

Katrina “Kat” Keller

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Interviewed by: P. Erik Warren

Interviewed via Zoom

Transcribed by: P. Erik Warren

In February of 2021 I interviewed Kat about her experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. Getting her point of view from being a student that lived on campus was enlightening. Being able to interview her gave me a completely different perspective on how the pandemic affected others. I considered myself and my family fortunate from the standpoint that our jobs/ income, housing, and family life were not impacted as heavily as others. For the most part my family and I were more impacted by the “great toilet paper shortage” of 2020 than by the pandemic itself.

Kat shed some light on how the pandemic affected her whole world in the blink of an eye. She went from living the college life on campus and living in the dorms to overnight having to worry about where she will live. During that ordeal she was also laid-off from her job which did not help her position. Hearing about her experience during this time broke my heart and gave me a deeper appreciation for my situation throughout the pandemic.

The interview with Kat went well and the interaction between us during the interview felt genuine. Kat was a great interviewee and was very open about her experiences during this trying time.

Keywords: COVID-19, UNM, dorms, unemployment, baking, laid-off, military family, home, library.



Erik: Alright my name is Erik Warren. It is February 23, 2021 I am here with Kat Keller. She is at her home. We are meeting via Zoom to maintain social distancing and be safe. How are you doing today?

Kat: I'm doing fine, a little tired.

Erik: I can understand that. We're going to talk about some of this Covid stuff. I guess the first question is do you remember the day UNM shut down almost a year ago now?

Kat: It was March and it was either a little before spring break or about to be spring break and the reason I remember it is because I was with my sister and she is one of my older siblings and she (Kat giggles) she was letting me stay over (1:00) for spring break and just hang out with her and the kids and everyone and I got an email from UNM saying that they were going to kick me out of the dorms and that I had less than a week to get all my stuff out before I would have to go through a whole process to even get my stuff out of the dorms. And within a few days of that before I got told by my boss that I was going to be laid off so.

Erik: Oh no.

Kat: It was very traumatic being that I was never laid off before and that I was also losing my place of home due to something that in my head in the first place I thought it could have been controlled just because I started reading about it in December in the Australian newspaper through the ABC.(2:00) Yeah so then I didn't think it would be that big of a deal and then it started snowballing down and I was like oh-no where is my life going.

Erik: Did you have a place you could go to? I mean right away? I mean obviously you were in the dorms, but was that a big scramble for you?

Kat: Um, it was for a hot minute. Another one of my sisters, so my third oldest sister, she actually called me a day or two after I received the email from my school, and she was like "so I have a proposition for you. Jaime and I were thinking that maybe you need a place to stay?" And so she went on, "we can discuss maybe rent and you doing household chores (3:00) and you can live here for a while until you find a place" and I was like it sounds good, but I don't have a job so I can't pay you rent currently.

Erik: Yeah, I just got laid off.

Kat: I did. I didn't tell her straight up. I told her a few days later. I was like hey, I don't have a job anymore and you're taking me to your house just letting you know. Cause we had to coordinate a day where they just came to my dorm and we were just packing boxes into the back of their truck and just like putting everything there. I had to take everything out of my minifridge. I had to clean the room. I had to make sure I had all my stuff out of the bathroom. It was just so hectic cause I was just nervous. The night before they came, I stayed up all night just packing because I was afraid, I would forget something and tried putting my most valuable stuff that I needed right away like my computer for school (4:00) because I was like oh-no what if I get another email I need to get to it. Trying to put essentials and then everything else that can go. Yeah, it was like when I got to the house and we're putting all the boxes in the room they let me live in for a while it just felt very sad for me because I paid to live in the dorm so that I'd get that college experience of like being in the dorms and being on campus and being emersed in the college culture because I wasn't emersed in college culture when I first started college so I wanted to see what that was all about and it was, it was, stressful.

Erik: And was that your first semester to stay in the dorms or was that like your second semester?

Kat: So that was my second, well one and like a fourth or something if you wanna really consider it cause (5:00) I had the fall and then the spring and then they kicked me out. So, I only had part of the spring. It was nice though because I didn't have to worry about paying a huge chunk for my tuition because they refunded it, but I still paid until that point for the rest of my tuition at that point, but I didn't have to worry so much about that because I was like I lost my job. I can't pay tuition. I'm getting kicked out of the dorms. I don't know where I'm going to live. I don't know how school classes are going to go on. I tried applying for unemployment and I didn't get it, and I tried multiple times, so I was like I don't know what to do and luckily I have very smart sisters who maybe care about me? I don't know we joke about it, but they do, but we don't like to tell each other outright it's just a family thing. (6:00)

Erik: Yeah through all the jokes they do still love you.

Kat: Yeah, ehh.

Erik: And at least you got it sounds like you got at least one semester and a very small portion of a second to get that college experience in

Kat: Kind of I spent most of the time in the library so I basically had class in the morning all the way to Monday, Wednesday, Fridays I had class until six with a small hour break from two to three thirty or something like that and then I had my marching band class so after all that I would go change, get ready, grab my notes and head to the library and I would study from seven until midnight because my classes were just really hard (7:00) and I was just trying to not get lost in everything cause I was taking two languages at the time so it didn't help that I wasn't comfortable in the dorms so I was trying to figure it all out. So not, not really, I didn't go to any major campus parties or campus events. If anything, I stayed in my dorms and haunted the kitchen at night just cooking up whatever after I came home from studying. I'm just like, hmmm you know what I should have? A salad! So, I would just be in the kitchen make a salad at like one a.m. and some people walk in and they are drunk or walk in and just be like "why are you here?" I'm making dinner. I think it's sad that I didn't get to fully complete a full year. It would have been nice to have had that experience fully to say like oh-yeah, I've lived in the dorm long enough, but I guess it's ok. (8:00)

Erik: It's almost like Zimmerman became your home away from home all of a sudden.

Kat: Libraries are always my home away from home. They just, there's so much knowledge and so many ideas that just pop-up in places you would not expect in a book or an audiobook or movie or even just the shelving of a book can sometimes create ideas that have nothing to do with the books but have to do something and I don't know I feel like it just gets your creative juices flowing.

Erik: Um, going back to you had mentioned you know basically you were told very quickly, hey, get your stuff get out of the dorm. Was that like a mad house was that very coordinated like highly coordinated? That ok, you know if you're on this block or if you got an odd number, I

have no idea how the dorms are addressed. You know was it even numbers (9:00) this day odd numbers that day or was it really just free for all, try to maintain six feet if you can. Get your stuff and get out.

Kat: Basically, a free for all. So, I had a friend who was in California when she got the email and she, we message each other on snapchat and I was like hey your dorm. Will you be fine, and she was like oh I am on the Greyhound to get or I'm with some sibling and we'll be there in like within a day or two that way I can get all my stuff and go home. The problem was since it was at the beginning of spring break she just got home, and she got the email so she was worried she wouldn't be able to get any of her stuff and she was like I can't come back to UNM if I come back to UNM and they are like no you have to wait seven days before we can even let your room process to get you all your stuff. She's like I can't do that. That wastes my family's money (10:00) and so she's like so she was just nerve racking cause she was like I don't know what to do and I was like I don't, uh, I can't help you there I got family in New Mexico. But yeah, it was a whirl wind day I was doing. It was a Saturday so it was just a bunch of people just constantly well I don't think we wore a mask in the beginning cause it wasn't huge like it was noticeable, but like it hey this is there but it wasn't like implemented that you had to wear a mask so we just moved everything packed up and then yeah it was kind of sad because even though I only used my dorm to keep my stuff, sleep, and occasionally maybe watch a video, or something, or do a little bit of homework (11:00) it still felt like a home to me. It felt like a place where I could be like this is my safe space. This is where I can figure out life. This is where I can relax and not have to be on guard. That if I walk out my door or outside of my whole building door, I'll meet somebody off the street who wants to like kill me because it is an open campus. So, it felt so safe in the sense that I had a place where I felt like I had a home finally. Umm, being in a military family home is not like, well in my family, home isn't like when people say home is where the heart is or home is where their most fond memories are I don't have that association to me. A home is a place that you have memories, good memories and you have maybe remember the smell (12:00) of like your grandmother's hair or you remember some big family event and so for me home is a word I say because it keeps people off my back, but I don't feel like I have that place yet so it was a little hard because I consider that my home. Which to me I value more because of how I grew up on it and just what it represents to me what I made it represent. So, I was leaving my home, which I pay for, on school property to end up where? Like even though my sisters are so nice I wanted to do it on my own. That's what college is for experiences to grow-up and learn things. Become an adult and get tools and skills necessary to live your own life the way you want (13:00) and if you can't be independent and have a place to live by your own merits or pay for it by yourself then it's not that I feel less of a person, it just, I feel less of an adult. I feel like a coddled adult and I don't like that that much it doesn't sound nice.

Erik: I can understand that. So, so you're from a military family so really it sounds like you kind of bounced around and you finally had a place that you didn't think you would kind of get, hey, ok, it's time for you to move and then that did end up happening to you it sounds like.

Kat: Yeah.

Erik: Yeah, well hopefully Albuquerque can continue to be your home and you can go back to the dorms soon.

Kat: That's ok. I kind of don't want to go back to the dorms. Just with Covid I don't feel like they (14:00) can sanitize it enough to be safe for every student that lives there. Because where I was living it was six, no, it was four rooms to one bathroom and you could have up to two people in each room so that's six people sharing one restroom and yes they can distance it so it's less people so it's one person per room, but that's still four people sharing one restroom and then there's only one other restroom and that was downstairs in the basement, but that restroom you would share with anyone who entered the building. So it's not that they wouldn't do a great job I just don't feel that they could keep it clean enough to where I would feel safe of not getting it. Even though I can get it more at my job right now, but my point is (15:00) I do not feel like it is something I want to pursue. Plus, I love living off campus now. I feel like I do more stuff now because I am not constantly at the library. Even if it were open like it's a while to get to school so I have to make it worthwhile. Otherwise like home is fine. I stay in the kitchen most of the time so my flat mates will just walk out, and they'll see me just cooking whatever, or baking whatever, or cleaning up a mess of something I made.

Erik: Or making your salad at 1am. (Laughs)

Kat: (Laughing) No, I'm trying to make breads right now so like.

Erik: Ohhhh, you'll have to share some recipes with me then.

Kat: I don't have any good recipes for it so far, I don't know. During Covid I just like everybody just pick up hobbies, but I've always baked. As a kid and I just now that I am on my own I'm trying to bake on my own with different (16:00) recipes, but I haven't got bread down. Bread is the hardest thing like I can do cookies, I can do cake, I can do rice crispy treats, I can make a somewhat decent meal, umm, but bread is so hard for me. I think it is the yeast or something like that. I made pizza dough once and it didn't rise. The dough didn't rise! I think maybe I added too much warm water and I just killed the yeast, but it just kept doing that. So, I am working on my dough technique, but we'll see. It's a process.

Erik: Well, it sounds like you have had some positives that have come out of it. You get to work on your cooking and your baking. Any other positives that you've been able to get out of this experience or out of this Covid thing? (17:00)

Kat: Positives, oofff, ummm, (Kat Pauses) when I think of positives I am reminded of all the negatives, but let's see, I guess a positive is, umm (Kat pauses and reflects). No, that wasn't fun yet (another short pause) umm, that I spent more time on myself? That I am learning to be selfish. That's something that is super hard for me, is being, is being selfish. So, I'm learning it is hard because I do feel regret afterwards for a small while. You feel remorse and then it's fine. Like my laptop I have currently, I needed a new one for school cause my other one was just, uh, it didn't want to live anymore. It does live occasionally (18:00) but it said uh-uh I'm done.

Erik: It said no. Sorry you are going to have to go through this experience by yourself. I'm out 'a here.

Kat: Yeah, and it... I was so afraid it wouldn't last me until the end of finals last semester just because I was like, at that time, I was like I can't afford a computer. I can't even afford to pay rent for January. I can't even pay my phone bill. I can't even pay for food because I got laid off in November. So I got laid off twice and in November after I got laid off I didn't go back to work after four weeks. I did get unemployment, but it wasn't a lot. It was barely, even like, if you go by weeks, so like a month, or what I would be paid a month for my work what they were paying me was less than half of what I was getting a month.(19:00). I was getting under a hundred dollars a week for unemployment and that only lasted for two weeks cause they didn't like through the week that I was trying to get unemployment during that whole week beforehand. So I only got it for two weeks out of the four weeks I was out, and that was kind of sad, but that helped me buy some food and that's what I used that money on and so it was very hectic at that time because my computer was giving up on me and was like no I can't do this. I talked to one of my classmates and was like what do I do, do you think UNM has a computer I could borrow for the end of the semester cause if my laptop crashes, I need to use the internet and public libraries are not accepting people to use their computers.

Erik: We have just over a minute left just to let you know.

Kat: Yeah, but (20:00) yeah so being selfish is (unintelligible)

Erik: Well, and I guess my final question for you since we're just over a minute left. Do you think like societally that there are positives or negatives that will come out of this?

Kat: I say there are a few positives, but I don't feel like society will look at all the negatives as costs because currently the death status in the U.S. has risen over all the people that have died in two wars for the U.S. So, I don't feel like maybe a lot of change societally just because the last time there was something that was huge like SARS or Ebola it wasn't like after that it was done. There was no prevention. No let's work with house officials to make (21:00) sure if it happens again like none of that. So, I don't feel like there will be. That's very bleak but (laughs)

Erik: Well, we have our last ten seconds I would like to say thank you very much for the interview it has certainly been a pleasure and we will see you later. Bye-bye.