



Narrator: Thomas Sweet (TS)

Interviewer: Shane Mickelson (SM)

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SM: Hello, my name is Shane Mickelson and for my oral history interview I'm going to be interviewing my classmate Thomas Sweet. TS, tell us a little about yourself.

TS: So my name is Thomas Sweet, um, Thomas Trues Sweet. My date of birth is August 17, 1999. And I was born in Longview, Texas.

SM: So, I guess [brief pause] we'll start from the top. Um, so what do you remember about the uh, when word of Covid started spreading and people were saying "Oh they're gonna be shutting down the schools" and stuff, and just uhm, the general sense of like panic that gripped society? What do you remember about that?

TS: Yeah, I was at the, I was getting towards the end of um spring term in uh, when I was over at Chemeketa in McMinnville. I also had a job working over at the library in the Chemeketa Salem Campus. And there was word going around that "Oh Covid was reaching the US." Already on the East Coast, there were rumors that stuff was gonna happen. So, randomly towards the end of that term, I came into work, I think it was March 13th, and almost everybody took the day off. I was the only one that showed up, and my boss was like "Okay you can show up today and you know, do your last day before spring break, or you could just go home." And I decided to stay the entire day, and do the last bit of work before Spring Break. And I was like [phone buzz] the only other worker there, except my boss. And then I ended up going home, and then as I was going home I heard, "Oh the oh the state's gonna shut down" like almost in its entirety.

SM: Do you remember [stutter] what went through your mind during that like, when you found that out?

TS: I was, I felt a little nervous. But then I remembered looking at like the, like the amount of people who actually the-the numbers they had for the people who died, and who caught it. And it was not as bad as, in my opinion, previous pandemics. So, if you look at like the Spanish Flu. So, for me I wasn't that scared. I guess I was at the time when they when they said like they had no

idea of the vaccine yet, or they had almost no idea at all. Plus China hadn't been that much forthright in how much it had actually expanded within their own country. They were pretty quiet.

SM: Alright, uhm and after when word got out that things were gonna be shutting down for a bit, do you have any particular memories of [brief pause] like you know the panic buying that kind of, and like other panic that gripped?

TS: Yeah, the first thing I remember is the like toilet paper.

SM: Ah.

TS: And then like right before stuff was gonna shut down, I think it was like the weekend before, seemingly, I remember like everyone made a beeline for the coast. I think it was like the Sunday before, when the stuff was gonna shut down. I remember a specific incident were like buying gas, and somebody had a—somebody put a giant tarp or something in their trunk...

SM: [laughing] Really?

TS: [SM continues laughing] And literally filled up the bed of the trunk with gas. In a big container.

SM: Oooh...

TS: [SM chuckling quietly] That's not the best idea.

SM: Yeah, because like gas degrades kinda quickly.

TS: Yeah it does.

SM: Yep

TS: I also remember like, toilet paper going away quickly and like cleaning supplies, especially like bleach. And yeah, just general panic of like, “Oh we’re gonna run out of this, oh we’re gonna run out of toilet paper, we’re gonna run out of cleaning supplies.” I remember going to Winco and like not being able to find like any cleaning supplies...

SM: [interrupts] Oh yeah.

TS: ...or toilet paper and like, and like pretty early on.

SM: That was something. In hindsight very wacky times. But yeah, we just didn’t know if/when things we’re gonna get back to normal. But uh, yeah. So as the lockdown went on and summer came around, there was the Black Lives Matter protests, the anti-mask protests happening, just a wave of social unrest across the board generally. Do you have like, do you have any memories of that time. Did you attend any rallies? Did you have connections to anyone? So, what were your thoughts of what was happening at the time?

TS: I have friends who lived in downtown, who had businesses, and as a result had to go out of business because of fear for their lives. I also have a close friend who’s a police officer and he felt like stuff, it felt like stuff was dangerous, specifically for him. Because he had just become a, he had just become a police officer. I remember there being very small protests happening like in McMinnville, which is very close to where I live. And McMinnville is a small town, it’s like barely fifteen thousand, it’s like fifteen thousand people. I remember there being protests happening everywhere. Where they were peaceful, it seemed for me to be fine. But where there were like, where there was at least some violence, in a lot of the larger cities like New York and like Portland, it made me scared to go to those cities, like if I ever had to. It didn’t, it didn’t help with, like stuff seemed to increase over time especially with like the Breanna, what’s her last name?

SM: Breanna Taylor?

TS: Breanna Taylor [pause] and how that ended later on. That seemed to increase stuff even more later on in 2020.

SM: And uh, speaking of things going on in 2020, um, I guess the next big event of the year that we experienced was in September when the wildfires broke out. And you know, this entire area was covered in a thick smoke cloud layer that turned the sky red. Do you have any thoughts or memories about that little [pause] that little funny time?

TS: Yeah, actually I have family who are volunteer firefighters.

SM: Oh really?

TS: And several of them went, at least one of them went over to fight in, in our immediate area. Because fires were breaking out towards like McMinnville and like Dayton. I just remember waking up one day and the sky was like completely like gray.

SM: Yeah.

TS: Which in the middle of August is very odd.

SM: Yeah, it's very... huh

TS: And then the next day it got orange, which that was even more rare. And then it got like, at one point like the sky almost turned like red. And that was even more [chuckling from both interviewer and interviewee], and that was even scarier.

SM: Oh, I bet.

TS: And then the, and then the quality of the air became [pause]—

SM: The worst in the county?

TS: Yeah.

SM: The worst in like the world basically.

TS: In Portland, I think Portland had worse air than, it had the third worst air in the entire, [pause] in the entire world.

SM: Mm-hmm, I remember that. So, you mentioned that you knew people who were volunteer firefighters during the uh, during the wildfires. Do uh, do you [pause] I guess because of their efforts do you have any other like kind of memories of that, like?

TS: I remember being scared of how, like, dry it was.

SM: Oh yeah.

TS: The fact of like, it was getting close to September at that point in time, and it was supposed to like there was supposed to be rain time. And it just kept going on and on, with stuff getting drier and drier. And no rain and no rain, and the wind kept blowing. And the wind was blowing like the wrong way. The wind was blowing towards the ocean, when it's supposed to be blowing in, well sometimes that happens, but for a wildfire that's not what it's supposed to do.

SM: It is very unnatural.

TS: Yeah, you're supposed to have wind coming in from the ocean, not from the desert. So that really helped, helped keep the wildfires going. I think, if I remember correctly, it's the second worst wildfire season in Oregon's history? It's the second worst.

SM: [stutter] I don't remember the exact numbers, but yeah it is one of the worst [chuckle of existential dread].

TS: Yeah, I think they said, like back in the like the '30's, there was a worse wildfire season.

SM: Yeah there was a pretty bad one in the '30's.

TS: Especially with the Dust Bowl.

SM: Yeah [pause] I had family who lived, lived kind of like east of Salem near where the fires were happening, and they were all on high alert the entire time. It was really scary.

TS: It was really scary.

SM: But yeah [pause], and then as the smoke receded and we got into November, we got into the very tense 2020 election [nervous chuckle].

TS: Yes.

SM: [pause] So uh, what were your thoughts and memories about that time?

TS: I remember the election itself being a bit strained, and then like the idea of like recounts and such. That had been done before. I don't know if you, the idea of, like, recounts had been done before. I don't know if you remember Gore.

SM: The hanging chad incident?

TS: Gore and Bush in Florida.

SM: Yep.

TS: I think Florida got recounted [pause] three times?

SM: Yep.

TS: So, it reminded me of that, for me, to me it was similar to that. Like this had been done before. For me what, for me it was January 6th that really made it [pause] I don't want to say special, but it, that's what that's what really set it off, was January 6th. If January 6th didn't

happen I think it would just be remembered as like another [pause] another Bush vs Gore incident where, oh it's disputed. One side or the other isn't happy with the results.

SM: So you mentioned January 6th, uh do you remember like what you were doing that day when you found out? Just what were your thoughts at the time?

TS: I remember being online, and suddenly I start, I was on Twitter. I was surfing through it, I was like "Wait a minute, there's a rally." I remember that there was supposed to be a rally. And then I remember the rally going, being like, "Oh, there's people in front of the capital. Oh no, they're having to stop counting. Oh no, there's people storming the capital. [nervous chuckle from interviewer] Okay, now we've got live footage." That was, they said that Confederate flags made it in into the capital. And like even during the Civil War that never happened.

SM: Yep.

TS: Because like during the Civil War, Washington DC was attacked. By a very small army, but still it was attacked. But still...

SM: It never got that far.

TS: ...It never got that far. It was a really small, small try. For me that was really, it was really hard to watch. Because it seemed, it was like a total breakdown of like democracy where people either didn't trust the process to happen, or they were wanting it to happen a certain way so they were going to incite violence. And that's not, that's not how it's supposed to happen. We're supposed to allow a peaceful transition of power.

SM: So, after that happened, so excuse me [pause], so after that we had the big ice storm in February. And at that time, and it happened like right as the school year was kind of beginning. And it knocked out power for a lot of us, I guess, how did that affect, how did that affect things for you?

TS: I was in the middle of starting, starting school. I was actually ending a term at Chemeketa at the time. And I was, and I had a paper that was due that week, and I ended up having to go over to my grandparents who did have power in Salem. And I was able to finish it there. But I know for my family the power outage only lasted like three days, which was nice. I know for some people it lasted at least a week, maybe more. I think the ice storm really, really showed a fault in Oregon's power grid; in terms of like what it was capable of dealing with. Granted we haven't seen something like that in at least ten years. I don't know if you remember the snowstorm we had in 2010?

SM: Yep.

TS: I guess that was something similarly comparable, but it wasn't as bad. It was the combination of the wind and the ice that knocked everything down. Because the ice makes everything brittle, and then the wind, and then because everything is brittle then the wind can knock over all the trees.

SM: Yeah, I live in a kinda rural part, in a kind of rural place outside of Independence. And yeah, the first morning the ice storm hit, I stepped outside and yeah, you could [pause], a minute didn't go by where you didn't hear something like crash.

TS: Yeah.

SM: It was weird, because that's like, that's not something that happens around here.

TS: I remember having a branch that was probably [pause] twice to maybe three, twice the length of, probably about the length of this room...

SM: Sheesh.

TS: ...almost fall and hit the roof above my bedroom. It was hanging by, it was hanging by maybe like six inches still on the branch. Otherwise, if it fell anymore then it would have come down, probably crashed into the side of our house, the house where I lived in.

SM: Scary stuff.

TS: Luckily I was safe, and we had to cut down that tree.

SM: Alright so [pause], I mentioned offhand about online classes. What was like, [pause] online classes were something we all you know learned, struggled in, had to learn to adapt with. Uh, what were your experiences during that time?

TS: I found it was really rough, especially like the first couple of weeks, because I was doing it at Chemeketa, and they were working on switching over from Moodle to Canvas. And I found Moodle was very organized, at least in my opinion. I found Canvas early on was very jumbled and very messy. And a lot of the teachers had never taught online. Luckily, I had one teacher who only taught online, so for him it wasn't difficult. But for everybody else, you have to learn to adapt. I think the worst part for me was my graduation from Chemeketa like didn't even happen. Not even online.

SM: Oh, that sucks, I'm sorry to hear that man.

TS: Yeah, yeah. But classes online I found were harder or hard to adjust to. Because I found there was, at least in my experience, a lack of urgency. Like you weren't like showing up to class and constantly being reminded, like you have this due. I find that online you can forget about stuff easier. Like for me I need to have a physical, like copy of like a syllabus, in order to remember things better.

SM: Yeah, same here.

TS: For me it was a lot. It was difficult at first, but then eventually I was able to adjust and my grades improved. It was, it was really difficult and I was happy when I was able to eventually come to Western, and they were offering classes in person. Because then, because then I could focus on, in classes, in person, at least that was my hope.

SM: And we're in person again so [sound of approval from interviewee], so during the lockdown when you weren't working on classwork, what did you do to pass the time?

TS: Usually I either went on walks. I live in a very small town that's like maybe 3,000 people. And then I would do video games sometimes, or I also worked for a little bit at George Fox University, at their bookstore. Because they were needing people to do that. I found it hard to find [pause], I found that it was easier, I found it was like easier to get stuff done at, at least at my home, when I was in lockdown, because of that it was easier to do.

SM: So you mentioned that you, like halfway during the lockdown, you transitioned from Chemeketa to Western. So, aside from the online classes, was there anything else different that you noticed that Western was doing compared to Chemeketa, [pause] in terms of the online classes and such?

TS: I guess it was, [pause] I guess there was more like structure here at a four-year university, instead of at a two-year college. Also, this college is a lot bigger, and, and I find that it's easier to learn here.

SM: So [pause], so as well, how did your family you know handle covid? Because you mentioned that you were born in Longview, Texas. I'm guessing you still have family out there as well?

TS: Yeah, I have a couple aunts and uncles who live in Texas.

SM: So, during the lockdown, [pause] like how was your family in both places affected, would you say?

TS: I'd say my family here was doing pretty well. My dad works in agriculture, so he didn't, [pause] he had his job all throughout covid. You can't exactly shut down agriculture because of the pandemic. You have to keep agriculture going. So, while some people got laid off, because he was the foreman of a winery, it had to keep going. And then my family in Texas did really well. They had a lot less [pause], I mean they had restrictions in Texas, but they had a lot less

than we did. [pause] Still so far, I don't think any of my close, any of my close family has yet caught covid.

SM: That's good to hear [pause], so during this time of covid, did you have any like positive, like notable experiences that occurred? We always like to focus on the, "Oh all this bad stuff happened," but did you have anything positive happen?

TS: Yeah, I stayed an extra half year at Chemeketa in order to get my associates, I had originally planned to go directly from Chemeketa to Western in fall of 2020. And it ended up not working out, but as a result I was able to get my associates degree. So that I can officially transfer here as a Junior. And [pause] in doing that, then that means I don't have to spend as much time here working on the basic classes. I can focus more on my degree, and courses that actually pertain to my degree.

SM: What is your degree by the way?

TS: History.

SM: Ah.

TS: Just regular history. I would have wanted to get a minor in Philosophy but that's no longer gonna be a thing.

SM: Yeah, I heard about that. Uh, [pause] so when things began opening up this year, and last year, how'd you feel? Like how'd it feel for things to be opening up again?

TS: I felt good. I felt happy. Because, for me, I like to say going on for a while, but certain states had restrictions longer than other states. And that's, that's a right that every state has, but [pause] yeah, I wanted stuff to be open so that I could, like, go to college, and attend it in person. That was my main want. I didn't want to spend another year doing the online courses.

SM: [chuckle] you and me both, man.

TS: Paying for going to school, and not being able to go to buildings, go into buildings and use the facilities.

SM: Paying for college, but not the experience.

TS: Yes, I had that in Chemeketa and that was not fun.

SM: I bet.

TS: Yeah.

SM: Yep, well we've reached our time. Uh, thank you very much for taking time out of your day for me to interview you.

TS: Yep.

SM: Alright.

[Interview ends, 26:08]