

Oral history interview with Kevin Staton, interviewed Felicia Pilewski for the Connecticut Historical Society's Community History Project discussing his experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Interviewed on 12 December 2022 in Woodbridge, Connecticut.

Transcript created by TheirStory and edited by Kasey Calnan.

Felicia Pilewski: So, my name is Felicia Pilewski. The date is December 12th, 2022. We are at the Woodbridge Town Library, and I am with-

Kevin Staton: Kevin Staton.

Felicia Pilewski: Can you please tell us about yourself, your age, occupation, and your hometown? Or where you live now.

Kevin Staton: Okay. I just turned fifty years old, and I am a library media specialist. At Fairfield Ward High School. I've been a librarian for six years and was a history teacher for 21 before that. And I live in Seymour, Connecticut.

Felicia Pilewski: Do you remember where and when you first heard about COVID-19?

Kevin Staton: I heard about it in passing because we worked in the schools. So, I knew something was brewing back in 2021, maybe around Christmas holidays, but you were hearing it, you know, sparingly. People were catching it back and forth, but I think I was also paying close attention to the fact that the current President was downplaying it, and the number of cases were starting to go up. So, it was definitely on our radar screen by then.

Felicia Pilewski: And what do you remember about the spring of 2020?

Kevin Staton: Yeah. It must have been 2019. I'm sorry.

Felicia Pilewski: No. It's okay.

Kevin Staton: Yeah. I think, the spring of 2020 I had actually just started working a new job at the school I'm currently at and it was really starting to spread, and you were hearing about it in the convalescent homes, specifically. So, of course, I was concerned about my mother and she was really starting to shut things down. She, by her prior occupation as a nurse, she was just like, look, I don't know what this is, but she understood the nature of infectious diseases. And she was like, this is killing people my age, Kevin, so you're gonna just need to drop off stuff. So, I was the gopher who's going out to getting groceries and whatnot. And then we got the call from the school district, and they were saying that we're gonna have to go full remote. And I hadn't been in my new job more than a month. And at the time, we were also dealing with George Floyd and the protests that was all going on all at the same time. And so it was, it's a lot, it's a lot of turmoil.

Felicia Pilewski: Yeah. And what was the first disruption to your life due to COVID?

Kevin Staton: I had to meet with my doctor to and go over what the plans were because I'm immunocompromised. So, they sat down and they were like, do you have a will? You know, have you worked all these things out? Because if you catch this, we're not gonna put you on a ventilator. So, have you talked to your daughter, you know, like sat down, you know, and her. Not the conversation you're really looking to have, which you're. But I remember just the gravity of it. Because at the time, I felt like, I felt like it was, I felt like voting was, you know, the recent election results and the transition that was going to be huge because I was just like, heading into November of that year I was like, if the death toll is already bad, if we got another four years of this guy, it's I mean, he'll wipe out half the population. And because they were just acting like it wasn't a big deal. And I'm just and so I'm sitting there and I'm like, and I'm you know, my mother's a nurse, her sister is a nurse, and my cousin is a nurse, so my, her niece, so my you know, we're like brother and sister. So, I'm constantly back and forth with them trying to figure out what should I be doing, you know, and then you're trying to figure out what to purchase because all of a sudden things like Lysol disappeared, and they make Lysol in New Jersey. And so, as a history teacher, there's an act that was used during World War II. World War II, when he had to go to the all the car companies and say, listen, you gotta start making jeeps and tanks. So, you gotta change your production. It's a production act. The President executive order he can sign it. Just like the former president could have just signed it. He wasn't doing it because you could sign it and tell, you can tell Febreze and every other company change the chemical formula, you're all making Lysol, because we all need disinfectant. Wasn't doing it. And so, I was just sitting there, and I was like, I was very hopeful that people would realize the gravity of the of the situation. Fortunately, enough people did, but that was really scary. Because, you know, they were just denying it. They were just, you know, Fauci's coming out, and he's saying this, and then you get, you know, this guy's telling people to drink bleach. You know, I'm just I'm just sitting there, and I'm like, yo, this is, you know, especially you know, there's no vaccine. There's no, you know. So, we're just sitting there. And, you know, thank goodness, you know, the school sent us all home initially. But even with that, we had to do a lot of training, for teachers as librarians to switch to virtual, that was huge. And, just that's what I remember the most about this, just like, that was when it really hit. Because, you know, I had, you know, music teachers meeting with me with tears in their eyes because they were like, Kevin, how am I going to teach kids how to finger on instruments and do tone and pitch? And this is all virtual now. And so, everybody, you know, we were all concerned.

Felicia Pilewski: How did you keep yourself safe during the pandemic?

Kevin Staton: I was very blessed. I have a cousin who works in corrections, and we were immediately contacting each other. We just basically did this whole, like, family emergency powwow, where it was like, okay, can you get mask? Can you get Lysols? So, I mean, we just had a network, like, hey, there's Lysol at this store. I'll never forget it was one morning I was just going out, and I went to, it was a Walmart, it's gone now. It's in, it was in the suburb called Branford. And I get out of my car there when they open and I see all these elderly people and they're running. I've never seen elderly people move that fast. I was like, why are they running into Walmart? There was Lysol in the

Walmart. So, I get into Walmart and there's a lady in there, and she says to me, she's taking cans, and she's putting them in different spots. And she says, listen, change your clothes and come back in. So, I took my coat off, took my hat off and my glasses and because you only get one. It was hilarious. We were like spies or something. I felt like it was a James Bond movie. And she had a whole different outfit. She had different outfits in the car. It was, I'm telling you it was just, but we really had a survival plan. I mean, I mean, it was the basic, because initially people were buying everything. So, there was no toilet tissue. There was no Lysol. My mom was great because we got spray bottles, and we used rubbing alcohol. Everything and my mother taught me that 70% stays more than 91%, 91% will evaporate. So, the 70% actually, so we're spraying, because that's what she used to spray everything with. So every day I'm spraying the house, I'm spraying sheets because I was the go out person. My job was to go out because, you know, working at home, my job was to go out, get whatever the family needed. And so that was really, and how I kept myself safe was, yeah, I was constantly spraying myself down. I still have alcohol spray bottles in the car. I still spray it. Alright. Yeah. I still spray. I spray my mask. Yeah, and then I had set clothes that I wore all the time when I went out and I washed those clothes. So, I didn't go through, I had like a special like COVID pair of jeans and a COVID sweatshirt. That was what I always wore when I went, it was the same, and I just washed that. You know, because I was like, I wanna just start wearing all these different now I gotta try to keep up with the virus on, you know, so it was. But we, my, my family, my cousin Marvin, he was huge in terms of just, like, going through everything. I mean, he gave me gloves, you know, the biggest thing you couldn't get those N95 masks, you couldn't find them, you know, and that you could find a little, the, the little blue ones, but, you know, when it was that first COVID, that blue one was flimsy, you know, that wasn't really gonna protect you for, you know, you're wearing like two of those and a cloth one over. You know, so that's what we were just doing everything we could, you know, timing when you went out. So, I always do, still to this day, I normally grocery shop. I'm there when a store opens. And I'm in and then I'm out. But even then there were lines, you know, people forget, you know, there were lines around the block for the grocery store, you know, lined up because people were taking everything because it just, it just didn't look, it didn't look good. And the leadership was basically ignoring, you know, what was going on.

Felicia Pilewski: So, did you or someone you know get COVID?

Kevin Staton: I was blessed. Thank God. I never got it. I did, and still do everything to not get it. I have not stopped wearing a mask at work and probably will not till I retire. So, I did everything possible to not get it. I knew of coworkers that had it. That when we went back, but I didn't go back that whole next year. So, you know, March 2020 they end the school year early. I mean, you know, in terms of they sent us all home and we're remote. That next school year I was blessed to talk to our human resources person, and I provided them with my medical information. I said, look, I've already met with my daughter and done a will. I can't, if you need me to come back into the library, I need to look for another job because I can't come in. Because, you know, it was a thing where, you know, they're kids, they're teens, they're young, they don't have that idea of death like you do when you get a few miles on you. So, you know, it's like, you know, they're coming back and you know, they're mad, you know, you get the undone, unmaskers, and it and so I was like, look, I'm not dealing with that. So, no, I never had

it, but I had several coworkers that had it. Family wise, not in the immediate. Not in the immediate. My mother's, my mother, you met her. She's a beast. My mother was not, she was just, she's like, "I'm not, I'm not going out like that." She was like, I understand if it's something else, but I can, I can fight this. So, she was my motivation, you know. So, yeah. But, no, I never, never had it.

Felicia Pilewski: So, you mentioned you have some nurses in your family. Where did you find reliable information? Was it from them?

Kevin Staton: All the time. I still tap into them. And I'll get multiple perspectives from them about what to do and what not to do. They were great in terms of my mother was always like, you know, with the rubbing alcohol spray your doorknobs, spray the doorknobs as soon as you come in the house and because you gonna touch that, your cabinets, and, you know, you constantly washing your hands and but they were phenomenal in terms of just, you know, walking me through everything I needed to do pre-vaccine, you know, and we were just all out there trying to figure out how we're gonna survive.

Felicia Pilewski: When did you first hear about a vaccine?

Kevin Staton: My mother, because we, I knew they were working on it, and there was a time period. And my mother, she watched it like a hawk, and especially because I was working at home. So, I'm working from home. So, my mother was sitting there. And she's like, okay. Eighty and up. You know, I think at the time, she was like, seventy-six. She was like, listen. As soon as they say, seventy-five at the, you coming to get me to get my vaccine. My mother was in me, Oh, that's it. She worked as a nurse in Walter Reed I tell people during the Vietnam era. I said, you know how much death and disease that woman saw? I was like, she was serious. So, as soon as we heard about it, and then you know, so I brought her. And she was like, you know, and like I said, the nurses, they kept checking. It was like, we'll keep, we'll let you know for the people that immunocompromised, and then I would meet it. Oh, you can go, make your appointment. Go. So, they made it, fortunately I worked somewhere where they made it for us. Through, through work. And we were able to get vaccinated. I believe it was, 2021. It was March. March, and then we got another one in April. Like, yeah, thirty, yeah, thirty days apart. And then I got a booster, and then I got another booster, and I have one more left. There's that final one that's supposed do all the stuff. So, I have to do that one. That's my Christmas present, do that during the break because I can't. I'm not trying to get some little, some special, you know, Crayola hope, hybrid version of COVID, some, you know, Popeyes chicken COVID or some crap. She goes, like, what? Is it in the food? Uh-uh, I don't want none of that. You know, I thank God. I was like, I made it through the big one, the one that was taking everybody down. I'm not trying to get some little, you know, piecemeal thing. So, yeah. But they gave me a ton of advice about the vaccines and everything.

Felicia Pilewski: Do you agree with vaccine mandates?

Kevin Staton: Yeah. Yeah. This, the irony for me has always been that, the person who was telling people to take drink bleach had already been vaccinated. And so, I was like,

and you get these people that wanna argue with you, and I'm like, you know, you had I don't get too political, but you had people that were saying, you know, all these mask mandates infringe on people's rights, but they were getting vaccinated. And I was like, they were running to get to, like, when that first thing came, and remember they were holding these, those events where everybody called them super something, but those super spreaders. You know, they were holding events, and you had people that weren't vaccinated, and they were getting sick and dropping down. And I was like, this the it's not a political issue. And that was my whole thing with, with Fauci, they were making him a political figure. And I was like, when you go to the doctor, do you care what your doctor's political views are or do you want just the right treatment? We got bodies in the grave. You know, I remember the pictures in New York where they had caskets like, you know, piled up, mass graves, in the United States, mass graves. That's something you normally hear in countries that you know, are very impoverished. But they were doing better than we were, you know, and that was the thing. So, yeah, I can. Another thing with mask mandates. 2019 I was in Sierra Leone. I was in West Africa, and so we were working with teachers there. And so, we all became friends and we're still in touch. And they said something that's so profound to me, it was like Kevin, even though our numbers are lower than yours. Only ten percent of people are vaccinating in our country, and they will add the at that time. And he said, because we don't have vaccines. He said, you all have more than enough. Are you not taking it? And they were like, that's insane. They were like, we over here like, hey, can you please give us vaccines so we could take it. And he said, you have millions of them and it's you got more than enough for your people, and you won't take it? They're just like, you know, because they had gone through Ebola and other things that they were like, Kevin, that's insane. So it was, yeah, I'm big on the mandates. And you people there, and we had people that were like, I'm not coming in. I'm not doing it. I'd rather, you know, trying to explain it all to me. And I'm like, you know, what, oh, I might have a reaction and this and that. And I'm like, well, they hook you up to that ventilator. And that's the thing with knowing people that died, I've known people that for whatever stance decided they weren't gonna get vaccinated, a close friend of mine, his mother, and her last words on her deathbed was I should have gotten a vaccine. She passed this year. Like I spoke at her funeral. You know, and this is like, you know, and this isn't like we were trying to figure out the vaccines. It's like, vaccines just out there, you walk into CVS and just get it. So, yeah.

Felicia Pilewski: And you agree with mask mandates as well?

Kevin Staton: Yeah. One, one hundred percent. Like I said, I might never stop wearing it in terms of work, because it's just I've seen the difference. Like, you know, just in terms of, like, the flu and colds and stuff. You know, like, you know, I'm around germy teenagers all the time. I wear the mask all day. I'm like, nope. Sit right there, and they're like, oh, you're still wearing? Yes. This this is on till, you know, till the end. But yeah. Yeah. I think, and once again, I think that's what shocked me the most how that was one of the few things people found out, alright you need to do this and to watch people fight it so hard like, it was, you know, just this horrible thing to do. It's like, it's, you know, putting a mask on.

Felicia Pilewski: So, how did you use the internet during the pandemic?

Kevin Staton: Well, I was on it a lot for work. It was non-stop Google Meets and Zoom meetings, like, all the time. But because I used it so much for work, it helped me manage it. You know, one of the great things I heard Denzel Washington say, he said, are you using your phone or is your phone using you? And it really became a thing where I learned to disconnect. Especially that, before we got vaccinated, that summer of 2020, I started hiking. And I had a buddy, and we would just, we would mask up. And, like, every morning before work we would just go. And I learned all these different trails, places I had never seen, things, and just the beauty of nature. You know, I'm a theology student. So, there's this whole, like, transcendence about the beauty of God's creation that I was able to get into because I had to detach from all that stuff on it, because I used it all day long. So, it wasn't like I was, you know, constantly searching and doing all this other stuff on internet. I learned to be purposeful in terms of actually, and I still do that. I still do that now. Where it's just, we do I do field trips with students now. We just did one on existentialism, and the kids went for a nature walk where they weren't on their phones. And they were like, wow, this is, because I'm like, you're going to miss life. That was the thing I came out of COVID. I had COVID taught me there's a difference between existing and living and a lot of people don't know that. They'll exist. We exist. But you don't live. You know, like, sometimes you and the internet is great for giving you this false sense of living. Like, live, you're on TikTok, I tell the kids you're living through other people. You know what I mean? Like, how much should I care about what Kanye West does? He's a billionaire. I got bills. Hey, like, if I care if he came in and said, hey, Kev, I'mma take care of your mortgage, and your life. I'll be, oh, talk to them all day. It's a shame what Adidas did to you. Yeah. If you did that? Oh, no. I don't care about that man. But that's what the kids, they're just wrapped up, just like. So, yeah, I had to make a very purposeful decision to just like, no. It's time to just relax. Started reading, I'm a librarian, so I have to read anyway for work, but I started reading more too. So, that was really helpful.

Felicia Pilewski: And how did your work change during the pandemic?

Kevin Staton: Oh gosh. The cool thing about when I was virtual was that I was split between two schools initially. And I was able to work with teachers virtually in both schools all the time. So, I have a really busy schedule. I'm not a traditional librarian. I don't just check out books, and I don't just purchase books for collections. I'm a research librarian, so I actually go in, and I do lessons with teachers, mainly history teachers and English teachers because I was a history teacher. So, I actually get called hey, can you come in and show my kids how to do this research? Like, I'm working with kids right now on the civil war. And I come in and we say, okay how are you, what perspective are you gonna look at transportation? Are you gonna look at medicine? And we come in and do that. So, it allowed me to spread out and do more of that kind of work virtually. And now I'm at just one school, but I still I'm known for it now. Like, I became known for that's what, you know, they're like, that's what Kevin does. So, that was really cool. But I initially, you know, we were just throwing out all these software packages at teachers and I was a big, I was adamant for not doing that. We lost three hundred thousand teachers since COVID, nationwide, have left the profession. And the reason why a lot of them, what broke them was you're already trying to teach, right? So,

you're coming in as a history teacher. So, you're coming in as US history. And they normally break it in parts. You go from like, you know, Native Americans to reconstruction, and then reconstruction the modern day. So, you get your two parts. COVID hits. We come in and I drop, like, four or five software packages on you. That you gotta learn and incorporate in your teaching. And if you're a new teacher, you're just getting your curriculum down. How many people would just, you had a lot of veteran teachers, but, like, they were they were dropping like flies. They were like, no, I'm not doing that. Dude's just like, nope. I mean, I knew cats, I was like, buddies, you know, dudes that were my age. I was like, hey, man, what you doing? Retiring. I was like, what? He's like, oh, that's it. He's like, I'm not doing this. And we just, you're already overwhelmed. And what and some of the teachers out to this day, we have great conversation. I was like, think about it. What's your first priority when it hit? I don't wanna die. I don't want my mother to die. I don't want my daughter to die. So, boom boom boom. So, that's my triad. I'm trying to live. Mommy needs to live. Baby girl needs to live. Now work and all that other stuff. I'm like, you're not primary right now. Toilet tissue is important right now. You know, like, seriously, I was like, yo, we gotta figure this out. You know, it's like, you know, you you're coming up with a schedule. Like, you know, there's no meat in the store. There's no stuff. You know, my buddy jumped here, like, it's gonna be like college for you again. I was like, yep, oatmeal every day. It's like it's gonna kick back in, oatmeal and a multivitamin. It's like I Am Legend. I could live off of that for a couple of years.

Felicia Pilewski: How has your community changed since spring of 2020.

Kevin Staton: You know, COVID, I think it really showed you who people were. I just felt like, I say this now. It used to be you could debate politics and it wasn't personal. It's all personal now. Like, it's just I tell people at work I don't even talk now because it's like, I feel like I'm trying to deprogram a cult member because some stuff is just so basic to the human condition that you're fighting. And I'm like, we can agree on a lot. We can agree on, you know, taxes and economics, all this other stuff, but it's like, it's a killer virus, man. Like, I don't wanna get it. Like, and it's and it's one of those things by you not masking up and getting vacc. You know, it's like, you putting me at risk. It's like if I'd, if we're roommates and you smoke. You know, eventually, I might be sitting in the doctor's office and they're like, oh, what are these growths on your lungs, Kevin? I'm like, what? I don't smoke. So, I think that it really showed you what people's priorities were, and their willingness. I mean, I remember marches in Michigan where people were saying I gotta right to die. It's my right. And I was like, but why would you want to make other peoples? You know what I mean? It's like, if you get it you can still spread it. But I don't want, what about my right to wanna live? I wanna live, you know? So, I was like, that's I think that was the big thing with, with the my community. But, you know, once again, also the positive side with family, we really rallied around each other in terms of helping each other out. And you know, I would say the biggest thing is sometimes when you have elderly parents, like, this is the funny thing with my mother, and I think she only does this with me. My mother doesn't give you a yes or no answer. My mother only tells me a story. Tell me that, hey, like I leave here and say, hey, you need some orange juice, I'll pick you up some. She won't go, yeah, bring me some orange juice. She'll go, "well, you know, today when I have breakfast," I'm like, I'm at the grocery store. Yes. No. Let me get it. It made me much more patient because when

it clicks and you're like, what am I gonna do without her? Like, it's just that's my, that's my, you know, that's my ride or die. You know, like, you know, she's old, you know, we've been we've been, like, we've been like this. Like, you know, and it's crazy because I'm an only child. And people say, oh, you must be a mama's boy. And I was like, I wasn't raised to be a mama's boy, which is a testament to her. Like, she was always like, she raised me to be independent. Like, she would take me to the laundromat. She loves this story. So, she would separate all out my clothes out. Put them over to the side and say, let me show you how to do this once. From now on, when we come to the laundromat, you gotta fold your own clothes. It's the same thing with, like, cooking. Like, I was about eight or nine, like, little stuff, like, grilled cheese sandwich. She'd go, "Lemme show you how to do this and then don't keep bothering me. You gotta learn how to do." And she'll tell you. They're like, why are you, she's like, because I didn't wanna raise no sorry man who couldn't do anything. So, by the time I got school I knew how, I could feed myself. I could wash my clothes, you know. You know, I always tell this story when we talk about community. I was going into my senior year of high school and, she sat me down and said, so what are we doing? I was like, what do you mean? She's like, because you're not staying here. She was like, you can go to the military, you can go to college, or I'm gonna give you a list of bills, and you're gonna get a job. You're gonna be responsible. So, you know, that's my community. You know what I mean? That that's how it's, you know, it really made me appreciative of the person she was, you know, you not gonna be like forty-five in my in her basement playing Fortnite. It's just, I wasn't brought up to be like that.

Felicia Pilewski: What do you remember about BLM [Black Lives Matter].

Kevin Staton: So, I remember it was going on and, because of the time period I grew up in, so I was in college in, I started college in '89 [1989]. So, there were things that already were happening, like Yusef Hawkins in New York. There was another one in Bensonhurst, a guy got chased and hit by a car. And then Rodney King was '92 [1992]. I was interning for Disney World. So, and then there was a young lady, that was also in California. Had the orange juice in her bag, and, the store owner shot her in the back of the head because she put ripped her bag away. This is all and this helped this is a part of what, Rodney King and all that was coming. And remember, there's no smartphones. So, we already had, like, even in Connecticut we, there were places where you knew. Even to this day, you're kinda, there are places you knew, like, you know, like, there's a reason why my car has all clear windows, and there's a big old sticker the side, it says, LH. That's Laurelton Hall where my daughter went to private school. There are just things you learn to navigate society, you know, like getting pulled over by the police. I tell people, I was like, you know, my biggest infraction with the law is when my daughter was born, I left my car parked in the lot at the maternity lot because my then wife was in labor for twenty hours and I couldn't leave her. So, that's pretty much me and the law. Now ask me how many times I've been stopped by the police. Eh, probably a good ten. Guns drawn? Eh, maybe a good three, four times of that. I'm a school teacher. I look, dressed. Like, so when it was going, when it was happening, I was like, okay. And with the younger generation, I always I always think in terms of strategy, and you have to think long term. And so, you can't, this is what I always say with my generation you can't be like condescending towards the young ones who have all this energy and this passion. At the same time, they need to respect your maturity

and your wisdom. So, I told this to my daughter, I was like, you're intelligent, but you don't have wisdom. Because and there's a difference. And I said, I don't expect you to see the world like I see it at fifty. You know what I mean? She sees it at eighteen. So, you're like, right here. I'm down here, and I could do this. And I said, so we gotta come and just like I said, because I know what it's like to be young and energetic and have older people just because with us it was the civil rights folks. And so, when I saw it, I was like, okay. I thought it was great that they're getting this recorded. But just the, with BLM, it's very easy to get overwhelmed because now that you can document it, you were catching stuff. You know, like, my mother knew growing up in the south, black folks were disappearing and getting killed all the time. So, now it's like, you couldn't even keep track, you know, oh, Tamir Rice. Oh, Treyvon Martin. Oh, Atatiana Jefferson. Oh, Sandra Bland. Oh, Botham Jean. Oh, Jordan Da- [Davis]. It was just like, boom, boom, boom, oh, Charleston. The Charleston one that one by far hurt me the most as a minister and a theologian. I called my pastor, and we had to sit down because we were both broken up because I said, 16th Street Church. They left a bag of dynamite where the four girls got killed. They left a bag of dynamite and they drove off and it detonated later. He sat in that bible study with them for an hour. And they did what you do. I've run bible studies. That's what you do as a Christian. You say, you welcome him in, give him a Bible. They showed him nothing, all Christian characteristics, love. Then he got up. And so, I was like, and so I wanted to explain to young people you're dealing with something different. This isn't, you know, like, it's like, Preston and going up to Buffalo. Like, he planned that for a long time, he drew maps of the supermarket and drove three hours to go and get, like, and they all sit in these chat rooms and these discussion group like, if you go to the Museum of tolerance in New York that the ADL [Anti-Defamation League] runs. They had a room, I don't know if they still have it with computers, and the computers are all on the hate sites that they monitor. There's millions of people on these sites. And so, when I saw BLM, I was like, alright, there's a couple of things. First is the integrity of your organization. You gotta set up. So, and they're dealing with this now. They had to deal with this. All that money comes in and donations. Where is it going? Who's, because then you have leadership because that's what soon as money starts hitting the table, right? Stuff changes. So, you got people "oh, they're by houses." You know, you know, so there was that was that was going on. And I was just wondering what are we gonna do with all this momentum. I think it did carry over into the election, which was good. But I knew the pushback was coming. And it has manifested itself as I can tell you as teacher straight down the pipe through these boards of ed with CRT [Critical Race Theory] and book banning because BLM was diverse, and it was young people mainly. How do you cut that off? You indoctrinate them. You wipe that whole narrative off the table, and you the only way you get out, you get it out of schools. Can't teach it. Can't have it in your library now. So, now you get what I give you, you know, from the internet and other places. So, that's my big thing with BLM is, and I can tell you from the movements, the nationalist movements I was involved in when I was college is when people start getting money and status and power, you find out how much of an activist you are. Because I had a whole bunch of fight the power, no justice, no peace people, and they are some of the biggest, like, they're not even conservative. They're just the opportunists. They just cash it in. They care less what happens, you know, to anybody but themselves. So, they just bought in. So, you know, I hope that as that generation who's now, you know, going from some the ones that were college students who are now young adults and the

ones that were like, you know, teens and in middle school and high school and now, or in the college, I hope they're able to take some of the lessons, the good and the bad and transition that. That's gonna be huge because, this the pushback no joke, voter suppression, all that stuff. Like, you know, with, Sisima [Kyrsten Sinema] becoming an independent now. Sinema, I was like, this. So, you think you got a breath of fresh air because you're like, oh, we got [Raphael] Warnock in, so now we don't have to worry about her and [Joe] Manchin anymore, but you don't have the House. So, what's gonna happen to that John Lewis bill that we needed, because if we could push it through now that changes everything. So, it's just it's a strategy to it. It's just so I hope that they recognize that.

Felicia Pilewski: I'm assuming you followed the election of 2020.

Kevin Staton: Oh.

Felicia Pilewski: Are you comfortable sharing who you voted for and why?

Kevin Staton: Yeah. I voted for Biden, but my main concern with him, him and a Bernie Sanders and a Nancy Pelosi. There comes a time where you need to train up the next generation and not assume. We had John Lewis. John Lewis was eighty. That man fought for sixty-five years. He started at fifteen. He went till he just couldn't do it anymore. And I was Rosa Parks' waiter in college. And her, when you meet her, even Maya Angelou, I met Maya Angelou when I was in school too. When you meet her, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni's still got a little fire, but Nikki Giovanni's tired. There's a tiredness in their eyes because you're human and this physical body it's just it's gonna, it's gonna leave you one day. So, it's like, you can't keep have this to you're just like, oh, let me just keep this all. You know, there comes a point where you just got, this is probably why I became a teacher. Like, this is the best thing. I had a student, like, two days ago, on Facebook friended me. I didn't recognize, who's this? And she told me, mister Staton, the only time I smiled was when I came to your class. And then you're like, you know, fortunately it's online, so she can't see me. I'm like, oh my gosh. You know, it because you gotta. So, I voted for him, but I am very much concerned with the, you know, these eighty-year-olds, that are acting like, you know, you can, I feel it at fifty. I feel all of it. Like, when it gets cold, the cold going right into my knees. Lower back and right up in here. Right here. Let me know. Hey. You know, you're fifty, right? And I'm like, yeah. But, you know, it's just, and I can tell you, that's my big thing. It's like, they should just be sitting down and just saying, okay. He's everything I know. This work, this didn't work. This he, I don't think, I don't think he should run again. I think that, you gonna run at eighty? Eighty-one or something like that? I'm like, you know, and then you gotta get you know, galvanized young people. And really, the only thing is and this is my big issue with the election is the other side grooms the next generation. DeSantis is smarter, more politically astute, and a hell of a lot more dangerous than Donald Trump. That man is Yale undergrad and Harvard Law School. He is no dummy. He ain't gonna be all, oh, oh, you know, oh, just making some little insult and all this other stuff. That man gets in, it's gonna be methodical, and it's gonna be something like you, because he's smart. And he's gonna surround himself with smart young people. I tell people in the 2000 election, the one that Al Gore lost. The lead lawyer in Florida was Ted Cruz. Ted Cruz twenty-nine years old. Did so they had their whole crop. I tell

people I've taught in the suburbs. I taught like baby Mitch McConnell, baby Trump. You know what I mean? When I'm looking at my daughter, I'm like, you know I'm not gonna be here. Like, when he's full, unless I make it to like hundred and twenty or something like that, you know, when he's full blast that's gonna be your, you know, your problem. Like, even, alright, say he's out of law school, and he's out, and he's the senator in the next thirty years. You know, God willing, I'm at eighty. Well, what I'm gonna do? So, yeah, I voted for him, but he really, I just I sit there, man. I'm like, like, Beto O'Rourke or somebody. Get somebody. You know what I mean? Pass that torch. Alright. Here you go. You do it. They're not doing it. So, we'll see.

Felicia Pilewski: What are your thoughts on absentee voting?

Kevin Staton: Definitely, if it, with all the voter suppression, yes. We I was, we had a conference 2016. It's three days before the election. We had this guy. I think Ari Bergman [Ari Berman], he wrote a book called Give Us the Ballot [Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America]. We're at Yale. And he's telling his journals. He's like, hey, Pennsylvania is in play. And so is Michigan and Wisconsin. He's like, North Carolina is done. You're not getting North Carolina. And we had a lady from North Carolina, and she already told us she said, they moved the bus line so that seniors and poor people could catch the bus to the polls. So, they took them. They took the bus, so you can't get there. So, this is all going on. I'm sitting here. And I'm like, three days before, because I said, this might be closer than I think. People aren't crazy, they're not going to vote for this dude. And, sure enough. It's like Herschel Walker. Herschel Walker shouldn't be close. Like, you I was like, they they're not even looking to get, like, they could've gotten a legitimate black Republican. You could pull somebody from the law school or there's plenty of them. They could've got, they got this dude. Just pull people off the street. I was like, yeah, this man is not but look, it got you the President. Right? I was like, I tell people, if you went into a doctor's office, and the doctor never went to medical school, but the doctor was rich, like his parents owned the hospital. Would you say, okay, what's your diagnosis? That's what we did as a country. That's what we did. Somebody with no experience, no understanding. And you went from somebody who was a constitutional law professor at Harvard. You went from that to somebody who's, but it just speaks to, where we are. You know, where people think rich people are smart.

Felicia Pilewski: What do you remember about the events of January 6th, 2021?

Kevin Staton: So, I lived in DC [Washington D.C.]. I am, now it's important as a theologian. January 5th is the key. January 5th was like a church revival. All these preachers were down there. God wants us to take it back. God elected Donald Trump. I believe God, so, and that's when you you're doing history and you're looking at like crusades and reform. This is all, like they have a playbook. They're reading from an old playbook. So, I'm sitting there. So, January 6th comes. I'm asleep. My buddy is calling me. We both went to Howard [University] together, both lived in DC. You know how your friend keeps calling you, so you think somebody died or something like that? You're like, what man, you called me like four times in a row? What? What? Are you watching CNN? I'm like, no. He said, turn on TV. I turn on the TV. I see people storming the Capitol. And I was like, how long's this been going on? He said it's been about a

little over an hour now, almost two hours. I said, where's the National Guard? Thinking get there, Felicia, ten minutes. Like, you're right there. I can run into Virginia from the Capitol. Like, they're right there. So. I was like, so, I was like, hey, ain't nobody shot? I was like, where's the bodies? I lived in D.C. You can't run up on the Capitol. Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. That's I was like, yo, people are in? He was like, yo they're in. Ain't nobody dead? Where's the tear gas? It was, I sat there and to me as a person of color it was the most rampant display of white privilege I've ever seen in my life. I was just, and I'm looking at the officers. I was like, how come you're not shooting? Like, I know, like, I remember Black Lives Matter. They were lit. I was at the Million Man March in '95 [1995] and we marched peacefully, and I knew million black men on the mall area, I was like, somebody do one thing stupid. I said, hey, today, they dropped a bomb in the middle of the mall area. Like, they would have vaporized us for some crap like that. And I was just like, people actually, and they were already there. You see him there, "Come on. I'll go with you." And I was like, well, where's the President? Because normally, if they attack the Capitol they move you to a remote location. I lived in D.C., I know all the, you know, we worked, we did catering for them, and I worked in a restaurant. I worked in a hotel. And they were like, yo, he's at the White House. I was like, what? They didn't move him? He was like, no. I was like, okay. And I think I went in the kitchen and made something to eat because I was just, I got some like popcorn. I was like, this movie. I said, let me just see this. And then a handful of people that died there. Oh, that's so terrible. I was like, nobody should've gotten home. Nobody should and I'm not saying get killed, but it should have been, like, a mass. Like, it been it should have been so many people arrested and in jail, like, just I was astounded. I was astounded because I know how quickly the National Guard can respond to something like that. So, I was just like, wow. Just to go, I could never I can't even conceptualize putting myself in harm's way with the police like that, because I know what would happen.

Felicia Pilewski: So, moving on to some more personal questions. Was your mental health impacted by the pandemic?

Kevin Staton: You know, I think, it was easy for a lot of folks to get stir crazy initially. But once I developed those coping mechanisms where I started getting out and hiking and doing other things. It's ironic because in seminary, we're studying, like, a lot of mysticism and introspection. And so that's actually helped. And I actually wrote about Christians don't do that enough. Like, you don't just, like, unpack you. You know, these, like, people, you know, people do those new year's resolutions every year, and it's the same resolution every year. No more fake friends, no more toxic relationship. Okay. Haven't you been saying that for like twenty years? I don't know. Maybe you should look at, like, how do we wind up in the fake friend situation? So, it yeah. It was, initially, it was, I took a hit, but, you know, because it's just sad. You know, you can't, you know, couldn't see my daughter. That was probably the biggest thing. You know, it's like my mom was talking about she couldn't see me or her grandchild. That was tough. That was tough. Because my daughter, we were really close. But once I developed like the coping mechanisms and the hiking thing, I really focused on my own personal wellness and finding ways to supplement that and talk like, we started doing family zooms, and that was big because it could we could get people from all over the country to see. So, we did like one for Thanksgiving and one for Christmas, and that was really cool. And you could tell my mother, she loved that, you know, she got serious, you know, even if

it's virtual, just see each other.

Felicia Pilewski: So, moving on to the big questions. These are more open-ended. You can answer them however you wish. What did you lose during the pandemic?

Kevin Staton: Well, I can tell you one of my biggest epiphanies, especially with the coming off the 2016 election and the 2020 one was I was like, it's worse than I thought. I was like, there's really nothing rational going on. It's really just people just going for it. And it's really cult-like. I was like, just as a country. I lost, it's not so much I lost faith because I never had, you know, my faith is in the divine, in God, it ain't really in America. But I really kind of took a step back, and I was like, wow. But honestly, I lost, I lost some fake friends. People, you know, you got people who check on you and concern and my real friends, we really became close, even though it was, you know, we couldn't see each other. You know, we talked to each other. We supported each other. And, you know, the people that were really negative, or it really just don't really care about you, you really see that. So, I feel like I lost stuff that I didn't have to begin with. During COVID. I gained weight. Ate a lot. A lot of stress eating. So that was, that was pretty. So, I lost some of my health during that time. But, yeah, it was, I just felt like I lost, you know, time I could have spent with my daughter. But other than that, it was my best year ever as an educator, my year home. It was awesome. There's no microaggressions. I'm not there. It was awesome. To the office. There's just stuff I just didn't have to deal with because it was like, alright, virtual. Alright, I'm here. Doing this with your class. Alright. See you later. It don't matter if you got an attitude or we're good. So, yeah, that was yeah. There's no great loss.

Felicia Pilewski: What did you find during the pandemic?

Kevin Staton: I found a deep appreciation for my mom and everything she's sacrificed for me, a deeper. I already had one. I found a lot of a real appreciation for nature. What is it we call it? There's apophatic theology and there's cataphatic theology. And I think, the one is more you understand, you come to understand God like, tech you know, it's more like a technical thing. And the other one is you reach a point where it's like there's just certain things you can never know. And I did a lot of that with the hiking. The hiking and the oneness. So that added a lot in it. It also like it helped my career because it really, my willingness to work with students, I think really added to my reputation among my colleagues. That was big. And there were family members that we became closer through COVID. You know, that was a big, that was a big addition. Where it's like, we really like looked out for each other.

Felicia Pilewski: Can you describe the pandemic in one word?

Kevin Staton: From, I would say from start to finish it was devastating. Because I think it really is for especially for the U.S., it really exposed us as a society. It really, you know, because there are other countries where they've had to deal with adversity all the time. And to watch people's like willingness, like I was using the Sierra Leone analogy, to watch people's willingness to just the individualism. It's just so, you know, when we went to Africa, they asked us what's the biggest difference between here and the United States? And I said, here, I said, over there, you all practice communalism. So,

there if it's for the benefit of everybody, you all would do it. Here, everything's a competition. And it's not even that I have to win, Felicia, it's you have to lose. So, you have to lose for me to win instead of you can't just win and I win. So, it's like, you're coming in as a new history teacher. I'm a veteran teacher. I'll tell you everything you need to know because I don't have an agenda. I wouldn't tell you something wrong so you can look bad or be sabotaged because why would I like Why? Why? It's not a competition? Why? But just that that whole thing where, and you just saw it rampant. You just saw it rampant because it was really you think about it, you were dealing with somebody who eliminated the, like, infectious disease task force out of spite. You know, it was just this whole thing. There was so many things that had been done that if we could have gotten out in front of this, it would, I just don't feel it would have been anywhere near as bad as it could have been. It was just been like, alright, look, we gotta shut this down. But once again, you get into this whole partisanship where people are just like, oh, don't listen to them. And meanwhile, you're slipping over to the doctor, hey, give me that, hit me with that shot. I was like, Mitch McConnell, them guys went and got their shot immediately. Like, soon as they found anyone die. It's like, come on, man. So that was, yeah, it was, it was devastating. Because it just to see, so many people that I felt died were dying unnecessarily. You know? That was the biggest thing.

Felicia Pilewski: So how did you change during the pandemic?

Kevin Staton: I definitely became more introspective. I definitely became more health conscious. And it was, gosh. The introspection piece that was my, I think that was a really big oh, and the whole thing of if there was something I wanted to do, I was like, I just need to go and do it. Like, if there was a place I wanted to go, like, I just went and did it because I was like, you just don't know. You just don't know. And I said, you wonder how many people on their deathbed, you know, and were like, going, you know, I should have worked more. You know, who says that? You know, so I and as a result, you know, in August I was in England and I got a fellowship for interfaith fellowship for religious leaders and in January I'm headed to Cairo. Never been. But I'm, it was stuff I would have never, old me wouldn't have signed up for. I don't know. New me, let's go. Let's do it. Like so I think that was a huge change where it's just like, you know, you get in the moment, you just you need to just go ahead and do it. You're not gonna get it back.

Felicia Pilewski: What advice would you give to someone who experiences future pandemics?

Kevin Staton: Trust the science and get as much medical information as you can. To me that was, and especially the blessing of having somebody like my mother. It was, she just walked me through this whole thing of how these kind, even not knowing everything about COVID, she just walked me through an infectious disease. How it's spread, this is what it does, this is what you need to do to kill it. You know, especially if it's a virus. Like, I would say the first part is focus on your well-being first. You need to try and stay physically healthy and then focus on the people around you that, you know, that you love and care about.

Felicia Pilewski: And what is your hope for the future?

Kevin Staton: In terms of, oh, that's an open question. Well, I hope that progressives will sit down with the younger generation and share all their information. I hope that there can be functional partnerships especially between the religious community and the educational institutions. It's just that's a part of what my work centers around is just having that dynamic That's a big hope, you know, because, you know, people talk about the school to prison pipeline, and I tell them, okay. Well, there's three parts. You just told me three parts. So, everybody goes mass incarceration. Okay. That's one part. School is over here. That's the other part. What are you doing over here? And then there's the pipeline. And people think the pipeline is like the Alaska oil one big pipeline. I'm like, oh, no. I can tell you as a teacher. There's a ton of pipelines to prison. They shoot out all over the place. You'll be very busy. You know, I tell people all the time. So, that's one of the, that's my big hope. It's especially on the, for like, your generation. I just really feel like we can't drop the ball again. You know, like because I have people. That's one of the things out of COVID I lost when I talk about losing fake friends, I have people that I just can't deal with anymore, because not only are they apathetic, but they're almost resentful of you trying to better your community. And I'm just at a point, I can't deal with them anymore. I just, you know what I mean? It's like, I like I like to laugh. I like to have fun too, but it comes to point where it's just like, you know, how much booty shaking are you gonna do? You know, it's like, we're at Howard homecoming. I didn't go. Howard students had led a protest because of the conditions in the dorms, mice. You're walking past, these are your kids' age. You're walking past the kids protesting to go to the party and they're protesting conditions you had when you were there. I'm sitting here like, none of y'all didn't just say, hey, what are these kids talking? I'm like, can we go to president and da da da da da? They're like, no. You know? He's dropping it like his hot. These kids are out there suffering. And I'm like, that's so that's yeah. That's a big, that's a big thing for me because especially at this point, like a lot of the work I'm doing centers around mentoring. Because I'm like, you know, I had somebody that looked out for me, you know. So, it's like, how can you not, you know, live it? But like I said, people got some money and they're just like, you know, that's what bothers me I think the most. It's like you don't cross the bridge, and I see you take out a knife and cut the rope and I'm like, yo, know how hard it was to get across that bridge? Like, really?

Felicia Pilewski: And what else do you want people to know about your experience during the pandemic?

Kevin Staton: I would say that I had a blueprint that I followed for making sure my family was okay. And I think everybody should have some kind of blueprint in case an emergency comes like that. It was crazy because my mother and I talk about it all the time, we already had, like, Lysol and stuff in the house. Like, you know, I had enough toilet tissue where I wasn't, like, you know, it was the first couple of months when it was, like, I Am Legend and it was, like, none on the shelf. I was like, yeah. I'm okay. You know, it's just certain, you gotta have a blueprint for it. It's like, you really do have, kinda, have to have a just in case you know, mentality where, you know, I have it. Hopefully, I won't need it, but it needs to be here.

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Felicia Pilewski: Well, thank you so much. That concludes our interview.

Kevin Staton: You're welcome. I didn't talk too much did I?

Felicia Pilewski: No. It was great.