

Austin Thomas  
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Interviewed by: Marisa Gurulé  
Zoom call  
Transcribed by: Marisa Gurulé

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Marisa Gurulé: My name is Marisa Gurulé it is February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021 and I am interviewing Austin Thomas over Zoom about pandemic life. So, first question, so like what was your first just general reaction when you first heard about COVID, and how that was being handled?

Austin Thomas: To be honest it was kind of a different—like I went through different phases of it kind of. I remember when it first kind of happened I was taking immunology, so our immunology teacher was kind of going through the whole thing with us as it was kind of unwrapping. And to be honest (1:00) when I first heard about it I didn't care about it, I was like okay this is something somewhere else the news just blows things up this is probably going to be nothing like every other thing. So, didn't really care about it. And then it got to the point where it was like wow this might be like kind of real you know? So that kind of started getting kind of scary. And then yeah, we showed up for class one day and our immunology teacher was like yeah this is going to be our last class for the semester and you guys are just going to be—we're just going to do the this online for the rest of the semester like take care of yourself, blah blah blah. And after that it was like oh shit, like this guy is a leading immunologist and he's like *actually scared* about this so maybe I should be too, ya know? So, at that point it was pretty freaky. So, then you're like a little bit scared. And then you, for me then you start watching YouTube videos about people that had it and you're just like holy shit, like some people it's like really bad and some people it's not. So, then we kind of went into like a (2:00), here at our house, it's just me and my girlfriend, so we went into like super clean prepper mode so we went and got a bunch of groceries and got a bunch of things, and that when like nothing, we got all of our stuff before everything ran out, but that was like pretty much at that phase where everyone was buying all the toilet paper and all that stuff so. We kind of went through that, and were like we're just going to stay home until this is all over. And I think, I definitely never expected it to last as long as it did ya know? It was more just like okay this is going to be weird for a while. So yeah so, then it turned into like holy crap this super scary so we would super sanitize, and wear masks all the time and then we would—yeah just like sanitize all our groceries like it was super crazy (3:00). And then it got to the point where like, so it was like that for a couple months maybe or like a month or two. And then it got to the point where it was like I felt so exhausting to be that way that I would just kind of let go I was like okay whatever if I get COVID I get COVID, I'll be somewhat careful but I'm not going to stop living my life so then I started living my life again. And then yeah still the same way with being—I would sanitize and stuff but, just kind of went back to living. And then yeah, I think I told you, so at that point I went back to work cause I hadn't been working for a while. And went back to work, and worked for six months and never got it but it was definitely kind of—I sit with very close quarters with people like in cars and stuff so it was kind of scary.

Marisa: When exactly did you go back to work, like what month or?

Austin: It was on, let's see (4:00), I think it was June or July—June or July I went back to work. Let's say June, I think it was in June. So, like all the way from March, March, April, and May we were off my whole work was closed no one was doing anything, and then, yeah and then we went back like in June, and just kind of same thing tried to have precautions and make everyone wear masks and sanitize and stuff but. Yeah so then it kind of got to the point where like I'm kind of a hypochondriac, so it was—it was freaking me out so much that I just finally let go, I was like you know what whatever if I get COVID, I get COVID I'm not gonna drive myself crazy about it you know? So, did that and then worked all the rest of the year until December. Never got COVID, and then on the last week of December we were in Florida and (5:00) Florida was pretty open, and we—the whole group of 20 of us that I work with, we all had a good time went to like Key West did all this stuff, and then when they were flying back, they got—some of my buddies that I work with got tested at the airport, and they were like yeah, we have COVID dude you should go get tested and I'm like oh that's crazy wow okay. So, I got tested and I was positive as well, so out of the 20 like 17 of us got COVID. And then it was like at that phase it was like wow this is—cause then I went to the doctor ya know cause you have to get tested at the doctor and the doctor was like look—was going through the symptoms and when to be worried and when to be scared so then it was like dang this is kinda scary like I could die, you know so it was pretty freaky. And then (6:00) so that was on December 17<sup>th</sup> I tested positive so then yeah just kind of quarantined, got a little bit—got sick but not too bad. Yeah, we were quarantined for Christmas so I couldn't go—I was gone for six months working—so I was pretty excited to come home to my family and then couldn't go to Christmas so that was kinda lame. And then finally I think I came off quarantine on New Year's Day, and then, yeah just kind of that was it and then still—I still to this day I can't really smell or taste that good but, besides that everything went back to normal. And now it's kind of almost like a relief a little bit you're like okay I know I'll at least have immunity for whatever 6 to 8 months or whatever it is, so now it's kind of like more of a relief more than anything.

Marisa: (7:00) So what would you say the biggest impact of all of this was on you, throughout everything?

Austin: I would definitely say, probably the biggest thing it did for me is it kinda taught me what was important in life. Like I said I went through phases of it where at first I was like this is scary I'm not going to talk to anybody, no one is coming to my house. Then it got to this point where I was like what's the point of life you know if you're just going to stay locked in your house forever, and then there's no point. So, at that point I was like family is what—and friends, and being with people is what's important to me so, if that's what takes me out, then that's what takes me out. So, then I went through that, and then after I went to work I started—cause you always think certain things are going to make you happy right? Like oh once (8:00) I see my friends and family that's going to make me happy, and then you do that and then you're like okay I'm kinda broke so then I went to work and started making a lot of money, and then that was like wow this just kinda sucks, I miss my friends and family again cause I was just gone for six months. So, like I said the biggest thing I learned throughout this whole thing is just how important—what things are important and to me that's friends and family and being home. So, yeah, I think that's definitely one of the biggest things that I learned through this.

Marisa: You have talked about your job a little bit, do you wanna describe what exactly you do and how COVID specifically effected that, like how you work or where you work?

Austin: Yeah, so I'm a professional racecar driver by trade but, nowadays I do more coaching and teaching so, (9:00) essentially, I work for various dealerships and stuff so if somebody buys a new Ferrari, or a new Porsche, or a new Lamborghini, I essentially teach them how to drive it. So, I'm an exotic car instructor, is what my title is I guess you could say—exotic car instructor. Which entitles, which entails us to be in a little Porsche or in a little Lamborghini with somebody that we don't know for hours of the day, so, with COVID it definitely got weird. It was definitely you had to make people wear masks, and a lot of those people if you own a Lamborghini or Ferrari typically your kind of successful and wealthy or whatever, so somebody telling you to wear a mask is not what they want to hear, so definitely got a lot of pushback from that. (10:00) I'd say at first, and then once kind of as it started going into the pandemic more people kind of realized okay we gotta wear masks. So yeah it definitely made work a little weird, trying to coach and all that with a helmet and a mask on was a little weird. Plus, it also, to me the funnest part of my job was the traveling and going out with my friends and doing—going to dinner trying restaurants and stuff. And with the pandemic pretty much nothing was ever open, and you kinda get freaked out like you're staying, I stayed in like 150 different hotel rooms last year. So, it's kinda freaky like you're always having to sanitize the hotel rooms and sanitize, you know so it definitely made work different for sure.

Marisa: So, when you got to a new hotel or hotel room what (11:00) did you do to make yourself feel more comfortable?

Austin: Yeah, so we would sanitize all of the major—so my girlfriend travels with me she works with me too, so we would essentially, I would take a wipe she would take a wipe, we would sanitize all the door handles, the remote, the little night stand, the light switches, the faucets so first thing we ever did when we walked in a hotel is we would do that. So, we would do that and then we would be good and then we would sanitize our hands when we came to and from or whatever. Yeah that was kind of our routine.

Marisa: So, all of this with the online classes and everything, did that effect your degree plan?

Austin: (12:00) Oh for sure. So, I was supposed to graduate last May, the pandemic kind of hit us mid semester. So, all of my teachers were like no were going online were going online, and two of my classes, the professors kind of made it, I don't know how you say it, they, I don't know they didn't want us to get away with just getting it easy because it was online for the rest of the semester so I feel like they made it overly difficult. And I wasn't able to pass those two classes, and I've never not passed a class, I'm just like, I feel like I'm not good at online stuff, I'm not good at concentrating when it's just a computer or logging on. So, I didn't pass those two classes so I didn't graduate in May. And plus, during while I was doing those I was on the road working, so it was like a double whammy. I didn't pass (13:00) that semester so that's why I'm taking two classes this semester to graduate.

Marisa: So, I know you had to quarantine when you had COVID, before that also did you have to quarantine for any extended periods of time?

Austin: Yeah, I actually—so midway through our tour, through my racing season, maybe let's see, I don't even know when it was, October or November or something. My best friend is a jet pilot and he flies a private jet for these people, and they essentially went to Costa Rica, and (14:00) on their way back from Costa Rica the people he was flying, the family, was like yeah we don't really feel good. So, he was like okay whatever and didn't think nothing of it they came home. And he was in Albuquerque so he was like yeah lets hangout lets go get lunch—cool. So, we went and hung out and got lunch, and then that night him and his wife were like we don't feel good, and I'm like dang that's kinda a bummer whatever. And then the next day they went home and they found out that out of the 7 people on the jet 5 of them tested positive for COVID and he was the other one that didn't test yet, so he went and he tested positive, and we were just went to lunch with them and they were in the car, like everything. We were like dang we probably have COVID too now, so we—it was kind of a pain I was only supposed to be back home for like a weekend and then go back to work. But yeah, I told my work look here's the deal I got an exposure like so they were like (15:00) just quarantine, and then, so I quarantined for like—at that point it was like you needed a 10-day quarantine. And I felt perfect for like 7 days and then—so I scheduled to go back to work that next weekend, and then on that like 7th day just felt like complete crap got super super sick. Which was really weird so I got really really sick like all my symptoms were like COVID like I lost my smell, I lost my taste, everything was like COVID. Everyone that had COVID at that time was describing to me exactly how I felt. So, I got tested again and it was negative so I was like that's freakin weird, so I got tested again with a different test and it was negative. I was super sick for like 10 days of the flu, but it wasn't COVID somehow. It was super weird (16:00) because even the doctors were like you probably have COVID the tests are probably wrong. So, I kind of thought I already had COVID. Then after three weeks I was finally able to get back to work because I was very very sick, so I went back to work maybe November or something. And then yeah, I ended up getting COVID again in December which was super weird, yeah it was a weird situation.

Marisa: Yeah that sounds interesting. During quarantine was that rough on you having to stay home the whole time, or how did you handle that?

Austin: I think there was definitely pros and cons to it. (17:00) So, I work on old cars and I work on—I was remodeling my house so it was awesome being able to finish a bunch of projects—that I had been out on the road—so not really able to do it, so I got a lot of that stuff done. Which was super cool. Started new hobbies, like I used to ride dirt bikes when I was younger, and me and all my friends got dirt bikes again so that was pretty cool. I started fly—so I always wanted to get my pilot license so I was home so I got that. So, I got my pilot license, so I was flying a lot. Yeah there was definitely—there was a lot of fun stuff to so while I was home. I definitely wouldn't say it was boring or anything.

Marisa: (18:00) So, we have like two minutes left—

Austin: Wait what was that, sorry I lost you at the end.

Marisa: Is there anything in general that you want to share or add in?

Austin:(long pause) I'd say not really, it was just kind of a weird time. It's still a weird time, ya know? Yeah definitely learned a lot about myself and about my family we all kind of figured out what was important in life. I think it was like overall, like kind of a good thing in some ways. But very dividing in others it seems like, it's kind of sad it turned into a political thing between certain members of my family and stuff like that, so in those aspects (19:00) it was super dividing cause, I don't know, I don't know how a pandemic turns into a political thing but it did. So that was kind of sad cause it kind of like brought some of my family apart. But besides that, it was a weird time, it was a good time, it was a bad time, it was kind of all of it ya know.

Marisa: Thank you for your time, and answering all the questions and everything.

Austin: Sweet.

Marisa: That's all I have for you. (19:31)