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Interviewees: Samuel Askin and Taylor Wilkerson

Interviewer: John Stefanek

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John Stefanek: Hello, I am John Stefanek. I am a doctoral student at the University of Montana, studying history. I am part of University of Montana's Department's [of History] internship documenting COVID-19. I am sitting down here in Missoula, Montana in my apartment with Taylor and Sam.

Taylor Wilkerson: Hello!

Samuel Askin: How's it going?

TW: I'm Taylor. I am a software developer and also a Twitch streamer and we are in Helena, Montana right now doing a remote interview.

SA: I'm Sam. Say your last name.

TW: Did I? Taylor Wilkerson. Yeah, I said that [laughs]!

SA: I'm Sam Askin. I'm a student here in Helena. I go to class online and I Twitch stream with Taylor here.

JS: Alrighty. Let's get started with your backgrounds. Where are you both from?

SA: You start.

TW: So I was born in Utah and I've lived all over the Western U.S. and I've lived in West Virginia for a little while. But for the most part I've lived in Montana off and on since I was about eight years old so I would consider myself from Helena and from Montana in general. But I've lived in Idaho, Arizona, Utah, West Virginia, Pennsylvania in addition to that.

SA: Texas.

TW: And Texas, that's true. I forget about Texas. How could I? [laughs]

SA: Taylor's lived in a lot more places than I have, I grew up in Helena and have lived here most of my life except for college. My first few years of college I did live in Bozeman at MSU. We both moved to Texas for about a year and then we've been in Helena, Montana for two years now together, and have just been living here. But as far as Helena years I think I've lived here twenty years.

JS: Taylor you mentioned you've been kind of all over the place. What brought you to Montana?

TW: Well my mom's family is from Montana originally, and so I think eventually when I was a child my mom wanted to move back closer to where she was from and where her roots were. We moved here when I was about eight years old, and then I've moved away a couple of times for short stretches but I like Montana a lot so I keep coming back and I hope to stay here for the rest of my life honestly.

JS: Great. You mentioned you both moved down to Texas for a bit, living down there?

SA: Yeah, we were in Austin for a bit. Taylor was working in San Antonio. You were working for USA, right? And then I was working with a music studio in Austin for awhile.

TW: Yeah it was pretty fun. We lived in San Marcos for a few months and then we lived in Austin, Texas after that—

SA: In total, probably a year—

TW: For you total about a year there. I was there—

SA: You were there for less 'cause she was doing a... I'm sorry I'm talking for you.

TW: Yeah, I was doing a software development internship there. And then you were recording music and being an extra in random films in Austin.

SA: I did so many random jobs. I was a film extra for *The Walking Dead* a couple times. I was just doing food delivery, side gig jobs. I was doing a bunch of auditions for Christian movies because I got like a baby boy face when I'm shaved like right now, so that works pretty well in those... maybe I don't wanna put that on the record [both laugh]. I was just making ends meet and just eating a lot of tacos and hanging out there. And Taylor was actually doing adult things [laughs]. But then we moved back to Montana and I got a job at the state... sorry I feel like we're rambling here. But I worked with the state. I was doing administrative work with the health department for about... I guess that was probably over a year, that was like a year and a half, and then I went back to school. And surprisingly I maybe am lucky because I got out of the health department before the coronavirus happened and I think my life would be a lot more hectic right now if I was still with the health department 'cause I took calls for Medicare, Medicaid and I answered a lot of questions related to those programs, and I think my life would be kind of crazy right now if I was still working there. And it wasn't like... I loved that job a lot but I was trying to expand my career because I had only gotten an associate's degree before, so that was why I was going back.

JS: Great. So how did you two first meet? Was it in Montana?

TW: We actually first met playing *Call of Duty* of all things in Montana outside of Helena. I was not very into video games back then. I played, you know, *Pokémon*, growing up and *Mario Kart* so I wasn't very good at *Call of Duty* and I remember I was like "oh, where are all the zombies at?" We were doing *Call of Duty* zombies.

And Sam was like "that's 'cause I'm killing them all, Taylor." And that was where we first met. It was probably four years after that we actually started dating so we were friends for a long time.

SA: Yeah, it's one of those true *Call of Duty* get-together stories, you know? Taylor was dating one of our friends and then in college we were both single, and I was a little scandalous, but I was working with the college movie theater for MSU and I was looking for employees. I was actually just asking around and then I talked to Taylor, she was looking for a job, and then we started hanging out after work and stuff so that's kinda how we started dating. We're married now, I don't know if that's clear at all. It's probably a thing to know [laughs].

JS: Certainly. How long have you been together and when did you get married?

TW: So we've been together for... I'm gonna get this wrong—

SA: No no, it's like—

TW: Three years, four years?

SA: Three to four, we're coming up on four because September 1st was our—

TW: Loosely identified date that we started dating.

SA: Yeah, and then we got married—

TW: About the same time.

SA: About the same time last year. So we've been married almost a year.

TW: Well at the end of August it will be a year, so we've got a little while. So three years together dating and then almost a year married.

JS: Cool—

SA: We were both playing video games the first time we met which is kind of weird, and we Twitch stream now.

JS: Yeah, that's a great part for my next question. So both of you play games and stream them online. You mentioned *Call of Duty*, were there any other games that you played at this time period or was it mostly just *Call of Duty*?

TW: Oh man.

SA: Well—

TW: I think we have to mention *Peggle*.

[both laugh]

SA: So that was like a game that we played when we were dating.

TW: Is the time period you're asking about now in quarantine or leading up—

JS: Yeah, leading up, growing up even before you met what were some of the games you played?

TW: *Pokémon*. I already mentioned that but you have all the time [laughs].

SA: Yeah, I played just like a lot of shooters and stuff like *Halo* and *Call of Duty*. But a lot of different weird stuff. It seems like we play more games together, like I wouldn't consider myself really into games until we started hanging out more because we started playing more games together, cooperatively and kind of finding different things we liked and I feel like now I play more different types of games than I did when I was a kid. I think I just stuck to the same three games as a kid.

TW: There's also less games available when we were kids though.

SA: Yeah I don't know maybe that's it too—

TW: But I know you and I both played *Lego Star Wars* when we were kids—

SA: Oh that one was good.

TW: —which still holds up in my opinion. *Shrek 2*, the video game, do you remember that one?

[both laugh]

TW: I don't know why but everyone played that game. And we both forgot about it.

SA: I played *Shrek 1*.

TW: You did? No, that's crazy.

SA: I don't want this to be a [unintelligible] I'm just kidding [laughs].

TW: No, yeah, I remember growing up we had a Nintendo 64 that my cousins had so we would go over and play *Mario Kart* on the 64 and *Donkey Kong* but not the actual game, like the little battle part of it, on the 64 and that was a pretty good time. And then we got a GameCube and then eventually a Wii when I was a kid and so we played all of those fun *Mario Party*, *Mario Kart*, Nintendo-ey sorts of games.

SA: It was always *GoldenEye [Goldeneye 007]* for me, just playing 64 *GoldenEye* with my cousin. I remember he had two TV's stacked on top of each other in his room so we could get, I think you could do four-player on each of them, and he had a friend bring over a 64 and then we'd all be playing *GoldenEye* at the same time. I don't think you could be playing like... they didn't have a four-versus-four, it was just like we're all just playing at the same time and that was pretty fun to us. Yeah, that's kinda what we did growing up.

JS: So you mentioned a few gaming consoles there, the Nintendo 64, Game Boy for *Pokémon*. Was there also an Xbox involved there too?

SA: I don't think Taylor did but I definitely did—

TW: You had the [Xbox] 360, right?

SA: I didn't ever have any games, I just would go bum off my neighbor who had all the game consoles and eventually got my own Xbox's and PC's, like with Steam.

TW: Yeah, I never really got into PC gaming to be honest. I mean I play *Civ. V [Civilization V]* sometimes on my laptop but that's about the extent of the PC games that I've... we downloaded a free fishing game off of Steam one time, that was pretty fun. Graphics left something to be desired as you can imagine for a free game off of Steam.

JS: Certainly. You both mentioned a little bit, I know Sam you mentioned a bit that you kind of changed style with games over the years and you play more cooperatively now. How exactly have you changed over the years in your gaming styles, the games you play, the consoles, does that make sense?

SA: Yeah, I think I used to play *Halo* a lot when I was a kid, didn't really play *Pokémon* at all at any point in my childhood but then I played that with Taylor a lot. We played *Pokémon GO* on our phones a lot. Taylor was sick one week and we just played tons of Double Dash, that *Mario Kart* game, just more like Nintendo, maybe a little more kid-friendly, cooperative games.

TW: We've swapped. I think I grew up with like the Nintendo, kind of cartoony style of cooperative gaming. And Sam I think you grew up with the more like single-player, grittier graphics sort of games and now we've both met in the middle somewhere.

SA: Yeah, it's kind of fun to do both I think.

JS: Awesome. So I want bring the conversation more towards Twitch. Twitch is a streaming platform which allows users to broadcast their gaming sessions in real time to their viewers. And your [Twitch] channel is called, "cozyfolk," right?

TW: Yes.

JS: Okay, and when do you first remember hearing about Twitch, and when did you start streaming?

TW: Oh, when did we first hear about Twitch?

SA: Okay, so I first heard about Twitch when I was really young because I was watching old YouTubers play. When I was a kid I really liked Rooster Teeth and gosh a lot of those... like SeaNanners videos and stuff. I really liked those when I was a kid, and then as I got older a lot of those streamers moved over to Twitch. I would hear from the news related to those companies that they were quitting because they wanted to go do independent work, and I'm like "but where are these people going?" So I would go follow these links and then follow Twitch and that was probably like five years ago when I first started seeing that, like 2015. And I've always been interested in streaming or recording content because I grew up watching it because I didn't own a lot of the consoles and the platforms so it was kind of a way for me to check out the games and stuff without actually owning them. When did you hear about Twitch?

TW: I think my first experience with Twitch after some sort of vague notion that it existed was the winter of 2016-2017. They were streaming twenty-four hours a day of Bob Ross' *The Joy of Painting* and I remember my roommates just had it on in our college apartment and so I watched it, 'cause I love Bob Ross, I always have, and so that was my introduction to Twitch. And I remember I was extremely confused 'cause I'd heard of it before as a video gaming streaming service and I remember asking my roommates like "hey, I thought this was for video games, what's going on here, why is Bob Ross suddenly a gamer?" But no, you can do all sorts of things on there. And then Sam I and didn't start streaming until, what, a year ago?

SA: It was September last year.

TW: Was it?

SA: Like right after we got married we started streaming.

TW: Yeah, I think you kind of had a little bit of an itch to do it for awhile, and you were doing it by yourself for a little awhile on like an old channel?

SA: I was doing it by myself on an old channel and really hated it. I really hated playing by myself and thought it was so awkward to talk on mic [microphone]. It's really challenging to sound interesting when you're playing the same game for like six hours, you know? Are you just gonna talk about... especially when there's nobody watching, that's the hardest thing about Twitch streaming, like how do you sound interesting when no one is watching you? I still don't think anybody is watching us but I think—

TW: We have a couple regulars now.

SA: We have a couple regulars, which is fun, but when I had that old channel I just stopped doing it 'cause it doesn't feel natural to me. Whenever I play games I like to play with other people, I like to talk about what's going on with them. I think it's way more natural. I had the idea to do it with Taylor so we called it "cozyfolk" because we were using the same pair of headphones and we'd have to split the mic on it, it was like this really terrible pair of like Skullcandy earbuds and so we had to get really cozy on the couch. Like we literally had to be like, two feet apart from her—

TW: Shoulder-to-shoulder like squished together.

SA: I didn't have a mic around so we just did that first and then we started testing out different stream stuff, we started doing different styles. And now I feel like we're more comfortable with just the way it is now. We kinda have a more defined setup, we have it kind of easier.

TW: [unintelligible] to retain the cozy element, as it were.

SA: Or hot chocolate.

TW: Yeah.

SA: Yeah that works too.

JS: Great. What was the inspiration for you both wanting to do this? I know Sam you mentioned you obviously didn't want to do this alone anymore. But what's your primary use for using Twitch, both of you?

TW: I would say it's just a fun way to hang out and unwind a little bit. Sam your experience is probably different, but I know for me it's like "oh, I'm gonna go play video games for a couple of hours and pretend like it's somehow more productive than it would be otherwise because it's streaming on the Internet." Which, I mean who knows if that's the case? But yeah, it's fun to

talk to people in the chat. As always it's fun to just play games with Sam so I like that aspect of it. It's very relaxing.

SA: Yeah, I think at first I had the mindset that I was going to be creating content. I look at it way differently now. I just look at it as like something to relax and unwind with. It seems like it always puts me in a pretty good headspace. We're pretty positive, we're pretty friendly, we're not trying to put negative vibes out there.

TW: I mean I don't know, we've had some tense moments on stream [laughs].

SA: We've had some tense moments but like—

TW: I don't know if we should say that unilaterally.

SA: Not like tense moments. I think it's usually when there's a glitch in the game or something.

TW: No, it's when the *Minecraft* creepers sneak up behind me ten times in a row—

SA: Or that.

TW: —and it ruins my day [laughs].

JS: You mentioned you had a few regulars that follow your stream. Do you know anything about them or why they follow?

TW: Yeah, it's a little bit of an odd group because I think the games we play either skew pretty young or to like *Halo* is a little bit more of an adult crowd or something like *Lego Star Wars* where people I think people only wanna watch it for the nostalgia factor which is mostly why we play it. So it seems for our *Lego Star Wars* streams we had a guy in there who is about our age that would like to come back a lot. And then on our *Minecraft* streams we have one regular in the *Minecraft* streams who comes to like everyone single one—

SA: Yeah, it seems like for each of our games that we play we have one or two regulars that are there for every stream, and they're always kinda interesting to talk to.

TW: Yeah, the kid on our *Minecraft* stream is like a thirteen-year-old boy from Greece, so it's always interesting hearing his perspective on what we're doing, how America is doing.

SA: He also has to tell us how bad we are at *Minecraft* [laughs].

TW: Which is true, we are bad at *Minecraft*!

SA: Which is fair. But there's a lot of these thirteen-year-old kids that are way better at games than I am so that's also part of it. Are they all like fourteen-year-old boys it seems like?

TW: No, the—

SA: The other kid was like—

TW: Yeah, the people in our other streams were about our age, I remember we were talking to them. But the *Minecraft* ones, people seemed to skew younger. Yeah, we've had a couple people flit in and out over the chat on those ones as well and I don't know anything about them really because they didn't stick around as long.

JS: Okay. So you mentioned a little bit you started streaming about a year ago. What kind of games did you stream initially, and have they changed since COVID or recently?

TW: Oh, yeah.

SA: We used to play some like—

TW: What did we start streaming? I don't even remember.

SA: I definitely think we know what type of games to play now 'cause like we tried so many things where the games were really heavy. Like we had this session kinda earlier on, I think we were trying to play *The Witcher 3* [*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*] and as fun as that game I think is... I mean a lot of these games are so expansive that you can't really like just press A and move left and right because you're trying to talk to Taylor and I kinda like it being low-key.

TW: Yeah, I think the difference is we started out with some of the games we were playing were like *Fallout* or *The Witcher* and they were one-person games extensively and we've since migrated to mostly games that we can both be on a controller at the same time. I just think that's more fun and a little bit easier to interact and just do, so we've kind of migrated from things like *Fallout* and that one... we did a *Blair Witch Project* [*Blair Witch*] game.

SA: That was fun [laughs].

TW: Yeah, and now we play more things like *Minecraft*, and *Lego Star Wars* we've kinda been doing the entire time. We do dabble in other things randomly like *Viva Piñata* and *Peggle* will show up every once in awhile if we wanna just stream and make sure no one's watching. The dark obsession of our's is definitely *Peggle*.

SA: Yeah, we were up awhile last night playing that for like three hours. We were trying to clear the whole game and it's so stupid.

TW: It is. It's a lost cause but it's very addicting [laughs].

JS: For people listening to this interview, what's the difference between *Peggle* and a game like *Fallout*, for example? I just wanna clarify that for the record.

SA: No, they're really the same, no just kidding [laughs].

TW: No, so *Fallout* is a... you should describe them I don't know the words.

SA: Okay, so there's a lot of core differences between *Fallout* and *Peggle* [both laugh]. So *Fallout* is a first-person shooter, it's a little bit of an RPG [role-playing game]. So it's like a post-apocalyptic sort of setting, but it's like the technology was pseudo-frozen in the '50s, '60s era [1950s and 1960s], like it's all got this kinda aesthetic that's from that time period while still being in like a nuclear fallout. So it's very much a role-playing game. You're very much developing your character, getting weapons, shooting lots of disgusting bugs. It's very deep. But *Peggle* is just literally a stupid puzzle game for the Xbox 360 that we still play [laughs].

TW: You shoot a little ball out of a cannon—

SA: You shoot a little ball out of a cannon and—

TW: —it hits pegs.

SA: —and it bounces around pegs and you try to catch them with a bucket. That's all it is [laughs].

TW: Yeah, *Fallout*, this world with an expansive story, and then *Peggle*—

SA: Expansive story, it's just a—

TW: I feel with *Peggle* it's so neutral you can put whatever story you want on it, right?

SA: Sure.

TW: Yeah.

JS: Sure. And do you mostly use an Xbox for these streams that you broadcast?

SA: Yeah, we try to do P.C. at first. I learned my P.C. is kinda garbage and can't handle it 'cause it's difficult to stream it and play it at the same time, it takes up a lot of processing. So I instantly just went to the Xbox and it was great with streaming it with the laptop and then learned about just doing it from the Twitch app on the Xbox, which is what we currently do, and we have like a whole mic connected into the Xbox, we just use like a little Yeti mic.

TW: USB mic.

SA: Yeah it's a little USB mic and that works okay for us now. That's what we're doing.

TW: It was very complicated at one point. It was going to one of those little Elgato [USB]—

SA: Yeah we were doing Elgato for awhile.

TW: —which captured it and sent it to the computer which had OBS [Open Broadcast Software] and would actually stream it to Twitch and then we had a mic connected to the computer also, right?

SA: Yeah that setup was a nightmare.

TW: It was a nightmare and it only worked about twenty-five percent of the time because there were constant software updates so the new Twitch app on the Xbox is much, much easier to use.

JS: Awesome. So I wanted to, of course, bring this into COVID-19. When did you both recall hearing about COVID-19?

TW: For me it was very early on, really near the beginning of 2020. I think that's only because I am a little bit of a nerd and like to keep up to date with new developments in the science world and they were kind of talking about it even when it was just in Wuhan. So I had heard about it early on and I'm sure I shouted it out to Sam like, "oh, Sam did you hear there's a new virus?"

And he was probably like, "yeah." I don't know. Do you remember when you heard about it?

SA: What was that ship called that landed from California that was the first one that... well okay, so the first time I heard about coronavirus, that was probably also in the beginning of... I think it was probably from you actually, just from hearing you talk about it.

TW: Yeah, early 2020.

SA: I can remember when it went from knowing about it to worrying about it [laughs].

TW: Yeah that's a much clearer timeline in my mind.

JS: Yeah, and about that timeline. When do you think it like started to really affect your daily lives? When did you notice that?

TW: Ooh, when did we move to this apartment? That was about the time.

SA: We moved apartments like right as corona—

TW: March, right? Wasn't that in the middle of March?

SA: Yeah, right in middle of March right as corona was happening. We basically were trying to move out of our apartment to a different one across town and we didn't feel like we could ask for help because it was such a new thing that we just wanted move everything on our own. I don't know, can you explain this for me?

TW: Yeah so what happened was we were moving... so it didn't affect us really too much in the beginning because I already work from home for my job and Sam was taking classes online for school. So we were both working from home already, so our day-to-day impact wasn't as large as some folks. But I remember I got really sick with a viral infection about the time it was starting to spread through the U.S. and of course the symptoms of COVID-19 are pretty vague and basically describe every single virus. And so at that time they were telling everyone who had a dry cough and a fever to go and get tested so I went and did that and it did come back negative. But between being able to get tested and getting the results we had to move and we couldn't just call our friends and family to help us pick up our stuff and move out of our old apartment because I might be sick with the brand new pandemic disease and we don't know yet.

SA: Yeah it wasn't like we could just... maybe if Taylor wasn't sick we could've—

TW: Even then everyone was like stressed to the max, nobody was shaking hands, nobody wanted to see each other, we were all talking on—

SA: FaceTime and Skype.

TW: FaceTime. Yeah, and so Sam and I ended up moving all of our stuff while I was sick and we have a hilarious video of our huge couch somehow sticking out the back of our Subaru Outback, which was quite the adventure getting it out of there but we did it somehow. I think I slept for about a week straight after that. But yeah, it was stressful at first for sure. I remember it was a strange thing where being, again, a nerd I was reading all the science journals about it constantly, and constantly refreshing and seeing what new research there was and of course there's no new research on something that's this new at the time. Yeah, it was certainly interesting and back then people still thought it was about as dangerous as the flu, was kind of the common knowledge. I mean some people still think that I guess but that was more of a widespread belief at that time when it first started. And so it was a very interesting thing talking to people over the phone and being like, "oh my goodness, what's going on?"

And someone's like, "I was at a barbecue and nobody was shaking hands." I don't know, it was a very strange experience for sure.

JS: You mentioned, Taylor, you read a few scientific journals about COVID before this all happened. How'd both of you receive your news about COVID overall, like now and during the initial outbreak?

TW: Yeah, that's a great question. I have a couple different channels that I like to go to for science news. There's a fun science YouTube channel that I usually find to be pretty well-researched called "SciShow." And so they were putting out things that I'd look at there. Basically as soon as this broke out my work set up a slack channel so people could talk about it without interrupting all of our other work messages and people were constantly posting scientific articles in there as well. I don't know where they get them. I like to look at Reddit for just more personal stories about it, like "oh, I'm in the hospital right now" sorts of things. I think sometimes I do see articles posted to Reddit but I'm always a little more skeptical of those ones because they tend to be a little less reliable. I don't know, how about you?

SA: I definitely learned a lot of this from you just 'cause I just would like annexing news out of my life 'cause I didn't like seeing news all of the time. But this is when I had to shift from being out of the dark a little bit to actually responding 'cause it was changing so rapidly. I had to change my habits 'cause I typically don't really like looking at that sort of stuff but I definitely started going on Reddit, *New York Times* and just checking it a lot and I still check it every day still.

TW: I guess worth shouting out is... what's it called? Maybe it's not worth shouting out then but there's a website somewhere that is a non-profit organization that put out a bunch of statistics for every state in the United States about how they're doing in respect to their COVID response and I remember I checked that at the beginning probably five times a day to see just what Montana's doing. And, of course, Montana we don't have that many people so we don't have that many cases so it's always the same. But yeah, Sam you were definitely better at balancing having some brain space away from all the anxiety and worry. I remember you were like, "Taylor you need to put that away, you're in bed sick right now you can't be reading this stuff."

SA: That first part of... well in mid-March when you were sick, we're moving, and it was all starting to really spread in America, everybody was on edge and Taylor was especially on edge 'cause she had the same symptoms. And yeah we kinda just had to really put it down, like we kinda just say "hey we're doing everything we can right now to eliminate the anxiety, we just gotta like not look at the news, we gotta stop refreshing, we gotta stop refreshing, we just gotta eat food, take a shower, we have to do human things because it can get really, really depressing to look at the news every five minutes."

JS: Sure. You've talked about it a bit but what is it like living together during such a historic time period? Have you noticed any big changes in your lives living together or anything that's surprising that didn't change too much?

TW: Yeah, like I said earlier, since we were both already working from home—

SA: That part didn't change.

TW: —that part didn't change at all for us which is nice. You always see all these reports of divorce rates going up in China after their lockdown and we're like, "well, we kinda know what we're getting ourselves into so."

SA: Yeah, we're also really lucky that our lives haven't changed and we're in this weird phase where our lives aren't that affected 'cause again if I was still working for the health department my life would be—

TW: Insane.

SA: —insane. I'd be working overtime and be out the office a lot more than I am. And I'm sure this whole thing would be a lot more stressful 'cause I can't put it down on my own time, you know what I mean? The thing is if I was still working at that job I probably would've hated my life a little bit more [laughs]. My brain would've melted.

TW: Yeah, the things that have changed are pretty minimal, like we don't go out to eat as much. Our favorite restaurant in Helena went out of business about two weeks into the shutdown. Our friends, we hang out with them a lot less—

SA: We do it differently though.

TW: We do it differently. We go to the family gatherings, we were doing that over Skype for a long time and now that it's nice outside we go do that outside if we can. Some of the more exhilarating socializing sort of things are pretty different and of course going to the grocery store is different.

SA: Yeah [unintelligible].

TW: Yeah I think that is probably the weirdest part, it's the most visible especially since we don't really go to any other stores and especially not during lockdown we weren't going out at all except for groceries but again we both worked from home and are introverts so we probably weren't going out that much before. But even less than that somehow. Those things did change a lot and just the general feelings of the people around us, you can tell... their demeanor is different if that makes sense. Everyone has a higher base level of anxiety. Well, I think that's started to taper off now that it's become more normalized but especially during the shutdown and at the beginning that was the case.

SA: The first month was really weird. Like March, April I think everybody just felt weird about it. There's a lot of weird... I don't know—

TW: Weird interactions.

SA: Weird interactions that I did.

TW: Like should I give my mom a hug? Should I not give my mom a hug? Like that sort of interaction was kinda weird to navigate at first.

SA: Yeah, my mom's a doctor so she... it was kind of weird talking to her about it because while I think she understood it I think maybe she had a hard time with—

TW: Not seeing you.

SA: —not seeing me and I think she understood that I wasn't at risk but, you know, a mom's a mom. She's gonna love all of her kids and wanna be around them a lot especially since we live in the same town but at some points like I don't think it's a great idea 'cause there's a lot going on and it's so unsure. And she was understanding but it's hard to tell those people that you love and that you're so close to that you're like, "I don't think it's a great idea" 'cause it's this gut-wrenching kind of thing that it does affect you, that this big problem affects everything we do.

TW: We have still been talking to them over video calls. Like we downloaded an app called "Houseparty" pretty early on and there's little games you can play with your friends virtually and we did that with some friends, we did that with family. So we have done things like that and we had a couple family dinners with both of our families actually over just like video calls, and so that kind of helps. Yeah, Sam your mom's perspective was particularly strange 'cause they were going through contingency plans at her work since she was a doctor, talking about how, "okay, well if it comes down to it, can we put four people on one ventilator?" and she had some interesting stories there for sure.

SA: She had some very interesting stories, stuff they've... that doctors have never had to do, like just changing constantly. But yeah, definitely like people that we knew, their lives changed really dramatically. Our's was pretty much the same, you know? We were just... like our social situations were mostly just over Skype now.

TW: They're the same but with a lot more anxiety I think is fair to say.

SA: Yeah, I'm like... it was more anxious but I think it's crazy 'cause just different fields like knowing people in the medical field is... their lives are a lot more stressful. It's just crazy.

JS: Sure. And you've both mentioned briefly but I wanted to ask again a little bit. Where were you both working before the pandemic? And you said it hasn't like changed much now, but just run us through your kind of typical workday.

SA: With college stuff?

TW: Yeah.

SA: Yeah, I mean I was taking like sixteen credits, I was just a pretty much full-time student. I usually--

TW: You did it online through MSU.

SA: Yeah, I'm still doing it online through MSU Billings. I wasn't one of the... so I was actually was just doing it online before they moved all of the kids to online for that last semester so I think people assume that I got bummed from doing normal classes to going online but like that's how I started out. But it was weird 'cause in some of my classes it's like thirty other students have just entered the chat, you know, like classes midway changed. Like they just added a bunch of new students. Couple of professors changed because they had to go back to their families in different cities.

TW: Did your workload change?

SA: My workload didn't change, no. It stayed the same. I'd say there's a lot more policies enacted because the teachers are like understanding the weight of the situation. There's a lot of anxiety and stuff so a lot of the teachers I think were a little more understanding if like a kid had a late grade. I stuck on point mostly 'cause I just kept doing my thing. But yeah, the change on the college side of things too.

TW: Yeah, for my job I work at a software development company out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and so before this and currently I roll out of bed around seven, seven-thirty and then go to work, sometimes it's eight. Usually not later than that though, I'm pretty good about it. Everyone is in a different time zone than I am so... but it means that our coverage is a little bit more varied. But yeah, I go to work, do my tickets, get things done, go to meetings, have lunch, have more work, go home. I will say it was... since we do tax systems for county governments, we did have a lot of last-minute work that we suddenly needed to get going for some counties in Florida. They wanted to waive some fees or taxes or postpone taxes or something like and so we had a lot of extra work coming into our plate and then of course as things are happening people are stressed and so even though that most of the company works remotely, at least most of my team works remotely, things were... people aren't functioning at their best. So we suddenly had a ton more work and less capacity to deal with it, was kind of what happened. We're doing a lot better now I think, but it was a little bit of a strange transition and so even though my work day does look pretty similar people were stressed at first and they... yeah, it's an interesting thing and you can tell people in meetings and things 'cause usually I interface with the people I work with over Slack but we do sometimes have face-to-face meetings over Google Meet. You could tell during those first couple of weeks that people were just kinda like, "ooh!" and that's all everyone wanted to talk about first and our

company did move our summer annual company meeting where everyone goes to Pittsburgh and hangs out in person once a year to online so that was a little bit of a change. But yeah, we... it eventually got to the point where all of our meetings just kinda had the first five or ten minutes just talking about COVID-19 and then after that we'd get on to the rest of whatever else we had to do. But it is interesting talking to them since they live across the states and so they have pretty different experiences with it.

JS: Certainly. And you know right now we're going through a phased reopening in the state of Montana. Governor Bullock started a phased reopening around late April. What are your thoughts on the reopening right now? I think we've kind of seen an increase in some cases briefly, six hundred cases right now, but I'm curious to hear your thoughts on the phased reopening.

SA: We talked about it a lot last night like... I definitely felt like... was it the second phased reopening? I think the second phased reopening I relaxed a little more. There's two, right? That we've gone through? There's the first and then the second.

TW: I don't remember, yeah.

SA: I think we're in the second phase. June 1st was the second phase I believe. I might be a little wrong on the timeline there but I remember being a little more okay with... I went to like Blackfoot, the brewery here in Helena, social distanced and wore like... kept my mask on me and it was weird, it was really strange at first. That first like part of June but I don't know. I still feel uneasy about going out now. We've had a couple in-person social gatherings with our families where everybody's not hugging they're just doing the wing thing where they—

TW: Bump elbows.

SA: —you bump elbows and it's just unsatisfactory. But it's... seeing these cases come up, you know, I think it's like you said, six hundred cases in Montana that have popped up recently. It's comforting knowing that like I know that it will be okay but we have to be reactionary and like we might have to go back into just being at home more, so yeah. I don't know if I said that well though.

TW: No, I think I agree. I think as soon I heard we were phased reopening I was like okay, we're probably going to have back into shutdown at some point when we hit a second wave. But Montana has really done this the right way from my perspective. Like our curve actually goes up and then comes back down, it doesn't have a long, flat part in the middle or anything like that. So I think we're doing a pretty good job and it probably helps that we're also far apart and there aren't that many of us. But yeah that first week when things were opening back up in April? Is that right? Somewhere around there. Yeah, when it was first opening back up things were bizarre 'cause the shutdown was weird having all of your favorite restaurants, well single restaurant, go out of business was weird and then now you can go outside but no one really

wants to be there and everyone's very stressed. And I remember at first wearing masks wasn't quite normalized and I think the C.D.C. at one point put out blurb about how masks might be counterproductive to trying to keep the virus from spreading 'cause you'll touch your face more. And so people weren't necessarily wearing masks but some people were and we were and then eventually I think enough people started to see it that it became a little bit more normalized and I think now most people we see in public are wearing masks.

SA: Something we also thought about yesterday before the interview but... we were talking about how it was interesting seeing the different changes locally and like a business standpoint. It seemed like some businesses were totally down, they were wearing masks, they were, you know, they were adjusting, they're being flexible and a lot of companies and businesses were not flexible. Either like they couldn't afford to be flexible or they just thought that the science wasn't... didn't relate to them. 'Cause I do get that sense that that happened in Helena and almost anywhere that people just ignored it and—

TW: Yeah—

SA: —I'm sure now we're like... you talk to people and they're like, "I don't want to go there because they just didn't follow the rules. Like what makes them feel like they're above everybody else?"

TW: Yeah, we were talking to a friend a few nights ago who was saying that if they see the employees in a business aren't wearing masks they just won't go in because they don't wanna risk it. And it does seem that different businesses, depending on how the employees of that business are behaving, they kinda sets the expectation for people who are patronizing the business. So for example, our local Safeway has been really great about social distancing measures and making sure everyone has masks. Even at the beginning of the shutdown they were only letting a couple people into the store at a time. And so when we go to Safeway everyone's wearing a mask. But there are a couple of places that we've gone to and we're like, "oh, it seems like this store doesn't care," and then by proxy we might be the only people in that store wearing masks.

SA: Yeah, it makes you really second guess like who's caring right now, you know? And it makes you... there's like the establishments, like we feel good in a Safeway but we don't feel good in another store so we just go to Safeway and we know that we're going to be okay I guess. I know it's like we're not gonna... it's not guaranteed safety but at least we know that the business owners aren't like just totally ignoring what's going on. But it's just kinda scary to see some people that aren't caring, there's a lot of people aren't caring which is terrifying. 'Cause you... I think that's just how we're gonna have a second curve go higher and higher.

JS: Certainly. And of course right now we're both living through... we're all living through a very historic time with also the protests going on nationwide. Have you seen any protests in your

area and any concerns about them and COVID? 'Cause it's a very interesting scenario we have here with those two ongoing events.

TW: It is. And I think, I don't know if you feel this way, but the protesting almost took up more of my... when those started I think that took up more of my time almost then when COVID started which I didn't think was possible to be honest. But Helena had a couple protests, smaller ones over the last couple weeks, but the largest one we had was on Sunday of this week, so that would've been... June 14th?

SA: 14th.

TW: Yeah. June 14th. And Sam and I both attended that one and it is interesting to note that on the Facebook event, the organizer did put very clearly in there, that this will be a socially distant protest, masks are required. But we were... yeah it was crazy the turnout. We thought there was going to be twenty or thirty people max but Helena really turned up for that which we were impressed by. There was about five hundred to a thousand people there and when we went the organizer was pretty clear upfront. And everyone was really wearing masks. I think I saw one person without a mask but right at the beginning the organizer got up with a megaphone and was like, "hey, if you're not wearing a mask, you know, black people are... do have statistically worse rates of COVID-19 among their communities. If you're not wearing a mask I'm gonna ask you to leave and please be responsible for your fellow citizens." So it was pretty clear at our protest, I don't know if they've all been that way but in Helena it's been... they've been doing a pretty good job of that so that was good to see.

SA: Yeah, it was a good thing. The protest was really good. It was again like five hundred to a thousand people at the capital building. But there was, you know, it got really heated a couple times. There was—

TW: I would say mildly heated. Heated for Helena but not heated for, you know, America.

SA: Well, okay. So comparatively when you think about like, you know, any other city, like major city it's nothing. But I mean when we went to it like you can clearly see like the opposition, the opposing views. There's lots of trucks and people that were aggravating.

TW: Yeah, they were... there wasn't that many of them though to be honest. I would say... so there's a lot of protesters and there were a ton of people driving by who were, you know, giving thumbs up, honking their horns, and being like "yeah!" And some people even drove around the block with signs and I think they were... that seemed to be their way of joining the protests without necessarily having to be in a group of people. So it was mostly support. I would say five percent of people who drove by were clearly upset and one person flipped me off and a couple of people had some nasty things to say, but I mean they were in the, you know, minority for sure.

SA: Yeah, but like the amount of support and people that were like cheering all the protesters there was like a huge amount of people which felt really good.

TW: Yeah, it was an overwhelming amount of support. I was surprised since Helena is a very white town and pretty conservative overall. I was pretty impressed by the amount of people who came out to support that. So it was pretty cool to see. By the end though... so the official protests went from noon to three and then some people hung out afterwards to do, you know, they made their fancy signs, they were showing 'em off. And so Sam and I were still kind of walking around with our signs and that point is when the... what was it called, the Patriot Parade or something like... I think that's what it was called, showed up and it was all these people. Half of them were in classic cars and they were all flying Confederate flags out the back of their car and had Trump signs and some people started getting heated across the street from us and—

SA: There was the couple of... so it was kinda like between one street at the capital, there was a couple of us, like there's probably like thirty or forty of us protesters on one side and then there's probably like—

TW: There was more protesters than that at that point.

SA: —maybe more than that? I don't know. Then there was like five to ten like anti—

TW: Counter-protesters.

SA: —counter-protesters? We were all kind of like just shouting at each other from across the street and then some riot police in riot gear got in between us and it got really tense and all the volunteers were like, "everybody get out. Like this is gonna be... we wanted this to be a peaceful protest. We don't want it to like be anything more than that." And so we all started just kind of like separating and I heard somebody say that somebody was getting assaulted down the street. So I ran down with my phone and I saw a girl, a white woman—like she was pretty young, she was probably like my age, she was probably in her early twenties—get out of a truck, like a Trump truck with Trump flags flying out of the back. And she came up to a... like a younger black girl who was protesting with us, we're all just walking in a line, and she like got up into her face and then like slapped her in the mouth. And then I... like that's when I started recording and it was so frustrating because I got the reaction, I got everybody pushing back her off. And then an officer in my video pulled her off. And I just really wish that I recorded a second before that because it would've gotten the story straight for what actually happened, but—

TW: Yeah, you got swarmed with the police and the journalists after that.

SA: I got swarmed with police and reporters after that, but I had to... I got to tell them what happened but... who knows what their side said, but I know what I saw so, but it was kind of

sketchy getting out of there, but overall like it sucks that that... I don't know if I should say that sucks... it just it's disappointing that that part of it tainted the rest of the day for how much support there was 'cause it was a really amazing day to see that amount of people caring that much about Black Lives Matter. But in the circumstances it kind of was interesting also in the corona sort of filter. Like everybody was six feet apart, everybody was wearing masks. It just felt like looking at it through pictures it looks like it's weird to be in this timeline.

JS: Certainly, and thank you for that response. I appreciate that. I... and just one thing I wanted bring... we're running out of time here... wanted to ask one question to end everything here, but for people reading this interview, you know, say years from now, what do you want people to like to know about the most interesting thing of your lives right now during this very historic time period? You know with the protests, with COVID, what more than anything do you want folks to understand about your lives or anything really?

TW: I think I would just say that humans are still human. We're a diverse bunch and people are reacting to it as you can expect by showing an amazing amount of resilience but there's also groups of people who are amazingly pig-headed when it comes to—

SA: Big-headed or pig-headed?

TW: Pig-headed. Is that a word? I think it's a word, you know what I mean. When it comes to like, you know, following guidelines that protect your fellow humanity there's a lot selfish people out there. And so all... every good and bad thing you see present in humanity is still present during the pandemic, it's... sure there's people pulling together to help out their neighbors and make society better and there are also people who are actively working against that so... I think that's my biggest thing that I would like future people to keep in mind if this ever happens again. It will probably play out the same way 'cause I imagine humans will still be humans.

SA: Yeah [unintelligible], overall... actually every single individual changes and that's just not gonna happen, which is the hard part. But us as individuals gotta go extra lengths to do what we can do. We gotta... I don't know.

TW: And... oh, sorry I didn't mean to speak over you.

SA: What were you saying?

Wikerson: Oh, I was gonna say also future humans check out *Pokémon*, it's really fun [both laugh]. It's a good time.

SA: Follow us on Twitch [both laugh]!

[End of Interview]