

- **Interviewer:** Brice Leroy Vircks
- **Interviewee:** Mark Eugene Komsie
- **Date of Interview:** 11/11/2020
- **Location of Interview:** Madison, Wisconsin
- **Format:** Zoom Recording
- **Transcriber:** Brice Leroy Vircks
- **Additional Transcription Equipment used:** otter.ai
- **Project in association with:** University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

**Abstract:**

Mark Eugene Komsie is a longtime resident of Madison, Wisconsin, and a graduate from the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. In this interview, Mark discusses the differences in COVID-19 responses between Madison and Eau Claire (Wisconsin), the impact of COVID-19 on his personal life, employment, and mental health, what he believes needs to be done in order to help America heal from this pandemic, and current events such as the 2020 presidential election and the impact it has on the future of dealing with the pandemic.

**BLV:** Okay, it is currently Wednesday, November 11 2020, at 7:16pm. The total COVID-19 stats for the United States are a total of 10.4 million cases up 140,000 from the previous day, and 241,000 deaths up 1.5 thousand from the previous day. And in terms of new cases; in terms of local cases to Wisconsin, we have a total case... total number of 294,000 cases with that up being up 7,000 from the previous day, and a total 2,500 deaths up from 76 from the previous day. So, I figured we just start here: tell us your name, ethnicity, race, gender, all that basic demographic stuff about you.

**MEK:** All right. My name is Mark Komsie. I'm caucasian I'm 23 years old and I identify as male. I currently live in Madison, Wisconsin. On the west side, I'll say.

**BLV:** Okay. And what do you do on a daily basis? You do? Where do you work? How much do you travel? That sort of thing?

**MEK:** Ah, at the current time, I am in an interim between jobs. I'll say that, so.

**BLV:**All right. All right. And then I would say, let's start at the beginning of everything. Where were you when everything shut down, when all the lockdowns happened? Let's start with where were you at?

**MEK:** Let's see, I remember hearing about the COVID pandemic at the time... earlier this year, this is back when I still lived with my father. This was [ASK LATER] in Wisconsin. I previously worked at Catalent in Madison. I think the lockdown started around, yeah, March, April. So at this time, I was actually in the process of trying to move out of my father's house and get my own apartment with a roommate of Madison. So that made it very interesting. I think right around one of the lockdowns happened within the month I actually had moved into my new place where I currently am right now in Madison.

**BLV:** Actually, I kind of want to elaborate on that further. Did you get any special with any benefits or specific struggles with moving in, in the middle of the pandemic?

**MEK:** Ah, specific struggles? Yes. You know, I like looking, you know, at the interiors, the apartments, I would like to, you know, try to rent. But because the COVID pandemic was spreading a lot at that time, most people didn't allow in person visits. So we kind of had a go for virtual tours. And that's when they started happening actually, was around the time I was moving out. And yeah, it was a struggle. But, once me and my roommate did secure a place it was pretty nice, because I believe they did reduce this security deposit amount, and gave us like a free month of rent, which is, which is pretty nice, honestly, I'll admit. It was a very, very weird time moving but it worked out, somehow, thankfully.

**BLV:** And I was meaning to ask, were you around the time the pandemic hit? Were you traveling at all? Or like, going about daily life?

**MEK:** Hmm. No, I was just in my daily life. I think by the time we heard about the lockdowns, I was in the middle of work at the time, so I didn't really hear about it till my lunch break. I think that day.

**BLV:** Okay. So, and have you... you (giving some background information to anybody listening here), you are a graduate of the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, correct?

**MEK:** That is correct.

**BLV:** And you've been... Have you been to Eau Claire since the pandemic started?

**MEK:** I have, yes indeed

**BLV:** So in saying it since you've been Eau Claire since panics pandemic started. I guess... I think it'd be interesting to hear the differences between Eau Claire and Madison in terms of COVID responses and attitudes. So I guess to start off, what are like some of the noticeable

differences between Eau Claire Madison with, you know, the smaller city being Eau Claire and the bigger city being Madison.

**MEK:** So in terms of attitudes, I feel like Eau Claire and Madison are on the same page. Honestly, I'll give them that. Most people are agreeing, to you know, wear masks obviously. According to the mask mandates. What is it... we were very pretty much compliant when the Evers does it stay at home order was issued. And you know, I feel like the same for Eau Claire, you know, we're college cities. In terms of responses, I feel like Eau Claire and Madison had a similar response. And personally, I don't think that's a good thing, understanding that Eau Claire is a smaller city, you know, being on lockdown for a shorter period of time, albeit still not great, I would be able to more, be more understandable of that. However here in Madison, you know, we have the same thing, except we have a bigger city, we have more moving parts, we got more people traveling doing carpools, etc, etc. We have a... because we're a bigger city, I feel like we have, you know, a larger diversity of the types of jobs that, you know, we do here types of people live here. So considering that we are a bigger city and all, I feel like more precautions definitely should have been taken.

**BLV:** Okay, so the responses between Eau Claire County and Dane County have been pretty similar. So I think I would have thought at first that living in the state capitol meant, you know, you're at the heart of the government. You thought I think that Yeah, regulations would have been a little tougher there. But...

**MEK:** ...I would have thought so too, honestly, when it first hit, but I look at the timeline and what's been happening and especially what the Evers versus Wisconsin legislature when they shut down Evers... what is it, stay at home extension? Hmm. That was... that was the main thing I noticed, okay? And I thought something was going a little amiss, so...

**BLV:** Okay. And I would say, in terms of, I don't know, going... Madison is a pretty big tourist town. So have... in Eau Claire, a lot of problems have been that people have been going to bars, people have still been going out their daily lives, like, you know, COVID isn't here. Would you say that problem is reflected in Madison, people go into bars, people traveling?

**MEK:** Oh, of course, people still do all that same stuff here. Definitely. I live on the west side of town. So I'm not even close to downtown or the isthmus where capital is. However, I have been down there a few times and I have a few friends who go to UW Madison, who go to school there. And, you know, I've been there just driving around, like, visiting friends at least to say hi, for a tiny bit a moment while I'm taking care of business in downtown. You know, I see tons of college students going to the bars, they're still open. You know, some of them aren't even wearing masks, which is, I think is ridiculous. So I see similar... similar sort of actions being taken there. Yes.

**BLV:** Okay, so say, similar attitudes between Eau Claire and Wisconsin. I mean, Eau Claire and Madison. So... I guess we're gonna... I'd like to move on to some job questions. So I guess I'll off, where were you? Where did you work when COVID hit because you mentioned earlier that you're kind of in between jobs right now.

**MEK:** Yeah. So at the time, I worked with Catalent, full name Catalent Pharma Solutions. They are a bio manufacturing company here located on the west side of Madison. And what they do is they work with clients, other bigger pharmaceutical companies who contract Catalent to produce, what it it...? What it it...? Bulk drug substances and biosimilars, so.

**BLV:** Okay. And did any of that work... I know, you might be under an NDA when saying this but...

**MEK:** Sure.

**BLV:** Can you say if you did work directly with anything regarding the pandemic?

**MEK:** Yes, we have. You can find this on the Catalent website. It's public information. But what is it...? Some Catalent sites have been working on COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, I'll say that.

**BLV:** Okay. So that information is not allowed to be public as of yet.

**MEK:** No, no, it's public. It's on the website.

**BLV:** I mean, the stuff on the website is but...

**MEK:** Yeah, that's all public information. I can say this.

**BLV:** Okay. Okay. Okay. And then, I guess, to go off from there, what were the immediate changes that you... when you went back to work in the middle of the pandemic, what were some of the immediate changes in your work that happened besides working directly to COVID vaccines?

**MEK:** Let's see. Our... Catalent was very prompt and I think took a good response to when the pandemic hit. So personally, we followed Ever's stay at home orders. So I believe all the employees got like, you know, the papers printed out like saying, you know, we're all... what is it necessary and employees to work for the company, especially since we're working on the vaccines are just about to start to, you know, we're central, central workers is what we were

considered. We got those just in case we were ever pulled over, let's say while we're traveling during the morning or on our commute back home. About half of our site was able to work from home, and they kept on doing that for months, and by the time I had left my position at Catalent, there were still, most of the employees at the site were able to work from home. So considering my specific position at the time, I had to always show up at work. So I'll just say that.

**BLV:** So you were the essential essential worker, pretty much?

**MEK:** Yes, yes. I wasn't allowed to work from home, considering the nature of my job.

**BLV:** Alright, and then if you're comfortable talking about this, did COVID impact you leaving your job?

**MEK:** Ah, I will say yes, yes, it has a bit. A lot of that leads into a lot of stuff. I can't say about the company, but I will say yes.

**BLV:** Okay, so more a little more personal stuff. Would you say COVID added on, like, everybody's dealt with this, but like that added mental baggage?

**MEK:** Oh, of course. Yeah.

**BLV:** Okay. All right.

**MEK:** It all... it all played into my leaving of my position.

**BLV:** Okay. And then, does anyone you know, how is the employment of anyone else, you know, been affected by the pandemic?

**MEK:** Oh, let's see here, locally... Most of my friends who are currently employed have kept their positions. I haven't heard too many bad things. However, I do know, when the pandemic first hit, I will say one at one of my family members (won't disclose), lost their job temporarily. Had to stay home for a while, they worked in a more hands on job. And so working from home wasn't an option. And so the business had a temporary shut down for a while but they've been... they opened back up and he has started working for them again.

**BLV:** Alright, alright. So pretty much a lot of people have either held on to their employment or they've been deemed essential?

**MEK:** Yeah, thankfully, thankfully.

**BLV:** Yeah. So that, alright, and then, I guess going off that going off to people, you know, your family or friends, I guess. How have your personal activities been affected by COVID you know, social interactions, visits, you live in a big... Madison is a big tourist city, how has that affected your daily life? I'd like you to talk about that a little please.

**MEK:** Well, most of my personal hobbies, I will admit, take place indoors, so those haven't been affected too much. However, when I go to visit my father, you know, always, you know, want to be careful around him. He's starting to get old. Back when the pandemic you know, first hit, he had to go in for a second amputation on his leg, and that was the scariest thing, especially being in, he had to be in the hospital and stay there a few days, and then go to another treatment center afterwards for a few weeks. So I was really scared, you know, not not being able to see him going through this super scary operation. You know, I'm always careful when I visit my father, especially, I'll say that as well if I ever want to go visit my grandparents, you know, they're, they're also getting really up there and age, like, I know, I'm a prime target to be, you know, targeted by what is it? Getting COVID, due to my nature of the work at the time moving around a lot. And just me being younger, being more willing to like, go out shopping, etc, etc. Just because I have more stuff to do. Usually, usually I'll say that. So I haven't visited a lot of my family in quite a few months. And I'll admit, that kind of sucks. But I know, it's a good thing, because I'm doing it just to watch out for their health. Because I never know when I may get COVID, I live with a roommate, who I may never know if he may get COVID or either of us may be asymptomatic. So I always want to take the most precautions I can.

**BLV:** Yeah, doing your part living in, I'd say living in a big city like Madison, especially where it's such a hot spot of COVID you always want to take all the precautions you can so I can see it's good keeping your friends and family safe. With... seeing as this is one of the challenges that resulted for many Americans in this pandemic, what are some other challenges that you've faced, like economically or socially as a result of the pandemic?

**MEK:** Let's see. Ah, economically, I haven't had too many challenges personally, and I haven't heard anything from my immediate friends or family, which I'm very thankful for. However socially, like going out to visit friends now just isn't a possibility. I personally, some of my hobbies include meeting up with people, and like, you know, playing, you know, board games or card games, etc, together, so, and a lot of that you can't really do online. So some of my interactions with some of my friend groups have been strained recently, for sure. Since we haven't been able to meet up, everyone's been having busier schedules, and we all want to take our best precautions not to get each other sick, because who knows who might be.

**BLV:** I would say that this, this video recording itself is almost a testament to the pandemic we're living in. Because otherwise, we'd be able to do this interview in person. But now we're doing it over zoom, which has, you know, exploded because of the need for doing this stuff

online. So going off your social interactions to talk about your friends. You mentioned earlier that, you know, students at UW Madison, how is that affected your seeing them, your relationships with them, especially, you know, those who may or may not be foreign exchange students at the University?

**MEK:** Mm hmm. Oh, let's see, a lot of our interactions I had with my UW Madison friends was in person. And it was usually me going to them. So down at the UW Madison campus actually. And, but I haven't done that, like I said, in months ever since pandemic hit. I know, UW Madison has over, like, 2000 confirmed cases among the students and faculty, I believe. Quite a large number. And so, you know, I'm trying my best to play, play and hang out with them, you know, try any video games online, you know, talk with them online, etc. Use social media. But, you know, I'm the kind of person where I really do need to see my friends and family in person from you know, time to time just to keep my mental stability in check. So it's been hard, and I know a lot of other people can attest to this as well.

**BLV:** Yeah, no, I think... I think that speaks for a lot of us here. Because I mean, we're all like that we all want to see our friends. But sometimes even in Eau Claire, we got to stay cooped up, because it's just been. It's getting bad. And it's been getting worse out there, as of today. Did... Did you mention, I think I know this more from our personal interactions, but you are friends with foreign exchange students at UW Madison right?

**MEK:** Yeah, yeah. One of one of my friends, families lives over in Malaysia, for example.

**BLV:** Okay, so were their experiences at the University in America affected all in all by the pandemic?

**MEK:** Oh, yeah, I mean, probably, I mean, I know, one of my friends was really worried like, when the pandemic hit his family, his family's living over in a different country. And because of the travel sanctions we have set in place, I don't think he was allowed to go visit his family, and he's, he's been here since, you know, he still goes to UW Madison, does his online courses. But you know, I haven't talked too much with him, how that has really deeply affected his feelings.

**BLV:** Alright, just want to touch in there. So we talked a lot about your social interactions here. Have the people around you been responding in a similar manner to you in the pandemic? As in, you know, wearing masks, social distancing, and doing these online interactions through Zoom, social media, video games, etc?

**MEK:** Oh, yeah. Thankfully, I'm really happy that my friends and especially my roommate, have been keeping up to date with how to... on the response to the pandemic, especially, you know. I always wear my mask, and when I go out in public, you know, always remind my

friends to especially, you know, if they do if we do need to visit, like, “Hey, bring a mask, I don't know where you've been”. One of my friends just got a new job, especially, so I don't know where he's been going all the time. Social distancing, I think is the harder one to maintain. For sure. Like keeping on a mask, I feel like that's pretty easy. No visiting like no, yeah, sure, that's pretty easy as well. But if there is a need to visit, you know, keep the mask on, but also remembering to social distance, especially when you're with your family. You want to give them a hug. You know, especially... my father misses me. So I call him, like basically every day. So just keep him in touch.

**BLV:** So would you say that issue with social distancing is being supplemented by living in a city like Madison?

**MEK:** Hmm, I feel like it makes it. It depends on where you live in the city, but I feel like it makes it harder. So because I know the west side isn't as densely populated as downtown, or the east side, per se. So, based on where I live in the city, I think it's made it a little easier on... what is it? I always got to make sure if I do see someone coming out of my apartment complex, I'm just gonna step out of the way and let them go. Before I even go in. Especially when getting mail, like I always, like open the door, and I see someone and I'm like, “Okay, I'll just I'll just wait a second”, you know?

**BLV:** So, you are you and your, you know, your friends are doing this. Do you feel as if there is, in Madison, that people are not doing enough to flatten the curve?

**MEK:** Yeah, I mean, of course, there's always a certain group of people. Ah, was it I feel like some of the younger people even like our age, I would say the college age, you know, like I said, I've seen them go to these bars. I've heard about some people going on, like, you know, the spring break trips, which really suck, a lot of people still love to visit here. And I really see that reflected in the behaviors, especially among people our age, I would say, honestly.

**BLV:** So you mentioned people visiting Madison. Madison being kind of a tourist town, would you say that tourists and Madison are contributing to the problem of COVID expansion in the city?

**MEK:** I mean, yeah, of course, if people are visiting the city, and you know, they're coming from like, another state, or even another country, I feel like that's a very scary thing. You know I do agree that, you know, there should have been like, a longer lockdown, but, you know, if someone's traveling to Madison for say, you know, I would only hope it's for like, very urgent or necessary reasons, family visits, hospitals, etc, work business that's deemed necessary. But just for tourist activities, I feel like it isn't quite appropriate.



**BLV:** Everybody needs to do their job to, you know, help us get through this thing. And just going to downtown Madison doesn't... going bar hopping just doesn't seem like a smart... doesn't seem like a smart thing. Yeah, I understand that sentiment. So, before I move on to my, I was gonna ask some political questions here. Before I move on to that. I do want to ask one more thing. If you're comfortable with this. Can you... has anyone you know, gotten COVID?

**MEK:** Has anyone I know gotten COVID? I don't? I don't actually believe so. Yeah, as far as I can say, no.

**BLV:** Okay, so moving on here. I guess I want to hear about your opinions personally, regarding the pandemic. What are your biggest concerns with this pandemic? If you want to start locally, statewide, nationally, start wherever you want, and then we'll go from there.

**MEK:** As well, locally, of course, I'll be worried about my friends and family. I guess it's more personally, but just sometimes, like I know, especially my grandparents, they live over on the east side. It's a little more densely populated, but they live in a pretty old neighborhood, I'll give them that. Now with my grandfather being more stay at home due to his health conditions that leaves it only to mainly my grandmother to take care of him and take care of any business that needs to be taken care of outside of the house. So I'm always, you know, worried for her, especially. Same with my father, especially since he's a double amputee and probably has some underlying health conditions. And I know he's a man who likes to go out and do a lot of things. You know, I'm always keeping them in my thoughts. What is it? What is the next statewide? I think my biggest concern was, well, I'll say was, was that the Wisconsin legislature shut down Ever's extension on the stay at home issue. I think that was a very big deal, honestly. Because, I mean, look, take just take a look at most any other country in the world. They took the proper responses as best as they could. And a lot of them are actually on the decline now when concerning COVID-19. Meanwhile, here in Wisconsin, especially, especially Wisconsin, we're getting more and more cases. You know, I know LaCrosse is getting a lot from what I heard, Milwaukee is getting a lot, downtown Madison, it's going crazy as well. So and then nationally regarding the pandemic. I just gotta say, if we actually did have our, what is the national pandemic response team? That would have been great. However, due to President Trump's order, they, you know, got disbanded I believe it was?

**BLV:** Okay, so, going off that, what are your opinions on how the government itself has handled the pandemic? You brought up the, you know, the pandemic team that got this that got broken up by the President? So if you want to go through this nationally, locally, like the same thing, or if you just want to say in general, how you feel like the government has handled the pandemic, that'd be great to hear.

**MEK:** Yeah, overall, was it I feel like a government has done a pretty poor response overall to the pandemic, though I feel like the only person I could say that, like, actually tried to give it their most locally, I'll say locally here in Wisconsin is Governor Evers. I agree with him, you know, mask mandate is great. Lockdown... lockdown is good, you know, we need to, you know, shut down the bars, like I said, like, I see these college students going out to the bars, and you know, there's 2000 confirmed cases among the students and faculty, that's crazy. It's like, so I think Evers's response was good. The Wisconsin legislature did not have a good response, you know, we shouldn't be so lax and letting people just go to, you know, these non essential businesses, honestly, like, even me and my roommate, we see people going out to the gym, like, right across the street from us, we keep seeing more and more, you know, people going into that. And like, I mean, that's, it could be good now, but like, I'm always, always worried. Let's see.

**BLV:** So going on that would you say, compared to, you know, you think the governor is trying to do his best and that the state legislature just doesn't seem to... they can't come to a consensus, They keep going to the court, striking down his orders.

**MEK:** I felt like that, honestly. Yeah. I haven't been keeping up with it too much in the past month or so.

**BLV:** Okay. Would you say that Dane County, like the, you know, county that Madison's in? Would you say that the county itself had a stronger response to the state government?

**MEK:** Ah, yes, I would agree, honestly, because Madison is the second most populated city in Wisconsin, and considering the amount of cases we have compared to, let's say, Milwaukee, or even , if you go look up at Oshkosh, or LaCrosse, I think, overall proportions, not as bad. But it could be better. It always could be better. But, I feel like, you know, there's a good culture here and Madison, among the people, I'll say that, to try to keep the pandemic under control as much as they can in their power.

**BLV:** Okay, and then let's get to the, you know, the big thing, you were already talked about it, the national government? I don't know if I want, I'm not gonna ask you if you think their response is poor, but what do you think that they should have done, instead?

**MEK:** It's just like, you know, keep up the lockdown. Honestly. Try to enforce it, you know, follow almost any other country in the world. Like I said, Look at them, most of them are doing better than compared to the past few months, which is great. You know, if we had a proper response, if we had that pandemic response team, I feel like we could be at the stage most other countries are, even at this time or in like the next couple of months. However, with our current response, I don't, I feel like this is going to go on for maybe even like another year or more longer. There'll be tons of lingering effects that'll last many years for sure.

**BLV:** Well, we've talked about what you think the government should do, you know, all that stuff. They've tried enforcing these orders. But one thing that's come up time and time again is people being resistant to these Orders now. In April and May, there were protests at the state capitol against Ever's stay at home order. They believed that it was shutting down the economy and doing very harmful things. And since you know, you live in Madison, albeit the west side, not exactly, you're still really close to downtown. How did you feel at the time about those protests in your city?

**MEK:** Ridiculous. Like, are you kidding me? Man, I, you know, what is it? I graduated with a BS in microbiology comprehensive myself. So I really understand the importance of, you know, vaccines, a proper response to an epidemic and pandemics. And, you know, we've talked about it in our courses at UW Eau Claire, where, how do you deal with these so and so called anti vaxxers, etc. And this is a similar sort of thing. You know, some people don't believe COVID is real, some people don't believe COVID as big a threat as it actually is. And, you know, I would say, these, these, these sorts of people do make it a really big challenge to confront, like how to actually resolve the pandemic, and how to actually handle this whole situation.

**BLV:** I can understand that it's frustrating, especially. Oh, yeah. Like, especially when you look at the rest of the world, South Korea, Japan, a lot of you know, a lot of Asian countries that wearing a mask is just normal to do when you're sick. So yeah, when you see them doing fairly well, relative to us, where we have people actively resisting this and making it worse I can, it's especially...

**MEK:** I feel like America doesn't have a super strong culture, at the time, at least, of looking out for one another, in that sort of public health field of view. So I do agree with the more Eastern countries like Japan and South Korea, you know, wearing a mask when you're sick, to stop spreading your disease to other people is a good thing. And I feel like we could learn a thing or two from them about that.

**BLV:** Mm hmm. So taking everything we've just talked about here about local responses, national responses, statewide responses, that I don't know if I want to say change, but did it further influence you and how you voted in this recent election about eight days ago?

**MEK:** I wouldn't say it changed how I voted. Further influenced. It's just like, I don't think I was going to vote any other way but this really, you know, set it in stone. So yes.

**BLV:** It really drove it home, because the other side at least you believe that they have a- you know, set in stone plan for fixing this even through all the resistance?

**MEK:** Mm hmm. Yep. Yep. Yep.

**BLV:** All right. So we're getting into the final part of this interview here. I was wondering, we already talked- kind of touched on this a little what needs to change statewide and nationally to heal from the pandemic, you know, going with the election? I guess, I would like to say this: what do you think President-Elect Biden needs to do once he takes office?

**MEK:** Put back together the national pandemic response team. Because I do think I do recall it was during Obama's presidency, that him and Biden work together to put that team together. And that would have been great if we had that honestly, so we need that back. I feel like that is one of the number ones especially, just reinforce the lockdowns. Yes, I agree. You know, we've been too lax. And even before, like, when we did the lockdowns, I mean, look at the cases and, you know, look at the amount of people who have it anywhere in the US, it wasn't as bad. And now that it's gotten worse, you know, wouldn't now especially be the best time to do a lockdown? Like, you know, this, this is something I don't really get. So I feel like, obviously, it's too late now to stop all the damage that's been caused, but we need to do our best as a nation to stop any further damage from happening.

**BLV:** “You need to come together”, kind of echoing the words of what the President Elect President Elect Just saying. We need to unify we need to heal as a nation together.

**MEK:** Mm hmm. I know. That's what every other country has done.

**BLV:** So. So would you say you have any closing statements regarding everything that we've talked about so far today?

**MEK:** Not really. I feel like I've expressed most of all what I wanted to, I think I've got my point across.

**BLV:** All right. Well, I'd like to thank you for doing this interview with us today. I think that your perspective from living in Madison, living in the center of our state government has added, you know, a lot to someone who, you know, for people listening in from the Chippewa Valley. So, I'd like to thank you for showing up again. We can talk after this any of you interview for any other questions you have and yeah, thanks for... thanks for doing this.

**MEK:** Of course, thank you too. It's been a pleasure.