

Interviewee: Tamara Harris

Interviewer: Alondra Harris

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Abstract:

Tamara Harris was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, raised in Black River Falls, Wisconsin and is now a retired teacher of the Chippewa Falls Middle School living in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. In this interview, Tamara describes how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected her daily life, relationships with long-distance family, and participation with the community. Tamara also describes how attitudes have changed during the pandemic and how she has dealt with these changes. Tamara had 7 adult children, 9 grandchildren, as well as many other family members spread throughout the Midwest.

Alondra Harris 0:00

The date is April 25 2021. And the time is 1:51pm. Currently, there are 31,795,248 cases of COVID-19 in the United States and 568,237 deaths. In Wisconsin there are currently 594,283 cases and 6,757 deaths. At the current moment, the United States has a vaccination total of 27.5% of the total population.

So, for this interview, what is your name? And do you mind sharing any demographic information for the current study?

Tamara Harris 0:54

Okay, my name is Tamara Harris, and I'm 63 years old and married with seven children between my husband and myself. And the ages range from 44 to 19. My husband is 72 and we live in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin.

Alondra Harris 1:22

And what are some primary things that you do on a day to day basis?

TH 1:26

My husband and I are retired. So on a day to day basis, I will typically go to the y (YMCA) and either swim or do a water exercise class. We walk in the park when the weather is good. I cook and clean do the usual household chores. Craft wise I do enjoy crocheting. So I'm in the middle of crocheting Afghans for all of the grandkids, and also do puzzles, and then we'll watch television or movie.

AH 2:09

And you said that you live in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, would you care to clarify what it's like living there?

TH 2:23

Okay. It's a medium sized community of about 13,000 people. It tends to be pretty Republican. But it's also a close knit community. And there's typically businesses like coffee shops and there's grocery stores in our downtown area. Otherwise, it's just kind of calm. There's one high school that's very active. And prior to retiring and the youngest graduating was very involved in the band program and volunteering.

AH 3:13

Now, you said they were very tight knit? So what has this community been like during the pandemic? Have they been kind of keeping that tight knit? Regarding, the businesses and the schools?

TH 3:31

Um, it's kind of separated more and more to the people who are very serious about controlling the pandemic and taking all the precautions versus people who don't think that we need to take the precaution so it's more divided than it ever has been.

AH 3:54

And would you mind clarifying if there's any particular categories for the division?

TH 4:01

Um, the division is mainly that, like I said, the people who think that everything should be open and we shouldn't take any precautions versus those who think that we need to take precautions to prevent it from getting any worse or, and that kind of that started at the very beginning of it when we started shutting down. Or like wearing masks like you've got half of the people that refuse to wear masks and the other half that do it very consistently.

AH 4:35

Now, on the topic of the pandemic, when the news of COVID-19 first came to Chippewa Falls, did you have any particular thoughts regarding it?

TH 4:48

When it first got here, I don't think anybody really, really understood how serious it was gonna get or how big it was gonna get. At the beginning, it was on the other side of the world, it was in

China and the first of the biggest news programs was about the cruise ship that had sick people on it, and nobody would let it dock. And then it spread and Italy was very affected. And so that was in the news. And then the first time it was in the news for the United States, it was all the way over in Washington State. And so I don't think anybody in the Midwest or in our small community really thought it was going to get as bad as it did.

AH 5:40

Did any of your thoughts kind of become changed once the pandemic spread to the Midwest, and the Chippewa Valley?

TH 5:52

Because of our age, because of my husband's health issues, and because of how our children or adult children are spread out, we were more concerned about not getting sick and not getting it. So we followed the procedures very carefully. And we were always very careful about staying inside when we first were supposed to stay at home, we were very good at staying inside and ordering our groceries online and just picking them up. Yes, we were very careful about it at the beginning. Because we were afraid that you know, if we got it, we were going to get very sick. And at the beginning. It was if people got sick, then they died, because then we it got to New York City and then that was all we heard all the time was how many people were dying in New York City and such. So we took it very seriously.

AH 6:56

And as you mentioned, a lot of your family is very spread out. So how has the pandemic affected any sort of relationships between you and the other family members? You've kind of said it sounds like you've kind of protected yourselves against especially at the beginning of this pandemic?

TH 7:18

Well, not only were we protective of ourselves, but our adult children are very protective of their parents. We have two sets of two kids that live in Chicago with their families. One daughter lives with her family in Minneapolis. There's one in Augusta there's one in Warrens who's currently in the military. And then there's one here that lives in Chippewa Falls. And so especially the ones from outside of Chippewa Falls, they were all very protective of us. So we've kind of haven't grown apart because we've talked to him on the telephone and stuff. But we haven't actually seen them at all. And the youngest grandchild was born in May, so he's coming up on his birthday. And we've only seen him once. And so that's kind of hard to not see people. And like my brother and sister live in Black River Falls and I haven't actually seen them for about 18 months now.

AH 8:27

That sounds like a very difficult time. Have you had any sort of plans kind of going into the vaccination becoming more widespread regarding any sort of potential changes or potential plans to kind of reconnect and more than just telephone calls?

TH 8:50

We plan on connecting with the family. Down in Black River Falls tentatively on Memorial Day weekend because because of their age, they've also been vaccinated. Now we've been vaccinated, we'll probably still have a picnic or dinner outside versus inside. So that's planned. I have seen the daughter that lives in Minneapolis but I had to quarantine for 10 days beforehand. And then quarantine after I got back and that meant that our college age daughter couldn't come home for two weeks because of the so that we could stay quarantined. So yeah, so over the summer we plan on getting more reconnected with them.

AH 9:41

And as far as your college age daughter goes, does she come home often, or what was your routine been connected with her?

TH 9:54

Our college daughter comes home, usually three weekends a month, you know, at least to stay connected. And so that works that her campus is testing the kids every week until they're vaccinated, and after they're fully vaccinated. So two weeks after their last dose, then they no longer have to get weekly tests.

AH 10:22

And how far away is your college aged daughter compared to your other children?

TH 10:31

College age daughter is at the university in Eau Claire. So she's only 12 miles away. One family lives here in Chippewa Falls, so they're close. The next closest one is in Augusta. So that's like 40 miles away.

AH 10:54

And as far as any sort of change in relationships, because of course, you have mentioned that your relationships and how you communicate with your family has been altered due to the pandemic, but has any of your connections with your friends or any other community members been changed to this extent?

TH 11:17

It's become all virtual, and all online. I got together with two girlfriends last fall. And we had a picnic in the park in October, which was a little bit chilly. But since then, we've not gotten

together at all, because it's all virtual. And one of my best buds has a son in law who is currently fighting cancer. So she's very careful about being around anyone at all. I do go to exercise class, so I see a small group of women and, and we do exercise class in the YMCA swimming pool. So you can talk in person, but we're still socially distant in a competition sized swimming pool with lots of chlorine.

AH 12:21

Have you participated in any other activities that have been altered to the extent like for instance, that your exercise course has been altered due to CDC guidelines?

TH 12:38

Um, we have not gone like I typically go out for coffee with friends, like, you know, once a week or so. And that we haven't been able to do or when, especially at the beginning when everything was closed down. And then it was that you could get things to go. But it was in the winter, so you can't really there's no place to go if you take it the go. Now since everything's been opening up with limited capacity, I've gotten together with friends a couple of times in coffee shops, and visited a friend, you know, another friend that lives along, we've seen I've gotten together with her a couple of times in her garage. So that we could spread out more than we can in her house.

AH 13:27

So with the relaxing measures, and then the changing measures taken to prevent the severity of COVID-19 Your sense of meeting up with friends has been slowly but surely kind of coming back to somewhat of what the quote and quote normal was before the pandemic began.

TH 13:52

Yes, it has become more normal.

AH 13:58

And regarding the outbreak, you said that many of your friends and people that your friends know are high risk. So in addition, have you known anybody who has gotten sick or has passed away due to COVID-19 complications?

TH 14:18

There was a friend of mine's mother in law, who was set who was second had it and she got the put she went into the hospital in October and came out after the first of the year. So she was in the hospital for three months. And now she has survived, she's got lung damage and she's not recovered at all. She hasn't fully recovered yet all these months later. There was a teacher that worked at our high school. That was 57 years old and had just retired in June. Very healthy, skied the birkebeiner, which is a cross country ski race, it's 52 miles long, so very healthy. And he died. He died last fall. Actually, pretty quickly from it. And he wasn't he wasn't in the hospital that

long. He was only in the hospital two or three weeks and, and he died. Another retired teacher passed away from it last winter. Actually, there were two other retired teachers that passed away last winter from COVID complications. So, so yeah, we've known people.

No one in our family has passed away from what they've some of them have gotten it, but they had mild cases. One son in law here in Chippewa Falls, had it and had a mild case of pneumonia, but and he was sick for two or three weeks, but he never had to go into the hospital. The seventh grade granddaughter had it. But her only symptoms were just to call that like common cold symptoms. So she really wasn't sick. Their mother didn't get that my daughter did not get it because she works in health care. Since she was one of the first ones that's vaccinated. And she has always had full PPE uniforms and stuff. So she's always been protected at work. So otherwise, like I said no one in our family had it just just friends and coworkers.

AH 16:49

And of course, that can be very scary when anyone gets sick, whether they get to the point that they need to be hospitalized or simply quarantine, but has any of these cases between the familial relationships that weren't very severe? And the tragic deaths of your co workers have any of how exactly have they affected any of your attitudes or response to the sickness?

TH 17:24

Well, when the first co worker died last fall. There weren't that many cases of it. But the cases that were there were very serious. And then in December is when we had a large spike. And the daughter who works in healthcare was working 60 to 70 hours a week doing overtime shifts at the hospital. And sometimes all she did on her overtime shift was Connect families with their loved ones on zoom. so that they could say goodbye, because they weren't going to make it. They weren't going to live and sometimes it was to sitting with people while they died. So that they weren't alone since their families couldn't be there. So I think all of that made us much more careful and much more consistent about wearing masks when we did go out and going out a lot being more and be more at home staying home more so that we didn't get sick or that no one else got sick.

AH 18:50

And that that must have been a very big mental toll on your daughter.

TH 18:56

Yes, it was she got very, very tired.

AH 19:01

Have you seen any sort of changes regarding mental health amongst all the stresses of the pandemic?

TH 19:15

I think mental health wise I think people the ones that I hang around were and friends and family were more lonesome. So we feel more isolated. I was glad that we had a very mild winter because we haven't had a severe winter where we couldn't even go outside to go for a walk or something like that. I think it would have been worse. There are a lot more people that I know and that the people that I know that are dealing with a lot more anxiety, a lot of depressions Because we're all very nervous, and very afraid of not only us getting sick, but loved ones getting sick or friends getting sick and dying. So we're kind of all more feeling our mortality a little bit more.

AH 20:21

And if you don't mind sharing, how would you say that your mental health has been affected in similar ways to how your friends' have been affected?

TH 20:33

Yeah, I think it's very similar. I mean, we're lonesome, we miss our kids, we miss our grandchildren. I miss seeing my brother and my sister. Just to see what we miss, we feel very disconnected. Because as good as Christmas and Thanksgiving were with just the two of us and our college age daughter, and then talking to the others on the phone. As good as that was, it was still completely non traditional. And just three of us, we did cook, I did cook totally non traditional foods, because I didn't want to have a big Turkey, like a traditional Thanksgiving when it wasn't when it was totally different. So we fixed totally different foods than what I typically do on the holidays. And so that worked out good.

AH 21:32

So it sounds like your typical holidays that you would celebrate with more than just your direct family was altered in more ways and simply just not having family. Other family visiting or visiting other family.

TH 21:49

That is correct. Like I said, we just did non traditional food and different cookies than we usually caught bake and we had to mail packages. Couple of them we met halfway between like halfway between Minneapolis and us to swap presents but we stayed outside. Because that was in December when everybody's cases were spiking so you can't even get to see them. We didn't get to hug or anything like that. So that was kind of hard.

AH 22:31

And this was all mostly during the spike of cases?

TH 22:38

Yes, cuz I around here they spiked in kind of November, December was really bad. And then January were also very high.

AH 22:51

And now lately, the CDC and local health departments have been showing that statistics since the spike have been decreasing slightly, with the effects with the production of the vaccines being released to different sectors of the public. Now, have you yourself been vaccinated?

TH 23:17

Yes, I've had both. I had the Pfizer vaccine. So yes, we're all vaccinated.

AH 23:25

And was there any sort of thought process or any sort of concern when considering whether or not you would choose to get the vaccine?

TH 23:38

I was mildly concerned because it did come around faster than a lot of other vaccines. But one of the adult children is friends with an immunologist who helped develop the vaccines. And as he said that, you know, they've been working on a COVID vaccine, for SARS, and for some of the other COVID infections so they kind of tweaked it to develop this vaccine. And he was confident in it and confident in the safety of it. And so knowing that made us more confident, as well as my own personal doctor, who was very confident and safety of the vaccine, and she said she was going to get it and without any hesitation. So in talking to the doctors that I trusted people I trust, then it was easier to just say yeah, we're gonna get this because we just want to be normal again.

AH 24:38

So with being presented this internal information from people developing the vaccine and having this background information that the vaccine wasn't simply made from scratch once the pandemic began, kind of helped you to come to your decision and be more comfortable with having the vaccine?

TH 25:03

Yes, that is correct.

AH 25:06

And for the process of getting the vaccine with the very large rollout, what would you say your experience was with getting the vaccine?

TH 25:19

It was hard, we had to wait. And we had to kind of look around at two places that we could get it. My husband got his because they were vaccinating healthcare workers at one of the local clinics, and they had several extra doses at the end of one of the days that if they didn't use them that day, then they would go to waste. And so he was then the doctor who works in health care called and basically said, Well, if you can get here in the next 10 minutes, he will get your shot. And so he started when a healthcare worker started, and I got mine about must have been about six weeks later that I got mine. And it was a matter of calling all the places that had it to see who had the vaccine available. And I was eligible because I volunteer at feed my people. And so through my volunteer work, I'm with the public more. And so I was in one of the first phases of the rollout and could get it so.

AH 26:31

And so did you get your vaccine being that you work with the public? And how easy was it to find the information for when you would be eligible as soon as possible compared to other members of your age group?

TH 26:47

When finding out when I was eligible wasn't hard. Finding the vaccines and who had it was a little bit more difficult because I ended up having to go to a clinic that's separate from the ones that I typically go to, in order to get.

AH 27:09

And how long would you say it's took for approximately from when you found out when your particular group would be eligible compared to when you were able to get the appointments to receive the vaccine?

TH 27:24

I'd it took me about two weeks of calling each day in the different places and then find a find the vaccine took about two weeks.

AH 27:35

And would you say this is similar to others, you know that received the vaccine?

TH 27:42

Yes, that's similar to to what is in some areas, I have some friends down in Black River Falls that had it, he is currently recovering from prostate cancer. And he had a very difficult time getting a vaccine. Even with his immune system being compromised. The major clinic down in lacrosse didn't have it. The local clinic didn't have it. He was on a waiting list for the county. And he ended up getting his from the Ho-Chunk tribe at their health center because as part of their

community outreach in their community activism, they invited everyone in the community to come out and have vaccines when they had it available.

AH 28:35

And would you say that due to this particular member being from outside of the Chippewa Valley, would you say that any of them have had any more difficult or easier of a time receiving the vaccine based on their different locations?

TH 29:05

They seem to have more problem getting it than what we did up here. It took him longer and it took them more phone calls and that kind of stuff.

AH 29:20

And I suppose as a lot of the information regarding the pandemic and the vaccines have been broadcasted through many different media networks, as and that's how much of the public has been receiving their information would you care to say which media you have received a lot of your information from?

TH 29:46

I'm getting a lot of it from the local television stations is the best the best place as well as on social media. I follow the Health Services in both Eau Claire and Chippewa County. And so that keeps you up to date. As far as national, I tend to watch both the conservative and more liberal media stations and then get some more balanced viewpoint on COVID, as well as everything else.

AH 30:24

And I apologize if you hear any clicking on the ground, my dog has currently decided to join me in this interview, but being that media during the 21st century has been very much more advanced. But also can be very biased depending on the source, would you say that your media has changed at all, as far as where you've gotten your information from within this past year?

TH 30:56

I don't think it's changed where I've got it from. I've gotten more careful about if there's an article that that somebody is talking about on the news, or you know, it comes up on one of the CNN or Fox are one of the local Facebook pages, I'm much more focused on fact checking everything before before believing it or before sharing it with anybody or talking about it with anyone. Solid, it's more accurate. So to try to stop the flow of false information.

AH 31:41

So your methods of receiving information has become more than just simply looking at an article or hearing a news source. And you have done more personal research before you tend to take that information to heart?

TH 31:56

Correct. Yeah.

AH 31:59

And regarding that, as pertaining to different biases, and the way that different media portrays different aspects of the pandemic, would you say that there's anything in particular that you believe that the media that is essential that the media is or isn't sharing, for whatever reason that you believe should be shared?

TH 32:23

I don't think that they're holding anything back. I think that the biggest thing is that the stuff that they are sharing isn't always consistent. Like one day, they'll say that it's, you know, it's under control and cases are going down. But then the next day, they'll be stories about Oh, my area, oh, it's spiking again, and all this kind of stuff. And we have to lock down and, and so the message isn't consistent. And I think that had it been more consistent at the beginning. I think more people would have followed along and done what needed to be done. So it'd be controlled faster.

AH 33:14

Would you say that this particular lack of consistency has created instability and a difficult way of following the information for the community?

TH 33:30

Yes, it has it's by being not consistent. It's created doubt. And that dealt in, in many cases, unfortunately, turns into conspiracy theories. And then those get all blown out of proportion. And so you lose just the factual basis of what we need to make decisions. And how they also lose trust when they're not consistent when people start doubting.

AH 34:06

How different and how severely would you say it has affected the attitudes of your community and yourself with towards the pandemic?

TH 34:29

I think that in a lot, in many ways, that's what's caused the divisiveness and the rantings and the bad media or the banned social media posts, like when, you know when people attack each other. And I think that that's all of the outside factors from the not uncommon inconsistencies, and then

the conspiracy theories have all added to that. Well, with that it's become political and, and instead of staying a health issue, it became a political issue, or has become a political issue. It still is. And that created more divides than there should be.

AH 35:26

And would you say that these divides because you referenced them before, when talking about your community in Chippewa Falls, would you say that these divides have been here, and in your community, for the entirety of the pandemic, and how they've been there, even before the pandemic?

TH 35:45

They've always been here, they were always there, but before the pandemic, and you know, like, private, like, five years ago, people could talk about their political differences. And they could have respectful conversations, like, this is what I think and, you know, this is what I think and, and talk and discuss it. Whereas now, if you disagree with someone it's become more anger, there's more anger, and more negative energy and more negativity. And so it's much more of a deep divide.

AH 36:37

So you would say the pandemic has almost filled more of a flame to create more risks, presenting these differences in these divides, and a much more extensive and obvious light?

TH 36:53

Yes, exactly.

AH 36:56

And, with your community, and the pandemic has definitely changed what we believe and normal and what how different people interact with each other. So for your personal experience, is there any way that you believe that the pandemic has significantly transformed, like how you think about your family, and like friends in your community?

TH 37:26

I think it's just highlighted how much we need social interaction with our friends and our family, and even our church because like, church can't meet in person, you know, you meet in a parking lot, and then the service comes over the radio. And it's really, really highlighted how much we just need human interaction, something more than just online or on the phone or on text, we actually need to be with other people. Because we're just social people.

AH 38:04

Excuse me for a moment, my dog needs to go outside.

And is there any particular ways that your attitudes have changed due to all of these devices and the changes that you have previously described?

TH 38:46

My attitude is kind of changed in that, like I said, I fact check everything. But it's also changed to where when I do go into a store or go out, you know, you try you try to be more kind, you say thank you, and you know, that kind of stuff. And you also make it up. I also make it a point to not argue with people. And you know, someone chooses to be negative than I that I choose to walk away from it, versus have a disagreement.