

Maureen and Mike

# Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

## **Archives and Special Collections**

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: [library.archives@umontana.edu](mailto:library.archives@umontana.edu)

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

The transcript with its associated audio recording was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the University of Montana COVID-19 Oral History Project.

**Oral History Number: 475-006**

**Interviewee: Kasha Kinyon**

**Interviewer: John Stefanek**

**Date of Interview: June 24, 2020**

**Project: University of Montana COVID-19 Oral History Project**

John Stefanek: Okay. Hello, my name is John Stefanek. I am a doctoral student at the University of Montana, documenting the COVID-19 experience through oral histories. It is June 24, 8:35am. I'm in my apartment in Missoula, Montana, and I'm here with Kasha from Montana Gecko and Ball Python. Kasha, would you like to introduce yourself?

Kasha Kinyon: Hi, everyone. My name's Kasha Kinyon. I'm the owner at Montana Gecko and Ball Python. If you can see him this is my son, Jasper, because we have some days where we don't go to daycare due to the COVID and my work schedule, so he may pop in and out of the video. Yeah, I'm sitting here in my house in Helena, Montana and ready to do the interview.

JS: Excellent. So, as we get started, I wanted to ask, just get a few background questions. Where are you from?

KK: I am pretty much from Helena, Montana. Was born in Anchorage, Alaska and we moved down to Montana in 1982. So we've been in Helena since '85.

JS: Okay, and what brought you from Anchorage down to Montana?

KK: Both of my parents were from Montana. My mom grew up outside of Great Falls and Fort Shaw, and my dad's family was from over by Havre.

JS: Okay. And so your business is called, MTgecko and Ball Python, right?

KK: Correct.

JS: And you're based out of Helena?

KK: Based out of Helena, Montana.

JS: Okay. And what inspired you to get this business rolling?

KK: You know, I grew up on a farm here in the Helena Valley, so I've always been around animals, always fascinated with nature and the different things you can find outside. So in 2004, happened to be cruising the pet store with my aunt and we saw these cute, little baby geckos and I said, "those are really cute."

And she's not a very helpful person in that regard, she said, "oh you should get one!" So I did. So after getting my first gecko I really was pretty fascinated with 'em, wanted to get another one and that at the time in 2004 most of the ones that you'd find in pet stores were supposed to be females, 'cause they could be housed together, ended up with a male. And, you know, one thing led to another and I ended up with eggs and so just decided to get going with raising reptiles. Then, shortly thereafter, I found out that you could order more online and have them shipped to you, so there began the obsession with getting different colors and different morphs and a variety of reptiles in my collection.

JS: Okay, and when did you start doing this?

KK: This was... so 2004 I picked up my first female so babies would've arrived in 2006 'cause it takes about two years before the females are ready to be bred or healthy enough to be bred.

JS: Okay, and so you mentioned you obviously have some interest in geckos growing up, but how about the ball pythons? How did you get into selling them?

KK: You know, it was 2009, I think, and I got my first pair, saw the piebald ball pythons online and they're beautiful, they remind me of paint horses, which is why they have the name "piebald," similar... so saw those. I picked up a pair of hets, which is heterozygous, carrying the gene for a piebald, which is a recessive trait, picked those up with the plan to raise them up and attempt to make my own the less expensive way.

JS: Okay, and you mentioned piebald, piebald I assume is a morph of—

KK: It is. Piebald is a morph. It's the ones that are white and brown, sorta like a paint horse. They vary in color and pattern depending on if there's extra genes in there but the base pattern is a... the brown and blacks of the normal, wild type, morph with patches of bright white intermixed in there.

JS: Okay, and how did breeders get into mixing and trying to get morphs? I know it's a huge attraction in the pet trade.

KK: Right, yeah, seeing the different colors you can create is definitely one of the things that keeps everybody going and motivated to try something new. Most of... there's different types of genes in all reptiles and in ball pythons in particular there are recessive traits which both parents must carry a copy of that trait in order for it to visually show up. There are also dominant and codominant traits and those can show up just by themselves whether or not the parent puts forth that gene into the mix when it's, you know, in the DNA mix when the babies are being created. So I think, you know, the first morphs happened by accident. I think albino was the first that showed up, and so somewhere along the line two animals happened to have that recessive gene and it popped up, and so then people just kept playing around with it. Some of the morphs do happen, I think, in nature but they tend to be more picked off more naturally

because they're different colors and easier for predators to spot, they don't have that natural brown and black camouflage that wild-type-colored ball pythons do.

JS: Okay, and so you have ball pythons and geckos. Do you breed and sell any other pets?

KK: I do. I've done a little bit of everything. I have dart frogs as well, poison dart frogs, in a couple different colors. I also have corn snakes, those were, along with the ball pythons, I actually had two corn snakes prior to getting into the ball pythons more. So I got those in about 2009 as well, or 2008. So currently: leopard geckos, corn snakes, ball pythons, and the dart frogs. I've done hedgehogs, I've also done crested geckos, gargoyle geckos... I think that might be it. I do have a pair... a little baby pair of milk snakes, pale milk snakes currently as well that I'm raising up so. Oh, and African fat-tailed geckos.

JS: Oh, okay. And so, yeah, and so all of these... and so is this a home brew business? You do this all at home?

KK: I do, I do. The overhead, since I am a smaller breeder, I mean I have less than two hundred animals so just that number of animals and given the fact that Helena, Montana is not terribly big and Montana in general is more sparsely populated and people are pretty well-spread out, it's harder to have a brick and mortar storefront and make ends meet with the animal sales and the pet sales. So I do have a room in my basement and that's where everybody hangs out and go from there.

JS: Yeah, and like... and so obviously I know pet stores are a big thing but would you say most breeders are kind of home brew? Do it at home instead of having a store?

KK: I would say it's just kind of a mix. It depends on everybody's situation. I know a lot of breeders are just in their home like I am. I also know some breeders that are fortunate, which I wish I had, have an outbuilding so that they've moved all of their stuff out into a separate facility still on their property because it's easier to maintain and keep an eye on everything that you need to do daily if you don't have to go somewhere. And then I know other breeders here in Montana even that do have a storefront as well. It just kinda depends on what everybody has going for 'em. I also have a full-time job where I work as a pharmacy technician at the hospital here so mine is sort of a second job, so not a full-time one for me.

JS: Yeah, and also about your business, I'm curious if... you sell online but do you know anything about... who would be your kind of average customer that would purchase pets from you?

KK: You know basically anybody who enjoys reptiles. I have sold reptiles all across the country. We're able to ship them overnight via FedEx so I can pretty much distribute to anywhere in the U.S. fairly easily. Locally it's just, you know, word of mouth a lot of times or Facebook has been super helpful over the years just growing that business and growing connections. I guess I wouldn't really say that I have an average customer. I mean you get all sorts from the people

that I think are more stereotypically thought of as reptile people, lots of tattoos, alternative looking sort of folks, down to people, you know, I guess like me that have a second job, no tattoos, you know, look really pretty straight-laced and, you know, wouldn't know that I have a room full of reptiles in my basement if you didn't ask. So just a wide variety of folks. The one thing they all have in common is that they enjoy reptiles and they usually enjoy all of the different colors and morphs that they come in and wanna add one or several to their own lives.

JS: Sure. And so, you know, I would say reptiles have really become much more common pets over the years, you know, I think ball pythons I think at one point may have been considered more exotic but I think you can see them quite often now in households. I'm curious to ask, to you what is the kind of the definition of an exotic pet, if there is one?

KK: I would say you could almost go with anything besides a dog or a cat. There's such a wide variety. And I have to say probably the biggest change in the reptile business and pet trade, where owners have to access to more, has been the Internet. You know, initially when reptiles were first imported they were harder to keep because not everybody had all the knowledge that can be found online, whether it's good or bad, it was... you either knew a breeder that had been successful or someone that had been successful in keeping something and could share that knowledge with you or you kinda tried to do it on your own. So with Facebook and all sorts of websites and availability over the last, you know, ten, fifteen years, I'd say it's really increased the availability of exotic type reptiles and animals in general as normal, everyday pets for folks.

JS: Okay, interesting. Yeah, and so you mentioned social media. Would you say that's been a big influence on your business over the past few years? I know a lot of pet owners use social media to great extent.

KK: Right. Yeah, I'd say it's been super helpful. Like I said, the amount of networking that can be accomplished now with Facebook and Instagram is, you know, instantaneous. You can reach way, way more people than you would be able to if you were just isolated with none of those options, you know, without the Internet. So yeah, it's been great. I mean I've got my page on Facebook and people follow that. I can post pictures, I have people that share my pictures on there with their friends so that's another set of people that's experiencing what I do and the stuff that I have available. Instagram's great, you know, you don't have to be in any of the groups to hashtag it and send it out to a whole different population of people, so I mean it just spreads amazingly quick.

JS: Sure, and I imagine it's been really useful with selling the various morphs of ball pythons and geckos you have for sure.

KK: Oh yeah, for sure.

JS: I'm sure. Yeah, that's very fascinating, wow.

KK: Yeah, when I first got started it was... I mean that was... so 2006 we did have a brick and mortar, you know, mom and pop type pet store here and I was just originally selling to them so they didn't have to order from their wholesaler, and that was just one pair of geckos so maybe ten to twenty babies in a season is all. And then I couldn't imagine I wouldn't have the number animals that I do have, trying to sell the babies if there wasn't that extended reach with the internet and getting 'em out there around the world. I did send one female to Russia last year. That was pretty cool.

JS: Wow, yeah.

KK: Yeah.

JS: So I wanted to get into COVID-19 a little bit here.

KK: Sure.

JS: When did you first recall hearing about COVID-19?

KK: Oh, you know I suppose there was some of it maybe January, February but I would say the main impact, you know, for us was the shutdown and everything wasn't until March.

JS: Okay. And when do you think it really started to affect your daily life?

KK: Probably about March. You know, I don't remember that exact timeframe but once they closed down the daycares and the schools then I was trading off staying home with this guy with my husband, but mostly it was me staying home and so trying to work from home a little bit with my regular job and then, you know, taking care of the animals and that sort of stuff.

JS: Gotcha. And how would you say, if it has changed, how would you say your daily routine has changed due to the pandemic?

KK: At this point since we've opened back up a little bit here I don't think my daily routine has necessarily changed. When I was staying home more it definitely made for more time to, you know, take care of the critters, sort of interact with them and make sure, you know, check on things as it was gearing up towards the breeding season. That's... March is when I started having geckos I think... March, April geckos started laying their eggs and then getting ready for ball pythons to follow shortly, so making sure the incubators were set up and everything so a little more time for that. Otherwise it wasn't impacted horribly by COVID. I still had people coming to pick animals, you know, we just do porch pickup type pickup or they would wear masks. But since, I will say since my breeding season starts later I didn't have a whole lot of available animals for people to be purchasing, so, you know, it didn't affect my sales a whole lot just because I didn't have the inventory ready and available.

JS: Okay. And you said you worked... you work at a pharmacy. Is that kind of your full-time job?

KK: Yep.

JS: How would... how has that changed during COVID-19, your job there?

KK: You know, initially when it was the shutdown it got really slow. So I work in the hospital pharmacy. It's a little different than say a retail pharmacy. We do most of the medications just for hospitalized patients and their care so because they weren't doing elective surgeries in the hospitals or extra visits our worked slowed down a little bit during this time. We started wearing masks full-time at the hospital. What else? I think that, you know, that's the more... just general safety precautions 'cause nobody was sure where this would kinda head or how quickly it may blow up. So that's most of it. I know that there have been some issues with drug shortages where everybody, you know, everybody is hoping that there's something that will help will cure this so then when that's announced those drugs seem to go really quickly and they're harder to purchase. I know that's been a struggle with keeping certain medications around and stocked so that we had some just in case as well.

JS: Okay. And, wanted to mention it of course, Governor Steve Bullock here of Montana, you know, initiated this phased reopening of the state at the end of April and so they're reopening businesses and public spaces but of course at limited capacity. You know Montana was one of the more least-affected states in the country. Right now I think we have around seven hundred cases. What are your overall views on the phased reopening?

KK: I think it's been good. I think it, you know, people were getting to the point where they were getting a little edgy, you know, not sure what to do with themselves and maintaining the closed status I think would've, you know, caused some issues. But I think it's been good. I think it's been good for businesses, I know there are some that have closed locally, they just were newer businesses, couldn't keep it going. I also know that the community here was really conscientious about small business owners and tried really hard to support them and keep, you know, ordering stuff for them for kinda curbside pickups during the whole time, so that was really nice that nobody was sort of left out. I know I have, in addition to my full-time job and my reptile business, I also do custom cakes and cookies for people so that business initially... I'm not super... it's not a super full-time sorta hobby it's just occasional but I would say March and April slowed way down and then once we started doing the phased reopening, June's been full for me. So people are trying really hard to support the small business people and the hobby folks, just keeping them going so it's been really nice.

JS: Okay. And I think you said a little bit earlier your gecko and ball python business hasn't been dramatically affected by the pandemic, you said?

KK: Correct.

JS: Would you say there have been any increases in sales, possibly for folks looking for pets to buy over during this really—

KK: I do think so. I think a lot of folks I know, you know, not even with just reptiles but I know a lot of shelter animals were adopted during this time. So yeah, there have been folks out looking for critters to have at home with them. It gives them something else to focus on and take care of rather than worrying so much and stressing about, you know, the pandemic and what it might lead to. They can focus on something else that brings them a little more happiness, plus the stimulus checks probably aided in that setting up of new creatures a little bit, you know, just like any other extra little income helps out with folks so... yeah, I do know that, you know, looking at other breeders online, like bigger breeders that maybe had stuff I don't think anybody's sales have really been harmed during this time. Everybody was still shipping out animals, I know I'd shipped out some and I had gotten some in, so everybody's still, you know, just chugging along, doing what they'd normally be doing with their reptile businesses, so it's kind of nice to see.

JS: Yeah, and the other businesses you mentioned, these are also in Montana or nearby?

KK: Some of them are, but no, this is all across the U.S. I'm friends with several breeders, you know, in Georgia and other places and they all are still shipping out animals on a weekly basis to new places and new homes so... yeah I think everybody's just kind of been going as usual. I know for me initially I had paired up I think like ten female ball pythons which could average out to, you know, six... let's just say six eggs a piece so that's sixty babies and initially I was a little worried that I could have sixty two hundred snakes and, you know, if everything had shut down and stayed shut down like where... what do I do with all of these as they continue to grow and, you know, need space and normally I would get them to the point where they're ready to go and sell them and move them out but then yeah, what do you do with that? So the girls had other plans and I don't have that many babies right now so we're okay [**chuckles**]!

JS: Yeah, and you mentioned there have been positive efforts with such as getting... animal shelters have been helping find pets homes during a time where people are feeling lonely at home, need a companion. But also I think there have been cases where the pandemic has also kinda turned people against like I think animals and their pets sometimes, especially I think with reptiles. For example I think there have been rumors that snakes can transmit the virus, which are I think still unconfirmed. And you mentioned overall you think that these businesses haven't really been impacted too negatively, but do you think possibly some of these rumors may have been negatively impacting businesses such as yours or others?

KK: You know, I'm not sure. I haven't really heard much about that. I know that there was one, [**clears throat**] excuse me, video floating around that, you know, same as any other time, not necessarily related to COVID, that depicted a lady opening a large snake tank and the snake grabbed a hold of her and wrapped, you know, around her arm and she needed another person



to basically get it off of her. And so you get videos like that that fly around 'cause everybody's got nothing else to do and it paints, you know, reptile owners and hobbyists in a negative light to the average person that might not know much about that behavior. So I think stuff like that where there's more free time to find those videos and pass that kind of information, you know negative information, around, that does impact the businesses and the trade in general.

JS: Okay, and would you say though that's overall been a problem even before the pandemic? Just—

KK: Oh yeah.

JS: Yeah.

KK: Yeah, I mean you look at all the big snakes down in Florida that where it's warm and repopulating themselves down there. I think it's one of those things that's always going to be an issue I think with any hobby where there's, you know, people that are passionate about what they do. There's also the other side where people are passionate about it not happening, so I would say it's kind of just a common theme and the best you can do in any of those times and even with the pandemic rumors, you know, that's it's coming from these animals is just more education and the more education that you can throw at people and expose them to and, you know, in support of what you're doing is gonna be beneficial and dispelling all of the negative rumors and made-up stories about stuff.

JS: Okay. And another question I wanted to ask... you know I think the United States overall doesn't have an overall policy on the exotic pet trade. I know a lot of states have different policies, laws. I know Montana law requires certain licenses and permits sometimes for selling exotic pets. Have these laws added any challenges to running your business?

KK: As a whole Montana is pretty relaxed as far as the reptile laws. I think the main ones that folks have issues with, and not that I do, but is the, what do I want to say, the ability to own, say hots like venomous species is prohibited as well as the five really big snakes, you know, anacondas, rock pythons, all of those, the five bigger ones are also not permitted without special permits or licensing. So, as a whole Montana doesn't have a lot of restrictions on what we do at this point so I don't have an issue with it. I think where it runs into problems for us down the road would be if there is a safety issue that, you know, isn't researched or doesn't have explanation behind it where people jump the gun and think, "oh my gosh, here's what happened," but they don't have any information on the reptiles or maybe the whole situation, so then there are laws put into place that would negatively impact that—

[talks to son] Do you wanna go get the door? Somebody's here. Oh, it's locked.

Sorry, somebody's at my door. So that time or, you know, the issue with the bigger snakes down in Florida caused there to be some—

[talking to person at the door and son] Hello. Okay. Sorry. Yeah, go ahead, buddy. Thank you, see ya.

The laws that were put into place to prohibit the transport of those larger, more invasive species did negatively impact some breeder sales and ability to maintain their businesses because they weren't allowed to cross state lines anymore. That one's been overturned. There are still individual state restrictions but as a whole the moving from state-to-state of those banned species is pretty much lifted I think at this point.

JS: Okay, and I'm curious to get your opinion... I know you mentioned a lot of the controversy over some of these exotics over, again, large snakes, the venomous ones, and I know there are certain people, like I think there's a YouTuber named "Viperkeeper" who I know is very adamant... some of these folks are really adamant about these laws, saying it violates their liberty as owners that own these pets, these animals. And like I'm just curious. Do you think there with these laws there's like a line that needs to be drawn with like what kind of animals should be considered pets or owned? Do you think there's some kind of definition there?

KK: I guess it would just depend. You know, I know there's lots of folks here in Montana, they're keeper type folks that I know that would love to have the bigger snakes and, you know, raise them. My thought is that, you know, you're average Joe, while he may want a gaboon viper or something, is not prepared for all that it entails to have one or the big snakes that get twenty feet long and require, you know, two, three people to move, they're not prepared to dedicate a whole bedroom and a house for that animal. They just think it's cute when it's little and it's really attractive looking but, you know, just the amount of preparedness for these animals I don't think everybody has. And I understand, you know, it does feel like some people it feels like it violates their freedoms, but with that I guess the only way I would think you could get around it is some sort of licensing or approval system sort of like with falconry where you have to go through apprenticeship, you know, just a level of preparedness to check off before being allowed to own these animals I think would be beneficial because people do get them and they're not prepared for them and they do end up in the E.R. or they end up on those videos that get passed around the Internet spreading all this, "oh my gosh, look what happened!" Again, with that lack of background knowledge for the average person watching the video all they see is the traumatic end result where the animal attacks because it's not being paid attention to or the person has a lacking skillset to successfully deal with those animals.

JS: Yeah. Have you by chance seen the show, *Tiger King* [***Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness***]?

KK: [laughs] I've watched a couple of episodes. It's not one that I could really get into a whole lot, but yeah, it was interesting and definitely plays high on the drama factor that people enjoy watching which I also find to be true for a lot of YouTube folks that get followed. It's, you know, a lot of in your face and here's something exciting and some drama added in. Those are the

people that get followed whether or not it's necessarily beneficial for, you know, everybody else in the trade or even for the general knowledge that people might take away from it. It may or may not be applicable or, oh what's the word that I wanna use, so I guess correct knowledge, it might just be one person's way of doing things with their animals so.

JS: Sure, and I mentioned the show 'cause it's been a big pop trend in the past few months. I think it has a... it's put an image on the pet trade to some degree but I was curious to get your opinion. Do you think these like owners like Joe Exotic or some of the folks that, you know, have their venomous snakes online, they show them. Would you say they accurately represent the average, you know, exotic pet owner?

KK: It's hard to say. I know, you know, like the big reptile one is, and I haven't watched I don't have enough time to sit down and watch YouTube stuff, but Brian Barczyk is one that's widely followed and whether or not he is indicative of the rest of us, I would say probably not, but he's good at what he does as far as showmanship and showing off his animals, and so I couldn't answer, you know, one way or the other. I don't... I'd say some folks are like that and some are like Joe Exotic and others you probably would never know that they had, you know, a pet tiger or, you know, some kind of creature. I have a friend here with a pet bobcat and she does let people know she has it but it's not out there for everyone to be a part of I guess and, you know, it's just a member of their family. So, I think you have both.

JS: Okay. And a couple of last questions here I just wanna get to. What kind of more than anything do you want future readers and listeners of this interview to understand about your life, your occupation, anything before and during the pandemic? Just anything.

KK: I just... I don't know. I guess it's been interesting to see, you know, just how something like this can affect small business owners and, you know, just everyday folks and their lives and how resilient people are to find ways to work around things but still be able to enjoy the life and the quality of life for their animals that they want. I also think that it's been a little disheartening to see the other side of the pandemic... you know Montana, we're lucky everybody being spread out as far as we are. We're also really close-knit, we look out for our own, and I know that's not the case in bigger cities where there's the rioting and just seeing everyone, you know, the civil unrest and that's been pretty disheartening to see that that might be, you know, where things are heading during this time or if it keeps going, so I would say that's been probably the biggest two things that I've noticed is some communities coming together and being real supportive where others are more leaning towards tearing themselves apart rather than helping each other out during this time where everybody's not really sure what's going on.

JS: Yeah. And I know you mentioned earlier you obviously have a big love for animals and it's what got you in the business, but what is like the most rewarding aspect of doing what you do?

KK: I'd say it's mostly just sharing it with others. I really, not that we have any going on this year currently, but I like going to the expos, the trade shows that we put on and, you know, taking

animals to sell but also just being able to talk with everyone about their's because it is something we all have in common, we all enjoy the different projects that we're working on. As a side thing with my business I do take my animals to schools and daycares or birthday parties, or at least I used to, it's not so much anymore this year. But just sharing that information and the animals with kids so that you have, like I said, more information available for folks, so more experiences that are positive is what's, you know, gonna help keep things going for myself and other breeders is, you know, just putting a face, a personal face to things and getting kids and adults to experience reptiles and exotics in a positive way so that they have a different appreciation for these animals. Plus looking in the incubator to see what new things are hatching is super fascinating every year so.

JS: Yeah, and I just wanted to mention the point you made about... so you used to bring some of your animals to birthday parties for children?

KK: Correct.

JS: So do you think that was a really overall, like really positive experience for everyone involved?

KK: I do. You know just myself and I would pick animals that are comfortable being handled by people, okay outside of their tank environments 'cause they just... they enjoy, you know I don't know if they enjoy it, but, you know, they tolerate it better and it leads to a more positive experience for everyone else that's visiting with the animals. So most of the birthday parties are for kids that really like reptiles or bugs. I do have some invertebrates that I can take along too like feeder insects and whatnot for everybody to check out. So it's usually hands-on. I do some educational information about the animals and where they're from and then I just let everyone that wants to touch them, and most of the time even if people are afraid they always give it a go and attempt to, you know, touch one of these live creatures and interact with them in some way.

JS: Excellent. And yeah, I know sometimes with these animals some folks can have a fear of reptiles or snakes, and do you think these experiences have been good for people who are kind of uneasy to deal with kind of handling them actually get more of a positive interaction with these animals?

KK: I do, I do. I think it helps a lot of people. I mean I've had people that are deathly afraid of snakes come and see them or interact with them or watch other people interact with them and they might still be afraid of them, but they're at least not just blindly terrified anymore, they're willing to stand back and watch and appreciate, or some of them, you know, even are okay with getting one down the road, they might have been scared of them. Like my husband at first grew up in Conrad which is a pretty rattlesnake-populated area so that's what he grew up with, was being where rattlesnakes... didn't like snakes to begin with and now he'll help me out at the expos. He tries to learn the different morphs and help me out in that way, but it's been nice to

see, you know, how far he's come and he's willing to hold them and mess with them for folks if they wanna see too, but it's... yeah, I think it helps a ton in just letting people experience something that they're afraid of in a safe and controlled environment where they don't have to be afraid.

JS: Sure, excellent. And yeah, I was just going to ask... you mentioned some of the expos like the Big Sky Reptile Expo you go to every year?

KK: Right, right. Yep, there was supposed to be one the end of May, obviously that got canceled. There was also going to be one in July, where was that? That was Billings. That one is canceled because the venue canceled all big events not necessarily because the show wanted to cancel events, I don't know where it's at. We're hoping that by September, there's one in Spokane in September that I usually go to but then also the Big Sky Reptile Expo may be in November in Missoula, we're hoping. 'Course that could just lead right back into flu season and an increase in COVID so there may be no expos this year, which is a bummer both for people wanting to attend them and for all of us vendors who enjoy the time to get together and chat with everyone and see breeders from across the state that we don't see on a regular basis just 'cause we are spread so far apart and we're all running our own businesses and jobs outside of this so.

JS: Gotcha. And so, you know, usually how big are these expos for business owners like you every year? Are they a big part of your business every year?

KK: Oh, yeah. It's definitely helpful. You know the May one for me this year wouldn't have been as successful because I didn't have a bunch of babies ready to go. Some years I have some stock left over or early clutches, but it is nice because not only does it allow you to bring the animals you currently have available it allows future, potential buyers to come meet you, interact with you, you know, take a business card so it... one expo might provide purchases for two, three, four months down the road just based on interactions that come from that expo. They might not purchase that day, but then they have your information and they can check back with you, so again, it's kinda like an extension of the social networking, it just is a nice networking venture for all of us. Like I said we're so spread out in Montana that this is one of the few times we're all together so people can see all of us at one time and, you know, it's not just online, it's face-to-face which is always super valuable.

JS: Yeah, and I meant to ask this earlier, but you mentioned all of these businesses, you're all spread out in Montana, but would you say you've become... are you well-knit with some of these other people that run these businesses?

KK: Yeah. Yep, there's... let's see, there's one up in Great Falls that I'm good friends with, a couple in Bozeman, there's another gal here in Helena who does some smaller breeding, James, the guy that puts on the Big Sky expos now is in Billings along with another breeder, there's a couple over in Missoula, I mean there's lots of us and then by the time the expo time, the

Billings one we might pull some vendors from Wyoming or other states, Utah, there I think we've had some folks come up from Utah, Missoula's the same, we pull some Spokane and Oregon folks over, Washington, Oregon folks as vendors. It's nice to move 'em around the state because, you know, Missoula you do get customers and folks coming from Spokane, from Idaho 'cause they're also a little spread out, you know, this whole upper quadrant of the U.S. tends to be a little more spread out for folks getting to venues and events so it's nice when we have 'em close enough that a variety of people can come to them.

JS: Excellent.

KK: Yeah.

JS: And yeah, one of my last questions I wanted to ask is what is your favorite animal to work with, at home or in your business?

KK: I like all the ones that I have currently. I would say, you know, I think I like the geckos and the ball pythons. The geckos are what I started with so it's kinda nice to still have them and be working with them and the ball pythons are just... they're so popular right now with the variety of combinations, and colors, and morphs that you can get. It's just fun to see and it gives, you know, people a way to connect with you and talk about different things so, I like them all. I enjoy the different aspects of different ones so.

JS: Awesome, and I meant to ask this earlier too so I apologize but I'm curious... 'cause I've heard about ball pythons and geckos but I'm not too familiar with selling and breeding poison dart frogs.

KK: Oh, sure.

JS: And I'm curious how you do that. How you end up importing them, end up breeding them. I'm really curious.

KK: They're captive bred. They're aren't too many that are importing currently of different species just because people are aware of, you know, they don't wanna remove all of a type from the wild and they don't always all do that well in captivity. Also, poison dart frogs is more of just the general name. You know, in the wild they're poisonous. In captivity they don't eat the same bugs and don't have the same toxins available to use. They don't actually manufacture their own toxins, it comes from the bugs that they eat and then they just kind of reuse that as their own toxin so, mine are not toxic. They've all been captive bred so mine lay eggs, I have little petri dishes underneath coconut huts in each tank so they lay eggs on the petri dishes and then I can remove them and make sure that the humidity levels stay up where they need to be to have successful clutches so, and then raise them up from tadpoles and sell them to new friends.

JS: Yeah, and would you say they're... are they a popular pet choice at least for you? Or like do you know many folks that own them otherwise?

KK: Yeah, they're pretty popular. I mean they're like anything else, there's always... every group has, you know, folks that are super into them. These are popular I'd say mostly because they're so bright and such different colors. One of my is azureus which is the bright blue with the black speckles and those are always popular. As far as being a popular pet, I think some folks wish they could interact with them more, but being an amphibian that absorbs things through it's skin it's not great for people to hold them. We have more toxins on us than they would ever have, you know, in captivity so we tend to poison them versus the other way around if people are trying to hold them. So they're more of like a fish tank type pet where you look at them and watch them and enjoy them rather than interacting like you would with a snake or gecko I guess, but they are popular.

JS: Great. And I think that'll—

[End of Interview]