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For questions concerning this document, please contact the Aufses Archives:

The Arthur H. Aufses, Jr. MD Archives
Box 1102
One Gustave L. Levy Place
New York, NY 10029-6574
(212) 241-7239
msarchives@mssm.edu

INT 0321

**Interview with Stephanie Ramos by Michala Biondi via Zoom
August 18, 2020**

COVID Memories: Okay, this is Michala Biondi, the archivist for the Aufses Archives of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York, New York interviewing Stephanie Ramos.

Stephanie Ramos: Ramos.

CM: Sorry, Ramos, via zoom on August 18 2020. Please note if you choose to reveal your own personal health information, it is no longer covered under HIPAA and confidentiality. Please avoid revealing anybody else's personal health information.

Okay, Stephanie. So, welcome. Thank you for joining us, would you state your department and the institution you work with and tell us a little bit about what your job entails.

SR: Sure, so I work at Mount Sinai Beth Israel, I'm the Communications Manager focused on employee communications and morale. So basically, my role is sort of building trust as we go through a transformation, if you will. Through a lot of content. I would say it's sort of bridging the gap between the business priorities and what the employees need and matching that up and making sure everybody can do their job more easily and sort of understand their role in a larger organization.

CM: Very interesting. Okay. Is there a particular story or event that to have recorded?

SR: Yeah, so I signed a lease to move on April 1 and I signed it, like at the end of February. I don't, you know, I probably should have looked up before this, but I'm not sure exactly when the lockdown started, but it was something like five or six days before I was supposed to be moving.

CM: Right.

SR: Um, so it was just, it was a very exciting time.

CM: That's one way to put it.

SR: Yes, I was also in grad school and I had to do like a bunch of classes like the few days before I moved, so there was a lot to do. My memories are around, as I'm sure everybody else's are, around a lot of uncertainty with the move. We did not know until maybe two days before whether moving companies were essential or non essential or whether we would have to just stay. Oh, I'm sorry. I thought it was on video. [turns on video]

CM: Oh there you are. Thank you.

SR: Hi, and so we didn't know whether the moving whether anybody be able to help us move or if it was kind of up to us. And in addition, with the lockdown a lot of other things closed that maybe you wouldn't think of immediately for a move, but things that you need. We were moving from a three bedroom to a one bedroom and we got rid of basically a one bedroom apartment. And it had to go on, all the furniture and stuff, had to go on to the street, because there were no thrift stores or places accepting donations. So it was very, very wasteful time.

And I remember there was a shortage of cleaning supplies. I wanted to get just some basic Lysol or Clorox to wipe down the boxes once we figured out we did have movers and then I remember not being able to even get into Walgreens to see what Walgreens may have had. It was only open nine to five and there was always a line of like 15 people outside, which I had never seen anything like that in New York. So that was really interesting.

One particular memory I have is that as part of the signage with - there was a lot of safety signage involved in my role. So every time the visitor policy changed, we had a new sign we had to put up in the hospital. Or every time we wanted to remind people to mask and hand hygiene and all of this stuff. So the marketing team had sent out these TVs for each hospital to be able to put digital signage on. And I found out a few days before my move that they wouldn't move our TV that we had for 10 years, unless it was in a TV box. So I remember taking that box home because I didn't know where I could buy boxes during the lockdown.

I was very scared because I'd been riding the subway with my gloves. This is before we knew anything - with my gloves and my mask and I had to take a Lyft home and I brought the box from the hospital. And like I remember not wanting to touch it and having a lot of fear about bringing like extra things from the hospital into my home.

I was wiping things down every single day. Changing my clothes right when I got home, I mean, there was a lot of, - I wasn't scared to be *in* the hospital, but I was definitely extremely cautious. And so I yeah I was. It was kind of an overwhelming move and the preparation for it was pretty interesting. I'm sure there are other people who moved during the pandemic. But this really - our experience really lined up with an interesting time where everybody was new to the lockdown. And there were no, there are no standards or there was no social understanding of what it meant yet. So it's really fascinating.

CM: Yeah moves are tense at any time. But under these conditions that must have been really brutal.

SR: It was it was, I will say, we did not get sick or anything. The movers did not wear masks. And we felt, you know, we were a little bit nervous. But also, it was it was a pretty warm day and they were going up and down stairs of - our first, the apartment we were moving out of, did not have an elevator. So we just we did our best and I get I think we got lucky honestly, that everything worked out.

CM: I'm glad everything worked out. Okay...How did the Covid crisis, change your day to day life? Like, what was your workday like before the Covid lockdown started and then afterwards.

SR: Great question. Before Covid it was a little more planned, and a lot more meetings. During Covid we had the same set of huddles for our emergency command center. Every day I had that locally with the MSBI teams. And then I also had that on the system level with the broader communications and marketing teams. So it was sort of like the morning was all this like bundled information gathering and trying to understand what the priorities for the day were. And then the rest of the day was moving really rapidly to make it happen.

So my functions, per se, did not change, but the rate of information changed. We had to get a little more creative in disseminating the information because we relied a lot on rounding. We used to have like a meeting where 30 people would come and sit in the same room and we would hand out flyers and have a cascade where we could pass this information out there at the hospital and that wasn't happening anymore. So we had to get really creative. But I would say it was similar work. It was just trying to align it all and make it, ah, passing the information in a time timely way and a useful way to employees get more challenging. And the days are longer, of course!

CM: Of course, And at home, how did things change for you. I mean, aside from putting together a new apartment.

SR: Yeah.

CM: and finding cleaning materials.

SR: Right, I know, we did find Lysol - it smelled really weird. It was like, very lavender and weird smelling that we did find something. But I would say a lot changed for me at home, except for, like you said. I'm Like my routines are just different. It's a different commute. We were setting up our apartment. We did have, we did get a washer and dryer and our new apartment, which was...

CM: NICE!

SR: ...everybody's gets really excited about that. I didn't necessarily get super excited about. It was just sort of the right apartment and it came with that. But it turns out it's very handy during a pandemic. You can just, you know, we have like the construction gloves, we sometimes use and then we just throw them in the washer, we can wash everything so and so that was handy. But I, you know,

I live with my husband, I wouldn't say a lot changed at home, except for I really prioritized sleep. And you know the leaving home is a little bit different, like in the winter, when you have to put on your scarf on your coat. Now, you put on your mask and your gloves, to leave. It's just a little bit different routine. That's really it.

CM: Okay. What was the most challenging part of this experience for you?

SR: Um, well, two things. I think was obviously juggling a lot, moving and dealing with the crisis and working on site at a hospital that was a lot, but also being in grad school, so I think that's the first thing was just, it was a lot to juggle. And the second thing was not, and I'm sure anyone would say this, but the uncertainty about when it's ending.

CM: Mm hmm.

SR: That's still challenging!

CM: Yes, I think we tend to think that it's ended, and we can go back to normal. But it really hasn't and we can't...It may never end. Yeah.

SR: Yeah, that was that feeling when the lockdown came that it was going to be like three weeks or a month, or you know what I mean, like, we kind of thought it was like, just for a very set time. And then it just kept going. I consider myself lucky because I could work on site - and I felt safe doing so. And I'm lucky enough to be able to have an office and shut my door and be able to do that safely. I rode my bike a lot to avoid the trains. But I think a lot of people were stuck living their lives and their work lives at home, and that must have been a whole different challenge, you know,

CM: Yeah, yeah, I'm one of those persons and it was particularly, I'm used to being home I live alone, and I've lived alone for a long time. I'm used to being home alone in my apartment, but it got it was just a whole 'nother level of odd.

SR: Yes.

CM: To conduct business from home as an archivist, a lot of what I do is hands on with my collections, which were in the hospital. So there was definitely limits but for sure, for a lot of other people it was very odd very stressful, especially those with children. You mentioned you were in graduate school. How did that change for you?

SR: Yeah, so I was I just graduated a couple weeks ago.

CM: Mozel Tov! Congratulations!

SR: Thank you. Thank you. Um, the program was already partially online and then four times a year, you would go in for, like, a long weekend type thing to meet with the cohort and the professors to do intensives. So we went to the first two, we went to like one in last September, and one in December, but then the March and the August ones were cancelled. So we did miss out on some of that curriculum, but they adjusted it to be remote.

I would say they did a really great job, because half of the program was already remote, we will use to the tools, we were used to that format. I'm sure would have been different. And in some ways, more fun in person. But they did a good job. I would say like anything else with Covid, it was still confusing at times, you know, like, how do we do a graduation [ceremony]?

You know, we had to do negotiation class through zoom, some kind of interesting things. And a lot of it was up in the air, because it, like I said, nobody knew when it was going to end. So we thought maybe we were going to be able to go back and do the August one, but obviously, here we are, in August, and that's not happening. So, um, so, yeah, it changed. But luckily, the way the program is formatted we were able to adapt a little bit easier, probably, than some other programs.

CM: Right. Yeah, because it was already adapted, do you want to mention the school and the degree that you earned?

SR: Yeah, so I earned a Master of Science and Communication from Northwestern University.

CM: Very good. Again, congratulations. That's always a good step. You're at BI [Mount Sinai Beth Israel], over on the far east side and I am working out of the eastside campus [of Mount Sinai]. So I don't go down to BI very often, but I know that they're changing the buildings quite a bit. And they're going to be, well prior to the crisis, they were planning on just demolishing some of the buildings, I think it was Linsky [Pavilion] that was closed and then they reopened it to use as Covid hospital is that...?

SR: Sort of. Yeah, we, we had some areas that were not being utilized. A lot of it was in Linsky and but we did have a few floors of Linsky [that were being used], it wasn't a whole building that was empty. And so, but there were some units that were not being used that we opened back up as part of the surge. Which was, it was a very interesting spot to be in to have the space so many other hospitals didn't even have the space. We have that one thing, we still needed staffing, we still needed beds, we still needed, you know, Pyxis machines. All of that stuff. But luckily, you know, we had amazing partners through the system that that could help us get there.

CM: So at this point, those, those spaces are probably empty again now and they're reverting back to emptiness, or...?

SR: They're kind of on hold. I would say we would be able to open them up again if needed. You know, there was this thought there might be a second surge in the summer. And so we kind of have it ready to go for the time being, until we know that this is not going to happen again.

CM: Right, good. Yeah, I guess. Down the line, say 2, 3, 5 years out from now, what do you think you'll remember the most about this time?

SR: Um, Oddly enough, I'm just, I'm coming back to all of my own processing that I did on my commute. You know, I feel like a lot of my thoughts are about that, because not very many people were commuting right? It was a different kind of feel for the city.

The trains were kind of empty, it was a new commute for me. So I was paying attention a lot. I didn't know the stops well. I started using my bike sometimes, that was a new path. That was all new for me. But that was sort of like when I would process my stress in the sense. And I would sometimes spend a little extra time walking in the park by the hospital and really looking at the trees in springtime, which I felt like they were blooming for me, you know?

Like everybody was at home, in just like such a different situation. And this whole idea of New York on lockdown was a different experience for me because every day I went to work. So I don't know, for some reason, I just think I'm going to remember that feeling of commuting, and feeling, you know, very ... It's not alone in a sad sense but like just, the city being more empty and really taking notice of the city and what it feels like, without people

CM: Yes. Yeah, that's a little bit shocking at any time that...

SR: Yes!

CM: ... quiet, others have mentioned that that quietness about the city as something they'll always remember, it's very odd. I'm just looking through the, the rest of these questions that seem to be a bit repetitive. So I don't want to... Here's one. How is this experience different from other historical events you've lived through?

SR: Well, I'm an adult. So that is - I'm thinking of 9/11. I was in high school when that happened.

CM: Right.

SR: So I was old enough to grasp that it was completely world changing, but it wasn't, I couldn't fully grasp it. And I did graduate into I graduated in 2007 and moved to New York in 2008. So I did sort of enter the world as an adult in a recession.

And I moved to New York to be an actress, so that that was great right off the bat. I feel like I'm, compared to other crises or world events, this is definitely the most shocking and the most long lasting. But i but i feel like I'm just old enough to have experienced some of it before in terms of an economic crisis and, getting here to New York and having my own challenges, with unemployment and being uninsured. I was uninsured for several years and in all of that. So, I can look back at the last 10 years and see that I knew nothing then. I know a teeny bit more now. This, this feels, this feels bigger to me then like the recession did in 2008-2009. But again, it's hard to say like perspective wise, like I just don't know because I still felt like I was pretty young, being 22 or whatever that was. 23? Life was simpler, I guess.

CM: So it's simpler when you're younger. Yeah, less aware of all the problems of adulthood.

SR: Mm hmm.

CM: I'm just trying to think, do you think that you'll stay in New York through this? Are you and your husband determined to stay in New York, where it's, because so many people have fled and probably won't be back. What do you think you'll do?

SR: Yeah, I mean, we're committed for the next few years, I think, for sure. But you know, we do ask ourselves that question. Like we moved here for the arts. You know, because we wanted to perform and be a part of that industry, but we still love them. We have a lot of friends in that industry now they're all kind of, not all of them, but a lot of them are gone, obviously. Because there's no work here and why, why pay the New York prices. If you're not going to be able to work here or, you know, have the nightlife or the restaurants or whatever busy life, so we do ask ourselves that question every day. But we don't have any like plans to move. We love the city.

CM: Okay. Is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to add to the video?

SR: I don't think so.

CM: Okay.

SR: So you know I value what you all do in the archives. I work with Stefana [Breitweiser, MSBI archivist] sometimes you know, on the BI stuff and I, I wanted to be sure you know I think everybody's had a really unique experience, so it's great to capture it.

CM: Yes, it's been very good to capture your experience and I appreciate your time. If you think of anything you want to add later you can always send us a written email and we can we keep that in another section. Thank you for your time.

SR: Thank you.

CM: Have a good night.

SR: You too.

CM: Okay. Bye bye.

END OF INTERVIEW