

[0:00:00]

Amanda: Today is Wednesday, April 20th, 2022. My name is Amanda Riggerbach and I am the manager for the Tumultuous 2020 Oral History Project at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I'm currently at the ALPL's recording studio with Harrison Brackett. We're going to be talking about his experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic working at Aldi, a grocery store chain. International, I think.

Harrison: Yeah, I believe so.

Amanda: For the Tumultuous 2020 Oral History Project.

[0:00:32] Thank you so much, Harrison, for coming in and on your day off, no less.

Harrison: Not a problem.

Amanda: So we like to start with the basic information. When and where were you born?

Harrison: I was born in Springfield. I wish I could remember a detail about that, but I was born in Springfield. I lived in New Berlin for I think maybe a year, maybe two years tops. Again, I don't remember anything about it.

[0:01:01] Then I lived in Divernon for about another year and a half and then moved to Rochester where I have stayed since.

Amanda: So I would imagine that you probably remember something about Rochester.

Harrison: Oh yeah, a lot about Rochester.

Amanda: And you know, we actually have a whole section of our oral history program that's about Rochester and its community.

Harrison: Really? I didn't know that.

Amanda: Yeah, so it sounds like it is quite a community there.

Harrison: Yeah.

Amanda: And what would you say were some hallmarks from your childhood, you know, if that question makes sense?

[0:01:33]

Harrison: Hallmarks, as in like standout details? I remember kind of a strange one. We had our elementary school building grades one through three, and then four

through six. And then our junior high school was seven through eight, and then nine through twelve. Or, that sounds right. Maybe I'm messing it up.

[0:02:04] But I remember more than anything wanting to be in the sixth grader wing in our middle school. And that same year they built the intermediate school, which I think it was due to the large influx of students we had had in the past few years. And I remember being so disappointed because I couldn't go in that sixth grader wing. And I got to go to the new school and it was a nice school for what it's worth but I remember that being a very disappointing part of my childhood as far as that goes.

[0:02:37]

Amanda: And what are your parents' occupations?

Harrison: They're both retired now. My father was a contractor for Repairmaster Constructions, always been a handyman, always been a hard labor guy. And my mom just retired in January and she was at the Illinois State Legislative Information System for about 35 years.

[0:03:04]

Amanda: So it sounds like they both come from different types of jobs.

Harrison: Very different types of jobs, absolutely. My dad would come home covered in paint and drywall finish and I mean just everything. He'd come home and take a shower immediately and my mom would come home, oh well, you know, another day, just the complete polar opposites.

Amanda: So, how did that kind of affect your upbringing with these two different worlds?

Harrison: Oh, not really at all. I mean, my dad would go home at three o'clock and he'd take care of me until five o'clock when my mom got home.

[0:03:38] And I mean, not much of a different dynamic. I mean, you know, they both have plenty of things to complain about at work as I'm sure most people do. Yeah, no, not too much of a difference in upbringing. I think there's a lot of families who have that kind of dynamic where two different parents have completely separate occupations.

Amanda: Absolutely. I was just curious if maybe they had different styles of disciplining.

[0:04:11]

Harrison: They definitely did. I don't know if that necessarily comes from their occupations rather than their upbringing.

Amanda: Yeah, definitely. And where did you say that you went to high school?

Harrison: Rochester High School.

Amanda: And did you participate in extracurriculars while there?

Harrison: You know, I was a big choir kid, I was a big theater kid.

[0:04:35] I was in sports all growing up my entire life and I think one day I just kind of got tired of it. It was too much of a time commitment, I'd rather be doing anything else. And I didn't really do too many extracurriculars. I was a pretty poor student, I'd say. I was, you know, get my work done, go home. I want nothing to do with this place. After high school, or in the middle of high school rather, I moved a block away from the school.

[0:05:03] And I've lived there since, and so I walked to school every day, and walked home from school every day. And so the instant that bell rung, I was out the door. I did not want to be there anymore. I could still hear the football games from anywhere in my house, if I needed to. I mean, yeah, I was not a very extracurricular kid.

Amanda: Do you remember any of the plays or musicals you participated in?

Harrison: No, I worked on the back stage of it all. I didn't get to participate in almost anything.

[0:05:32] I had a big stage fright as a kid. I didn't really get over that until I think my junior year. But by then I was just kind of, you know what, I'm comfortable here. I don't really need to go on stage.

Amanda: And you say that you were a poor student, but I think that going to school probably means you're not a poor student.

Harrison: Yeah, I guess that's a good point. I don't think I ever missed a day of school, ever. I think I had a perfect attendance.

[0:05:57] I just, I don't know, just, you know, get there, get it done. I didn't see a reason to mess around.

Amanda: And what was life like for you post-graduation?

Harrison: Strange. I think like a lot of high school kids, neither of my parents ever gone to college, so they really wanted to push me out of the frying pan, into the fire, go right to college after this. And I really did not want to do that.

[0:06:29] But I figured, you know, all my friends are doing it. I can knock it out, same as them. And I think once I got that freedom in college, I realized, oh, I really don't want to do this. Now that I have the option to do it, and there's no

truancy officer who's going to come get me for skipping classes, I don't want to do this. And so, yeah, I haven't gone back yet, but I think I will when I'm ready. But I know that's not right now.

[0:07:00]

Amanda: That inner knowledge of yourself seems to be important for getting it done, and if you're not ready, you're not ready.

Harrison: It was something I was really scared of at first, was the whole, you know, my parents would be disappointed, all my friends are finishing up their associates degrees, you know, I have really nothing to show for it. But, you know, I think the more I started branching out, whether it was through Aldi or just through meeting new people, I've realized there are way more people than I've ever understood that go to college in their 30s or their 40s.

[0:07:34] You know, just everyone has a different time. Where some people are miserable going through college in their 20s and some people are more financially and mentally stable in their 30s and they realize, I want to do this now. And I don't think there's ever a bad time to go so long as you're able to afford it and you're not causing unnecessary mental strain on yourself.

[0:07:58] I think you can go whenever you're ready. And that was something I was, again, really horrified about, but I've come to terms with it just in the past couple of years.

Amanda: That's wonderful.

Harrison: Yeah.

Amanda: And when did you start working at Aldi?

Harrison: In January of 2019. So not right after, but very, very shortly after I graduated high school.

Amanda: So remind me then, you graduated May of 2018?

Harrison: That is correct.

Amanda: Okay.

[0:08:31] And what were your initial impressions of working in a place like Aldi? before the pandemic?

Harrison: I think when I first got there, I'd always been conditioned to, you know, janitors do the cleaning, weather people give you the weather, and cashiers check, and that's just the way the world works. Everyone just has their one

expertise that they're good at, and other people do other things. And at Aldi, we really don't have that.

[0:08:59] It's kind of everyone is expected to be able to do everything. Even if you're not the best at it, you need to be able to do it just in case any circumstance happens where maybe someone's sick that day and we need an extra stocker. Everyone has to be able to use a register in some capacity. Even if it's not very quick, you need to be able to do it. And that was a hurdle I had to get over because I really did go in there thinking, alright, I'm just going to be on the register for seven hours a day, you know, whatever.

[0:09:32] But when they first pulled me off, like, all right, we're gonna teach you to do floors, and I'm like, don't you have someone to do that? Like, no, everyone does everything here. And it was a very cold water, you know, experience.

Amanda: I don't doubt it. And I think you have mentioned in our pre-interview that you're the person who's been there the second longest.

Harrison: That's correct.

[0:09:56] Yeah, I've been there for three years this January, or well, January of 2022. And, yeah, I'm only bested by one woman who's been there for 10 years and I don't think I'll ever be here on that. And then, I guess if you consider my store managers, they've been there longer, but as far as associates go, I've been there the second longest.

Amanda: And so then kind of moving into 2020, I like to start by asking people if they had any New Year's resolutions for 2020, any goals or plans for the year.

[0:10:34] Well, I really don't do New Year's resolutions too much. I did them back in high school, but I've just kind of fallen out of that, because then I get upset if I don't fulfill my New Year's resolution and that just causes more unhappiness, and it's just a self-fulfilling cycle every year. So I've kind of strayed away from doing that. Plans?

[0:10:57] I made plans to fly to Texas, plans to fly to Virginia. I made plans to go visit all my buddies in 2020. I have a job now, guys. I can afford to come see you. And as we'd soon find out, that wasn't quite what happened. But, yeah, that was mainly my plans, was just to better myself and be able to go visit people, experience new things. And things kind of fell short due to some unforeseen circumstances.

Amanda: In the spirit of foreshadowing.

[0:11:32] And I think you had mentioned that you were at that point you were still taking classes?

Harrison: That is correct.

Amanda: And how many classes were you taking?

Harrison: I was taking four at that point. Full load, yeah.

Amanda: Was that difficult balancing work and school?

Harrison: Incredibly, yeah. Because I had been so used to come home from high school, get your homework done, and then you have the rest of your day to do whatever you like. And I worked the afternoon to closing shifts at Aldi, usually 2 to 9, sometimes staying later depending on the state of the store.

[0:12:08] And so I'd go to classes until 1, and then I'd pretty much go straight to Aldi. And I'd come home and I'd have 2, 3 hours till midnight usually to finish my homework, go to bed, and then wake up again to go to classes at 9 o'clock. So I really didn't have very much of a – I had a social life in the bounds of the college, the people I could talk to in between classes.

[0:12:38] But past that I really didn't have a very large social life. And it definitely affected my work performance. And it definitely affected my grade performance. It was kind of a n win for all parties in that regard.

Amanda: That does sound exhausting.

Harrison: Very.

Amanda: And I know you had mentioned that you were able to do at least one trip before the pandemic really became prevalent.

Harrison: That is correct.

[0:13:05] I was in – I have a very, very poor memory, even just going to a couple years back, but I was in Virginia, in Norfolk, Virginia, when talk of this horrible flu was arising and they were talking about shutting down airports and any non-essential travel would be impossible. And a bit before that, it had been a rumor of this big bad flu going around, everybody wash your hands. And it was something that you know, I was 20.

[0:13:45] So I was just kind of – I guess I was 19 at that point – I was just kind of, you know, I'm not worried about it. Who cares? It doesn't matter to me. I have a very good immune system. I'm not worried about it. And yeah, when we were in Virginia, it became pretty clear pretty quickly that we needed to start panicking.

[0:14:09] When the day we drove up to Washington, D.C. and spent the day there, and the day we had come home to Virginia, they closed everything down in Washington, D.C. There was no more tourism allowed, no nothing. And we

kind of realized then this is a bit of a bigger deal than we were initially expecting it to be.

Amanda: Yeah, and so some dates is that January 30th was the day that the World Health Organization declared COVID a public health emergency.

[0:14:37] But I mean, for a lot of people, it really wasn't until mid-March that even the, what was it, the stay at home order started coming, all of that.

Harrison: Yeah.

Amanda: And yeah, I was gonna ask, you had talked about hearing just a little bit about the virus before March, but not really that much.

Harrison: Oh yeah, I mean it had been a thing, I want to say almost every day on the news, but it was, it was a minute-long segment about, hey there's a flu going around, wash your hands.

[0:15:11] Don't stick your fingers on people's mouths, like just really, really generic health advice. And you know, I mean you hear about every year during flu season, you know, wash your hands, cough into your elbow, I mean, or sneeze in your elbow. Like it was just, you know, really generic health advice and that's nice and all, but it wasn't a big – we didn't think it was gonna be a pandemic. No one thought it was gonna be a pandemic.

[0:15:38] And on your trip to Virginia, you had mentioned that there was a mandatory meeting.

Harrison: Yeah, there was a mandatory meeting that was – and I really wish I would have remembered this exact, the date of the call. I'm sure I might be able to pull it up and let you know at some point. I can email you a log of it.

[0:16:04] But I remember having to have everybody from stores I'd never heard of check in and voice that you were there present, so they knew whether to brief you or not when you got back to your store or what the case was. And I Really remember them talking about you know, there's this flu going around and it's a big deal. It's like, okay, sure, it's a big deal. And they said alright, so we're gonna start requiring all employees to wear masks.

[0:16:40] You know, we're going to – you know, wash your hands, of course. Again, very generic health advice. And I believe they discussed hazard pay on that phone call. They discussed making an extra dollar an hour for hazard pay. And you know, that was that was nice. It was uplifting news. But again, if your company's – I believe the CEO of your company is calling everybody and telling you, it's a bit of a – I'd never had that.

[0:17:14] I still have never had that happen past that one point. So it's kind of one of those what's really going on here kind of situations. And yeah, that was most of the phone call I believe. It was early, early, early in the morning. It was like 7 o'clock in the morning, which is very early for me at least.

[0:17:34] Yeah, I just remember not wanting to be there. I was like, oh boy, I can't be doing anything else in my morning.

Amanda: And did you say that it was with the CEO or was it with your regional manager?

Harrison: The person was based in North Carolina. I think the CEO of Aldi is in Germany. I think. So I want to say it's a regional manager because I know everybody else other than my regional manager and I didn't recognize the voice. So by process of elimination I'd have to guess it's my regional manager but all I know it was a large figurehead at Aldi.

[0:18:07]

Amanda: And did that start to raise those alarm bells for you?

Harrison: Absolutely. I believe that was the same day that they had closed down Washington, D.C. and said no more travel. So hearing all this news, hearing that in the morning and then afterwards, hearing Washington, D.C. is closed, no tourism activities, nothing's open, you know, we're closing the whole thing down, it started raising alarms.

[0:18:28] Because you think of a large tourism attraction like Washington, D.C., and you think, what could possibly be happening to make something that catastrophic happen? I mean, aside from war, I would have never assumed that they would close down a national monument.

Amanda: Yeah, and I actually have the date for when the D.C. Department of Parks and Rec closed off facilities, and that was March 20th.

Harrison: Okay. I had a friend tell me that it was that day that we heard, so maybe I was misinformed on that. It could be a different section of Washington, D.C. was closed, something along those lines.

[0:19:09]

Amanda: And I don't remember where I got this information, maybe it was like a...

Harrison: Yours is probably more reputable than mine is. Mine was my friend telling me, you won't believe it, the day we left D.C. was the day it closed down. So your information is almost certainly more reputable than mine.

Amanda: But, I mean, that's really interesting. You mentioned that you guys took that trip to D.C. When you guys were there, did it seem emptier than normal? Did anything seem amiss?

[0:19:39]

Harrison: No. I've never been to D.C. That was my first trip there, so I didn't know what to expect. Plenty of people, tons of families. It was populated for sure. Very populated. Obviously in different areas. I want to say the Lincoln Monument was, I guess it was kind of scarce there, but I think almost everywhere else was kind of populated. Granted, the Lincoln Memorial doesn't have a whole lot to – I mean, other than Lincoln, you don't really get to see a whole lot. So, I mean, I didn't really expect it to be super populated.

[0:20:11] But tons of people everywhere else, all over D.C., yeah.

Amanda: Wow, I can imagine for people who live in D.C., that would have been so shocking to go from very populous tourist town, to emptiness.

Harrison: Absolutely. Yeah, big time.

Amanda: And were you worried about, you know, if you guys were going to be able to fly back to Springfield?

Harrison: That was our biggest concern, for sure. Our biggest concern, absolutely, was, you know, we got these plane tickets.

[0:20:39] Are they going to be honored at the gate? Are they going to tell us no non-essential travel is allowed? Are they going to just tell us, you know, tough luck, your round-trip flight is cancelled, you're stuck here until this pandemic ends, which, you know, I mean, that could be – I obviously didn't think it would last multiple years, but even a month, just being in a foreign state that I'm not used to, away from my family and my job was kind of a very nerve-wracking experience.

[0:21:14]

Amanda: Yeah, absolutely. And what did you think of that phrase, essential worker, essential travel? I mean, it became such a phrase that we heard so much in the pandemic, but I know a lot of people, it wasn't really always well-defined.

Harrison: Yeah, I remember when essential travel first became a buzzword.

[0:21:39] I remember that everybody – well, you know, I work a grocery store, is that essential? Okay, yes. I need to go visit my sick mom, is that essential? And that was when it kind of started getting rocky. Is it essential for your

survival? No, but I mean, what can we define as essential? I know there were tons of people in the kind of small niche food industry, you know, small mom and pop bakeries that weren't deemed essential, even though they provided food.

[0:22:14] And I want to say, I don't know the date of when that happened, but I believe they did – either the CDC or the FDA did eventually define essential as, I believe – and I could be completely wrong on this, but that a certain percentage of your store has to sell food exclusively, I believe.

[0:22:37] And that was what deemed you essential. So like if you were a hardware store that didn't have any groceries other than hardware, you weren't essential. Again, I mean, what if you have a home improvement job that is essential? What if you have a leaking roof that you need to fix, that is impacting your livelihood? That could be argued to be essential. Essential travel was one of those that I don't think anyone ever really buckled down and was able to say, you can't go somewhere unless you're doing X, Y, Z.

[0:23:09] I remember all these rumors of cops are going to arrest you or are going to pull you over and start, you know, asking where you're going. And finding out if you're really going to an essential place, which to my knowledge never came to fruition. But I remember all those rumors and it really did feel like living in like a lucid dream where it's like, what is happening? On the topic of essential workers though, that was one of my favorite phrases. My mom would always wake me up and go, you know, good morning essential worker.

[0:23:39] I mean, it was a mixed bag of people. Very appreciative that I'm risking my life during this pandemic to, you know, sell them things. And another healthy mix of spiteful people, angry that they can't work, but that I can, that I can make money. And it was a pretty good mix of both. I'd say maybe a 50-50 split on people who were upset at me for things out of my control, and for people who were very proud or happy of me for things out of my control.

[0:24:15]

Amanda: Yeah, I know that emotions were very high at the start of the pandemic, but...

Harrison: Throughout the entire pandemic.

Amanda: Even today. You know, you brought up a really interesting point about with the hardware stores. I've had interviewees talk about the frustration with that essential categorization because it allowed box stores like Walmart, who they had a capacity for groceries but then there's sales of you know home improvement stuff everything else skyrocketed.

[0:24:51] And some of these smaller businesses were kind of left out because they were very specialized.

Amanda: Absolutely. Yeah I really think that was one of my biggest issues was I really hated seeing mom-and-pop shops just completely drop on the face of the earth and not be able to afford to stay open because they have no income without their store being run.

[0:25:15] And, you know, I mean, property taxes still a thing. I've never run a business, but I'm sure it's very expensive to run a business for the licensing and the product. So it was really heartbreaking to see, even if it was just on social media, seeing XYZ place has closed down indefinitely and Y Place.

[0:25:41] So it was really disheartening to see all these places being forced to close down while – you mentioned the giant itself, Walmart, was able to just stay open. And that caused a large influx of people who would have regularly gone to mom-and-pop shops coming to the bigger businesses and even if you didn't support Walmart you really weren't given much of a choice.

[0:26:06] You were kind of forced into a situation where you kind of had to support them or at least support a large chain like Aldi or County Market or Walmart you kind of had to.

Amanda: And yeah, I read also that Aldi experienced insane growth during the pandemic. I think I have a statistic that I found online. I think they were in June of 2020 – which we'll talk we'll kind of go chronologically but not to jump ahead too much.

[0:26:38] But they were on track to become the nation's third largest retailer and then in June of 2020 they hit their 2,000th store in the U.S.

Harrison: Interesting, very interesting.

Amanda: Yeah.

Harrison: Our store I definitely would say I don't have any particular numbers for our store during the pandemic. I was more worried about going home and seeing my family than numbers. I do have access to them if I was interested, but I didn't really care.

[0:27:11] It was a real big time of a contingency and emergency. I just remember in particular, I remember – I work maybe 10 morning shifts a year. I'm not a morning person. I struggle to get out of bed past noon, before noon. I'm late to bed, late to rise. I would occasionally pick up morning shifts for coworkers who had family emergencies or had something else going on.

[0:27:41] I just remember seeing lines of 30, 40, 50 people outside our door at 9 o'clock in the morning and I'm thinking, oh my gosh, what is happening? I would never in my wildest dreams wait for a store to open, a grocery store to open at the least, just on a Monday. I remember that.

[0:28:06] That was another hammer in the nail that really put in my head, like, this is a problem. Like, this is a real emergency. Even if I wanted to neglect what was on the news and ignore all that, I mean, seeing is believing, and watching, I mean, hordes of people coming through the door at any given moment of the day was just, I mean, mind-boggling.

[0:28:31]

Amanda: I don't doubt it. And so kind of talking then more about like the personal experience of working there and getting into more concrete examples, how were you feeling at that point when, you know, the virus was just beginning? You know, you got that phone call, you were back in Springfield. Yeah, I think you had mentioned in our pre-interview that, you know, there was a lot of concern for your parents.

Harrison: Yeah, my parents are both well past their 50s.

[0:29:03] They're both towards the elderly stage. And so it was one of those things that, again, I really maybe get the flu or the cold once a year at the absolute most. I don't think I've had a flu or a cold other than like a food poisoning or like a stomach bug in every bit of five years. I'm not a very sick person. I don't really get sick from anything. And I wasn't really worried about my own health.

[0:29:34] But when I would get home, the first thing I would do is I would, when I left for work, I had to hang a robe outside on a hook in our garage. And every morning or every day or every night when I got home from work, the first thing I would do is I would take all my clothes off in the garage and put a robe on and I would wash my clothes and then go and take a shower.

[0:29:57] That way I had absolute no contact with any – kind of anything I would have met throughout the day wouldn't reach my parents. It was just one of those things. I mean, it took an extra ten seconds a day. It didn't matter, but it was another kind of hard hit in the head where it's like, oh my gosh, this is crazy, is this life? Like I mean if you had told me ten years ago I'd be taking your clothes off in the garage every day and then having to wear a robe inside, taking showers. It's just like, what is happening?

[0:30:34]

Amanda: I remember in the beginning, officials were very adamant about conserving masks for health care workers.

Harrison: Yeah.

Amanda: Were you guys provided with masks?

Harrison: No. No, absolutely not. And now you can correct me if I'm wrong on this. I do believe at the very beginning, didn't the CDC, I don't know if they specifically said to keep them for health care workers, did they?

[0:31:03]

Amanda: I maybe should double check, but I don't want to say for certain.

Harrison: No, yeah, I don't say for certain either. To the best of my knowledge, I just remember them saying, you don't need to wear a mask, it's not going to do anything, like don't even bother wearing one. And that was so strange. I was watching the news with my parents when it happened. It was so strange. It's like, well, no one was thinking about wearing them in the first place, like why even mention it?

[0:31:31] Again, I could be totally wrong about them saying that or my chronological time of events could be off. But, yeah, we weren't provided with masks at all. Our masks that we did sell, just for a brief period, we have them in our special buy, our weekly calendar – we have them every now and then, just masks and gloves. And it happened that we had them like two weeks after the CDC had come out and said that. And they sold in a matter of an hour tops.

[0:32:02] I mean, we put out everything we had in the back. We don't usually keep things in the back, but we had an excess of them. Just because sometimes we get extra supplies of some things. And yeah, they sold out in every bit of an hour. I mean, probably a thousand units of masks and gloves, latex gloves. They all sold out instantly. And again, we didn't have masks. It wasn't a thing where anyone was really worried about it.

[0:32:30] But then that's when you started seeing some people wear the masks, it was kind of like, okay, they said that's not going to do anything. And then I guess some time later, that proved to be false. And they're like, actually it does, we were just trying to save them for healthcare workers. And we weren't deemed healthcare workers apparently, even though we interact with, or at least I personally interact with every bit of 1,000 people a day. It's real upsetting to think that due to misinformation, or something along those lines, not being equipped with things like, you know, PPEs, that I could have gotten someone sick or I could have gotten sick, you know.

[0:33:17] And again, I personally interact with a thousand people a day. That doesn't include all my co-workers who interact with either the same people or different people depending on the time of day. Yeah, so I'm sure there was a lot of virus spreading just in that alone.

Amanda: And that's a perfect transition because I was just about to ask then, you know, what kind of things did ALDI do then? You know, so you weren't masking, though I think you had mentioned that in that mandatory meeting the regional manager had talked about wearing masks.

[0:33:53] We weren't provided with it though. It was kind of on us to wear them. He had discussed saying, I'd like people to start wearing masks, start wearing gloves, start wearing protection equipment, but I was never equipped with any of that. None of us had ever gotten a shipment of that. We didn't have any. We did have rubber gloves that we wore. We were provided with rubber and cloth gloves, but never masks. We weren't provided with those until much later, and we got them in droves after the whole Save Them for Healthcare workers kind of subsidized.

[0:34:31] We had 20 boxes of masks that we were able to give to customers if they weren't wearing one or if they wanted one, and that we were expected to wear as well.

Amanda: Do you remember what month that might have been in?

Harrison: When we were provided with them?

Amanda: Yeah.

Harrison: Yeah. I don't.

Amanda: That's okay. I know it's all a blur, isn't it?

[0:34:59]

Harrison: Yeah, I usually have a very poor memory as it goes, just in general. I usually happen to crisscross some details, and time and dates are horrible for me to remember. But I remember the first time we had actually gotten any kind of mask was from a very sweet regular we have. And she handmade a bunch of masks out of different material. I don't really know what the material is, but she handmade them and tied the little strings and put a cloth, it almost looks like a dryer sheet, but not a dryer sheet.

[0:35:39]

Amanda: One of those filters.

Harrison: Thank you, a filter, yes, that's what I was looking for. Inside of them, a brown paper bag, probably had 30 of them in there, and we wore those for our first, before we got our regular ones. I still have some when she made there. They're very high quality. They're very nice. And then I transitioned to a reusable gaiter that would just wash every day because the strain on my ears was just unrivaled.

[0:36:07] It hurt so bad to wear those for eight hours a day. So I started wearing a gaiter that would just wash every day when I got home, just hand wash it and call it good. But yeah, it was some time before we were provided PPEs

Amanda: And at that point, what did you know – as much as you can remember, what did you know about the way that the virus was transmitted?

[0:36:31]

Harrison: Airborne. I just knew it was airborne. I remember the biggest concern, especially at ALDI, is the boxes. What if somebody who has COVID touches the boxes? And then someone else is gonna touch the box, because we have to throw it away and then it gets crushed into a big bale and then the people who drive the trucks have to touch the bale. So that's three people, not including customers, who have to touch this box.

[0:36:57] What if it gets handled that way? And I remember that was a issue for maybe a couple days and then either somebody mentioned it or it was announced that it's an airborne virus that I think it dies on surfaces pretty generally pretty quickly. But then people saying that's not true. That was when when I think delusions of not wanting to trust the government really started beginning was, I don't trust that I don't believe that. You know, they don't have any source to prove that wrong but they just don't believe it so I mean their word is law.

[0:37:32] And I it was one of those things I still wore my mask I still wore my gloves. Again I really wasn't rolling around in boxes in my free time so I wasn't too worried about it. But yeah.

Amanda: You mentioned not really being confident in your ability to remember stuff but you've been doing fabulous so far, so I do appreciate it.

Harrison: I appreciate it. Yeah I have a very very poor especially short term memory.

[0:38:02] You know I almost want to make an addendum and say my trip to Virginia might have been in March is the issue. I'd like to actually check my phone in a little bit and see if I can make an addendum to that.

Amanda: If you would like to do that right now. Yeah, I'll just pause it. So what date did you end up finding it was?

Harrison: It was March 12th. I have a picture of us in March 12th and March 13th. So it was probably that week of March. Not January.

[0:38:32]

Amanda: So yeah, you were there right as the pandemic was starting.

Harrison: It was beginning, yeah. And I remember coming back and the first thing after I got my flight was, I was like, I'm just gonna go to the gym. And I go to the gym. It's supposed to be 24-7 and it says yeah we're closed until the pandemic's over. I'm like oh you've got to be kidding me. And that was when again everything started kind of closing down and everything became less available.

[0:39:01] And I mean you couldn't go anywhere. Yeah.

Amanda: Yeah I think actually the word that you used in our pre-interview was coming back to Springfield, it was like a ghost town.

Harrison: Very surreal to come back and have no one really out driving. You know, all the cars and all the businesses you used to see, like Dollar General and stuff, there's just no one there. I remember going down Dirksen, and there's just past Anytime Fitness, the gym I go to, and past like the Dollar – I think it's Dollar General or Dollar Tree down there – and there being no cars in that entire strip.

[0:39:42] It's like, I've never seen it empty, ever, ever. And it was bewildering to see just everything not have a single car there. If there was an episode of The Twilight Zone or something, it was, yeah, it was crazy.

Amanda: And I actually remembered, it's good that we went back a little because that reminds me that a question I was going to ask you about just the experience with the big chain stores, yada yada yada. Were there any stores, like more local ones in Rochester that closed?

Harrison: Oh, that closed in general?

Amanda: Because of the pandemic?

[0:40:21]

Harrison: Rochester's really small. I think we maybe have 30 stores, like actual buildings that run companies in the entire town. I could be wrong about that, but to my knowledge. So I think almost all those closed, at least temporarily, but no one in Rochester really has to go to those. We're so close to Springfield, it's a 15 minute drive to Springfield. So, you know, it's not really inconvenient for us to go a little bit of the ways to go somewhere else.

[0:40:51] To my knowledge, none of them closed permanently. I believe we still have them all here currently. But yeah, they were all closed, absolutely. There wasn't a single one open aside from the chains like Head West or Subway. Those are all still open. But otherwise, yeah, everything was closed.

Amanda: And then kind of going back to where we were at, I was asking you about what Aldi was doing. I think another thing that we had talked about in the pre-interview was they hired extra staff.

[0:41:23]

Harrison: Yes. We opened a couple extra positions, I choose to believe, out of the goodwill of Aldi, wanting to give people employment opportunities. That's what I'm going to choose. It was to stand outside and wipe down the carts with Clorox wipes. We have people from Cintas, it's like a cleaning company, C-I-N-T-A-S.

[0:41:50] And they come and they refill this area in the back of our store that's got this hose attached to it that has some cleaning fluid in there for various things. We have a glass cleaner, we have a heavy disinfectant that we use, and we used that to fill up bottles that we would use for spray bottles to spray off the carts and wipe them down. And that person who was staying outside would also double as a counter. And we prefer you have a physical way to, even if it's a piece of paper, to see how many people there are in the store.

[0:42:25]ff And they would – no more than 60. I'm almost certain it was 60. No more than 60 people out in the store, not including employees. And because I think the limit was 70 and we didn't have 10 employees on the clock ever. So yeah, it was 60 people and that was pretty much your entire job when you were out there was to clean the carts and to count the people. And if there was a limit of 60, you just kind of had to stand there and tell people, hey, can you wait a little bit for people to come out so you can go back in?

[0:42:57] Because we had signs posted up, I believe three signs posted up on the doors saying we have a limit of six or a maximum occupancy of 60. So yeah, we hired, I believe, two extra people for that, for both shifts, for morning and night shifts.

Amanda: And I'm sure that every person that had to wait were always very understanding and never upset with you guys.

[0:43:24]

Harrison: Oh, never. Yeah, that was one of the worst. I'd say that was probably when I went from being a really happy retail worker – my view kind of got changed on that when I started seeing how aggressive and I'd almost even wager on

the term of maniacal people get when someone stands literally between them and groceries or food.

[0:43:57] And even if it's for two minutes, people really start to kind of become animals in that regard. I mean, I think spitting on. Especially during a pandemic, spitting on people, I mean, you know, threatening to beat you up, I mean, threatens of violence or of death. I mean, you know, just really, really cretinous activity, just really awful, really awful. Yeah, that was probably the worst I've ever had it.

[0:44:29]

Amanda: I don't want to make you relive it if you don't want to.

Harrison: Oh, I'm not traumatized by it or anything. It's just one of those – you know, it's disheartening to see how awful people can be when put in a circumstance like that.

Amanda: And do you have any like specific stories that you'd be willing to share?

Harrison: Absolutely. Now, are we just talking about when I was outside? Are we talking about just kind of...

Amanda: Right now we'll talk about outside and then we'll talk more about the specifics elsewhere.

[0:45:02]

Harrison: No problem. I vividly remember, very vividly remember, we had – and this was already in the pandemic, just it was a health and safety thing – we had a person come out and spray paint no parking on the very, very sides of the store. It's a fire lane. If the store is on fire and we have to call the fire department or the police for any reason, that's where they park. It's not even like an all this specific thing. Every store has it.

[0:45:32] You you can't park there. And people if they didn't want to – I'm sure this has been happening forever, but now we had actual signs saying, you can't do this. And I would tell them, would you mind not parking here? And tensions were high. People were already very just anxious about the pandemic in general. And I really remember one guy telling me, you better not be back out here when I come back, because I'm going to shoot you. And, you know, a pretty baseless threat. I really wasn't worried about it.

[0:46:02] I did invest in a bulletproof vest after that. I did. I don't think I maybe wore it to work once or twice underneath my uniform. But it was just one of those things that, you know, a bulletproof vest isn't too expensive, but it was, I shouldn't have to buy a bulletproof vest to work in the grocery store. I just

shouldn't. And the managers are very accommodating. You know, they're, they're absolutely willing to come out, or they'll call the police in a heartbeat on somebody if they're causing issues. The staff at Aldi really is one of the highlights of working there.

[0:46:32] It's, it's the best part. So I was never really worried necessarily, but it was just one of those things that, you know, crazy people exist everywhere in the world. And I understand that the longer you're in public, the more you're exposed to them. And the more you're exposed to something happening, whether it be a freak accident, whether somebody's, you know, drunk driving or anything. And that was kind of when my, my view on a lot of things, kind of flipped, was just having to stand outside for two hours a day and clean carts.

[0:47:03] And there was a really good amount of, of people, very sweet people who would try and tip us for doing this thing. Very kind. We're not allowed to accept tips, for good reason. Then everyone would want to stand outside if they could get tips. So I understand the reasoning for it, but very, very sweet people. But just a lot of threatening. Just, I mean, seriously, we're not telling you, you can't come in the store.

[0:47:32] We're not telling you you're banned forever. We're just saying, you can't come in here for a minute and a half while the person who's bagging their stuff up and it's almost done walks out the door. You can go in. And two minutes and people would just become violent. So it was bewildering. Just, you know, if someone at work had told me that I would have probably called them a liar. You have to see it to believe it. It is just insane.

Amanda: And you had mentioned that people were spitting?

[0:48:01]

Harrison: Oh yeah, oh, spitting on you, spitting at you. I mean, just really bringing to the height of, I don't believe the government that this is a virus. And to prove it, I'm going to spit on you because there's no risk of you dying from it. Even if there wasn't a pandemic, I think spitting on people is probably not a very nice thing to do. So, especially during a pandemic where spitting on someone could literally kill them.

[0:48:32] It's crazy to think that people would actively do behavior like that. And that wasn't like a one-off thing. That was, I mean, probably during the course of when we had people outside, we had people outside for probably about six to eight months before we started, before we had a self-servicing station. Firstly, because of the threat of bodily harm to our employees. And secondly, just because it minimizes the contact of us with others.

[0:49:01] And it makes it a little bit easier for us to not have to catch anything. It's just a self-service station that just has a bunch of Clorox wipes that we put in there. And you just pull one out, clean your car off with it and throw it in the trash can. And yeah, I think we had people out there for six months. And it probably happened maybe a dozen, maybe two dozen times in that six-month period, people spitting. I mean, people spitting, I mean, threatening to bite you.

[0:49:31] I mean, when I say animalistic, I mean animalistic.

Amanda: Bewildering.

Harrison: Yes, truly. Very.

Amanda: Just to really paint this picture, what would be the average amount of time someone would wait?

Harrison: If they even had to wait. I'd go plenty of days without ever having to stop someone from going in because, I mean, you know, you get in, you get your groceries, you bag it, you get out.

[0:50:02] Depending on how much you're shopping for, it's anywhere from a five to twenty minute process. I mean, the biggest issues, I think, as far as people waiting, were the big families that would come in with two parents, maybe one of their parents, and then their three kids, or four kids.

[0:50:30] I mean, that'd be like – I remember on one occasion I had to stop a family of seven from going in there. I was like, we have a load of sixty and there's currently like fifty-six people in there, so we have to have you wait for four people. And they were unhappy, but not unruly. They're, you know, alright I guess, you know, rules are rules. I mean, we're not above the law. So yeah, I think on average, on the rare occasion someone had to wait, I think two minutes would be, if not less, would be the average.

[0:51:02] Maybe ninety seconds, a minute and a half tops. Yeah, I mean, and to get in and do your shopping and then leave, it's just, I mean, what is that two minutes really going to do for you? I mean, you know, to be fair, it's a minute drive to Walmart if you want to go over there. That's my favorite thing to tell people is if they're unhappy with having to wait.

[0:51:31] I'll go into this later, but a big favorite of mine was when people would say, I'm not going to wear a mask. Walmart doesn't even wear a mask, so I'm not going to wear a mask here. And I tell them, well, you can go to Walmart then because I'm not going to serve you if you don't wear a mask. So on average, two minutes, a minute and a half usually.

Amanda: Such a great amount of time.

[0:51:58]

Harrison: Oh, just inconsequential amount of time, just nothing.

Amanda: Yeah, and for the audio record that was sarcasm.

Harrison: Yes.

Amanda: And more discussion above that is doing some Googling of Aldi and just kind of getting to know it as a corporation. I mean, I think I read that the average square footage of a store is like twelve thousand, fifteen thousand square feet?

Harrison: Very small.

Amanda: So there are more limitations for that in terms of the amount of people.

Harrison: Size, correct.

[0:52:29] Yeah, Walmart could probably – if I had to take a shot in the dark. I have no idea if they even had a maximum occupancy probably 300 I'd say. Their stores aren't easily ten times bigger if not more than ours. So, yeah, we had pretty strict limitations as far as size goes, yeah.

Amanda: Do you think that that was a limitation or was that a benefit in terms of safety?

Harrison: Benefit. But I mean a limit of people.

Amanda: Right. I'm asking for your opinion on it.

Harrison: Yes. It was absolutely a benefit.

[0:53:01] Yeah, I don't want to be in a store with 200 people filling up every every single corridor where if one person has Covid, that right there is infecting 200 people, just yourself.

Amanda: And I think that another thing you had mentioned during the pre-interview was your manager's willingness to blacklist people.

Harrison: Absolutely. That was really a blessing.

[0:53:31] You know, before I had worked retail I would have never thought it was possible to get banned from a grocery store. I mean what possible deviant acts could you be performing to get banned from something like that? And after you're currently working retail it is mind-boggling. People willing to literally shove old ladies over for stuff. I mean Christmas is the worst time of course.

[0:54:03] But especially during COVID, people saying, I have more important things than the person ahead of me so I should cut ahead in line, and I have to wait less times. And my manager was very consistent with, you know, listen, man, you know better than anyone else you're shopping the same as everybody else. And my manager is definitely firm but incredibly fair, where if you're arrogant, he's not going to tell you you're not going to come back here.

[0:54:34] You really have to push the line. You have to push the line to a point where you are beginning to become a threat to others. Or it has to be a constant thing. If you if you are arrogant 10 times in a row coming in, you're mean to other customers, you're willing to bad mouth the employees in front of them, you're willing to borderline fight other people for stuff, we don't want you in the store.

[0:55:05] At that point you are a threat, you're a risk, and it's just not worth having in the store. Yeah my manager is incredibly firm but fair, very firm in his – well, once I make up my mind on something that that's the way it is, and I hope you're okay with that.

Amanda: And so two follow-up questions to that. One, what what does it exactly mean then to be banned? Is it just your specific Aldi?

[0:55:38] To my knowledge, to be banned from Aldi means you cannot step foot in another Aldi period. Now obviously, no other Aldi has a way of really enforcing that. We're not going to send a picture of you to them, because there's just way too many of them to keep track of this point, and if every store were to send them we'd have a wall the size of this room. I mean just dedicated to people's faces that we can't have in the store. But we usually do have their names, and if you get arrested for any reason on Aldi premises, then you can get arrested for trespassing as well.

[0:56:17] And usually telling them that is good enough and they to my knowledge never set foot in another Aldi store. Maybe they do. I don't know. But we had people banned from my store specifically I have never seen back in Aldi ever.

Amanda: And I mean if you are comfortable talking about it, what would be some examples of people's behaviors to become blacklisted especially during COVID?

[0:56:43]

Harrison: Absolutely. Instacart shoppers who think they are a priority. Because in their defense it is their job to come, that's how they are making money. But we had at least three of them get incredibly unruly and demand to be the

front of the line and tell everybody, like, you are just shopping, I am working, I am more important.

[0:57:09] And that's just not the way it works. I mean you are just a customer to us. Instacart shoppers are still customers the same way everybody is a customer. We don't have any kind of symbiotic relationship with them. So there was at least three people on that that got blacklisted. There was a man – and this is I think unrelated to COVID, this was during COVID but unrelated to COVID – where he was just harassing a group of women, three women.

[0:57:42] And this was the first time he had harassed women specifically in the store but he had just kind of been an antagonist from the beginning. And he harassed a group of three probably adolescent girls and at that point my manager said you know what, you are becoming a hazard, you are a risk to us and it's just get out, you are not welcome back here.

[0:58:11] During COVID time, at least when I was working, I think in total maybe six people got blacklisted. Which to be fair, it's a small number, but I think only four of them were ever blacklisted on my shift. So two of them, I don't know what they did. I cannot imagine what the other two people did. I mean the three I mentioned, the Instacart shoppers, pretty inconsequential. You just don't get to be rude and expect people to do things for you.

[0:58:43] That's just not the way the world works. So that is what it is. I can't imagine what the other two people did. I kind of hope it's pretty milquetoast, but at the same time, getting blacklisted isn't an easy feat. It really isn't. I mean, you have to really go above and beyond into basically terrorizing people to get blacklisted.

[0:59:14]

Amanda: When the pandemic started, did you think that the themes of, you know, hearts for health care workers, this theme of compassion, do you think it was going to last?

Harrison: Oh, no, no, no, no. I predicted – I don't know really how it came into fruition. I'm not sure how, when it began, where it began, any of that. I don't know who was the line pusher on that.

[0:59:43] But I remember my neighbor had one of their children works in the health care department. And so they had a heart for health care workers in their window and on their car. And my mom loved it and just kept saying, why isn't there one for essential workers? Why isn't there one for you? And I was like, I don't know. It doesn't matter to me. But I predicted right when I started seeing that this gratitude is going to turn into animosity and spite pretty quickly.

[1:00:08] You know, for a week it's nice to say, we're really thankful for healthcare workers and we're really thankful for essential workers. But after two months of not getting income because you're not one of those, it starts to become, you know what, like, why do you get paid and I don't? And it really becomes, again, animalistic and why do you have this and I don't? And now I'm angry at you because of it. I'm owed the same thing you are, despite completely different circumstances.

[1:00:41] And in the customers at Aldi, all due defense, they were almost exclusively pretty gratuitous about that. They were very, very thankful. I still to this day get, you know, thank you for working today. Which is usually very uplifting to hear. It's very nice. I really love when people, you know, are showing any form of gratitude. I'm not asking you to put on a pedestal, by any means. But, you know, I always appreciate people who are appreciative.

[1:01:11] But I think the vocal minority of people who were very on that train of, I don't trust the government, this isn't a real thing, this is something they put out on purpose, this is all a hoax, this is just a flu, those people were very against the whole Heart for Health Care Workers thing. Because again, they were out of a job right now. And they believed that – I on two occasions had people say, you know, your job is a government manufacturer.

[1:01:44] Which I really didn't understand at the time. I still really don't understand what that's supposed to mean. But I think what they were trying to say is that the CDC put out this virus to give people like me more money. I think that's the best interpretation I can come up with. It still doesn't make sense. I still don't get why. I don't know if it was two separate people who said the exact same thing. So I don't know if it was a thing going on Facebook or what.

[1:02:14] But it turned into spite pretty quick. I mean, I saw the Hearts for Health Care Workers thing for maybe a month and then people started taking them down. I mean, yeah, the longer the pandemic went on, especially the less appreciative it was. It was more of, you know, I just want to work again. I just want things back to normal. Yeah, yeah, it didn't last very long.

[1:02:43]

Amanda: Yeah, I'm sure it's very lucrative to be working at Aldi with their hazard pay right?

Harrison: Yeah, yeah, that extra dollar really helped.

Amanda: But I'm sorry to hear about those experiences that you had.

Harrison: There's nothing you can do about it. I mean, this exists in all parts of the world. I'm sure it's much worse in Florida in California. I'm sure it's much worse over there. If this is the worst I have to endure in Springfield, I'm pretty okay with it to be honest.

Amanda: And throughout the pandemic in Illinois masking has been a point of contention.

[1:03:20] And so in the beginning like we talked about, masks weren't required. Were they ever required at Aldi, or was it kind of following the state guidelines?

Harrison: For employees or customers?

Amanda: Customers.

Harrison: Again we had signs that said you must be wearing a mask to enter. Didn't really get through people's heads.

[1:03:47] So we put up another sign that said the exact same thing on the door, on the inside. When you first walk in the first sliding door, there was a sign there just in case you missed it There's another one. So didn't really get the memo across. So we got a large probably three foot wide and maybe four foot tall sign right by the entrance of the vestibule that says you must be wearing a mask to enter.

[1:04:17] And if you ignored that sign it was pretty clear you just weren't gonna wear one. You acknowledged the sign was there, but you just weren't choosing to avoid it. And originally we were telling people you have to wear a mask to enter. They just, you don't have it You know, that this is the way it is this is for our safety, and for everybody else's safety. Everyone else is wearing one. Why can't you?

[1:04:41] And there was a security guard in Michigan who had been shot in the head for asking a family to put on masks. And they wouldn't comply and he was murdered for it And after that my manager said it's not worth your guys's life to to enforce this. I'm not gonna have one of you die because you you asked me to put on masks. He said that's just not worth your life. And he's right. It wasn't. I mean, I'm very thankful for that because I've already highlighted some nuts that we had come in. So to think of what could have happened if one of those nuts had been just pushed a little bit further and told you have to wear a mask, they really could have been a bodily harm threat.

[1:05:28] Or bodily harm risk rather, absolutely. So we we did everything we could to enforce it without forcing people – without tying people down and forcing them to wear it. We had – this is around the time that we had gotten the

shipment of masks, and we had one box in every cashier's drawer that you would hand to people if you saw them coming without a mask.

[1:05:52] And if they refused one, there's nothing you can do about it. I mean I we can't we can't put it on them. So yeah, we did I think I personally the most we could have done.

Amanda: Yeah, that's one of the things I was going to ask you about. How did that make you feel hearing about that security guard in Michigan?

Harrison: Oh, it was terrible. I actually didn't know it happened when it happened. I left for work and I think right before I left for work my mom had told me like hey, you need to be really careful.

[1:06:31] There was a security guard in Michigan who had been murdered either this morning or the night before. I don't quite recall, but for asking if you put on a mask. And I went and just talking to my co-workers about the news and stuff, I mentioned that, and my manager, he's like, what? And I told him about it and he looked it up. He's like, yeah, we're not we're not gonna force that anymore. He said we just can't. He said that's not worth your guys' life.

[1:06:57] At Aldi, we really are a family. I know everyone says that and it's one of those things that gets tossed around so much. You know, at Walmart we're a family here. You know, your family's like 80 people. But at Aldi we're a pretty tight-knit community and we really – I mean, you know, I know all my co-workers' first and last names there. You know, their kids their spouses. They really are a family. And to think about losing a technical family member to something like that is just heartbreaking.

[1:07:29]

Amanda: Yeah, and I wish that I would have written down the name of that security guard because I feel kind of bad just calling him the security guard.

Harrison: Yeah, I do too. It was in Minneapolis.

Amanda: Flint, Michigan.

Harrison: Flint, Michigan. Thank you.

Amanda: We talked about it. We knew it started with an M.

Harrison: Thank you. Yeah, it was one of the M states. Yeah, I really can't remember his name to save my life.

[1:07:55]

Amanda: So besides, you know, asking people to mask, we talked about – the hours were shortened.

Harrison: Yeah. We're usually open – pre-pandemic and post-pandemic, we are open from nine in the morning until nine at night. So 12 hours. And during the pandemic, we were open from nine until seven in the night, seven in the evening.

[1:08:29] So just back by two hours, it minimizes the contact. And I personally think it was probably a test to see if we're really losing that much money in that two hour timeframe. Because from seven to nine, it's usually kind of slow. Not always, usually kind of slow though. So I think it was kind of a test to see, are we really making enough money in those two hours to justify it? This is the perfect time to test it, because we're already going to close early due to health and safety concerns.

[1:08:58] And we opened at eight o'clock on Thursdays. We opened an hour early for people who were high risk. So elderly people or people with autoimmune disorders or any kind of issue. So they could come and shop early, didn't have to deal with a large portion of people. They had that extra hour in the morning to come and get their stuff and leave before the big crowd comes. And we actually just stopped doing that extra hour, I think two weeks ago.

[1:09:28] Because it was just being abused. I mean, everybody coming in that extra hour. And you know, people abusing a good thing just ruins it for everybody else, unfortunately. But as far as closing early goes, maybe this is selfish of me. One of my favorite things is whenever people will be trying to finish up the store, it'll be 9:30, 9:45, and people will come and they'll knock on the door as if we're going to let them in.

[1:10:02] And it drives me crazy because we're open for 12 hours. And I understand, Aldi isn't necessarily convenient for people who work a 9 to 5 or God forbid a 9 to 7. That's really inconvenient because you have two hours of shopping then. And in the case of the pandemic we weren't open at all for you. But people at 8 o'clock, 8:30 still knocking on the door from the beginning of the pandemic towards the beginning, it's understandable. It's kind of a random shift.

[1:10:30] We have our hours post outside the door on a big sign. It was a bit more understandable, but towards the end, we've been closing at 7 for months now. I mean what's happening? And I remember getting a text in –I'll get the date here in one moment.

Amanda: Take your time. It's so handy having our phones so accessible.

Harrison: Oh it's so nice.

[1:11:40] Yeah, okay, here it is. On September 30th of 2020, we started staying open until 9 o'clock Monday through Saturday again. So, I mean, let's see.

Amanda: Of 2020 or 2021, did you say?

Harrison: 2020. September 30th, 2020.

[1:12:11] And all the employees were very, very, very upset about that. We really did like closing at 7. They gave us something to do with our evening and our night. But yeah, as long as that worked the night shift, we did it. But a lot of customers were very unhappy. People coming through the exit door, I mean, demanding to be serviced. You guys were open until 9 before. I've been really trying not to use this word, but entitlement is really is just the best thing I can describe for...

[1:12:45] I don't want to say a majority of customers, but for a large portion of customers, I think entitlement was really the key word I would use to describe the pandemic. Of people expecting, you know, you guys are out of this milk that I like. Why? Is there any in the back? And I have to tell them, we don't have anything in the back. We don't keep things in the back. We don't have the space in the back to keep things.

[1:13:13] Just a lot of arrogance and entitlement. Yeah, closing early was a blessing for the employees and a curse for the customers.

Amanda: I think in our pre-interview you mentioned one woman was blaming you for not being able to feed her family.

Harrison: That is correct. She came in the exit door. And this was one of my now managers' first week on the job. And I'm technically seniority there.

[1:13:42] And she comes in the exit door while our last customer is leaving. And she comes in the exit door and says, you guys close at 7 now? This is probably, I want to say maybe August. So we've been closing at 7 for maybe 3 or 4 months now. And she's going, you guys are closing at 7 now? I said, yeah, we've been closing that since the pandemic, which more or less is true.

[1:14:12] And she said, well, how am I supposed to feed my family? And I said, well, you can come back at 9 o'clock like everybody else does. She goes, that doesn't help me at all. And I told her, I really don't care if it helps you at all. And she left. And my manager got on the walkie and said, that was awesome the way you dealt with that. We all had a good laugh about it. But just really, really, again, put into scope that people expected you to do things for them. And I don't know her circumstance. Maybe she'd been at work all day and she didn't get off till 6.30 and rushed to the store and we were closed.

[1:14:45] But at the same time, that's not something I can control. I mean, it's tough. We don't have any registers in there after we close. We're done. The night's over. We can't sell anything past nine o'clock. So that's out of my control, out of the company's control. And I mean, it's unfortunate, but what are you going to do? I mean, yeah, it was crazy.

Amanda: And I think one of the hallmarks of the pandemic was, of course, the infamous toilet paper rush.

[1:15:18]

Harrison: Shortage, yes. Yeah. Yeah. It's funny, that was, to my knowledge, an issue almost exclusively in Australia, because Australia doesn't really have... I really could be talking out of my butt here, but I'm pretty sure I'm right. They don't really have a lot of toilet paper facilities in Australia. A lot of Australia is not even habitable. So the small bit that can live on the coast, they really don't have a lot of toilet paper made.

[1:15:51] So a lot of it is shipped from overseas. And that was an issue almost exclusively to Australia. And once word of a toilet paper shortage in another country happened, America started freaking out, and then Canada started freaking out, and every other country started panicking to this issue that was exclusive only to this one continent. And at Aldi it was bad, it was really bad. Our third aisle is full of almost exclusively toiletry supplies, cleaning supplies, kitchen stuff.

[1:16:25] I will never forget walking down that aisle and there being no toilet paper, no paper towels, nothing. You know, the deodorant and toothbrushes are all still there, but just this, I mean, 10, 15, 20 foot long section is just completely bone dry. And of course, when it's empty, the customer, do you have any in the back?

[1:16:51] Do you guys have any on hand? Is there some somewhere else? And we have to tell them, no, we just don't have any. I mean, you know, if you come at 6 o'clock at night, I mean, we're done for the day. Everyone's bought their stuff. Also, it became a point of aggression for a lot of customers of, you know, my family and I don't have any toilet paper. That sucks. It's crazy to think, but I really don't either. If I don't get here early, even if my shift starts at 2, if I don't get here at 9, in the same way everyone else does, I don't have any either.

[1:17:21] So yeah, that was, once again, another point of borderline aggression for a lot of customers.

Amanda: And then another thing that I've noticed, and I think a lot of people noticed in grocery stores was the putting up of like the plexiglass.

Harrison: Yeah.

Amanda: Did that seem effective to you?

Harrison: You know, I really didn't like it at first. It was very inconvenient to get people's money.

[1:17:48] People who wanted to grab their receipts couldn't grab their receipts. You'd have people knocking on the glass thinking they were comedians, like as if you're a fish in a fishbowl. I mean, it was kind of funny the first two times, but when it happens like a dozen times a day, it stops being funny. It's like, hey buddy, quit touching my stuff. I think it's probably going to be a permanent addition, if I had to guess. And you know, I've really started to come to like them.

[1:18:16] I'm sure we're not out of the frying pan yet. I'm sure we have plenty more, uh, of COVID-related stuff that's going to happen. You know, I mean, knock on wood, it doesn't. But even if it doesn't, even if no more COVID stuff happens, it's something I like, because it does kind of give me a barrier between the customer and I, to where even if a customer gets violent, I know I technically have something protecting my front.

[1:18:54] I just kind of gotta watch my sides. And even though it's completely see-through, it gives you a bit of privacy. You kind of do your own thoughts. You don't feel as exposed. I really didn't like them when we first started, but I've come to really like them. I think if they took them down, it'd be very upsetting for a lot of people.

Amanda: It's just one layer of protection.

[1:19:16]

Harrison: Yeah, it feels secure. It feels secure the same way a blanket around your back does. Where it really isn't doing anything, but it feels comforting. And I think that's kind of at least the mental effect that the Plexiglass has on me. I love it.

Amanda: And another thing we discussed that you mentioned that Aldi was doing was paid leave for people who were sick with COVID.

Harrison: Yeah, originally, I believe it was a week.

[1:19:49] If you're sick with COVID, you get a week off. You're sick. You can't prevent that, especially when you're in a high-risk environment like we were. If it happens, it happens and you shouldn't be deducted or docked because you got sick with something that technically you might not have gotten if we didn't put you in the position of working here. I believe it was a week for a while and then we bumped it up to two weeks.

[1:20:14] I believe that was when the CDC said it takes two weeks for all the symptoms to disappear. And so it'd be a week and a half to two weeks depending on when you found out you got it. If you found out you got it very early, then we prefer you do the whole two weeks. But if you think you were sick for like a week before, then we only really require you take a week off. It was mainly people who are no longer with the company who were hired either during COVID, almost exclusively people during COVID who were hired. But people just really abusing that that gratuity by the employer.

[1:20:51] Really saying you're gonna pay me to take two weeks off and do whatever I want even if I still have COVID. And then when rapid testing became a thing and became readily available – we have one five-minute drive from Aldi. When that became available, we started requiring a doctor's note or confirmation of you having COVID. And then funnily enough, that number dropped pretty drastically.

[1:21:21] And I remember a very specific circumstance. One of my co-workers didn't have a car for a while. So I drove him to a rapid testing facility because he wasn't feeling well. He falls sick kind of often. He's not usually feeling all that great. So I figured I'll take him to rapid testing. I'll get one while I'm at it. You know, we'll both get one. And they said they'd email you your receipts and email it in like within 15 minutes. He gets his back and it's positive.

[1:21:51] And I'm in the car with him. And I'm like, all right. I roll the windows down. I said put a mask on. He puts a mask on. We roll the windows down. And I'm transporting patient zero back to his house. And he said, if you wouldn't mind calling our manager and letting him know that I'm not doing so great that, you know, I have COVID. I just got an email. And I said send me the email confirmation. And he forwarded it to me and I sent it to him, my district manager and my store manager.

[1:22:20] Store manager's like, you know, thanks a lot, I guess. You know, thanks for letting us know. And yeah, he took the two weeks off because he actually had it. But yeah, Aldi was very generous in saying, you know, you're in an environment where you could get it, and it's kind of technically our fault if you get it because you wouldn't be exposed to all these people if you didn't work here. So they were very generous. I never got it. So I didn't really know the details. Maybe they texted you every day and asked for a checkup on you. Or if they texted you every other day and said like, do you want to do another test?

[1:22:54] Or I don't really know how that all went. But I do know that they would pay you if you had COVID. Which again, just as long as you didn't have it every third week of the month, which just kind of became a little suspicious at that point. But otherwise, very, very generous of them. Yeah.

Amanda: And that was actually one of my next questions is if you ever got sick with COVID?

Harrison: Never. Never. I wore a mask everywhere I went. I got the vaccines the day I got the opportunity to do them.

[1:23:25] I got the booster the day I could. And again, I really just don't fall ill very easily. So I know I never got COVID. And that was another awful part was if you just had a body ache. You know, if I had gone to the gym, I woke up and I felt really sore. I'd go, oh my gosh, is this COVID? I mean, you know, everything became COVID. I mean, if you had a slight cold, COVID.

[1:23:54] If you cough a little bit too hard, COVID. You know, and that was when we really started requiring doctor's notes is because it just became, you know, I sneezed this morning when I first woke up, I have COVID. It's just like, come on. Yeah.

Amanda: Absolutely. And we've talked a lot about Aldi and those experiences.

[1:24:22] But one thing that you were going through while going through the pandemic as essential workers, also as a student.

Harrison: Yeah.

Amanda: What was that like having this last half of the semester online?

Harrison: Terrible. Really terrible. I'm very computer savvy. I mean, I don't mean to brag, but I grew up in the age of technology. I know my way around most computers. And I have a really high end computer at home that I built myself.

[1:24:55] And if I'm given the opportunity to get on that and do my homework in quotation marks, I just I have everything else at my fingertips I can do other than pay attention to the lecture. And it was just a very, very non-engaging, very hard to focus. And I realized after that I just I couldn't handle it. I just realized there's just there's no way I can do this for another semester.

[1:25:24] And yeah, I told everyone, I'll go back next semester when COVID's over. And I end up saying that for another three semesters because COVID just didn't end like in a month like I thought it would. So, yeah, being a student, I applaud everybody who was able to pull that off because I know I sure didn't. I couldn't.

Amanda: Was that your last semester till you got your associates or did you have – like is it three more or two more?

[1:25:53]

Harrison: Yeah, I had at least two more. I was quite a ways off. If I had taken full loads, I would have had two more. Again, we mentioned it really early in the interview that that distinction between work and school was just something that I could not balance because I really wanted to work that 40 hours a week. I wanted to get a good paycheck, but I also wanted to have free time and I also wanted to get good grades. And it just seemed like managing all three of those was impossible for me.

[1:26:21] I mean, you know, I'm sure others could pull it off. I don't think I could, though.

Amanda: I think those three things are impossible to have at the same time.

Harrison: Yeah, you have to sacrifice free time if you want to do school and work or you have to not work if you just want to have free time in school or you just don't go to school and you work and have free time. I think it's almost impossible to have all three of those, a good balance of all three of those at once.

[1:26:45]

Amanda: And, you know, talking then about summer of 2020, which we have really talked about it, as we've gone through this list of different things, different ways that Aldi responded, but did you have set plans for the summer that were interrupted by the pandemic?

Harrison: I mentioned I really wanted to go down to Texas. And my buddies and I have been talking about maybe going to Hawaii for a vacation. And, you know, once COVID began and the whole travel ban started getting discussed, just talked about it and we said, you know, just scrap the idea.

[1:27:27] We'll go sometime in the future when the world is in a more healthy position. And especially when we're able to rent a car, I think 25 is the renting car age. So we figured, you know, we're too under rented cars, or how are we even going to get around we get there. So we kind of figured it'd be better to wait.

Amanda: Yeah, no, that makes sense. And not only was the pandemic happening during the summer of 2020, but there were also nationwide protests that started with the murder of George Floyd and just continued with various other social justice movements.

[1:28:04] And I know that there was a lot of concern with protests that there was the possibility of looting. I actually don't know this for sure, but was there any of that stuff happening in Springfield?

Harrison: There was rumor of a bus full of St. Louis protesters coming to Springfield. I remember when we left all through that night, I expected all of them to get looted.

[1:28:29] I really did. I was almost certain we were going to get looted. We didn't, but I was almost certain we were. At the end of the day, if it's something like that that were to happen to Aldi, really no one can control it. I mean, there's nothing we can do about that. So just do your best. If it gets looted and it looks terrible the morning after, well, I mean, it's unfortunate, but we'll just have to call the district manager and he'll figure something out to do.

[1:29:05] Because that's not our job, to figure out what to do with the store after it's been, you know, looted.

Amanda: But it was OK?

Harrison: Oh, yeah, yeah, we were fine. Tons of customers coming in and telling us, you know, oh, there's a bus full of people coming from St. Louis, you guys need to look out tonight. And I would say we put a bit more pep in our step to get out of there at a reasonable time, because I really don't want to be out at 11 o'clock when there's potential looters around.

[1:29:33] But, otherwise, yeah, I think Aldi was fine as a whole.

Amanda: And then also in the summer of 2020, Illinois moved into phase three, so restaurants and bars reopened with indoor seating. So I think a lot of people thought that the pandemic was starting to get over, yeah.

Harrison: Yeah.

Amanda: Did that change anything at Aldi?

Harrison: Certainly, we saw – at least I personally saw a pretty significant decrease in customers

[1:30:05] Not in general, just I wouldn't get massive waves of thousands of people every hour. But I would definitely say the day of phase three, I remember my managers and I threw a little bit of a party. We got some milk and donuts and we got really excited because this was supposed to be the light at the end of the storm that was gonna show that, oh, look, you know what? We're finally gonna be able to go home on time. The customers are gonna stop flooding us so hard. And that lasted for about a week.

[1:30:36] And I think people went back to normal. Well, went back to freaking out.

Amanda: COVID normal?

Harrison: Yeah, correct, COVID normal. Yeah, we have a couple of restaurants next to us. We have a Golden Corral and I believe it was Pizza Ranch. I don't know if it's still Pizza Ranch. But we have those right next to us. And Golden Corral has had so many cars in it. And we figured, you know what?

[1:31:04] That's probably half our customers over there right now. So that was fine.

Amanda: Yeah. And then actually before I move them to fall, I know we talked about that in the very beginning. You guys were experiencing those supply chain issues with shortages not just of toilet paper that but also meat, produce. Can you talk about that a bit?

Harrison: Absolutely. Meat was it was definitely most frustrating because I'd say we get we get tons of meat a day.

[1:31:39] Every bit of a couple thousand worth of meat on the trucks that we put out every day. And a pretty reasonable amount of it sells throughout the day. Sometimes the entire stock. Especially now the entire stock is being sold out. I haven't closed with meat on the shelves and probably at least two weeks. People buy it the instant we put it out. And while it was in short demand it became even more tense, especially around customers.

[1:32:08] Let me think. There was one particular scenario where a customer had gone up to my manager. It was like a school child almost. I mean, it was an adult but they were they were tattling on someone saying, you know, I was reaching for the meat, and they took it first. What are we gonna do, tell them like, they were reaching for it, so it was theirs? We kind of told them, you know, we don't have anything in the back.

[1:32:34] That was the last pack of chicken breasts, and that's just the way... I mean, people getting very angry at each other. The supply chain issues became a real big issue with dairy and anything that really came from a farm for the most part. You know, most processed things like the chips, that was all almost stocked every day. Totally fine.

[1:33:00] But milk, meat, butter, eggs, and any canned goods that would come from a farm all really were jeopardized. And eggs in specific, we had to put a limit on them. We originally would allow people to buy as many as you wanted. It wasn't a big deal. And there was one customer who had come and he wanted to buy like 40 containers of eggs. So, you know, yeah, 40 containers of a dozen eggs. And it was just like, you know, that's what, 480 eggs, if I'm thinking correctly?

[1:33:37] Why you would need that many eggs for anything is just – they will expire. Eggs don't last forever. In fact, they don't have a very long shelf life at all. So I remember my manager came out and said, look I I'm not gonna sell you 48

containers of eggs. He said, well, there no limit. And he said well, I'm telling you right now I'm not gonna. He was in my line and my manager had to come out, because I asked him. I said, can I sell him 40 dozen eggs? He said no.

[1:34:03] And the guy, he was really upset about it. You know, there's no limit sign on there, so I can buy as many as I want. So my manager printed out a limit of six sign, put it in the computer, and we've had a limit of six since. And he told the guy, yep, there's a sign now. Can't buy more than six. And we still have that. We still don't allow more than six milks, six eggs, and six butters. Those are all three because we just – even now, even allegedly post Covid, we still really don't get a lot of butter and milk. We're short on those pretty consistently still.

[1:34:41] And so those three items were really high in demand and really low in supply. Canned goods was another thing that we rarely could get in. People would buy 24 cans of whatever their favorite vegetable is. I remember one occasion that my parents have yelled at me to make sure I mentioned this interview is, one guy, we put a limit of four on our canned goods eventually. Because it just got to the point where we have a shelf full of nothing, an aisle full of nothing but canned goods.

[1:35:12] And there is no reason that should ever be empty. We get so many cans put on there a day There is no reason should ever the entire aisle be empty, ever. And we put a limit of four on all canned goods. And one guy came up with I think 48 green beans. And I told him, I can only sell you four. And he goes well, I'll just come back in line. And I said that's not really how that works. You know, you don't just get to buy four, get back in line, buy another four.

[1:35:41] I'm not gonna do that for you 12 times. This is not gonna happen. And so he took the cans and threw him at me. He took the box they were in and tossed them at me and said, I don't f-ing want them. And again, animalistic is really a good word for it. Very, very entitled. I deserve these cans.

[1:36:09] And the question why got brought up pretty often with customers, and the best answer I could give them is because everybody needs to eat. And because if you're buying 48, we don't have enough to give everybody 48. And so that became a bit of tension between employees and customers, because they were unhappy that we weren't going to sell them it, and we just weren't going to sell them. Like, there wasn't any breaking of those rules. We just weren't. And if you didn't like it, again, Walmart's across the street.

[1:36:40] Yeah, supply chain issues were one of the worst parts of the pandemic. If nothing else, if not the customers spitting on you or threatening to shoot you

or beat you up, it was definitely the shortages and people getting inconsolably angry at the fact that they can't buy 12 cream corn cans.

[1:37:09]

Amanda: And when you say that he threw them at you, were you injured?

Harrison: Oh, no. Let's see, if they're in a box of 12... He didn't throw them at me. I mean, it stung, but he didn't pelt them individually at me. He would throw the entire box of three of the four of them at me. And they fell all over me and a lot of the cans were dented. And we just put them in the donation cart that we give to the homeless shelters because they were technically damaged products.

[1:37:42] The inside wasn't but the outside was. So no, I wasn't injured, but it's almost almost emotionally injured in the sense of like, man, this is really what the world has come to, is people people throwing things at each other because you can't buy an exuberant amount of canned goods.

Amanda: Yeah, I'm stunned. I'm glad that your parents were telling you to make sure you share that story because I think it's important for it to be recorded.

[1:38:17]

Harrison: Yeah, I had forgotten that story until I had gone home and my mom said, did you tell her about the about the can, the guy who took the cans at you? I said, oh no I didn't, I forgot about that.

Amanda: Thank goodness for moms.

Harrison: Yes, exactly.

Amanda: And then moving into fall of 2020, it was an election season, and so it was full of high tensions on top of the virus.

[1:38:39] Did you feel like the virus became politicized?

Harrison: Absolutely, absolutely. I think the virus is probably the most politicized thing the entire year. It was one party saying, you know, it's against our personal freedoms to wear masks, and it's against our constitutional rights to wear masks, to be forced to wear masks.

[1:39:09] And there's people who would get angry if someone walked in the store not wearing a mask, understandably, and there are people who would get angry if someone walked in the store wearing a mask. They would see you as a traitor of a different breed than them. You're different than me because you choose to wear a piece of cloth on your face. Yeah, it was awful, it was awful. The election was probably the worst part of COVID, I think.

- [1:39:40] I might have made a statement contradicting that saying something was the worst part, but the election that you mentioned, it was the worst part of COVID for sure.
- Amanda: What kinds of things did customers say to you about it? I'm sure they talked to you about it, right.
- Harrison: Oh yeah. I remember people coming in, various paraphernalia with whatever their preferred candidate is. I mean, literally screaming in the store about Biden's going to fix the world by doing this.
- [1:40:12] Trump is going to do whatever. I mean, just really, really crazy. I'm a political person. I really am. I enjoy political discussions. But I would never in my wildest dreams consider going somewhere and shouting my opinion in an environment where it's not invited or even welcome. It's one of those things. I would never force my opinion on anybody else for any reason ever. And to think that somebody would go into a hub of people who are just trying to do their shopping for groceries to eat, like a basic human need, that you would go there and choose to just scream to the top of your lungs about something you believe in politically.
- [1:40:59] I mean, you can say that for a rally where everyone there is interested in the same thing, rallying around a political candidate or a political idea, but to go somewhere where people have to be there because they need groceries to live is just bewildering to me. I've never understood it, ever. Tensions would get high among people who, if they knew that someone disagreed with them politically, they would argue at the checkout lanes, and we have to call a manager up in case anything became physical.
- [1:41:36] And that happened more times than I'd like remember. Probably a dozen, just in that season, which, again, a low number, but more than one is even too much. You shouldn't be arguing with somebody in the checkout line about politics. I mean, grow up. And the pandemic really heightened that, because people were already on edge. You had political candidates saying, I'm gonna force everybody to wear a mask, and then you had another political candidate saying, no one should have to wear a mask, I'm gonna make it so if you wear a mask it's illegal.
- [1:42:08] And people were really rallying behind their political candidate of choice and saying, they're the truth, and if you don't like it, then get out, or get away from me. Any tension that was already high due to COVID was amplified tenfold. I mean, insane. It was bad. It was really bad. I mean, political season is never a pleasant thing, but especially when there's a pandemic going on, when there's a lot more important things to worry about, just politics is the last thing I want to hear about when I'm at my job.

[1:42:43] When I'm working, you know? Yeah. Yeah.

Amanda: And it's funny, because I started the question off asking, do you feel like it was politicized? And then my next question was going to be, did it affect people in the store? And obviously it did.

Harrison: Absolutely.

Amanda: Did people really get physical in these discussions?

Harrison: In the store? Never. I heard on three occasions of people fist fighting outside the store.

[1:43:14] As long as it's on the sidewalk, as long as it's outside of our parking lot, it's outside of our jurisdiction, we don't do anything about it. And so if it ever went to the sidewalk, it was just kind of whatever. We did have to call the cops one time on people who were fighting in our parking lot and were kind of becoming a problem to others. Again, I cannot imagine getting so heated about someone disagreeing with you that you think you need to fight them to show that your policies are better, I guess.

[1:43:48]

Amanda: That definitely seems like the right way to make social change.

Harrison: Oh, absolutely. It seems like the right way to convince people is to beat them until they believe what you believe.

Amanda: And of course in the fall and winter of 2020 is when cases began to rise again with people being back in school, with people gathering indoors. It was a rough time for cases going up. Did you start to relax over the summer a bit?

[1:44:19] And then with the fall and winter cases rising, were you starting to worry again with your family, with your parents?

Harrison: Yeah. It's strange because after the initial – right before we'd gone into phase three in Illinois, that was when all my worries subsided, and it just became routine. I mean, wear a mask, go to work, wear gloves, come home, take my clothes off, take a shower. Just every day it became routine for me.

[1:44:48] And I knew as long as I kept doing those things – well, I hoped as long as I kept doing those things that nothing – you know, I wouldn't give my parents anything. And it just became normal. It really did just become the way I expected life to be lived indefinitely. I wouldn't say I really relaxed over the summer. I mean, it's always gonna be there. And you'll have to help me jog my memory on when we were allowed to take masks off the first time.

[1:45:22]

Amanda: Well, I know that it was officially lifted in 2021.

Harrison: Yeah

Amanda: And I don't remember exactly the mandate list for 2020.

Harrison: Okay. Well, I wasn't sure if it was 2020 or 2021. But up until that point, up until we were allowed to take masks off the first time, it just became routine. Put a mask on, go to work, put a mask on to go anywhere. But I would definitely say once case started rising again, that people again got the tensions, began rising more.

[1:45:57] And people just generally became more unhappy because at this point now for almost a solid year they've been told what to do and told you have to do this to go into the store. And I understand not being told what to do, but if it's for the safety of everybody around you, do you think you would kind of obey it?

Amanda: What do you think the role of uncertainty played in this rising of people's tensions?

[1:46:26]

Harrison: Uncertainty as in...?

Amanda: Just that overall sense that nobody knew what was coming next. Nobody knew what to expect.

Harrison: I definitely think that's when it – yeah, I think it got much worse with uncertainty. Because the more people weren't sure if this was going to go on to 2021 or even 2022 or 2023 or so on and so forth, I think people really started to freak out because everybody wanted to go back to normal.

[1:47:02] Everyone still wants to go back to normal, but having that reminder that cases are rising again, we have to start kind of cracking down on things again, it just felt like a loop that we were going to be going in indefinitely. And people started getting more probably anxious as that loop kind of got closer to fulfilling itself.

[1:47:27]

Amanda: Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense. But I guess one positive thing that came out of the winter of 2020 was vaccines became available to health care workers, long-term care facilities staff and residents, on December 15th. And I think it was relatively shortly after that that the vaccines began rolling out for essential workers.

[1:47:50]

Harrison: I believe that's correct. I know it was snowing the day I went and got mine, so I believe it was probably in January, probably mid-January, if I was taking a shot in the dark. I know the day they became available for me, I got them. The day. And that was that was when, even though the election had kind of been done with, that was when it really started getting bad, at least at all the – as far as people...

[1:48:21] If you didn't agree with them beforehand, it only got worse because if you were vaccinated, now you are really a traitor. Now you have something in your body that they don't like and that makes you different from them. And that was when it got bad. I want to say there was at least a couple, maybe not physical altercations to my knowledge, but at least quite a few verbal altercations between customers who were upset about about vaccinations and people getting that, and people not having to get them, and who should be allowed to get them, and who should be exempt from them.

[1:48:57] Yeah, that was bad.

Amanda: Did there seem to be – like, the people who were upset, did it seem to be the people who were pro-vaccine, or the people who were anti-vaccine? I mean, what was that?

Harrison: I think it was weird because I would like to believe, obviously due to HIPAA laws, we can't ask the customer if they've been vaccinated. But I'd like to say the pro-vaccine people were a lot more angry at the people who weren't getting vaccinated.

[1:49:28] And usually people who weren't getting vaccinated would say I'm medically exempt because XYZ. Sometimes valid, sometimes very clearly not valid. At least to my knowledge. Again, I can't typically ask them. So I think the pro-vaccine people, especially because the pro-vaccine people were higher in numbers, it was a majority, I like to believe it was a majority of our customers got vaccinated.

[1:49:56] So the people who weren't were kind of seen as outcasts, were kind of like, you know, why haven't you gotten it yet? And then the people who were anti-vaccine, obviously, I think they were a little bit more aggressive, a little bit more like, I'm not going to get it because it's my constitutional right not to get it. And a little bit more headstrong in their belief of, I'm not going to get it and you're not going to sway me to do it. And all of that became a problem because we had people say, I hope you die of COVID to each other.

[1:50:25] Like, you know, if you didn't agree with them. It was something.

Amanda: Wow. And then we're kind of in this December part. I was gonna ask you about, on a personal level, what were your holidays like?

Harrison: I don't usually do much for the holidays. I'm usually a kind of homebody. I have a good connection with my parents.

[1:50:57] We usually just kind of do things on our own little sphere. So I had my partner over and we did Christmas Eve with my partner. And then they did Christmas Day with their family. And Thanksgiving, I also did it with my family on 2020. And so yeah, we just kind of exist in our own sphere.

[1:51:29] Again, due to my parents' age and all that, I really didn't want to go anywhere and be around a large majority of people. I have a really large extended family, but we all kind of agreed this year, we just don't want to do anything due to rising tensions with a possible pandemic coming back on our hands and contributing, especially because we're all from different states. And if we were all to come together and one of us were to have it, we would spread it to like eight different states, just our family alone.

[1:52:00]

Amanda: Was that a difficult decision or was it a little bit of a relief to enjoy the holidays on a very intimate level?

Harrison: We usually just do holidays with my immediate family. Again, we are very close, so we like to have a lot of just family time. And this was one of the first years we kind of decided to maybe do something with the aunts and uncles. And, you know, they're all kind of around the same age range.

[1:52:28] So it was disappointing to say the least, but it was understandable. I mean, we all kind of understood the importance of it and that it was a necessity and that we could always reschedule for another year or reschedule for another month whenever this is all said and done.

Amanda: Absolutely. And then I'm looking at my outline. I've realized that December 14th, which is the day before the vaccines became available, I found a news thing from the Illinois Department of – I don't remember which department.

[1:53:01] But Aldi in the state of Illinois had this partnership where they now allowed EBT and SNAP benefits to be used online through platforms like Instacart, which was, I think, an Aldi specific thing. Do you know much about that?

Harrison: Yeah, I didn't know that was an Aldi specific thing. Yeah, so we have a partnership with a company called Instacart.

[1:53:26] And Instacart will allow you to have groceries delivered to you through shoppers. And in all these situation – and thank you for jogging my memory on this – I forgot about when we opened up curbside, which is a program where we hired another two additional employees for this. And we usually have two to three depending on the day and how everything is going.

[1:53:58] People with phones walking on the store, and they do the shopping for the customers. And we bring it to the back. We scan it. We bag it. We put a little name with a label on it, and when you're here, you press a button and it lets us know you're here. And we will pick the groceries up and take it to your car. Easy in easy out. It minimizes contact. I really liked it because I liked that the at-risk people didn't have to come in.

[1:54:31] Especially if it maybe you couldn't make that eight o'clock period on Thursday. Or maybe you need groceries before. So we could bring it to you. And curbside has been relatively – I'd say a healthy growth for Aldi. I wasn't sure about EBT and SNAP. That's news to me. I didn't even know that was a was a feature we offered. But yeah, so we had somebody come in and spray-paint four of our parking spots with numbers on them and you can park there for curbside and pick up groceries.

[1:55:06] And I do think it's been an overall positive for reducing contact, especially for people who maybe have anxiety going to the store. I think it's just a good program all in all.

Amanda: That's always nice to hear.

Harrison: Yeah.

Amanda: Positive things.

Harrison: Yeah, yeah. No, I think all in all, Aldi has grown in a very healthy direction over the time I've been there. Very healthy.

[1:55:30] That's in no short [fee] thanks to the management and the staff that works there. It's wonderful.

Amanda: And then moving into the spring, the vaccine was rolled out to everybody regardless of employment status, all of that. That was in April. So in June is when Illinois moved to phase five, which was really almost a total reopening.

[1:55:59] There were some minor restrictions. What was that like? People didn't have to wear the masks.

Harrison: Yeah, very relieving for at least a lot of us employees. We really liked not having to wear masks for eight hours a day. I really didn't mind it. You know, of course, I'd prefer not to, but if I had to, I had to. It wasn't a big deal. But being told you don't have to anymore was very relieving.

[1:56:29] And the sideways comments from a lot of customers revolving around like, finally glad to see everyone's face again. It's like, yeah, I know, but you know why we wore them, right? And a lot of people who said that didn't wear them in the first place. But it was almost as if they were kind of saying like, I

won. You know, by saying, like, you don't have to wear a mask anymore. See? Yeah, total reopening, it was nice.

[1:56:57] I think we kind of started going back to normal levels of business. A little bit heightened, I think. I think the people who were probably going to mom and pop shops, that maybe those places closed down or dead or were forcibly closed, they probably started shopping at Aldi probably semi-permanently. Phase 5 was probably one of my favorite times to work because everyone was just so excited.

[1:57:25] Things were finally going back to normal. We still had a kind of a supply chain shortage. I'd even say we still kind of do now. Less than what we had previously, for sure, but we still kind of have that. But otherwise, things were really just going back to normal. The only difference was the supply chain and the plexiglass, which, you know, I think is a positive addition.

Amanda: And we'll definitely talk about those new normals later.

Harrison: Yes.

Amanda: I think you had mentioned in the pre-interview that throughout this time, it seemed that every other customer was talking about either President Biden or Governor Pritzker.

[1:58:00]

Harrison: Yes. Oh boy, Pritzker. That's a fun topic. Every customer who came in, you know, Fat Cat Pritzker's making us do whatever. And I'm not really too politicized in local elections. I kind of am more focused on the national scale of it.

[1:58:24] I've never understood this whole opposition to authority where, he's making us do... I think you can absolutely disagree with something. But I think everybody coming in and saying these things, I think they forgot that I'm forced to sit in a chair where I have to talk to you, and I can't just get up and leave.

[1:58:53] If I was standing somewhere and doing something and you wanted to talk to me about something like that, or you want to make an offhand comment about, I really don't like former President Trump, I really don't like current President Biden, you can say that to me. We can have a conversation about it. But when you're forcing somebody in a position where they can't leave, it's really uncomfortable. Because if every 10th person who comes in is complaining about the same person, it's just like, you know, yeah, I've heard it all before.

[1:59:23] I promise, I hear it every day that you don't like X person for X reason, and please let me ring you out and just leave. Please leave. I don't want you here.

Amanda: What is your ideal customer?

Harrison: My ideal customer is somebody who is – oh boy, I really don't know. You know what? I think my ideal customer is probably someone who is friendly, can hold a conversation for 30 seconds while I'm ringing it up, is punctual with being able to pay on time.

[1:59:58] Because at Aldi we have numbers we have to abide by for scanning rates, and every time someone digs through their purse or wallet, that subtracts from our numbers. And every time somebody fumbles to find their card, that deducts from our numbers. So somebody who is punctual with either putting their card in before the transaction is over or during it, or having the cash ready, I can say, thank you very much.

[2:00:24] Have a wonderful rest of your day. Thanks, you too. And then I'll see them whenever. And in a perfect world, every customer would be like that. Hold a conversation for 30 seconds. And for some people, I understand that going to the grocery store might be their only interaction with people all day, but unfortunately, it's not my only interaction with people all day. And I can't afford to have this super deep, personal conversation with every customer that comes through my line, or I would never leave.

[2:00:49] I'd be there until 12 o'clock at night talking to people. But one of my least favorites is definitely people who just want to come and rant about politics. I'm here for work. I'm here to do my job and get paid. I'm not here to discuss ideologies with people.

Amanda: No, yeah. And what you mentioned about people not realizing that you can't leave, I think that's poignant.

Harrison: Oh, that's one of the biggest things for sure.

[2:01:17] Yeah, I can't just get up and walk away. Even if they're the only person in my line, and sometimes there's a line of five people behind them, if I just leave, I'm messing up the line for everybody else. I can't really just tell them, I don't want to talk to you about this. Because then that becomes kind of almost like a perceived slight, where it's like, I think you're wrong, I don't want to talk to you about that.

[2:01:41] You know, I can't tell every customer I'm just here to do my job. Yeah, the people who are chatterboxes are sometimes a little bit of an issue, especially when it comes to really opinionated things that especially other people in line might hear and not agree with.

Amanda: Some people it sounds like forget that they're there for groceries.

Harrison: Yeah, everyone's there for groceries and the employees are just there to get paid and work. Yeah.

Amanda: And then unfortunately it was in the end of July when Delta really became prevalent in Illinois and August 4th Governor Pritzker reinstated the mask mandate.

[2:02:22] And I imagine that was an intense time to be working where you were.

Harrison: I think I might have said this three times now. I think that I'm going to retract my statement about the election. This was the worst time to work during COVID, because even the people who were really on board with wearing masks, they were tired of it. Everyone was tired of it. And of course, everyone was tired of it.

[2:02:50] But I really started seeing a big increase of people saying, I'm not going to wear a mask, I'm done with this. I did it for a year. I'm not doing it anymore. And people saying, the government is just doing this. They're going to have another one next year. And more hate Pritzker, hate Joe Biden. I mean, just everything. I think even past the election, this is probably the most politicized part of COVID, was when that second strain hit.

[2:03:20] Because people wanted to believe that this person they already didn't like created this big, abominable evil that they were enforcing just to see if they could get away with it. And all these crazy conspiracy theories started popping out of left field. And the whole QAnon thing really began kind of starting up. And that was when it started getting to just ridiculous degrees of people, again, trying to talk politics with everybody.

[2:03:49] And not everybody's the same person. Some people react to it differently. I know I have coworkers who don't know anything about politics. They want to keep it that way. They don't care. But the central core theme of, we are there to work and you're here to get groceries is – never want to be broken. That is always the dynamic of things at any job.

[2:04:11] And so when they come and they want to talk politics, when we have a metric that we have to be meeting, a quota we have to be meeting as far as scanning items and customers per hour and stuff like that, it gets to the point where people are really starting to impact your job by, you know, I'm not going to wear a mask.

[2:04:35] I can't make you wear a mask. I don't even know why you're telling it to me. I didn't make you wear one. So I don't know why. And then they're mad at you because there's a sign outside that says you have to wear a mask to

come in. And they go, you know, we're done with that. No, we're not really done with that. Yeah, that was awful. That was a really bad time to work, I think at any retail store. I can't imagine the amount of people who – you know, Aldi is usually pretty respectful with our customers. Well, our customers are pretty respectful to us and usually pretty decent to us. But I can't imagine other stores, maybe bigger chains like Walmart or County Market.

[2:05:10] I cannot imagine what they had to deal with with people coming in there. You know, just ridiculous. Really ridiculous.

Amanda: And for the people who really would start talking, how long would they stay?

Harrison: They would stay until you made it as humanly clear as possible you did not want to talk to them anymore. And you couldn't tell them it. If there's another person in line, you'd usually, once you finish that person, you'd say, have a wonderful rest of today. Even if they're still talking.

[2:05:48] And you go, how you doing today? You just start talking to them because they're the one you're focusing on now, you're ringing them up. And usually that would get the memo across, hey, your time's up, man. Next person's time. Not always. Not always. Not always by a long shot. I think I had someone up there for like five minutes talking to me after they were done checking out.

[2:06:07] And I called my manager up and I said, look, I have things to do. And my manager, he's like, hey, you mind coming to the back real quick? And I said, yeah, sure, exactly. Again, we have a pretty good communication system at Aldi where if one person's uncomfortable, we will do almost anything to rectify that and make sure that they're not uncomfortable.

[2:06:27]

Amanda: And one other hallmark that happened in fall of 2021 was President Biden announced the vaccine requirement for employers with more than 100 employees. And that caused quite an uproar.

Harrison: Yeah, it did. Now, that was for if a store had more than 100 employees, correct? Yeah, Aldi has – I think we might have 20 at the most on our roster. We don't we don't have a large employment staff. So we really didn't have a problem in our store. Obviously, no one was required to be vaccinated.

[2:07:10] However, there, there were quite a few customers coming in complaining about it. A lot of customers. Again, for some reason or another, I guess retail employers are like discount therapists where it's just, you know, we kind of have to listen to everybody's woes. Which usually isn't a problem if it's kind

of something mundane, like, oh, well, you know, the ladder broke when I was on it today. Oh, that's unfortunate. You know, thank you. Have a nice day. Like, you know, it's if it's something like that, I really don't mind a nice conversation.

[2:07:41] But yeah, if when people come and complain about their job to me, who is at my job right now, it's very frustrating, because you're making my job frustrating. How funny is that?

Amanda: It's interesting to note that that vaccine requirement was actually overturned in the beginning of 2021 by the Supreme Court. People were upset for different reasons.

Harrison: Yeah, people were upset for the opposite reason then, where they wanted to work in an environment that was safe and pretty much immune, as immune as you can be.

[2:08:18] And yeah, so it was the exact same reaction for the opposite reason.

Amanda: And kind of moving towards that personal note, were you guys able to do something different for your 2021 holidays?

Harrison: Yeah, in 2021, I went to my partner's Thanksgiving with their family. And there was maybe 12 of us in there, and we were all vaccinated, every last one of us.

[2:08:51] One of them didn't have the booster yet, had scheduled to get it in like a couple of days. But I mean, we're fully vaxxed as far as that was concerned at the time. And then I spent Christmas Eve with their family as well and spent Christmas Day with mine. But yeah, I think once I was sure that everyone was getting on board with the vaccine, I'll be honest, if anyone at either holiday had said, I'm not getting vaccinated, I probably wouldn't have gone. I put my family first. That's incredibly important to me.

[2:09:25] And yeah, so I just really needed to make sure that everyone is in the same position I am, as in, we're all on the same board that we're all getting vaccinated for a valid reason.

Amanda: Yeah, and you brought up getting the booster, and I think you had mentioned you had a pretty terrible experience.

Harrison: Horrible reaction. My first dose of – oh boy, I always mess this one up. I want to say it was Moderna.

[2:09:52] First dose of the Moderna vaccine was smooth sailing, no big deal, a little bit of pain in my arm that I got it in, but that's to be expected from any kind of shot or vaccine. The second one, I kind of had a body ache for like a day and

whatever. The booster really did me in. I was bed bound and shivering in a 90 degree heating blanket. I was freezing. I couldn't get a full breath. My teeth were chattering.

[2:10:23] Oh, I was miserable, miserable, miserable, miserable. And I would not wish that kind of feeling of my worst enemy. Although I know plenty of buddies who had no experience or no side effects with the vaccine or the booster. But mine was a very negative experience, very negative experience.

Amanda: And for some people that experience is reason enough not to get the booster. For you, was it worth it?

Harrison: Oh yeah, absolutely. I tell everyone that with some of the things that people put in their body, I think a vaccine or a booster is probably the last thing you really need to worry about.

[2:11:02] Especially after it got FDA approved in late 2021.

Amanda: Late August.

Harrison: Late August. Yeah, it just, it seemed like after it got approved, there was no reason not to get it.

Amanda: My aggressive facial expression was, yes, I agree.

[2:11:27] Which I really shouldn't be saying in the interview. I'm supposed to be impartial. Oops. And then I'll note the time on this because it's a little bit more sensitive, but you mentioned in early 2022 is when they took away your hazard pay.

Harrison: Yeah. 2022, they took away our hazard pay. It was one of those things that we all knew was coming, but you were kind of fingers crossed that they would just keep out of the kindness of their hearts.

[2:12:02] Because once again, I would almost even be able to argue if you worked through the pandemic, you should keep it. Maybe not start people off with that, but if we've worked through the pandemic, putting ourselves at risk for your company to make money, it kind of seems like we should be rewarded for our dedication and hard work. And to be told that that was going away was really frustrating.

[2:12:30] You know, it's only an extra \$2 an hour, which money is money. I mean, I will never complain about getting extra money. But the worst part is that I really don't know who even to be mad at. It's not my store manager. I know it's not him. I know he had no part in it. I doubt it was my district manager. It probably comes from way higher up, from people I've never met. But it really is like a middle finger to you.

[2:13:02] Like, you know, you worked really diligently. And not to toot my own horn, but I worked through the entire pandemic from the day it started until now. And it just didn't feel like I was being appreciated. It kind of felt like you put yourself at risk, your family at risk, you dropped a lot of things you were doing to work for us when you could have just quit and claimed unemployment.

[2:13:30] But yeah, it was really, really frustrating, really frustrating.

Amanda: I guess one last question before concluding questions, which is, March 3rd is when the Illinois mask mandate ended. And fingers crossed, we won't have another variant becoming very prevalent here. Has that changed the atmosphere once again?

Harrison: No, I don't think so.

[2:14:00] Again, I think everyone who was fed up with it to begin with just got happy that we're finally looking towards clearer skies. The people who are very cautious about it and were very anxious about COVID as a whole are kind of relaxed. I think we're kind of now hitting a little bit of a tranquil era where we're kind of relaxing just a little bit and everyone's in better spirits and all that.

[2:14:32] And some people are still wearing masks and to each their own. I still encourage people to wear masks. But I think we're in a good position now. If it stays like this it'll be a blessing.

Amanda: And then my concluding questions. One thing I always like to ask is what would you say was the most difficult experience for you during 2020? And this project is called Tumultuous 2020, but it really should be called Tumultuous 2020s.

[2:15:05]

Harrison: Yeah yeah.

Amanda: So it doesn't have to be necessarily within 2020 but I guess just the pandemic.

Harrison: Again, I'd say probably when the Delta variant first came on. When COVID first started and all the enforcement started getting pushed on. And right on the election. Those three are probably the the standout moments of like wow we are really heading towards a dark path if this is how people react to to things like this.

[2:15:39] Yeah, they were probably the standout moments of just people forcing their opinions down your throats, threats of bodily harm. I mean, people who are

just fed up with everything, blaming everybody they can. Yeah, that was probably the worst time.

[2:16:03]

Amanda: Did you ever take any of that kind of emotional baggage home with you?

Harrison: No, I've always been pretty good about that. I was a counselor at Lincoln Land for a couple of years. I'm pretty good at shrugging off emotional baggage. I mean, it builds up over time as it does with everybody, but I never really lost my mind about it.

[2:16:30]

It was kind of, you know, I go to work, I'm making my money and I go home. And it was unfortunate all the things that had to happen in between those during it. But at the end of the day, I'm just going to keep on doing what I got to do. And until I can't work, I'm going to keep working. And COVID is not going to stop that, you know, unless it does. It's not going to unless it does.

[2:17:00]

Amanda: And the scope of the pandemic, just the full length of it, did it change kind of your future aspirations in any way?

Harrison: It's definitely set them back a bit by a couple years. It really hasn't changed much. Again, I think I still probably will wear masks in crowded places, I imagine the rest of my life. I really don't know that I'll ever be done with it personally.

[2:17:28]

And that's for a variety of reasons. One, I don't want to smell people's bad breath if they have it. Two, it's going to stop me from any chance of getting the flu or a cold that someone might have. And, three – and again, fingers crossed it doesn't happen – but three, in case another outbreak of COVID happens, will be good. But looking back on it, thinking about if you used to walk into a store with a mask on, I mean, there's a chance you have the cops called on you. I mean, you'd almost look like you were robbing the store.

[2:17:58]

But, you know, now it's just commonplace. Now you're weird if you don't. And I think I probably will wear mine just for other various reasons other than COVID.

Amanda: And given the face of your experience, working in such a public-facing field like this grocery store, did it change your view on people?

Harrison: Absolutely. Before I started retail, I would have told you that humanity is going towards a place where people are more educated than ever and people are smarter than ever and more empathetic and compassionate than ever.

[2:18:35] And while I still think maybe more education is still true, that we're more educated than ever before, I still think what people choose to do with that education is completely on their own decision. And I really don't think people have that compassion anymore. I really don't. After watching people turn into savages over having to wait a couple minutes to go into a grocery store, it's really eye-opening.

[2:19:05] And watching people spit on others or willing to fight others or harass others because of things they believe in or because of things they do and don't like, things are out of their control, out of your control, out of my control, out of everybody's control. Yeah, I don't know about the face of humanity anymore. I really don't, to be honest. I don't want to be too pessimistic, but it's a really, really unfortunate thing to see.

[2:19:37] If I could lived my whole life without seeing this side of humanity, I would have chose to.

Amanda: What are some ways that you've coped with – you know, I feel like that's a burden, that knowledge.

Harrison: Oh, certainly. I don't even know if I've coped with it yet, to be honest. I really do remember back when I first started, I was really bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and very excited.

[2:20:04] I mean, I was smiling the entire time. I'd go home and my cheeks would hurt from my muscles just smiling so much. And I rarely have that experience now. I'm more often than not just monotone. I'm here to do my job and go home, because even the people who are better now, I've seen how they act during COVID. And I don't want to assume that's their true nature, but you can only stare in the void and then it'll stare back at you.

[2:20:33] Now I have this knowledge of what people can be like, and it's very, very upsetting. If it were a situation where you're trapped in the wild with somebody and you hadn't eaten in a week, it'd be different. But this is, you're going to a grocery store. I mean, there's no excuse for humans to act like this.

Amanda: Especially when there's McDonald's open, Subway, Burger King.

Harrison: Absolutely. And again, Walmart's across the street.

[2:21:04]

Amanda: And what would you say is your vision for normalcy, and how has that changed because of the pandemic?

Harrison: Well, I still hope to see cleanliness stations available. I hope to see a lot of these no contact things like the wet wipe dispensers in bathrooms.

[2:21:34]

I noticed in the elevator when we came up there was a hand sanitizer dispenser. I don't know if that was there beforehand. Okay, perfect. Perfect example. You know, sanitizer being used more often. People just being more conscious of their health, I think, and being aware of others. I don't think we ever need to go back to the beginning of Covid where if somebody coughed, you had to kind of deal with...