

Interviewee: Danielle O'Connell

Interviewer: Morgan Moe

Date: November 23, 2020

Location: New Brighton, Minnesota

Format: Video Recording, Zoom

Transcriber: Morgan Moe

Additional Transcription Equipment Used: Otter.ai

Project in association with: University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Abstract: Danielle O'Connell, like many other brides this year, could be known as a COVID Bride. Danielle got married this year under strange circumstances. Danielle give us insight into just how much this pandemic had changed her plans, as well as how much she felt for the safety and health of her guests that attended.

MM: All right, does it say it's recording on your end.

DO: Yes,

MM: Okay, perfect. My name is Morgan Moe, I am conducting an oral history interview as part of an effort to archive the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and communities in the Midwest. For both the Chippewa Valley COVID-19 archive and the Journal of the plague year COVID-19 archive, today's date is November 23 2020. And the time is 5:39pm. As of now, there are 376,000 cases in the United States. And in Pierce County, there are 2000 to 203 cases and 20 deaths. Today, we will be speaking with Danielle O'Connell. So weird to say that I'm in where do you live right now.

DO: I'm currently in New Brighton, Minnesota.

MM: Alright. And we will be discussing her wedding journey during the pandemic. So first To start off, we'll just kind of get some introductory questions when you first learned about the COVID-19 virus, what were your initial feelings about it.

DO: So ironically, I remember exactly where I was the first time I heard about it. Um, I was at work in downtown Minneapolis, I work for a corporate Trust Company. And it had been making a few headlines, but nothing major yet. And the managers and higher up like CEOs of our company started to make contingency plans on what we would do if the pandemic were to come to the United States. And this was like, beginning of the year, like, before we're there even we're even seeing cases in the US. So me and all my coworkers laughed about the fact that they were being so overly cautious about it. And they were actually like having a set up our computers at home and testing things out in case we had to move remotely. And we thought they were just being absurd about it. And then a week later, we were officially working from home and state was shut down. So it happened fast. From just oh my gosh, they're totally overreacting, this isn't going to happen. It's going to be like Ebola, which we really didn't see in the US, to all of a

sudden, the state has shut down, the country has shut down. We're all going to be working remotely. So that was my first real idea behind it. But it definitely changed quickly, once, um, from the initial sort of laughing it off to “Oh, like this is actually serious. We need to take it seriously”. Yeah, it happened very fast.

MM: It really did. It did. Did you think that it would be as bad as it is now in November, almost nine months later?

DO: No. So the first, when we first started working remotely, um, the plan was that half of our staff would work two weeks and half of the staff would work the other two weeks, and we'd sort of rotate, then we quickly realized that that wasn't going to happen and going to work. But we thought it was just going to be like a few weeks, month tops, and then we'd be back. Um, so like I left things at my desk that I needed, thinking that we were going to be back and now they just actually extended again. So we're going to be working from home for it will be a year since the pandemic started. So

MM: that's insane.

DO: Yeah.

MM: So what issues were you most concerned about both like personally and for the general public? of the United States?

DO: Sure. Yeah. So just the general United States. I mean, I am fortunate enough to have quite a few grandparents still alive, including my great grandma who's 102. Um, and she lives in a care facility. And so just hearing that that population is at such an extreme risk was really scary knowing the health of the grandparents that I have. More on a personal level, but also on a nationwide level. I mean, everyone has loved ones who are at risk. It's going to touch anyone. On a more personal level, I'm fortunate enough to have a job where I can work from home. So I wasn't concerned about the financial side of things, losing my job losing hours. I've been very fortunate in that. Um, however, I did have a wedding coming up that I've been planning for two years. And I remember when we first started seeing the headlines, I texted my mom. And I was like, “Oh, my gosh, like, the weddings coming up? should we think about what we're gonna have to do if we have to reschedule”. And she shrugged it off. And she was like, “oh, we'll cross that bridge when it gets here”. But she was like, it's not gonna get here. And then it did get here. So, personally, that was definitely one of my main focuses, given that my finances were pretty set. So that was the main concern I had.

MM: So kind of going back to pre-COVID, like you said, you were getting married planning this big event in the middle of the spring. What were your initial plans for the wedding? So if COVID didn't exist, what was the ideal plan?

CO: Yeah, so, um, we were supposed to get married in May, I have the exact date here. I don't remember what the exact date was May 16, of 2020. Um, in River Falls, Wisconsin at a golf course. Um, so ceremony was going to be outdoors, but the reception was going to be indoors. Um, and we're gonna have about 175 to 200 people. Um, so that was the initial plan.

MM: How did those plans change as the pandemic so kind of think back to like January, like, like you said, you talked to your mom, and you were like, ah, let's just cross that bridge, as it comes to it kind of walk us through those days of like, we got to do something.

DO: Sure. Um, so the first couple of weeks, I was working from home, it was still like, we had family canceling vacations, and we had people starting to rethink sort of their spring months. Um, but like I said, we did not think it was going to last this long, by any means. I was going to be a month, two tops. So we thought we were going to be in the clear by May. Um, it wasn't until we started seeing the stay at home orders come through our state, that we started to get nervous, because the stay at home order for Wisconsin ended, like the day before the wedding was scheduled. So we were like, technically, we would still be in the clear. But we don't want to risk anything. So we were sort of mulling it over. And that's when we got the email from the golf course, we were initially going to have the wedding saying that they were having all of their events at 50 people, um, through the spring. So that's when we started to think about rescheduling, potentially canceling looking for other places and just sort of opened a big jar of worms. So what are we going to do in this situation? Yeah.

MM: Yeah, that would definitely throw a wrench into things. So was it difficult finding, so eventually, you ended up rescheduling it? What was that decision? Like?

DO: It was a really hard decision is a really stressful decision. Because, I mean, it quickly became apparent that we had no idea how long we were going to be in this situation. We still to this day, don't know how long we're going to be in this situation. And luckily for us, we weren't set on that date. The date in the venue didn't really have significance to us. Um, and we already live together, like we have a dog together, the wedding itself wasn't really going to change anything for us. It was just more for us to celebrate. Um, so it really came down to um, we have talked about rescheduling it, so we talked about rescheduling it to later which we did initially reschedule it at the same venue to August um, but they ended up in extending their restrictions at the golf course, students to sort of reevaluate later on, or like earlier in the summer. And it really came down to, um, like I said before, we have a lot of grandparents that are up there in age, and a few that I'm very close with. So it was a toss up between, do we just say, screw it, and reschedule it to next summer? Or do we have like a smaller ceremony for with just grandparents in immediate family, and then schedule something later? For the whole group? Or what does that look like? And we came to the decision very early on that we needed to have something this year, because my great grandma was 102. Like, she doesn't have a whole lot of time left with us. And I knew that I wanted her there.

MM: Yeah.

DO: So it was really important to me that we at least had something for the grandparents. on the off chance that something between this year and next year, if something were to change. Um, this time, it was a lot of discussion of guest list, like, could we cut the guest list down to just 50 people? Yeah, and we decided that wasn't something you're interested in, because the wedding was for us to celebrate with everyone. Um, so ultimately, the decision to hold the entire wedding this year, which was risky, came down to if we could find a venue to accommodate us, if we

could find a venue to not only accommodate the size, but to accommodate restrictions that were in place, due to the size. And if we could find a venue in our area in the time period that we wanted, which, of course, opened up the whole process of rescheduling. Which was a nightmare.

MM: Yeah, I cannot even begin to imagine what that was like. So

DO: yes.

MM: Was it difficult finding a venue that would accommodate what you were looking for? Or was it kind of like, just pick one and go with it?

DO: Yeah, so confession time. I know this is recorded for the future to look at. And I feel bad about this, in Pierce County. Um, so the golf course we were initially going to get married at is in Pierce County. And they had restrictions on groups of over 50 people. We knew going in that we were going to have about 100. We didn't necessarily cut anyone from our list, but we knew just going down the list that these people aren't going to come because it's so far out, and they're worried about COVID, or their success susceptible to COVID. So we had a pretty good idea as to who was going to come in what our numbers were going to be. Um, so if all of the venues in Pierce County followed the restrictions set in place, we would not have found a venue.

MM: Wow.

DO: Ironically, because the restrictions were sort of history lesson. restrictions were sort of put into place by county, as well as state, but each county itself had different restrictions on top of state restrictions. So we looked at a few different venues. One was about a mile away from the golf course, that we were initially going to get married at, but it was outside of Pierce County. So they had different restrictions, and they weren't restricting guest size. The venue we ended up going with is in Pierce County. However, her the owner was not following restrictions. Um, due to multiple, very, like various reasons, which we had to weigh to determine if we thought they were doing enough to really justify hold.

MM: Yeah.

DO: Does that make sense?

MM: Yeah.

DO: Okay. I forget what the question was,

MM: it was just like, was it difficult finding a venue?

DO: Oh, so yes It was difficult. The venue we went with, and it worked out in my favor, because the venue we went with was the venue I initially wanted. When we were scheduling our wedding,

MM: silver lining,

DO: however, the venue had initially a guest count minimum, which was over the guest count we had. So we had to sort of cross that off of our list pretty quickly in planning. But due to COVID, she waived the minimum guest count, which is then how we got into the venue. Um, so that actually worked in our favor, into getting into the venue that we ended up going with.

MM: Yeah, that's almost like a silver lining to the whole thing, because I remember talking about how badly you want it to go be at that venue. But just all of the factors of like budget and everything just weren't working out. So it's kind of nice when I was like, Oh, that's so fun that you could send it there.

DO: Yeah.

MM: But was it kind of concerning to you? How like, kind of, did you ever have this thought where it was like, Well, if they're not taking the restriction seriously, like how well are they going to be taking like health precautions, or safety precautions

DO: For sure. So in order to in order to sort of walk through this, it's important to note that the ceremony would have been outside the reception would have been outside, they have sort of an inside outside Gazebo, at the venue, where if it rains, the walls sort of come down. But if it's sunny out, the walls stay up, and it's outdoors. So we knew going in that it was going to be outside, we weren't going to be restricted into a small space people could spread out. We also knew the venue holds 400 people, our guest count came to 125. So we knew that we could spread people out and really distance people. Um, I mean, also made sure in early talks with the venue, and we decided that we were going to change venues that we're going to supply masks to everyone. Um, hand sanitizer was going to be readily available at multiple locations for everyone. Um, it was going to be a buffet style. So people weren't being served and centered sort of going through people. But the buffet was served. So people weren't like touching utensils and stuff in the food. So there were multiple areas where we sat down, and we're like, we need we understand you're sort of lax on these restrictions. We also need these restrictions in place to make sure that the people who do come are being protected. Yeah. So well, then a decision easily made, that's for sure.

MM: Yeah, for sure. And kind of like you talked about, did you like encourage social distancing, too, because you mentioned like, the sanitation and everything, yeah, the spacing out of the tables,

DO: we did. So there were eight people per table. And we tried to keep it, um, per family as much as we could. Um, the tables were more spread out than they would have been pre COVID. So people weren't sort of stacked on top of each other. Yeah, we also made it a point to have to open tables, which we called our social distance tables. For anyone who got there saw their table, and didn't think that they wanted to sit there if they wanted to distance themselves. There is room for them to do so. We also made it abundantly clear that if anyone had any symptoms coming in, that they should not come.

MM: Yeah.

DO: So we definitely tried to hammer that into people's minds. Like, if you have a sore throat, as much as we want you there. Please don't come because we need to protect everyone else. So we made sure that we were following the restrictions as much as we could while still doing what we could do actually have the wedding.

MM: Yeah, for sure. Did you kind of have a fear in the back of your mind? Like, oh my god, what if something does happen? What if someone ends up like ends up getting COVID? And

DO: oh, yeah, absolutely. Going back to my great grandma, who was lives in a care facility. I mean, when we saw the pandemic really hit care facilities were really shut down. I mean, no one other than workers can get in. Um, so we actually had to get special permission from my grandma's care facility to let her leave to come to the wedding. Um, so she was quarantined, so they let her out for one night. So she got her hair done and came to the wedding, and had to go back. And then she was in a pretty hard quarantine for two weeks after that, um, and given her age and her health, like we knew, like if she were to get it, like that would be it. Like she would not survive it. And there were a few a few people in the same situation, not to the extent as my great grandma. Ultimately, we gave her the decision.

MM: Yeah.

DO: Um, we laid out the options to her, because I was talking to my mom about it. And I was like, if she comes and if she gets it, like, I don't know, if I'm gonna be able to live with myself knowing that she got it at the wedding. Yeah, and my mom was like, like she, like, so badly wants to come.

MM: Mm hmm.

DO: So we made the decision, like, Oh, she needs to make this decision for herself. Yeah, depending on how safe she feels. Um, so we made sure that she was wearing a mask at all times, except when she was eating. We had a grandparents table, which was sort of off in the corner. And to approach the table, you had to be wearing a mask.

MM: Yep.

DO: Um, so we I was definitely terrified, something was going to happen. And in the fall, the weeks following the wedding, I was like, calling her like, every other day, like, do you have a cough to have a sore throat like, so? Luckily, nothing happened. Um, so it was always a fear in the back of my mind, for sure.

MM: Yeah. Did you kind of have a plan ready to go like, Okay, what if something happens? How are we going to like contact people that had direct contact with them?

DO: Yeah, so, um, luckily, our wedding was pretty small in size. To begin with, we only had about a little over 100 people. And they're all people we were pretty close with. So we knew how to get a hold of everyone, if something were to happen. We also had a Facebook group for those who are on Facebook. So if someone were to test positive, we would have posted something in

that group. So the most people could see it all at once, and then reach out to the people not in the group separately. Um, so it wasn't necessarily put in place for the pandemic, but it definitely was there in case something were to happen.

MM: It's good to have like, an action plan ready to go, especially during a time where anything can happen. You just don't know. So given everything all the replanting was your wedding day, still everything you would have hoped for pandemic or not?

DO: Um, it was, yeah, it helped that I ended up getting the venue that I wanted. My hopes, yeah. And in the end, the people who didn't come because of the pandemic, we made a point to call them and have a good conversation with them and just catch up with them. So they didn't feel like they were missing out on something.

MM: Yeah.

DO: Um, yeah, I mean, luckily, everyone that we really had on our list that we were like, this person is a must have, was able to make it and I think had a good time, despite the challenges put in place. So

MM: I will say it was kind of a very nice break from just like, kind of like, what life was like before the pandemic.

DO: Yeah,

MM: Like a nice night to just take our mind off of everything that was going on. While also like still being mindful of everything that's going on. But yes, just a nice break to just let loose and relax.

DO: Yeah, It was.

MM: So you answered most of my questions.

DO: Oh, good.

MM: I'll kind of start just wrapping it up here. Okay. Has your experience with the pandemic transformed how you think about your family, friends and your surrounding community?

DO: Um, it definitely has, and as much as I sort of played into this with so holding the wedding, during a pandemic, um, it's been frustrating to see people not take it seriously. Um, like at all, whether it's wearing masks out in public or refusing to wear masks out in public, or just not really taking restrictions into account at all. It's been frustrating. But also it opens your mind up to I'm like really cherishing the time that you spend with people. Because now that we've been in this for quite a while, you start to, to really miss spending time with people. So I think once this sort of clears, and it's behind us, that's definitely something that will stay with me, just knowing

that this could easily happen again, it could be a part for another year. So it's definitely changed how I think about that, for sure.

MM: Yeah. And then kind of the bigger picture, um, knowing what you know, now, what do you think that individuals communities or governments need to keep in mind for the future?

DO: Um, I think it's definitely important to have a contingency plan. Going back to sort of my first statement about how we sort of laughed, when I'm my company started thinking about that really early on, it became pretty important once things started to quickly spiral out of control. And we ended up in a shutdown. I mean, we were already set up at home, we already knew what we were going to be doing. So that had a very easy transition. Um, I think on all levels, that is important, whether it's federal government, you can say what you will about that. State Governments, and then even businesses or even household levels, I mean, as much as you can, I know, not everyone has the ability to save a controller have a contingency savings. But it really opened up to how quickly something that isn't in your control can have an impact on your life, and how you live your life, specifically, financially. Um, so I think it's important to keep in the back of your head, like, what sort of thing is Could I live without if it were to come down to my last pennies? And like I said, I'm fortunate enough to not have to really worry about that too much. But I know many people who have been and I think it's definitely something to keep in mind, even after the pandemic. You never know what could happen on any level.

MM: Yeah, kind of going back to finances to like, just this past weekend, it was my mom's birthday. And for the longest time, he's wanting to do one of those Board and Brush things which can be really expensive. Well, maybe we could do one, just find one where they're wearing their masks. They have certain numbers at a party and I kind of just had this idea where I was like, wait, my cousin's and artist, we have access to barn boards. Let's just do it ourselves. You know, we just like found fun things to do without trying to spend money or just finding a way to do stuff at home even so.

DO: Yeah, definitely gotten the creativity out of people. That's for sure.

MM: For Sure. Definitely. All right. Well, this has been fun.

DO: Yes, it has.

MM: Thank you so much for doing this.

DO: Yeah for sure

MM: I will go ahead and stop recording.