

Covid_chester_sara

Cara: Today is August 25, 2020, and Cara Vanderree at the Ashland Library is interviewing Sara Chester.

Cara: Sara, do you mind giving your age and occupation?

Sara: No, that's fine. I am 39 years old and I am currently employed by the United States Embassy in Algiers, Algeria, as a human resources assistant working on the American portfolio.

Cara: Sara, when did you first hear about the Corona virus? Where were you when you heard, too.

Sara: We were living in Algiers and around the New Year holiday, maybe just after that finished and people were coming back to the embassy and getting back into the regular routines. There had been bits and pieces on the news about it and what was happening in China, but one of the things that sticks out early on was that some members of the Foreign Service community that had once worked at the US embassy in Algiers had taken a cruise and many people who still knew them were talking about how they were stranded on a cruise ship. I don't even remember which country, but they were one of those first cruise ships that ended up having to come in and dock. But everyone had to stay on there and be quarantined. And many people were talking about that. That's one of my first real... I think that was one of the times that I realized that this was much more serious than I would have liked to have believed.

Cara: What was your reaction then? Had you believed it up till then, how did you feel about it at that time?

Sara: I think initially it felt like China was still a long way away and it wasn't really... it was going to be one of those things that didn't really affect us. I grew up in the United States; up until this point I had lived in the US my whole life. And these sorts of viruses that would come about never really seemed to affect us, especially here when we were growing up in the Midwest. But I think being in a place where people were so close to other people that knew that or they had experienced it. That's when I started to really realize that this could be... we were now in a part of the world, that it really could reach us and affect us. But I still didn't really feel like it was going to end up in the United States, or at least not end up being as big of an issue in the United States as it did.

Cara: OK, you were living in Algeria at the time that you first heard about it, who lives in your home in Algeria?

Sara: Yes, it's myself, my husband. I have a 13-year-old daughter and a four year old son. We moved to Algeria at the end of October, so we had just been there a few months. We'd been living there a few months and were still kind of learning the city and learning the the foreign service life, so to speak.

Cara: When did the virus really become real to you or when did it affect your life and your family's lives?

Sara: It was the first week of March? And I had gone back to Washington, D.C. to do some training for my job. And I had already felt anxious about leaving my children for three weeks

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and my husband in a foreign country. And I've never been away from them for that long. And within that first week of the training, it was already apparent that things were changing quickly on a global scale. And the Wednesday evening of that first week of March, the president announced that he was stopping travel from Europe to the United States. And when I went to the training the next morning, I was very anxious that the next step was going to be Europe stopping travel from the US. And that was my only way back to my family. So, on that Thursday, I started contacting the embassy to find out about getting back, going back to Algiers.

Sara: And the training site had already been in discussion about shutting the training down. Most of us in that class were from embassies from around the world. And that afternoon, actually, I got an email from both of my children's schools that the schools would be closing that day and would not be opening again for a few weeks. It became apparent that I needed to get back to Algeria.

Cara: Was your husband able to stay home with them?

Sara: He was able to because the embassy also began instituting sort of an alternating schedule for the staff, so that every department broke up into a Team "A" and a Team "B" so that they weren't there full time. We also do have a nanny that helps us from time to time, so we were asking her to come in a little bit extra, but I was able to get back to Algeria on, I believe it was a Sunday, I think I left the US on Friday night, so I guess I got back on Saturday night, late Saturday evening, I arrived back in Algeria. The workweek there is Sunday through Thursday. So, I stayed home on Sunday with the children and Brad went in to work.

And then I just, in communication with my director, found out which team I was on and when I was required to be in the building. And from there we just alternated our schedules. Brad would go in at one time, one day, and I would go in the next. Our schedules were opposite, so we didn't have to rely on our nanny as much.

She is a local Algerian and we were also being encouraged by the embassy to minimize our contact with everyone, not just other embassy staff, but also locals. The city itself of Algiers... well, the country, the entire country had what they called a curfew that we had to be in our homes by 5:00 p.m. and we could not leave our homes again until 7:00 a.m. So that posed a few challenges for my husband at work. His work involves security of the embassy, and he supervises the guards who provide that security. So they had to get creative with scheduling them in order to meet those curfews. They could be at the embassy, but they couldn't leave the embassy after 5:00 pm. So it definitely created some challenges for him at work and it created some challenges for us as a family. We have a little bit of green space outside of our apartment building, but for the most part, we were feeling pretty cooped up.

Cara: How long were you "cooped up"?

Sara: We stayed in Algeria until, well, by April, my 13-year-old daughter was very done with Mom, Dad and four-year-old brother. My four-year-old son actually ended up getting sick, not with the coronavirus, but he was running fevers and had some symptoms that pointed to possibly appendicitis.

After having to seek some help from the local health care system in Algeria, thank goodness it was not appendicitis, but that kind of put me on edge. So, when my husband said, "I think you need to take the kids on this next opportunity and go back to the United States," I didn't

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disagree this time. Initially, I didn't feel like it was necessarily the best option when everyone from embassies around the world were getting on planes and going back to the US. I felt like that would just put us right in the line of fire. But after those... I guess it was almost six weeks, I decided that probably would be best for the kids.

The flight that became available took us out at the end of April. We flew through London, which was in itself an adventure. We flew out of Algeria, into London, one of the airports, and then had to taxi to the other airport and stay in a hotel. But even getting the hotel room was a little bit of a challenge because at that point, the city was shut down, London was shut down. And so, I had to have my orders from the US government that said that we were traveling on official orders in order to get a hotel room because our flight from Heathrow Airport didn't leave until the following day. And we checked into the hotel and couldn't even get food delivered. Thank goodness for the little convenience shop area. We just found what we could to eat, we had already eaten through all the snacks I had packed into bags.

Sara: And then the next morning we were able to take a bus to Heathrow Airport and we got on our plane and flew from there to Chicago, and had a very long layover in Chicago, but we had planned on ending it up in Ashland, but we felt like we would go to Kansas City first to quarantine.

Sara: We felt like we'd have better resources for quarantining away from family there. And as we sat in the Chicago airport and I'm watching flights to Wichita get canceled, there were only three flights booked and all three of them were canceled. I knew that it was an even better choice to go to Kansas City because we would have been stranded in Chicago if we had tried to come on to Wichita. So we quarantined for two weeks in Kansas City in a hotel. And thank goodness for the Residence Inn! We had a little kitchen and we rented a car so we could get our groceries.

Sara: And they had a basketball court that we could use. That we could use was about the only thing we could use, the basketball court and the laundry room. And they were working with minimal staff. The manager was cleaning rooms, and working the desk, and being the manager.

But my sister lives in Kansas City. If we really needed something, I could have called her. And then we came to Ashland because my dad and my mother-in-law both live here. We also had anticipated a little bit more to be open, like we expected... I didn't anticipate the city park to be closed or the school playground to be closed. Part of the idea, we thought, of coming to Ashland, besides family, was that it's kind of secluded and maybe not so deeply affected by the virus.

But we were, despite our disappointment of the city park being closed and the playground being closed and the swimming pool opening later, that just hit home. The reality, especially for my children, that this virus is not something that people are willing to risk. They weren't willing to put anyone else at risk. And I'm proud of my community, that they were taking such precautions. We did our best when we got here to stay engaged between grandma's and grandpa's houses and the outdoor spaces that they have. And we had lots of projects. The library was a saving grace. They were finding books and letting us pick them up and then things started to open up here in Ashland.

Cara: What things changed right away for you after you got back to Ashland, was everything shut down when you got here or did it shut down after you were here?

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Sara: No, when we drove into Ashland, I remember driving by the city park. My dad lives just down the street, and I saw the barricades and the sign that said that you weren't allowed to go to the city park. And I remember saying to my dad, "Why is the park closed?" And then as we drove around town, the playground had the chains and the locks, so everything had shut down in a sense. The grocery store was still open. The pharmacy was still open. Masks were being encouraged, but not required in most of the places. But for the most part, we were between houses, grandma's house and grandpa's house, and so it wasn't affecting us too deeply.

Sara: I would grocery shop. Usually I would let my 13-year-old watch her brother while I would grocery shop so we could minimize that contact.

Cara: So, you weren't feeling the pinch horribly.

Sara: Not so much, I think I was more anxious when we first arrived. My dad is 80 years old and he has some underlying health issues. And I was feeling a little anxious, even though we had quarantined in Kansas City, I still felt a little anxious about potentially carrying the virus to him. But after a few weeks, when it was apparent we were all fine and his volunteer work was minimized by the virus, we were spending a lot of time together and he was taking walks with the kids. I think it was it's been a good relief for us to see that everybody's doing well here.

Cara: What is your job situation right now?

Sara: Part of the embassy's plan, when they encouraged us to divide into teams, was that you were still working full time. So, when you weren't in the building, whatever you could do on your computers at home. So then, when I knew that I was going to take this departure, they have special training, online training that you have to do to work from home. I did that before I left Algeria and I filled out all the necessary paperwork to be teleworking. So, I've been able to do that, which has really honestly been a gift because I've had this time with my children, especially in a time that there is a lot of anxiety.

My four-year-old, when we were traveling here from Algeria, it became apparent to me how much he had actually been listening to the news, when at every airport that we went to, he was crying and screaming, "Don't scan me, don't scan me!" This is a little boy who has traveled since he was an infant and previous to this would walk up through security and put everything-- his jacket, his backpack-- up on the security, on the conveyor belt to go through the scanner. He would walk through the metal detector as if it were something he did every day. Going through those airports with him, so anxious between what he had heard (he'd heard enough about this virus) and needing to be scanned and leaving Daddy behind in Africa. It was definitely a really emotional time.

So even getting here and having that time to just give him the extra attention and the extra, just kind of the extra support that he needed, is very meaningful, and my schedule is very flexible in what I need to do. I meet my deadlines on my schedule. There's quite a time difference between here and Algeria. I just have to take that into account.

But my coworkers have been very supportive and helpful and I have been doing everything that I can do from home. I've been getting it done.

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Cara: You are thinking to get back to Algeria, hopefully in October, or in September?

Sara: Yes, so initially when you take something called "Authorized Departure", the American government sets the criteria for your return and the criteria for this was that the host country be in what's called "Phase Three" and that there are the different phases. All have various components. But one of the reoccurring themes is decline in the number of cases in that country, the number of Covid cases in each country.

Algeria moved into phase one at the beginning of June, but has still not moved to Phase Two as of now, almost the end of August, and the American government said in order to return, if you took authorized departure, your host country must be in Phase Three. But given how long this has lasted, there are things that can be done. Our management officer at the embassy reached out to those of us, those family members and some staff that took the authorized departure, asking if anybody felt like they were ready to return, that they felt like it was safe enough for them to return. And so those of us that responded, she worked on getting the necessary permission for us to return, which goes up to someone much further up the chain in Washington, D.C. And she did get that approval. So we are approved to return, but my husband is coming here first, to spend some time away from post to take what they call R and R, Rest and Relaxation, and then we'll just return with him.

By the time he comes, and then when he's spent his time here, it'll probably be the end of September when we board a plane to head back to Algeria. And we are hopeful. My daughter's school started, it's an American school in Algeria, and they started today with online classes, which is how they finished the year, but the Algerian government has decreed that schools will not open until October.

The American school chose to start again online and we'll see what the guidance is from the Algerian government as we move closer to October, but the plan is that when the schools can open their doors for the kids to be back in the school, they will. So we're hopeful to get back by that beginning of October so that if Ellie can get back into her classroom, she can. My son is in preschool and it's an Algerian preschool. They are at the mercy of the Algerian government as well. And to be honest, online preschool sounds like the worst possible idea, at least for me!

Cara: You did have him start here in Ashland.

Sara: Yes, I did, before we were sure whether or not we were going to get the permission, I decided it would be great for him to do, especially since it's a part-time preschool program here, just to get him around other four-year-olds and allow him a little bit more structure. We've been on a summer schedule since the end of April and just kind of not getting into a good routine. So this kind of helped all of us straighten that out and get on our routine with going to bed and getting up. So he is in preschool here and he'll be there until it's time for us to return. We'll take a little time off when Daddy gets here, but he'll go back and just that way, give him a little bit of continuity and structure and that socialization with boys his own age.

Cara: And they are all boys!

Sara: They are all boys in his class. Yes. God bless the teacher.

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Cara: I'm not sure what she did to deserve that. But when do you think life will get back to normal? And why do you think that time?

Sara: You know, that is really the million-dollar question. I don't know that... I think we're going to discover a new normal. I'm hopeful that we don't always have to wear masks. I don't know that I can tell you... my family's horrible at social distancing. We love being around other people and visiting and playing.

And I guess hopefully this just brings a new awareness to us. With just being more in tune with our own bodies and when we really need to say, "I don't need to go to work today or you don't need to go to school today," not just because of the threat of coronavirus, but just because we are all people.

Cara: Is there a prayer of getting back to normal?

Sara: Exactly.

Cara: And define normal. It wasn't so awesome, to be brutally honest. There were things we could have done better.

Sara: It's true. It's true. I don't know when this will change. I feel like we are seeing... I don't follow the news as closely, partly to protect my son because obviously when it's on, he's listening. But at least I do get emails. We get a daily email from the embassy that talks about the numbers. Basically, it talks about Algerian happenings like government-wise. And the numbers are starting to decline now, not as dramatically as they would have liked, but they are starting to decline there. So I'm hopeful that, you know, when the two weeks shut down, it was supposed to be a 15 day to flatten the curve, I'm hopeful that maybe we're getting to that point, where we're flattening the curve. Maybe this virus will be around for a while, but maybe we'll just have to deal with it like we do other viruses that we deal with on a regular basis, cold and flu and...

Cara: Is there anything you think will be changed, that will never quit? Is there something that we're going to do forever because of Covid?

Sara: Oh, gosh, that's a good question. This temperature taking thing is pretty funny. At airports, at the school. They have a... we call it "the robot" for my son. He goes in and has to stand in front of the robot for his temperature to be taken. I sure hope that we don't have to continue those things.

Cara: Well, we've got them now.

Sara: That's true, now let's use them, right? But I guess, maybe, just hopefully maybe, just that idea where people will be more mindful of how they're actually feeling, whether it's coronavirus or not. But, "I'm not feeling well, maybe I shouldn't be around other people. Maybe I shouldn't go and expose other people."

Cara: Is that your reaction now? You just think people should be more aware?

Sara: I think so. To be to be honest, living here in Ashland for these last four or five months,

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we're kind of in a bubble because when there is a case or a suspected case, it doesn't take long for people to know and for you to know whether or not you were around that person.

Sara: So I feel like maybe I'm living in a little bit of a skewed reality.

Cara: We have contact tracing down to a science.

Sara: That is exactly right. But I don't know, I just can't... I wish I could predict the future. I know that even the communication that I'm getting from my husband is that actually people that work at the embassy, local staff, Algerians, have had family members that have died. It's been interesting to hear because that, again, poses challenges if those people then had come into the building after being around that family member.

Sara: Sara, thank you so much for giving us your time.

Sara: Thank you.