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COVID Memories Interview with Erik Blutinger, MD
Interviewed by Angelyn Thornton
August 25, 2020

[after technical issues; interview starts at 4:00]

COVID MEMORIES: Perfect, perfect.

ERIK BLUTINGER: Okay, great.

CM: Off the top, I just need to read some stuff off. Okay.

This is Angelyn Thornton, Marketing Coordinator at Levy Library at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, interviewing via Zoom today, interviewing Erik Blutinger. I'm sorry for that pronunciation.

EB: It's perfect.

CM: Please do not disclose any personal health information regarding patients or other persons. If you do disclose your own health information, it will not be covered by HIPAA.

Okay. To start us off, please tell me your name, your department and the institution at which you work.

EB: My name is Erik Blutinger. I work in the Emergency Medicine Department at Mount Sinai Queens Hospital in Astoria.

CM: Great. Can you tell us a little bit what you do at your job?

EB: I work full time clinically, seeing and taking care of patients. And throughout the COVID crisis, I was working full time in the emergency department as well as via telehealth from home as part of the Mount Sinai Health System.

CM: Do you have a particular story or event that you would like to have recorded for this project?

EB: Throughout the crisis I recorded a series of over 50 video diaries and those were all captured and provided to the media office for Mount Sinai. They have been shared far and wide with media outlets and other venues. But if there is a way of having those accounted for in the Archives, I would very much appreciate it.

CM: How did COVID or how has COVID currently changed your day to day life, both at work and at home?

EB: COVID has completely reshaped my thinking on the world, both professionally and personally. In emergency medicine professionally, we're always trained to deal with the unexpected and handle extreme moments of uncertainty, but COVID redefined what uncertainty really means to me. I, I grew up watching Michael Jordan play in the NBA playoffs and every day throughout the COVID crisis felt like game seven of the finals. Morning and night, not knowing what kind of sick patient would be suddenly presented right in front of you and having to react with such little medical information available in the world, to absorb and swallow such a threatening and devastating illness.

On a personal level, COVID has made me really appreciate that tomorrow is no guarantee and facets of life that I used to take for granted, such as seeing people walk the streets without masks, or hearing from my godson about how school went during the day, are actually no more guarantees, at least now given the pandemic in which we find ourselves.

CM: What has been the toughest part of your day currently, and what is the best part of your day?

EB: It's a great question. The toughest part of my day is the evening time when I look out my window here in a tiny New York City apartment, before realizing or recognizing the gravity of the situation and seeing the streets pretty much empty and high-rise apartments, with over 50% of them with all the lights turned off because many have moved out of Manhattan. And I feel uneasy with the new levels of crime and the social distancing measures that are now taking place. And, in the evening, when I see that, it just, it magnifies the impact of everything because I remember moving to New York about a year ago and seeing how many people were in the city, were in the streets. How many pedestrians were bustling between stores, the honking of taxi cabs, which at the time was a nuisance, but now, in hindsight, I kind of miss that.

The best part of my day is walking into the emergency department and realizing that we don't have patients in the hallways who are gasping for air anymore, and COVID is pretty much nowhere to be found, at least in the emergency department. And for a place like Queens, which was the epicenter of the pandemic here in New York, to see that now, when thinking back to memories of March and April, it's, it makes me feel more at ease.

CM: I'm glad to hear that, definitely. What has given you comfort and hope during all of this?

EB: Comfort and hope has come from a variety of sources. I have found new ways of sharing my thoughts, with even myself, and in writing journal articles and reading more, in learning how to reflect and meditate in the moment, because that has been one way in

which I've created an outlet for myself to stop thinking and ruminating over what happened and what has been happening with COVID. I also have loved living with my girlfriend and about to take the next step today. [Smiling] So that has been like a wonderful outlet for me. I'm sorry. I was your question, what would have been the moments that have been...

CM: Oh, it's, um, what's gives you comfort.

EB: What's given me comfort? What's also given me comfort is hearing from friends and family and even seeing on the media, folks who are not, who were not in the trenches, but have still remained as vigilant as when this all began. Because I think it's that level of vigilance that will help us more quickly take ourselves out of COVID-19 and put it in our past and create a new and better world. And so, seeing that, that level of vigilance and desire to still learn about the illness, what we can do as a society, what can we plan for in the coming months, that has been that's given me a new level of comfort, because it makes me realize that you don't just have to be in medicine to understand the gravity and also feel as motivated to come up with solutions.

CM: Congratulations, by the way.

EB: Thank you. Let's hope she says yes. [laughing]

CM: I believe you already touched on this briefly but what have you learned from this or what will be your biggest lesson that you'll take from this?

EB: There have been a lot of lessons I've learned from all of this, and what I'm about to say is extremely cliché, but I don't know how else to say it. You can get past anything you put your mind to provided that you have the strength, the desire, the motivation, and the support to push on to the other side. It's devastating to see a city like New York get brought to its knees due to COVID-19, a city that I always imagined growing up was invincible. But even though it can be brought to its knees, there are still ways of getting, of reforming and becoming a safer place to live. And so I think COVID has taught me that there is resiliency in anything as long as you don't lose hope and as long as you don't lose the passion to find it in any corner of life.

CM: So, we're nearing the end and I just want to leave it open to you say anything at all that you want to say.

EB: So, I just want to say that I think, I've spoken to a lot of colleagues across the country in emergency medicine, who have worked in health systems in parts of the country that did not suffer from COVID as badly as we did. And I really believe – and I'm not just saying this - that Sinai did a phenomenal job protecting its employees, protecting its staff, providing communication, remaining very transparent about PPE, which was an area that we, that I was extremely concerned about because we were struggling to even

find N95 masks when things were starting to get really bad. So I think Sinai, looking back, did a phenomenal job and is a, should be a beacon of hope for other health systems in the country who may not know how to mobilize its resources or may not know what key, what key stakeholders they need to reach out to in order to prepare their system for something as dire as COVID.

I'll also say, there's been a lot of, one area of this whole pandemic that really still continues to upset me is the degree of disinformation and politicization, of polarizing politics that have really permeated how, as a society, we can unite and live a safer life together in a community. We're all one world, we're all one people, we're one species where we live in different cities in different parts of the world and this country is very different. But at the end of the day, I think we can all agree that, in order for us to get out of COVID, we have to all work together. But sometimes seeing the politics and the polarizing debate that takes place across online blogs and daily broadcasts and even in conversations between folks that I see out on the street in New York, that hurts me and I hope that eventually that can change and we can all coalesce together, because we really don't have a choice. And so hopefully, when we look back on COVID-19, we can realize, we can see how damaging politics and differences of opinion can be when they are not grounded in science and expert-crafted facts.

But overall, I'm grateful for this, for this interview and for the efforts that are being put forth by Sinai to do this project. I think it's a wonderful initiative and I've been saving a lot of artifacts and materials, little things, scraps of paper, anything because I know that one day, who knows what...how we'll look back on this, no matter how hard we try in the present to recount at all.

CM: You're absolutely right. And thank you for participating in this. We really appreciate it.

EB: It's my pleasure. And again, I apologize for being five minutes late because of technological glitch issues, but I'm grateful for your time and for interviewing folks across the Health System because, in my mind, everybody's a hero, whether you're in medicine or not. And the more we can document it, the better off we'll be.

CM: Absolutely. Well, thank you, and have a great day.

EB: Thank you, you too.

CM: Thank you.

EB: Take care, bye.