated and boosted and everything. But I actually, one of my family members, not direct, but like a cousin, had it at the very beginning in March 2020 and didn't know what it was until they were like, "oh, my God, it's COVID." So that was really interesting to kind of see how they dealt with that.

Taki Tanaka: I'm kind of the same. I didn't get it officially until the second wave came. But we, myself and my chef, we talked about this. But like, "did we already have it?" Like we really asked that question to each other because we were, we had a like slight cold like just before this thing came official.

Anne Mercer: Mhmm.

Taki Tanaka: You know, and we were like, "did we already?" I mean, in the restaurant industry too.

Anne Mercer: Yeah.

Taki Tanaka: Because it's just, we were constantly with people all the time.

Alex Duben: Yeah.

Taki Tanaka: So, we wondered that, but you know.

Alex Duben: Between winter in New England and food service.

Anne Mercer: Yeah. Yeah.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah.

Alex Duben: You're used to getting like a little something all the time. So, where did you find reliable information?

Anne Mercer: During like peak COVID?

Alex Duben: Yeah.

Anne Mercer: Like you said, New York Times, CNN.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah, I think just like anybody else, I think we pay, everybody pay attention to the news.

Anne Mercer: Yeah. A little more than normal.

Taki Tanaka: But also, again, being in this industry, you know, we were in contact with the Connecticut Restaurant Association all the time. The state, the government and even the city did a lot too. So, like those, those were big for sure. Connecticut Restaurant Association was working hard too to keep us open yet be safe at the same time. So, they did a lot of hard work.

Alex Duben: So, they were providing you with certain information and resources?

Taki Tanaka: A lot of information, updates.

Anne Mercer: Yeah, especially as like the restrictions and everything would change for us. Like, you know, one month it was like, all right, you can have, I don't know, for shits and giggles, you know, 25 people in. Okay, now it's, we're back down to 10 people in at a time. Like they were really good about updating us on all of those changes.

Taki Tanaka: And I think they did a lot of kind of, not negotiating, but figuring out how can the business stay open inside this pandemic. That, and work with the government.

I mean, they were definitely, they definitely presented as, I felt they were doing a great job during that time. It really helped.

Alex Duben: So, did you agree with the mask mandates?

Taki Tanaka: Absolutely at the time, yes.

Anne Mercer: Yeah, at the beginning. Absolutely.

Alex Duben: Vaccine mandates?

Taki Tanaka: I did.

Anne Mercer: Yeah.

Alex Duben: So how, I mean, you've talked a little about how work has changed through the course of it, but sort of your work kind of kept constantly changing and adjusting. And there's kind of the rules shifting. Especially as that summer happened and everything kind of half opened.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah.

Anne Mercer: Mhmm.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah. So, I think we ended up closing yet again. And I actually, like I'm a workaholic, a bad case. But during that time, I had a little bit of a break actually, I felt. And I was able to stay home a little bit, a couple weeks again. And it was actually more than that, maybe three weeks or something like that. And for me, it was actually kind of helpful, to be honest. Among all the bad news I was getting, but I was getting the rest that I needed. But when we came back, it was a difficult situation because, one, the government, to me, it felt like the right thing for the government to step in and help the unemployed people. But at the same time, in my situation, nobody wanted to come back to work when we needed people. So, that happened also. And we were working with, again, minimum staff when we came back.

Anne Mercer: Remind me what the question was. Sorry.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah, I'm sorry. I think I kind of went off-

Alex Duben: Just how work changed over the course of this. But you kind of went into-

Anne Mercer: Yeah, I think for us it was, like you mentioned, minimal staff. We had to shift hours. Yeah, I kind of described it before. It was a lot of just, like, we had to take away a lot. And we didn't really add things back as new mandates or whatever came out. Just because, like you said, you shut down again. We never knew if it was going to be like, "all right, we'll bring this back. Oh, just kidding. We can't do that now." So, we were very cautious in that regard. Yeah, I think it was just a matter for us as a business as a whole and not just a coffee shop. We really looked at other sales channels to keep

us afloat, which is how our wholesale and our, it was really just our online sales really helped out during that time.

Alex Duben: So, how has your community changed since spring of 2020? However you want to define your community?

Anne Mercer: I mean, I'll take it from a small business standpoint. It was actually kind of surreal to see people really championing small businesses at that time. I know I keep harping on the online sales, but that's really what helped us a lot during that time. And we had just launched that online store maybe like three or four months prior. So, like, wintertime in 2019. And we did it very quietly. Just like, "hey, we have an online store if you can't come to the shop." Like, we didn't really think anything of it. And that first week when we had to say, like, "hey, you can't come in anymore. You can do takeout only. We'll still be roasting for the retail shelf." It was just surreal to watch everybody be like, "oh, no, no, not a problem." And then just order all their coffee online. And next thing I know, I came in one day and it was like, "hey, you have to package up 100 boxes of coffee." I was like, "what? This is fantastic, but oh, dear God." So, it was really nice to see the community kind of rally around small businesses.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah, I agree with that. Not only just small businesses, but I think overall, I think I felt at least in my community, like as in this particular area, I felt like people were more sensitive to other people's needs. I really felt that during the time. And I think there's still a little bit of residual effect of that right now, too. So, there was some, that's one good thing that I think that came out of it. I think it definitely kind of changed people's mindset a little bit.

Alex Duben: Yeah. So, moving on to sort of the rest of 2020. What do you remember about sort of Black Lives Matter and sort of how that conversation evolved in that summer?

Taki Tanaka: What do I remember? I remember marching. I remember putting up the signs. I remember, I mean, myself and my partner were, sensed some importance in it, definitely, and definitely wanted to be supportive. And we were somewhat vocal and expressive about that feeling. We tried to help out, we think, where we can.

Alex Duben: You were talking about that sense of community you felt, in general? It was an extension of that in some ways?

Taki Tanaka: Yeah, I think so in general, I think so. And that was, I think, was obviously the things that triggered were very, very negative things. But at the same time, I think people were also in that sensitive mindset at the time. And I think we all of us were able to, again, maybe limited to our areas. I don't know. But at least in my experience with my neighbors, we felt like we were rallying for others.

Anne Mercer: Yeah. So, the way I remember it is my husband is a middle school teacher. Actually, 2020, nope. Sorry. At the time, he was an elementary school teacher. He had just shifted jobs at the end of 2020. And I remember him having to kind of explain to children what was happening over Zoom. So, I remember him trying to

navigate that. And you know, the school district he taught in or teaches in is predominantly white. So, having to kind of navigate that conversation about, like, what's happening, why is everybody doing the things they are doing? It was interesting to watch him, you know, communicate that to six, seven, eight, nine-year-olds. And they got it, which was the great part, which makes me very hopeful for future generations. But yeah, that's what I remember most about that time was seeing how the younger generations.

Taki Tanaka: Kids are different now. Kids are really sensitive about those things nowadays. Which is really, really good. It's a good thing.

Alex Duben: So, did you follow the election of 2020 and are you comfortable sharing who you voted for?

Anne Mercer: I voted for Biden. It was the day of our anniversary, my wedding anniversary, when they announced that he had won. So, that was a very nice day in multiple respects.

Taki Tanaka: I did not. I actually, I'm here on a green card, so I can't vote. That's okay, I think being on record.

Alex Duben: Fair enough. So, what do you remember about the events of January 6th, 2021?

Anne Mercer: I remember sitting on my couch. I was doing a lot of at-home freelance work at that time while still working here and everything. But that was one of my days to be at home and do freelance work. And I turned on the news because I had seen something on Twitter. Like, oh, something's going down at the Capitol. And then I remember watching it going like, "oh, oh." And it just kind of started escalating. And I was texting my husband being like, "hey, I know you're at school right now. And I know we're nowhere near Washington, D.C. But still, you just might need to be aware of what's happening. Especially if your kids start talking about it in class." But it was wild to watch on the news.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah, I was just like anybody else, watching it on TV.

Anne Mercer: It didn't seem real, you know? It almost seemed like you were just watching a movie. You were like, really? And then it sunk in, you know?

Taki Tanaka: It's similar to the Twin Tower attack. It was just TV. Just staring into TV all day. Like, it's surreal. Can't believe it. What's going on? This is the United States. I mean, I'm here by choice. You know? That's a big deal to me, you know?

Alex Duben: So, was your mental health impacted by the pandemic?

Anne Mercer: I mean, I feel like generally, broadly speaking all of our mental health was impacted in some way or another. I think there's both sides of the party. Some of us, for those in the food service industry, if they shut down or hours changed, we got that time

off that we really never got to get before. And then for others, it was, you know, whether you're in the medical profession or emergency services, or like my husband, a teacher, it just kind of went a little negative for a while. Personally, it was a very turbulent time to figure out career and life. We were in the middle of a move in the summer of 2020, so that was fun. So, I think, I mean, mental health was definitely affected. I'm not sure if it was overly positive or overly negative. It kind of balanced out with everything going on, but definitely affected.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah, me too, I think. It was not more public or more work than personal for me. It's just that the labor relations as a manager of a restaurant, it was very difficult. We needed people to come back to work. People didn't want to. Okay. Understandably so.

Anne Mercer: Yes.

Taki Tanaka: So, what do we do? How can we reward the people who actually came back to work in a fair manner? While people who are also at home, decided to stay at home, are they taken care of? Well, we better at least be able to take care of people who are coming back to work for us, especially. And it was difficult. It was difficult, because it's not like we're making great sales at the time either. We were operating on limited time. People who are usually rely on tip income were not getting the same tips. Or actually per sales, maybe we were getting more and more tips, but then we're just shortening hours and less people coming out. Overall, it was just a difficult time. And being a manager, I was in between my staff and ownership and balancing. It was a real balancing act. And really, to be honest, it was pretty stressful at the time for me because of that. More than anything else, really, to be honest.

Alex Duben: Did your approach to mental health and your own self-care change?

Taki Tanaka: Not me.

Anne Mercer: I don't know. Not in the short term. I think short term, it was a matter of just taking on whatever new information was coming at us, rolling with it, and seeing what happened. I think maybe a few years out now, we're thinking, alright how do we better take care of ourselves, physically, mentally, etc. So, I think there was a lot of lessons learned related to mental health. And hopefully, knock on wood, we can all move forward in a better manner towards our mental health now that we've all been through it. But yeah, I think was just more like a lot of lessons learned and how to deal with it all.

Taki Tanaka: I ended up losing my job because I snapped at my ownership at the end. It's a business, so there's a bottom line. So, I understand the bottom line. But I had asked for a certain sort of attitude change, basically, from the ownership. I didn't get it, and I kind of snapped at them. And I couldn't believe it, but I was let go a couple days later. So yeah, it was pretty stressful. And then I ended up joining the ranks of stay-at-home, people were staying at home for a while because of that. I don't know. It was crazy. It was a crazy time.

Alex Duben: Sort of a forced vacation.

Taki Tanaka: Forced vacation for me, yeah. Because I was willing to work.

Alex Duben: Did it give you a chance to kind of rethink what you were doing, what you wanted to do, how you were going to do it?

Taki Tanaka: Yes and no, because I think I was that way from, I always thought staff first. That really didn't change for me. But then I realized that I have to choose who I work for carefully. Because if I'm not aligned in that sense, it would be difficult for me. I think probably a lot of people felt the same way. Because a lot of people left work once, and then probably rethought about what does it mean to work?

Anne Mercer: Yeah. What is labor?

Taki Tanaka: Yeah. What is the simple balance? But it became more than just life-work balance. It was more real now. For me, work is life. To be totally honest with you. It was a lot of figuring out in that sense. But it was really like, where do I go? Who do I work for? Let's make sure I'm aligned with the ownership, whoever I work for, in regards to the labor relationships. How to respectfully treat your employees, the people who actually work for you.

Alex Duben: How were your relationships with loved ones affected at this time?

Anne Mercer: I was forced to stay at home with my husband forever. It was great, because we're kind of similar in type. My husband and I are both workaholics. We've both got our day jobs, if you will, and respective side hustles. On top of being a teacher, he's a musician. Pre-pandemic, he was always playing gigs and teaching. He would be hired to go teach other schools' various programs. I was freelance writing all the time, doing coffee stuff, working my way up in that world. So, to have this time together, it was like, "oh, we actually have time to hang out and watch a movie for once? What do you mean?" It was nice to get to spend that time together that we really never had the opportunity to do in a long term. It was difficult being away from my parents, my sister, his brother, grandparents, etc. I remember we did a lot of Zoom game nights, which was a little weird and hard to organize. It's very hard to play Pictionary over Zoom when somebody's literally watching you pull the card and draw it. It doesn't work. I feel like everybody made that extra effort to be connected, however that meant.

Taki Tanaka: Similar, I got to spend more time with my partner. My partner has a son, and I cooked a lot. I did a lot of cooking like I've never had before. Being Japanese, I was cooking Japanese food. Her son was introduced to a lot of Japanese food and he actually liked them. All those little things that actually were a good thing that came out of it. As far as my family, they're back in Japan, so they all did the same thing using technology to connect and make sure everybody's good and feeling okay. Extra communication happened, actually. I never talked to my parents.

Alex Duben: Here you were checking in constantly.

Anne Mercer: Right, yeah.

Alex Duben: So, did you pick up any new hobbies?

Taki Tanaka: I did a lot more cooking than I used to.

Anne Mercer: I don't know if I picked up new hobbies. Matt definitely did. He picked up every possible hobby that wasn't related to music and teaching. I think I resorted back to hobbies I used to have but didn't have time for anymore. A lot more reading. I love to read, but I never have time to do it. Reading, any sort of exercise, fitness. I actually had time to do that now. Going outdoors more. We saw, especially in Connecticut, a huge surge in people using trails and outdoor areas, which was great. But then those of us who like to use the trails all the time were like, "go away." But yeah, I think it was a lot more going back to hobbies I had previously but just didn't have time for.

Alex Duben: Alright. So, the final little batch of few questions are what we call the big questions. They're kind of open-ended. What did you lose during the pandemic?

Taki Tanaka: I almost want to say nothing.

Alex Duben: You did lose a job.

Taki Tanaka: That's nothing. Again, having said work is life, at the same time, I'm happy with the way I lost it. I stood for what I believed in. I was able to get another job soon enough. But yeah, I guess you could say that. Realistically, I did lose a job.

Alex Duben: And we can say, work is life, but also in the midst of a pandemic it kind of puts that phrase into a little, it's kind of like, well, yes and no.

Taki Tanaka: Right, gave me a new perspective. And it, really it probably helped me a little bit, to be totally honest with you.

Anne Mercer: I would say time, but with those who are older. A couple of our family members were in nursing homes at the beginning. So, you know, you couldn't go see them. They don't understand Zoom by any means. And we tried, and it just absolutely did not work. So, I'd say time.

Alex Duben: What did you find during the pandemic?

Anne Mercer: Sleep. No, that's a fake answer.

Alex Duben: What's a real answer?

Anne Mercer: Yeah, a lot more sleep than usual.

Taki Tanaka: I mean, definitely gained personal time, for sure.

Alex Duben: Can you describe pandemic in one word?

Taki Tanaka: Pandemic in one word. Another word. Hmm.

Anne Mercer: I don't know if this is a good word, but I'm going to use the word turbulent.

Alex Duben: That's a good word.

Anne Mercer: Because beyond, you know, or am I allowed to explain it, or do I just get one word?

Alex Duben: You can explain it.

Anne Mercer: You know, there's the turbulence of not knowing what's happening. There's only so much we know and we're finding out. And then all these socioeconomic problems are happening on top of medical problems. It kind of felt like being on a plane. You hit turbulence, and it's like, "Oh, dear God. Okay, we're back to normal. Oh, dear God." You know, just little bumps of turbulence.

Taki Tanaka: Can I bandwagon that?

Alex Duben: Sure.

Taki Tanaka: Because that's good. Because everything else was happening. I mean, maybe it was causing some of it, too. I don't know. But everything else was happening at the same time. And definitely yeah, turbulent. That's a good word.

Alex Duben: The greatest lesson you learned.

Taki Tanaka: The greatest lesson I learned.

Alex Duben: I mean, you kind of talked about this, about work, about what it means, about what you do and who you work with.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah. I think my beliefs are mostly confirmed, I think. What I stood for, what I stand for was mostly confirmed. Yet, I also had to learn to sort of take a step back, too. I was forced to, and I found out that it was not a bad thing. So, that's something that I gained from it. I learned from it. Yeah, so both.

Anne Mercer: There were many lessons learned. I think maybe the biggest one is that life's too short to do something you're not a fan of. I think we saw a lot of that in the food industry. A lot of people who may not have used the food industry as their career, like Taki and I do. But it was just a means of income for them. Maybe they used this opportunity to go finally do that thing that they love. And we can't be mad at them for that. That's their life's trajectory. For me, I'm not necessarily somebody who enjoys being behind the bar as much as others. But there are pockets of this industry I do love. So, it was a matter of finding those various pockets and paths. I think the time that we

were forcefully granted to think about that really led to that lesson.

Alex Duben: How did you change during the pandemic?

Taki Tanaka: I might have, I might have become, again, I think because my beliefs in what's, I don't want to say it's right or wrong, but it's more of how I want to be was confirmed. And I think I might have become more stubborn.

Anne Mercer: Yeah.

Taki Tanaka: I think I started drawing a line. It's kind of similar to what you just said. What do I really want to do? Who do I want to be? And I think I started drawing a line where I won't cross that towards the other side, I think. So, in a way, I'm more stubborn now than I used to be about those things.

Anne Mercer: I'll kind of echo that. I wouldn't necessarily call myself stubborn. I can be very stubborn, don't get me wrong. But more, I think, cognizant of things I enjoy, things I don't enjoy, things I'm okay with, not okay with. That was a period to be like, "All right, I don't agree with this, here's why. I do agree with this, here's why. This is what I like to do, this is what I don't like to do." And all those that are in those cons column of the pros and cons list, now I know. Let's not go that way. So, I think I changed that way, knowing. I think you said your beliefs were kind of solidified a little younger than you. I had that time to be like, "All right, I'm not focused on my job right now, let's focus on me" and learning those things.

Taki Tanaka: Yeah.

Alex Duben: What advice would you give someone who experiences a future pandemic?

Anne Mercer: Oh boy. Don't use social media as a news source unless it is verified from a verified news source.

Taki Tanaka: That's a very, very good one.

Anne Mercer: Vet your sources.

Taki Tanaka: That's a very, very good one.

Anne Mercer: If social media still exists in the future.

Alex Duben: Yeah.

Taki Tanaka: What advice? I want to say, you know, not to panic and also to, this may sound weird, but the trust the authorities who have done the studies and like just, I don't know, just be similar to what you said, I think. Because the confusion and chaos is what you want to avoid. And, you know, everything that comes from the health department may not be absolutely correct, but, you know, it's still, I think avoiding the

chaos is most important, I think, you know. And it was somewhat because of social media, I think the chaos was possible. And I think more or less, I think we avoided a lot of it here because we're in a certain area of the country, luckily, I feel.

Alex Duben: What is your hope for the future?

Taki Tanaka: What? That's a big one.

Alex Duben: I told you these are big questions.

Anne Mercer: I'm going to kind of-

Taki Tanaka: Hope for the future. For who? For us? For in general?

Anne Mercer: I think just for the future. I'm going to steal from Rene here because you've probably heard him say this many times. I would hope that we as humanity do a better job at coming to the table and like breaking bread, if you will, and talking things out rather than going back to social media just screaming into the void on the internet. You know, find time to listen to others, hear their perspectives. Be a more understanding, I guess, society as a whole. I don't know what that looks like. I don't know what that may mean in the future. There may be social media. There's not. Maybe there's flying cars. I don't know. But just understanding as a whole because I think if we talk a lot of things out, we'll find that there's more commonality than separation.

Taki Tanaka: I totally agree with you. But that's, I mean, is this like a realistic question or is this like?

Alex Duben: It means whatever you want it to mean.

Taki Tanaka: Oh, my God. So, yeah, the hope is definitely that. Hopefully, definitely that. Realistically, it just feels like it's getting more and more difficult every day. So, realistic hope is that I'm just hoping that it doesn't escalate to the point where it's just nobody is communicating. So, opposite of that. And like, you know, I just want to avoid violent situations, hopefully. Just again, I live here by choice. I believe in this country, the idea. I believe in it. The idea is threatened to a good extent right now. And so, my hope is the idea wins. Of this country. [unclear]

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

Anne Mercer: I mean, I think this is kind of a very selfish thing to say. But, you know, one thing we didn't really touch on was the state of the medical system during that time. I'm somebody who has multiple autoimmune conditions. So, trying to get the support, I'll say, that was needed for those various conditions was drastically altered. You know, everything went to Zoom calls, understandably so, as it should. Because, you know, somebody with an immunocompromised system, like going into a doctor's office filled with COVID or other ailments is not the best idea. But then, you know, I think it really showed us that, you know, the U.S. health care system has some work to

do. I don't know the answers to them by any means. I'm not qualified to talk about that. But it was definitely eye-opening to say, you know, or to experience that side of things.

Taki Tanaka: What was the question again?

Alex Duben: Is there anything else you wanted people to know about your experience?

Taki Tanaka: I just – and corporate responsibility. What it means to employ people. Again, it's a maybe unrealistic hope I have. But just overall, like, without legal, you know, penalties, I just wish that people who are in place to employ people, especially large, you know, thousands or more, that they act with some sense of honor, which sometimes, I mean, I don't see. So, that really came out, you know, in a small scale, larger scale. Everything came out in the open because of the pandemic. And it's just if we don't see those issues, yeah, this time, I don't know when. So, I hope we are including, I just don't know if we are. I just keep hoping, you know, keep hoping. And I think, again, as something, if I'm ever in any situation, any position to be responsible for others, then that's something that I would always, always honor. Just it's a huge responsibility to hire and to be a manager of others in a work situation. Because, again, you need to work to make a living right now. And as long as that's the case, I, for myself, I never want to forget how I felt during that time and just reflect that for myself to be better. And I just hope that people with a lot more responsibility than I have act the same way. I'm just hoping, I think.

Alex Duben: Well, thank you.

Anne Mercer: Thank you.

Taki Tanaka: Thank you.