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Polly Chappell

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**Pandemic, Political, and Protest Yard Signs in Sartell, Minnesota,
Spring 2020 to mid-November 2020:
Personal Narrative, Rhetorical Analysis, and Oral Histories from Community Members**

by

Polly Chappell

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

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Abstract

In 2020, there was a trifecta of events that spurred yard signs to multiply in yards in the suburban community of Sartell in central Minnesota. Covid restrictions, a divisive presidential election, and the violence from the death of George Floyd who was murdered by the police in Minneapolis, 80 miles away, motivated people to communicate via yard signs, flags, and window messages. Through rhetorical analysis and oral histories, I looked at the role of these signs and the way that people in the community observed these signs and images. In my analysis I found that people viewed these signs as communication during social distancing, as building community with like-minded neighbors, and as an authentic and artistic experience. I interviewed seven community members for their oral histories regarding yard signs and images during Covid. The narrators talked about their experiences and although their political and pandemic ideals varied, everyone who talked about the Justice for George Floyd signs, agreed that what happened so close to home was an important time for social justice and change in Central Minnesota.

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Chapter 1: Personal Narrative of Polly Chappell

During the 2020 presidential campaign and election period, Covid-19 was prevalent everywhere, along with the Black Lives Matter movement. In Sartell, Minnesota, where I live, 2020 was an eventful year because of these circumstances. In my community, there is a mixture of rural, suburban, and urban settings that exemplify many of the political, cultural, and social divisions in our country. Sartell is approximately 80 miles from Minneapolis, where George Floyd was murdered in a diverse community. Within two miles of my home are rural areas, and within four miles is the urban area of St. Cloud. Throughout this time, I social distanced and worked from home, but I took every opportunity available to get outside and explore my pandemic world on my bike.

I was drawn to the signs and images that started to appear in yards and windows in the spring. The first to appear were messages about the pandemic, and I found it surreal when I came across the messages because seeing them made the situation of Covid-19 real for me. The phenomenon of the pandemic fascinated me because it was like a creeping disaster or a disturbing event that did not really have a beginning or end, but everyone in the world was experiencing it at the same time. I was learning about rhetoric and the power of language in my graduate classes, and these signs gave me an opportunity to see complex rhetorical devices and theories in action in the real world, and thus provided a rhetorical research opportunity for me. When the election signs started to appear in late summer, I felt hopeful because in Sartell I usually saw conservative political signs emerge during the election season. Signs from both candidates were displayed and mixed with non-political images and messages, which was unlike anything I witnessed in Sartell. The political climate, the pandemic, and the violence we

witnessed contributed to these images that appeared, and as I encountered them, I decided to document them by taking photos with my phone.

Before Covid-19, I viewed Sartell as a place where families lived, among a few businesses, in relative peace. Due to Covid-19 many people lived, worked, and studied in their homes (Morris) and (Yang), and some people turned to communicating to the outside world by using pandemic and political yard signs and images. I found myself trying to apply what I was learning to the signs and images. The rhetorical power of them was that they were material goods or things in yards and not just messages on the Internet: “language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter” (Barad, 801). The power of the physical signs, which seemed to challenge this notion, for me was the authenticity of the nature in which they were displayed in yards and not the exact message that these signs conveyed. People in Sartell interacted with the signs, and for most people their individual experiences with these signs were unique based on their age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, where they worked, and other contributing factors. Even in my own home, where we displayed a Biden sign (see fig. 1), the experiences for each of us was authentically different. For me the Biden sign was a message to the community that I was not voting for Trump. For my husband, a veteran, the sign was a symbol that showed others that he did not hold conservative beliefs like most in the military. For my daughter, who was 12, the sign was a battle flag because she put one in her bedroom and when she had distance-learning classes her classmates could see it in her background. The 2020 election was her first memorable presidential election, and she found herself in the minority of her conservative-leaning class and

school, which was sometimes a scary place for a young person to be when they were living in a virtual, pandemic world.



Figure 1. Biden Harris sign in Sartell, Minnesota

I was interested in how these images from this specific time and place provided opportunities for people who witnessed these signs and images in my community to alternatively corroborate, challenge, and develop ideas of their own. These signs as physical objects provided opportunities for people to make connections in uncertain times of social distancing and civil unrest as Minnesotans faced Covid-19 and restrictions, Black Lives Matter protests, a contentious presidential election, the death and appointment of supreme court justices, and the early October snowstorms in 2020. For me the message displayed on these signs was a rhetorical tool used to inform passersby of the homeowner's beliefs. These images showed me that even though technology allowed words, images, and video to be instantaneously reproduced and shared across time and space, many people continued to express themselves with traditional means like yard signs, chalk drawings, and graffiti. In Sartell these signs and messages multiplied at a higher rate than before the pandemic as many of the messages were Covid-related and not relevant before the pandemic. In *Rhetoric Online*, Warnick and Heineman discuss the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama and the first-time success of using of social media,

namely Facebook (96-97); however, when the book was published in 2012, no one could have predicted the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump where malicious Russians actors attempted to create change in the United States elections by spreading disinformation throughout social media (Beskow & Carley, 66). Due to the Russian bots, Trump's contentious four years in the White House, and his abuse of Twitter, Americans were tired of seeing and displaying political posts and information online, and they turned to using traditional and authentic yard signs.

I wanted to understand how Covid, the 2020 presidential election, and the racial violence, that happened in about six months, affected the way that people viewed these signs and images in Sartell. I wanted to know what role these physical images and signs that appeared in greater numbers played in the way people changed and adapted in their ideas, concerns, and hopes, and how these changes may or may not endure as we slowly moved past the pandemic, a situation we may never experience again, where people were confined to their homes away from family and friends. I also wanted to understand why people decided to display more signs and images but as I worked through my project, I realized that is a question I may never be able to answer because of the logistics of speaking to homeowners whom I did not know, in the wintertime, and during the pandemic.

When Yard Signs are Art

As I started my research and I talked about these signs with classmates and my family, I learned that once people thought about these signs, they could not stop seeing them. When the pandemic hit, Americans reacted with graffiti, yard signs, protest posters, construction paper hearts of hope, flags, and stickers. These messages I came across in yards, on windows, on

fences, in bushes, on car bumpers, and on doors in neighborhoods across Sartell, acted as proxies for direct person-to-person communication. The more signs I came across, the more I viewed these images and photos I gathered as visual rhetoric or unique works of art, and not just rhetorical ephemera using language, text, and symbols to persuade, redirect, or pacify an audience. The term visual rhetoric is new within the ancient study of rhetoric. In *Theory of Visual Rhetoric*, Foss states that “not until 1970 was the first formal call made to include visual images in the study of rhetoric, which until then had been conceived exclusively as verbal discourse” (141). Studying visual rhetoric has continued to prosper because visual images are now a significant part of our culture, replacing speeches in ancient times (142). In 2017, the Minneapolis Institute of Art displayed world-wide political, social justice, and racial conflict photos, turning images of yard signs and protest signs into the art exhibit *Resistance, Protest, Resilience*. The exhibit included images from the civil rights movement in the United States, Japan’s U.S. security treaty conflict, the Iranian Revolution, Vancouver’s Gastown riots, and the 1984 Democratic National Convention. One year later, the museum had another protest-and-politics exhibit that contained artwork which became a memorial for Philando Castile who was shot and killed by a police officer when he was stopped for having a brake light out in Minneapolis, Minnesota. After his death, Castile’s mom received random art from people memorializing Castile, which she then donated to the museum. The art included videos, portraits, ceramic sculptures, and protest posters (Carroll, 119). I experienced these yard signs and images, which I came across and photographed, as documentary artwork like a photo exhibit in a museum. These yard signs, flags, and images were carefully displayed in yards and throughout the community. Philosopher Walter Benjamin proposed that original art objects possessed an

aura of authenticity that photos or mass-produced works (3-4) lacked, yet he did not experience photos or mass-produced images in the world we live in today where the Internet displays images instantaneously.

In the 1930s, in his *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin theorized that original art objects, which for Benjamin was any man-made artifact ranging from a painting in a museum to a chair made by a craftsman, possessed an ineffable aura of authenticity that their mechanically reproduced counterparts, such as a photo or mass-produced goods, did not possess. I turn to his essay to define authenticity as the presence of the original, and aura as its unique existence (Benjamin, 2-4). These art concepts help me understand the visual rhetorical power of these handwritten messages, signs, and graffiti that I encountered during Covid, when people were not having in-person encounters during their everyday lives. The situation of people connecting with others by interacting with physical images due to time and space is a distinctive situation that may never happen again. These yard signs were also symbols that sought support from others who identified with the signs and their messages. I think about how real-life changes like a pandemic, time passing, and technological advancements prompt modifications in his theory. A photo of a mass-produced sign could become a work of art displayed in a museum, which gives the photo artistic aura and authenticity, much like the Castile exhibit.

The notion of aura for a digital age, in which the reproduction and manipulation of images is infinite and instantaneous, was unknown to Benjamin. I contend that physical objects, even mechanically reproduced ones like campaign signs, can possess a certain kind of authenticity by virtue of their existence and placement in the material, non-digital world. A mass-produced sign placed in an individual yard can become an authentic work of art with aura

because although the sign was not an original work of art, the act of displaying the sign, perhaps with other signs or on its own, gave it authenticity in that time and space. In looking at these physical signs, I see that they had a certain effectiveness because they were not easily reproduced for the same purpose once they had been displayed in yards or on other property. This makes these signs authentic to both individuals who placed these signs or messages and to those viewing them, giving these images a sense of aura or uniqueness. I look at the aura and authenticity of these images, as these yard signs became works of art in yards of homeowners, which shaped the future for everyday people in terms of the election outcome, the pandemic, and the way the killing of George Floyd was interpreted.

In [*Preserving the memory of what just happened*](#), Frank Edgerton Martin explains that “making protest art can become a powerful act of discovering one’s own human agency.” The murals memorializing George Floyd (see figs. 2 and 3) are a perfect example of the presence of the original art and its authenticity, and the aura of its unique existence. These images were created after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, 80 miles away from Sartell. I visited the [George Floyd Memorial Square](#) in summer of 2020 and I took these photos (38th and Chicago). In fall of 2020, the Walker Art Center, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) both turned down displaying the art due to their lack of qualifications based on their founding histories by white people. “A spokesperson for the Walker Art Center told a reporter that as ‘a large institution built on the foundations of white supremacy, it is not the Walker’s place to lead such efforts’” (Martin). White supremacy and white supremacists are not the same, and in defining white supremacists as a parasitic public and NOT a counterpublic like Black Lives Matter, it is important to differentiate counterpublic from parasitic publics because “if one can use

'counterpublic' to identify Black feminist publics and white nationalist publics, then the conceptual framework lacks sufficient recognition of power, privilege, and oppression” (Larson & McHendry, 520). Last May, a year after Floyd’s death, the [plywood art murals](#) were exhibited at Phelps Field Park, one block from the murder (Sepic).



Figure 2. Michael Brown and Breonna Taylor at George Floyd Memorial Square, Minneapolis, Minnesota



Figure 3. George Floyd Memorial Square, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Rhetorical Power of Yard Signs

Every time I came across a sign, I also looked at the image’s rhetorical situation and the circumstances of the homeowners who attempted to use yard signs to communicate and possibly modify beliefs and behaviors of others who witnessed these signs. Rhetorical studies examine

how symbols, text, images, patterns, and speech are used to redirect or persuade an audience. I thought about the audience, the people in the community who happened to drive, walk, or bike by these yard signs, and whether they could be influenced or persuaded by them. Depending on the interests of the audience, various signs catered to some but not others. The context of these yard signs differed because these signs varied in location from dead-end streets to streets that had heavy traffic. The exigency—the pandemic, the election, and the social justice violence—was complicated altogether, but looking at each event individually, the problems were easier to identify. The situation of the pandemic produced signs of goodwill, the election generated political and campaign signs, and the death of George Floyd and the BLM movement brought about social justice signs.

When I first encountered these signs and images, rhetorical terms and concepts were new, and I soon learned that “while normal scientists are able to carry out their work free of contentious disputes about their assumptions... the rhetorical practitioner’s methodological choices are open to dispute and charges of bias at every turn” (Ramage, 175). Ramage introduced Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical term: terministic screen, which is a concept I avoided for a long time because of its complexity. But Ramage does a good job explaining this concept as multiple paradigms, principles, and theories used in examining rhetoric and through the years researchers have borrowed from this theory or that, from post-modern to ancient theories, and what is actually borrowed is not “method, techniques, or principles so much as ‘terms’ [introducing terministic screen as] ... vocabularies that serve a theory-like function” (175). Ramage explains that this mixed-up connection of theory and practice puts rhetoricians in the position of justifying their research and conclusions by applying fragments of theory (176).

Given this information, I did my rhetorical analysis in this manner, using tools, devices, and theories I learned about by looking at a few of these yard signs and images in different ways.

First, I concentrated on the audience, and I thought about what their special interests were depending on which public, counterpublic, or parasitic public they belonged to, or not. Keeping in mind Warner's list of rules, to understand a public's role in our world, helped me decide which public the audience might belong to:

1. A public is self-organized.
2. A public is a relation among strangers.
3. The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal.
4. A public is constituted through mere attention.
5. A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.
6. Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.
7. A public is poetic world-making. (50-82)

I thought about the audience in terms of differences like whether they were a democrat, republican, man, woman, gay, straight, white, a person of color, as well as their occupation, education, and other defining traits. Next, I looked at the rhetorical context, the circumstances of these signs, and the rhetorical exigence, the problem or situation that prompted the agents to display these yard signs.

Rhetorical Decay and the Branches of Oratory: Judicial, Oratory, and Deliberative

Rhetorical decay (RD) is a rhetorical tool used to disrupt, derail, or suppress the argument and speaker. During my research, rhetorical decay seemed to be one of the most impactful concepts to come from rhetoric recently because of the current polarized beliefs in the United States, and the discourse which is born from those beliefs: "RD is a particularly useful tool for disrupting arguments for social change. However, this does not mean that RD exclusively appears in conservative or pro-status quo interventions... RD appears across ideological lines"

(Fulton-Babicke, 279). Some yard signs and images use rhetorical decay to derail the status quo by everyday people—white women who did not vote for Trump and their allies, and Black Lives Matter and their allies—who practice rhetorical closure. Rhetorical closure “for the development of plural perspectives on an issue, pushing instead toward unquestioning acceptance” (284). “In This House” yard signs state these are the rules (see fig. 4):



Figure 4. “In This House,” Sartell, Minnesota

IN THIS HOUSE, WE BELIEVE:
 BLACK LIVES MATTER
 WOMEN’S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS
 NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL
 SCIENCE IS REAL
 LOVE IS LOVE
 KINDNESS IS EVERYTHING

If someone wants to enter the house, they follow these rules. These “In This House” signs have been around since 2016. The first one was hand-written and displayed in Wisconsin. These signs are a symbol of a white woman counterpublic who wanted to let others know that they did not vote for Trump, like so many white women who did vote for Trump. Warner describes counterpublic by saying that “ordinary people are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene” (86). Crafty in nature, these signs, could be described as cheugy,¹ (Wikipedia) and you could envision these signs being displayed inside a house next to the farmhouse decor or the “Wine Time” plaque (Hess). These signs speak to others in the counterpublic, and the statements effectively draw in people who agree. My contemporaries, who happen to be mostly white women that did not vote for Trump, love these messages, and they embrace every single statement. These signs can bring the counterpublic to tears. What I find interesting about these “In This House” social

justice signs is that they are political in nature, and they are also deliberative and epideictic.

These signs are deliberative in attempting to persuade others to act and abide by the house rules.

Ramage describes deliberative as “it turns ‘could’ into ‘must’ or ‘should’ or ‘did’ without acknowledging its sleight of hand” (73-74). These “In This House” messages are deliberative because the persuasion to follow the rules borders on coercion, and any possible alternatives are suppressed. Aristotle in his *On Rhetoric* expresses “in epideictic, there is either praise [*epainos*] or blame [*psogos*]” (48), these signs are epideictic because the messages praise the actions being suggested in a poetic fashion.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) signs (see figs. 5, 10, and 12) state the obvious: “Black Lives Matter,” no questions asked, and the Justice for George Floyd signs, also state the obvious, that justice is the only option. Justice for George Floyd signs (see fig. 6) are judicial, which “is often referred to as ‘forensic’” (Aristotle, 48), and it is oratory from the past, it is considered justice or injustice, and the purpose for using it is to accuse or defend. Rhetorical decay in all three of these examples, “In This House,” BLM, and Justice for George Floyd, does not attempt to build consensus. These signs are statements of strong beliefs, and the speakers are willing to agree to disagree as long as their messages are part of the process to successfully coexist as a diverse population (Fulton-Babicke, 288).



Figure 5. Black Lives Matter, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 6. Justice for George Floyd, Sartell, Minnesota

Fulton-Babicke explains that “two straightforward descriptions of bad faith include ‘one’s opponent [. . .] deliberately spouting a fog of nonsense in order to pollute the conversation rather than reach truth or achieve clarity’ (Linker), and an argument that ‘disguises the core point of a debate rather than addressing issues, beliefs, and values head-on’” (284). Signs and billboards directed at Minnesota Governor Tim Walz (see fig. 7) are examples of a public using signs for the purpose of dismissing a speaker [Tim Walz] by redirecting the audience to an unrelated topic [the picture of Walz with his head in his rear-end] and generalizing on a topic that makes the rhetorical exigence unactionable [not agreeing on his point of view without saying what that is specifically]. Rhetorical decay tactics cause the discourse to be derailed, impede the production of new knowledge, unequally benefit discourse that vindicates the status quo, and these tactics are used to stymie change. This tactic, of everyday people of a counterpublic or parasitic public derailing the argument by “masquerading as constructive clarification [that] moves progressively further away from the initial problem space moving ‘laterally’ along a series of tangents” (281), is often seen online in memes or on social media, and these signs are similar to social media posts that might not be appropriate for all audiences except that they were found in front yards and on billboards for everyone to see.



Figure 7. Governor Walz head in rear-end message, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 8. Back the Blue and Nurses for Trump, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 9. St. Cloud Superman Truck, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 10. Trump and Don't Tread on Me, Sartell, Minnesota

Looking at the Trump signs and flags (see figs. 8, 9, and 10), many counterpublics felt threatened by the displays simply because of Trump's stand on social justice issues throughout his presidency and candidacy. Trump's constituents were part of a parasitic public, and "parasitic publics are reactionary discursive spaces formed residually and institutionalized affectively through the invention, circulation, and uptake of demagogic rhetorics. In articulating with dominant discourse and against counter discourse, these publics exploit historical and contemporary discursive, material, affective conditions of institutionalized, systemic oppression" (Larson & McHendry, 535). Trump signs and flags were often grouped with several signs and flags like the American flag, Don't Tread on Me flags and signs, All Lives Matter signs and flags, and Blue Lives Matter signs and flags, making those images part of the Trump parasitic public.

Ethos, Pathos, Kairos

Some of the yard signs used pathos and ethos, to persuade and influence their audience. Pathos was used to appeal to readers emotions of love and caring: "do not bring hate home" (see fig. 11), and "work for the issues that you care about" (see fig. 12). Ruth Bader Ginsburg's

image on yard signs adds ethos to messages because of her status, authority, and credibility.

Ramage describes the agent's ethos as the person's trustworthiness, their credentials, experience, and history (91).



Figure 11. Hate Has No Home Here BLM, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 12. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sartell, Minnesota

Kairos is the timeliness of an argument or message at the opportune moment; “Kairos refers originally to passing through a momentary opening before it closes” (Herrick, 41). Black Lives Matter has been around since 2013 but in 2020, it became the most relevant movement in the world due to the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. For those of us in Central Minnesota, the message was not new but given the pandemic, protests, and politics, the season for Black Lives Matter (see fig. 13) was upon us. These messages gave us the opportunity to process what happened while protesting for justice.



Figure 13. Black Lives Matter Billboard, St. Cloud, Minnesota

Logos and Ethos Today

Today, people in the United States are no longer swayed by discourse and charts with logos because they believe the data can be manipulated, so the use of logic in arguments has become counter intuitive (Fulton-Babicke, 280). Going back to the sign directed at Governor Walz, the lack of logos or logic in the message seems to appeal to the parasitic public or the audience who displayed these signs or agreed with them. Likewise, ethos has lost some of its appeal because people have conflicting values of what makes someone credible (279). People in the United States and other places no longer seek or believe the expert advice of scientists or the CDC especially regarding the pandemic, vaccines, or other scientific theories. I think back to the yard sign with Ruth Bader Ginsburg and many people in our country do not agree with what she stood for even though half of us believe in her work of supporting gay rights, the poor, women's rights, and other marginalized people. Because ethos and logos are no longer as affective in persuading audiences, pathos, the appeal to emotions or the values of the audience, may be more effective.²

The Pentad/Hexad

For the last image I analyze, I look at Burke's pentad to help me realize the motives behind the signage to promote identification. He added another sixth term, making the pentad a hexad. To see different and new perspectives, rhetorical analysis using dramatism "can refresh community and build identification when we recognize that our differences and uncertainties are at least in part a consequence of our symbol systems" (Blakesley, 23). The elements of the pentad are act [what happened?], scene [when and where?], agent [who did it?], agency [how and with what was it performed?], purpose [why?], and attitude [what is the agent's attitude toward

the act?](33). Looking at the sign that says, “Veterans Against Trump,” (see fig. 14) it is obvious that the owner modified a sign that read “Veterans for Trump” from the 2016 election. Taking a basic look at the pentad, the act is the modification of the sign of changing “for” to “against.” The scene is the 2020 presidential election and Sartell, Minnesota. The agent was the homeowner who put the sign out in their yard. Agency is that the sign was modified with paint and the original sign from 2016. Finally, the attitude of the agent was that they no longer supported Donald Trump although it appears they did in the 2016 election. This yard sign also uses ethos because many Americans value the opinion of veterans, and they find them credible.



Figure 14. Veterans Against Trump, Sartell, Minnesota

Oral History

I became interested not just in documenting the signs but people’s reactions to them. One book that inspired me was *Posters for Peace: Visual Rhetoric & Civic Action*, where Thomas W. Benson collected protest posters made by Berkeley students on campus with some encouragement from faculty. These posters were made of silk-screen or from printed photos and they protested the Viet Nam War and racism. Students situated posters throughout campus, in dorm rooms, on gates and fences, and used these posters as picket signs. Benson looked at the experience people had when they viewed these protest posters around Berkeley in the 1970s by examining how they fit into a larger tradition of images used in protests that came before and

after. Originally these posters were made for temporary purposes, but they live on as visual rhetoric created during a time of change because he collected and saved these posters that now reside in a museum in Pennsylvania, and photo images are preserved in his book. I wanted to understand how everyday people in my community, who were isolating and social distancing during a pandemic, experienced these images with the everyday use of rhetoric during a watershed moment of changes, an exigency we may never experience again. I wanted to learn how others who were basically people on the street, as opposed to a graduate student like myself, connected with these signs and images.

I decided to interview people in Sartell to gather their oral histories. In looking back at my coursework and what I learned and gained from my graduate studies, I had the opportunity to do some storytelling in my digital rhetoric classes by blogging, and this was one of my strengths. Storytelling and interviews with common people have been interests of mine since I was in high school when I read Studs Terkel's *American Dreams: Lost and Found*. I found ordinary people's stories interesting and awe-inspiring. I admired Terkel's work and the power of oral histories in preserving memories and details of life experiences in a format that everyone could understand and learn from. Another online storytelling resource I have used to capture oral histories of my son and father is [StoryCorps](#); their mission is to archive people's stories to build connections with the hopes of building a kinder world. This is important to me because I believe in a society that emphasizes and values the collectivism and solidarity of community and family, and these stories show us that we have more in common than we think even though we have different values and ideas, and I believe that is a powerful rhetorical tool.

By conducting the interviews, I sought to capture the stories of people in a suburban community during Covid, the 2020 presidential election, and the racial violence, and create permanent records that contribute to understanding the past. I wanted to highlight the voices of other people in my community and give them a chance to tell their stories to document this unique historical moment in time. Their stories stand alongside mine as equals and provide more than a theoretical point of view. I do not interpret or analyze their stories. I am simply providing a record for others to look back on. I consider my personal narrative an oral history from a graduate student's rhetorical view. The following chapters are oral histories of their interactions and connections with the pandemic, protest, and political signs and images during the beginning of the pandemic in spring 2020 to approximately November 2020 as the election season ended.

A Note on the Methodology for Oral Histories

Drawn from *Principles and Best Practices of the Oral History Association*

1. I chose potential interviewees (narrators) based on their relevant experience to my project.
2. I sent narrators email messages outlining plans for the interviews, and then followed up.
3. After narrator agreed to interview, I scheduled a non-recorded meeting to go over the interview information, questions, and reasons for doing the interview immediately before the recorded interview. During that time, I obtained informed verbal consent. For the child I interviewed, I obtained written consent from the parent/guardian.
4. Using Zoom, I interviewed narrators for their personal stories during the pandemic, protest, and political election period of approximately May 2020 to November 2020 in Sartell in relation to the yard signs and images they encountered. Using Zoom transcripts, I edited the interviews and allowed the narrators to edit or revise their oral histories.
5. By using this method, I captured oral histories that are of lasting value that will help us understand the past from historical and rhetorical perspectives—a time when we were social distancing because of a pandemic during a contentious presidential election and social justice protests—an exigency we may never see again.
6. These oral histories transcriptions are part of my thesis project, along with my personal narrative and the photo images of yard sign artifacts that I collected.

I identified 20 possible narrators based on several criteria. They had to be residents of Sartell, Minnesota, during the pandemic, protests, and 2020 political season. I wanted as diverse a group as possible so that all voices could be heard and I tried to identify defining traits such as veteran, nurse, student, teacher, immigrant, person of color, religious conservative, activist, local government employee, police officer, parent, grandparent, child, social worker, and small business owner, which is a cross-section of the residents who live in Sartell that I know. I contacted ten people; nine people agreed to be interviewed, and one person declined. One person who agreed to be interviewed did not show up for the interview. The potential interview was with local government, and their oral history would have been a valuable contribution; however, they decided not to show up or respond. One more person had to reschedule, and we were unable to find a time when both of us were available. I completed seven oral history interviews and I

gathered in-depth accounts of personal experiences along with the narrators' reflections of their experiences.

My aim in editing the interviews was to make them more concise and readable while trying to maintain the character of the narrator. I occasionally asked follow-up questions in the interviews. All the participants except for Lynda Schulte wanted me to ask them the questions that I provided them before the interviews to preserve the flow of the conversation during the interview. I corrected grammar when necessary. All narrators had an opportunity to change or correct their oral histories before I included them into my thesis. The recorded Zoom files were saved to the cloud and will remain in my St. Cloud State University MediaSpace account. No one will have access to the video or audio files except for me. In accordance with *Principles and Best Practices of the Oral History Association*, I offered the narrators the option of using pseudonyms. Two of the seven narrators opted to use pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Chapter 2: Oral History of Kathy Markman

Sartell, Minnesota, March 2020 through November 2020

Interview Saturday, February 12, 2022, 2pm

I moved to Sartell in March 2000, and Kathy Markman brought over a plate of chocolate chip cookies to welcome us to the neighborhood. I consider Kathy a close neighbor friend. Kathy is married to Mike and has two grown sons, Matt and Eric. Kathy works at CentraCare Health Plaza as a nurse. Early in the pandemic, I ran into Kathy walking in the woods with her dog, Bella. Kathy told me she and Mike recently had Covid, and their son Eric was living with them at the time and he got Covid as well. This was before the vaccines were available, and all recovered. Kathy posted about their experience with Covid on social media and I believe it was the nurse in her that gave her friends like me hope that recovery after Covid was possible at a time when many of us were scared and worried.

PC: Did you display any signs or images, not just political signs, from the time the pandemic started in spring 2020 to about the end of the election season in November 2020?

KM: At my work, at the CentraCare Plaza, we displayed hearts of hope in the windows, but I did not personally display any signs or images. I saw a lot of hearts of hope in homes (see fig. 15)—about every 10 to 15 homes in Sartell seemed to have heart displays—when I went for walks, and I thought they were positive signs of hope for all of us during the pandemic.

PC: Why did you not display anything at home?



Figure 15. Hearts of Hope,
Sartell, Minnesota

KM: There were several reasons—it was mainly because of social media—either people were politically motivated to put up signage or they had strong opinions one way or the other. I am a little more private on my views, and I think back to when I did not know my friends' views and I liked that because we got along much better. I would rather not know if my co-workers are Republicans or Democrats, or if they are strongly affiliated with one over the other, or if they have strong opinions. Knowing what my friends and coworkers' views are, seems to have a negative impact on my life, and so I shy away from expressing my views in this manner. There are people in my life who I am no longer friends with primarily because of their expression of views. The people did not necessarily display signs, but they posted something on social media.

PC: That is very true, and I can think of mutual friends of ours where that is the case.

KM: I feel that the people who expressed their views, whether on social media or signs or images in their yards and windows, probably did not mean to alienate their friends and neighbors.

PC: I am political, but I try to be open and accepting to other opinions.

KM: Everyone is entitled to their opinion but when someone feels their opinion is more important than my opinions, it has been a distraction in some of my relationships.

PC: We talked about the hearts of hope earlier but what other signs or images do you remember?

KM: When I think about the images and signs, I tend to gravitate to the more positive messages. When I saw the particular truck—an image with several pro-Trump and anti-Biden materials (see fig. 9)—it made my stomach roll to think that there are people that feel this way. It is really disheartening to me. The positive messages of hope showed me that the people who displayed them put more thought into displaying them than one person driving around displaying their viewpoints.

PC: You mention viewpoints, do you think any of the signs—not so much the political signs since we already discussed that—were persuasive?

KM: I think the positive signs have some persuasive power because when I encountered them, I felt good, and they gave me hope. When I walked along Pinecone Road, I came across a sign thanking healthcare workers and first responders (see fig. 16), and I felt great. There were a handful of signs that were tough to see, but in the past year and a half, a lot of the signs were wonderful.



Figure 16. Thank you healthcare, emergency and all essential workers! Sartell, Minnesota

PC: On our way to the bike trail in Bowlus, out in the country, we saw lots of signs and flags for Trump, and some of them are still up.

KM: While driving up to my cabin, I would see a lot of signs, primarily Trump flags, and some are still up too.

PC: Some of the school messages were powerful like the sign on Pinecone Road, I am sure you walked past it, where they had all the 2020 high school graduates listed.

KM: Yes. Last year I participated in a wellness group and one of my assignments was to go out and make sidewalk chalk messages to make others feel good. I went with Chelsie and her daughters, and we wrote messages in chalk (see fig. 17) on the way to the middle school to uplift the students and anyone else walking by. The work the group did was wonderful.

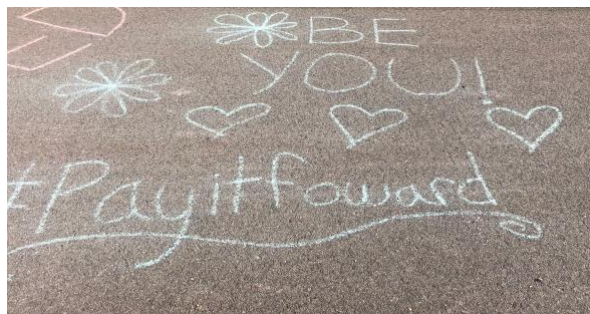


Figure 17. Be You! Pay it forward chalk art, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 18. I Love You, Sartell, Minnesota

PC: One of the images I captured was an “I love you” message (see fig. 18) scratched in the dirt in the woods. I looked at the signs to communicate during a time when most of us were social distancing. Some of those pandemic signs came when we were working from home. Did you have any unique connections to the signs about the pandemic?

KM: When we talk about the pandemic and social distancing and the impact that had on people in our community, I was overwhelmed by social media messages. I wonder if there were not a

pandemic, or because there was a pandemic, people were more active on social media to get their messages out because they were not sharing them with their neighbors or running into them at the grocery store or out in the community. I think this is true on social media and in front yards too as people expressed their opinions on whether they were for or against facemask mandates. I noticed that even businesses expressed their views on facemasks on their door windows whether Governor Walz was pro-business or anti-business for his stance on facemasks.

PC: I read that CentraCare went to area leaders to ask them to pass facemask mandates. I saw the letter from the mayor, and I understand that nothing moves quickly in government because there are checks and balances because where I work it is like that. At first, I was disappointed, but I understand.

KM: I feel it comes down to personal responsibility. If people do not want their government telling them what to do, then they should do the right thing to begin with.

PC: As a nurse, how do you feel about facemasks?

KM: I feel it has been proven that facemasks prevent the virus from spreading, and without facemasks people are giving the virus more room to continue to circulate. I am pro-facemask, and I am grateful for a workplace and employer where facemasks are mandated. There are no patients coming into CentraCare without facemasks, and if they do, they will not get treatment. If I worked in a restaurant or a grocery store it would be challenging and hard to work with so many people coming in without facemasks. Also, with the facemask mandate at work I never feel that I am in a position where I must justify why I am wearing a facemask.

PC: I think about that with Molly and school. I hope the facemasks are not on the way out in schools because it seems a lot of places are trying to move on. [Note: Two days later I received an email from Molly's school indicating that facemasks were optional starting the next day.]

KM: Eventually there will be a point in time where we no longer need to wear facemasks, but I am leaving that up to the experts to figure out when that point in time will be, it is not up to individuals.

PC: Well, that is good to hear and that gives me hope.

KM: I base this on the fact that between all the people who have already had Covid, and all the people who have been vaccinated, that we are getting to the point in time where the virus cannot circulate as easily because it does not have as many places to go, and that gives me hope.

PC: I think about the flu, and I never lived in fear of getting it. I am still a little bit afraid of getting Covid because I do not want to get sick after all this time of trying to be so careful.

KM: Covid will not go away completely but there will be a better time for people. In the end, we must balance the fear of getting Covid with our mental health in relation to everything else in our lives.

PC: That's very true. Do you believe that people in our community will continue to use signs and images to convey their messages?

KM: I think they will probably continue to do so because the signs and images have been effective. For instance, the guy who drives around in his truck with the confederate flag on the back of his truck is getting a reaction from everybody who sees it and that is what he is looking for so it is effective for him to continue his actions because if his truck sits in the garage and he does not go anywhere he will not experience the same effect.

PC: Do you think any of the positive messages will continue and be effective?

KM: As for the positive signs and messages, I hope they continue. If there is one issue the pandemic brought to the forefront it is that mental health is important and the positive messages, along with who we surround ourselves with, are very important for our overall outlook on life, and those positive messages are a piece of it. If I can uplift somebody or make their day and send a note to a friend, I will continue to do so.

PC: My master's degree is in Writing Studies and Rhetoric. Wikipedia defines rhetorical power as the power to persuade. We touched on this a bit, but what kind of persuasive power did the signs or images have for you?

KM: I have become desensitized to some of the signs over time, like the Trump signs, and I tend to look away very quickly now. I have been able to ignore the signs or messages I do not agree with. I think that signs whether they are physical or online are not going to change the way people think about politics or facemasks, and I think it is not worth the time and effort to try to even get into that. Up north I will see the most dilapidated trailer homes and you cannot believe that someone lives there but there will be a Trump flag outside. All I can think is, what has he done for you? I don't get it. It makes me wonder about the thinking behind it.

PC: I remember that six months after some elections, I could barely remember who ran against someone if they did not win.

KM: Yes, exactly. We are at a different spot in history now it seems. It is hard to even see where we go from here.

PC: I know you cannot speak for your kids, but for me I have a lot of hope in the younger generation.

KM: Yes. I do too. I am very excited about our kids and the fact that they will be taking the helm at some point, thank goodness.

PC: Can you tell me more about the wellness group you participated in?

KM: The wellness group was interesting because I would get points for completing different things. It ran maybe two or three weeks, and every day we were challenged to do something in our community, so it was very much pro-Sartell, and that was interesting, and the messages were good. That was something that I would not have done on my own. It was fun to have Chelsie and her family involved. I remember one of the daily challenges was cleaning up a place in the community, and we went out and picked up garbage in the woods. She brought her four little girls, and it was fun to do that.

PC: What other good aspects can you think of that have come out of the pandemic?

KM: There are some good things that have come from the pandemic. We got a Peloton bike, and we really enjoy it more than we thought we would. Mike is loving the Peloton, and it seems he is on it all the time, at least daily or five days of the week. It is very interactive, and it faces out toward the backyard. I did not think I would like it as much as I do but I am finding I really like it a lot because I can go on there and time just flies. I usually pick a 20- or 30-minute ride and it goes very quickly. Also, I have spent more time with my kids at home. They were able to work remotely, so Matt and his girlfriend, Sam, spent five months living at our cabin, and that was over the summer so we would come up to the cabin and it would be opened, and lots of times they would have cooked a meal for us. We would have the whole weekend to spend with them or longer because Mike was working from home too. So, we spent a lot more time with them at the cabin and that was a plus. Having the kids around us was a huge plus. Having Mike work

from home has been good. He used to eat lunch out every day, and now he is eating healthier food right out of our fridge. So, we are saving money too, I am sure. At this time, he is still working at home primarily and he might go in one or two days a week. I feel like if I had little kids in the school system, it would be a whole different level than what we have. The pandemic has made me think about how I want to spend my time and what to prioritize.

PC: That is true. There were two days a few weeks ago when Molly could not go to school because she was so stressed out. All her friends had Covid, or symptoms and they were not testing, and it was right around her birthday, and your birthday, too. So, I let her stay home and have a few mental health days.

KM: Taking care of ourselves and our mental health are good life lessons to learn.

PC: That is so true. I think about how people were overwhelmed with social media and how you said that you have been able to turn away from signs in the physical world, and I think that is interesting.

KM: Yes, and I think this project is interesting because we were not able to communicate in more traditional ways during the pandemic and the signage took the place of some of that since we were not running into each other at Coborn's or whatnot.

PC: Yes, those are all my questions. Thank you.

Chapter 3: Oral History of Anderson Henry

Sartell, Minnesota, March 2020 through November 2020

Interview Tuesday, February 22, 2022, 10am

The pseudonym Anderson Henry will be used for this interview to protect the narrator. Anderson is a political science expert who happens to live in Sartell with his family.

PC: Did you display any signs or images during the pandemic or political season in 2020?

AH: No. I did not display anything at all on the house or in the yard or on the cars, and I was very apprehensive about even thinking about displaying anything. My wife wanted to display some political signage and I pleaded with her not to. In my mind, I was concerned, honestly, for my safety. I did not feel safe putting signage out on the yard, particularly knowing that it was going to be different to the majority opinions where I live, and recognizing that I, as an immigrant, minority, and person of color, might put myself in a situation where I might be under observation. There are certain elements that I did not want to add to that. I immigrated from a place where it was not uncommon for people who did not belong to the majority community to be under observation. I do not want to say under surveillance because there was nothing official about it. In general, if they did not go with the majority, they would stick out, they would be observed in everything they did. So, for me, and knowing some of the militancy that was being displayed under the previous administration, and seeing the militancy exhibited in the means of firearms and threatening people's safety—from the governor of Michigan to elsewhere—I did not feel safe to express my opinion and put out a political sign, and so we did not. I think this speaks something to the nature of democracy and freedom in America. Because we hear

from many folks how they pride themselves that we are in a free country. And maybe they are free, but others are not. I think this is a pertinent question to others who maybe are the source of intimidation, to ask themselves, is this the kind of freedom that they want?

PC: Okay, so I have two follow-up questions for you. First, when you say in the area that you live in, are you talking about Sartell as a community or just your neighborhood or the greater St. Cloud area?

AH: I would say the area, not the neighborhood. I have not seen anything from my neighborhood that would really raise concerns. I would say the St. Cloud area and Central Minnesota.

PC: Okay. My other question is, if you feel threatened by people who are displaying signs that are not your beliefs, do you think that these people might feel threatened by signs they do not believe in?

AH: I feel that there are some people who display signs that of course are not scared because they are the ones who are scaring others and threatening others. They are the ones showing up with their firearms and threatening people left and right at civil rights demonstrations. Maybe they do not feel threatened, and maybe they just do not feel like putting signs up. They do not care about any of this. I cannot speak for all the groups of people who are not scared, and why they are not putting signs up, but I can tell you because I saw a boatload of signs and flags here in Sartell. They clearly were comfortable putting those up. I am sure they were not concerned for their safety or their well-being. I do not know how much you want about the political ramblings in here. Is that okay for your study?

PC: Yes, it is perfect. It is your oral history. I am not planning on analyzing or interpreting your oral history. It fits into my project.

AH: So, for example, people put up big Biden signs, and they were not concerned. But again, when my wife came to me and said, “hey, look, they have a big Biden sign.” And I said, “look, they are white. They are Christian. They are Minnesotan. Half of this town is probably their family and their relatives. Even if some people do not like what they put out there, nobody is going to touch them. They are protected. We have nobody here. So, we are not protected. We are like a tree alone on a big mountain in the wind, with nothing else.” So, these people probably did not feel threatened to put signs up. I think being a minority in a place creates a unique set of circumstances on whether they can express their opinion, particularly if it is not a popular opinion. Now, if it is a popular opinion, they can do whatever they want. By the way, had this been six-seven-eight years ago, I would not have been concerned about putting up a sign. It is the increasing militancy, the increasing position to use violence, the display of—on numerous occasions—firearms, and the conspiracy to commit acts of violence. Of course, it culminated with the insurrection. We saw that.

PC: Yes. I agree with you because I felt comfortable putting up a sign, but I am white and Christian and from this area. My biggest fear was that somebody would steal it.

AH: Yes, I could see that where you would be worried somebody would steal it or they would do a minimal act of vandalism of some sort. But you know, with everybody being from this area and having family ties and everybody knows everyone, and their families have ties, people would think twice before they attempt to hurt somebody from the community who has family, they go to the same church, and so on. But they probably would not think twice to take out somebody who is an immigrant, a foreigner who just lives here all alone.

PC: That is an interesting point from where you are, thanks.

AH: This makes me think, how different is America than many of these underdeveloped countries around the world where people do not feel safe, and where people get threatened when people express an opinion?

PC: That is another good point. You talked a little bit about this, what signs or images do you remember seeing in Sartell during that time?

AH: I saw the pictures you had. Starting with the pandemic, I saw a lot of positivity and warm signs on people's doors and windows and so on early in the pandemic because I would go out for walks to just get out of the house and still be somewhere safe. It was very nice. It was very heartwarming. It was clear that kids made the signs and images and posted them on their windows at home. So those are my recollections of pandemic related signs. Early in the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd happened so as far as civil rights and Black Lives Matter signs, I did notice a few signs in Sartell that were put up for Black Lives Matter, but they were small, they were minimal, and they disappeared very quickly. I would go out on a walk and two days later, I am back in the same neighborhood thinking there used to be a Black Lives Matter sign here. Where is it now? I was wondering, where did they go? Were they stolen? Were they taken down by the people living there themselves? I could not tell, but I did notice a few that appeared, but then disappear. Later, months later, we started seeing maybe one or two All Lives Matter types of signs. As for the political signs, obviously a majority were Republican, or Trump signs. This time I did see way more Biden signs than I saw of Hillary signs. I mean, maybe ten times more Biden signs than I saw of Hillary signs. Those are the kinds of signs that I saw around. It was interesting by the way, that—one of the questions in the study was about how these signs were used to convince others, right—I saw the signs more to communicate to others

on where they stand on an issue. I do not really see signs as a way to convince others because nobody is going to drive by and see a Biden sign and say, who is that guy? I think people are basically putting up signs to say this is who I am, and this is who I stand for. It is interesting to see in some places, some yards, a race going on between signs. There was a situation like that in the yards on one of the corners here in the neighborhood. One neighbor would put up a sign and the other would put up an opposing sign, so the other neighbor would put up a bigger sign and/or a flag. It was interesting, and I had not seen that before in the 15, 16 years I have been here. As an immigrant and a person of color, the Trump signs, to me this time, felt threatening and felt like a personal message against me as opposed to all other elections in the past. I would drive by, walk by, and see all sorts of signs in the past. Some were Republican presidential signs and no matter what size; it was no problem whoever the Republican candidate was. It was they like they have some opinions on this, and it is policy related, or tax related, or whatever, and that is no problem. But with Trump and his violent, anti-immigrant, anti-minority, anti-refugee stance—and with his followers being militants and with a disposition for violence and using weapons—I started taking it personal because now whoever puts a sign up is not saying, “well, I have some different policy beliefs.” This guy is saying “you immigrant, I do not want you here. I do not like that you are a person of color, the police should rough you up.” Trump told people at his rallies that police officers should rough people up: “You are too nice to them [people of color].” The signs also say “if you are a refugee, we do not want you here. If you belong to a certain religion, we do not want to allow you to come here.” So, when I see somebody putting a Trump sign up, it was personal and different from signs in the past. It never hurt me before to see somebody put a Republican sign on their yard because it was not personal. This past election was hurtful. This

time it was very hurtful. Aside from the fact that it was also threatening, and it was not about government and policy and institutions anymore. The signs were about personal attacks on people for their racial, religious, ethnic background, and national background. This was very different in terms of the interpretation of the signs we saw.

PC: As a woman, I felt the same way with the Trump signs. In past elections it did not seem personal. Sometimes I even had to really think about who the person was who ran and did not get elected. This time the signs are still there to remind us. People are still flying flags and have the signs in their yards. So, it is not over even though it is a year later.

AH: No. It is still not over; it was a cult of personality kind of election. Trump built a cult of personality, and his followers were not following a set of beliefs that Republicans and conservatives follow or believe in. They were following the personality cult. So that is why when he lost the elections, they still have his flags and his pictures.

PC: I am taking a rhetorical theory class and we are learning about parasitic publics, and Trump created a parasitic public with his followers, people who like to incite violence. As far as the other signs, the pandemic signs, and even some of the school signs, did you notice those? If so, do you think they had a bit more rhetorical or persuasive power than political signs? I agree with you on the political signs. I think now people are more political and it is harder to persuade them. Growing up in the St. Cloud area, it seemed like whoever had the most signs up was who got elected regardless. It did not matter if they were Republican or Democratic. People did not have a lot of political knowledge. But now, I think the signs have lost their persuasive power. But the other signs like school signs, did they have persuasive power for you?

AH: Yes. I saw those signs. There were a lot of Congratulations to the class of 2020 (see fig. 19). I saw some people in my neighborhood who put graduation banners or signs in their yards. But I did not see any specific school signs because we were home all the time, and we were working, and the kids were doing school online, so we did not drive by any of the schools except the one on Pinecone Road. But I saw signs that were on people's yards.



Figure 19. Congratulations Class of 2020, Sartell, Minnesota

PC: For me, I looked at the signs to communicate during a time when many of us were social distancing. Can you think of anything that you have not mentioned already, any unique connections that you made with the signs about the pandemic and social distancing? Do you remember any of the original signs or images?

AH: I do not go out a lot. So, I have not seen many. I saw one about medical freedom, but aside from that I have not seen any signs that pertain to vaccines. Again, during the elections is when I paid the most attention to the signs. The Trump signs communicated to me that whoever lives in this house does not like you for who you are, your skin color, your religion, your nationality, your ethnicity, and does not want you here. And whoever lives in this house agrees with the president who stands for these things, agrees with the president who supports neo-Nazis, and has spoken in favor of neo-Nazis and white supremacy. And whoever lives here also is okay with

the people who have used violence, threatened the use of violence, because if they did not, they would not put that sign up. That is what it is like for me. I have heard some say that is not true. But you cannot have a sign up for somebody who stands for all these ideals but then say you do not support those ideals. Why have the sign? The sign represents the totality of that, and if they believe only in one-tenth of that, do not put a sign up supporting Trump.

PC: If I did not believe in a candidate completely, and if I was not informed, I would not feel comfortable putting up a sign in my yard.

AH: Or at least agree with most issues of the candidate. They might not agree with one or two issues, but at least the vast majority of the core beliefs, assumptions, campaign slogans of the candidate. I do not think it is possible to say, “I totally disagree with Trump on 95% of these issues, but I have his sign out in my yard.” The problem is they agree with him on 95% of his issues like building a wall, keeping people out, and banning people from traveling. The essence of his administration is that they will use violence against people who are demonstrating for civil rights. Trump told the police in a rally that they should rough up the demonstrators and use live ammo against them. So, that is the difference, and it speaks to the nature of the candidate himself, and those who follow him. It also speaks to the nature of changing politics.

PC: I am wondering if the pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, and the election have anything to do with the nature of the signs we witnessed and the fear surrounding those signs? I am wondering if those signs would have been as hateful if those events had not happened at the same time?

AH: Yes. I think the signs would have been as offensive because the threatening and offensive nature of these started way before the pandemic. It started during his campaign when he called

Mexican immigrants murderers and rapists. Then he talked about building a wall to keep everybody out. Then he talked about a Muslim ban, and when he passed the Muslim ban, kids were captured and separated from their families at the border. And he talked about the police roughing up people before George Floyd was killed. Before any of this, Trump spoke as a candidate at rallies that police were too nice to criminals and that they should shove their heads into the cars. So, this was something that existed, and was building up. Then Trump started to attack China even before the pandemic and he was raising anti-Asian sentiment—this was across the board and anti-anybody who was not white. The neo-Nazis were demonstrating in Charlottesville and Trump said that there were good people on both sides, referring to the neo-Nazis. So, Trump has been going on and on for the past several years. Did the pandemic add to that a bit? Yes, because the pandemic gave people the opportunity to show up with their guns and threaten people with the use of violence and firearms at demonstrations. At the anti-Black Lives Matter movement, they also showed up with their guns and stood on the side of the streets with their firearms, threatening civil rights and those who were demonstrating. Did that add to it? Yes. But that was just a portion of all of that and I think it was building up toward it. Who knows when it would have shown up if these events did not happen, but it would have shown up eventually. I remember when he ran against Hillary, he said if she won that the Second Amendment people were going to have something to say about it. What did he mean the Second Amendment? Was he saying that people with guns were going to go and stop the elections or do something to those who voted for Hillary Clinton? The sad thing is that the Second Amendment was not intended for people to use firearms for violence and for terrorism. What Trump was trying to do is basically turn the Second Amendment into a tool for political violence

and extremist expression. Because when people show up carrying guns to intimidate others, to use violence against them, or to threaten the use of violence against them, that is the textbook definition of terrorism which is the use of violence or the threat of the use of violence against civilians for political means. So, when peaceful Black Lives Matter groups are demonstrating and people stand on the side of the road carrying guns to intimidate them and to threaten them, they are threatening the use of violence against civilians for political reasons, because the demonstrators are not displaying any firearms. We now know that it did express itself in violence. We know in Kenosha, people were shot and killed. We know in New Mexico where people were protesting to have a statue removed that somebody got shot and killed who was demonstrating. When these people show up with their guns, they use violence against civilians for political means, which is the classical textbook definition of terrorism. That is the sad part about what Trump did, he got us to this point where constitutionally protected rights for people, for self-defense, were now being utilized as a tool for domestic terrorists. It makes me think about what is going to happen in the future elections, and it is very concerning.

PC: That ties into my next question, do you believe that people in our community will continue to use signs and images to convey their messages?

AH: I think so. I wonder if the pandemic and people being locked up added to the expression and the utilization of signs because that was a way for them to communicate to the outer world. I wonder for the next election, if there is no pandemic or if we are in an endemic situation, if people will use as much signage and flags. I do not think it is going to go away completely, but I would not be surprised if it shrinks. When people express their opinions in person and go to rallies and attend meetings, they may not feel the need to go out and put all the signs and flags in

their yards. I feel this was part of being locked up and wanting to express and communicate to others that they support this person.

PC: Wikipedia defines rhetorical power as the power to persuade, shape, and affect civic life, communities, and citizens' character. You talked about this a bit, but can you add anything about what kind of persuasive power these signs or images had for you? You can stick with the political signs if you would like because you said that you came across more of them than you did the other images.

AH: I think the age of persuasiveness through signs is gone. It is basically like going to a Vikings game and people wear Vikings jerseys—not to convince others to switch teams—but to show who they support. I do not think that signs or flags in yards change any opinions. People seem to be making their opinions using social media, the news that they garner from online, and certainly from friends, family, and associates who also influence their opinions. I do not think anybody's changing their mind by seeing signs and flags.

PC: Bringing up the jerseys, I wonder if people are using the signs for camaraderie to find other people or to build a community? Not necessarily face-to-face or spending time together with them, but building a community of people who think the same as they do?

AH: I think that is a natural byproduct. If I walk in the neighborhood, most of the time people know one another. There is no doubt that there is communication among groups that think alike, but the images do not convince anybody.

PC: Do you have anything you want to add? I am at the end of my questions.

AH: No. I think I have covered a lot. I do not think this is something that you spend a lot of time thinking about daily.

[I stopped the recording but restarted it because the conversation continued.]

PC: If Trump runs again, and he has been banned from so much social media, I wonder if that will affect his campaign?

AH: I think there is no doubt it will affect his campaign and his reach. Social media made his last campaign. He was a nobody as far as the political world was concerned. All Republicans thought he was a joke. Most of them made comments like “you will never be the candidate, let alone be president.” The media amplified this and gave Trump airtime, not just on social media, but also on the regular media like broadcast television and cable. CNN gave him the biggest platform, in my opinion. So, I think he is going to have a much harder time reaching out next time without that coverage. That is why he has been trying so hard to come up with a new alternative platform. He tried a new platform, and it did not work out. I think just yesterday, I read that Trump is coming out now with another new platform but whether it will succeed or not, I do not know. Part of the problem is Trump simply does not have any good competent people around him anymore. The competent folks that could have really helped him, want nothing to do with him. So, he is left with only a bunch of incompetent imposters around him like the “My Pillow Guy” [[Michael James Lindell](#)] (Wikipedia), and these folks will not get somebody to the White House again. He got to the White House last time because he had competent folks around that did not know who he was really or how he was or how he was going to govern. They said “he talks like that but when he is president he is going to govern better. Everybody in the White House grows up” and then it turns out that he did not. I think a lot of regular media outlets will not give him a platform, especially when he is spreading his racist

propaganda and I think this is going to be a major disadvantage for him. He might be able to create a platform, but guess what, it is going to be only his followers.

PC: I was thinking about that when you said that he is trying to create a new platform because he was able to persuade some people who were undecided with what he was saying on social media during his last election success.

AH: Right. A lot of those people did not know him and what he was about or how he was going to govern. A lot of people gave him the benefit of the doubt and they said they would give him a chance as president. They gave him a chance, and they saw what came from that. Some people voted for him, and after seeing what he was about, they did not vote for him again. Some of them did not even cast a vote for either candidate or they stayed home and did not vote. That was a big part also of why he lost. Some undecided voters, whether they were nonpartisan, even some Republicans by their own admission, they voted for him the first time and they said never again after they saw how he governed. He is going to have a very hard time succeeding because he has a track record now and he cannot expand his platform. He narrowed his platform as opposed to expanding it. In fact, some Republicans like the "[Lincoln Project](#)," and others, were campaigning against him. There are Republicans campaigning against him and raising money against him. This has never happened before where someone is running for president as a Republican and the party is campaigning and creating groups against them. Clearly, he is going to have a much harder time if he decides to run again.

PC: Thank you for your answers and your oral history. I appreciate it.

Chapter 4: Oral History of Annabelle Trombley

Sartell, Minnesota, March 2020 through November 2020

Interview Sunday, February 27, 2022, 4pm

I have known Annabelle Trombley her entire life. She is my daughter's friend in 8th grade at Sartell Middle School.

PC: Okay, did your family display any signs or images during the pandemic or political season of 2020?

AT: Yes, we did. During the pandemic, we had hearts up in our windows that we cut out. We also had a Joe Biden sign in our front yard.

PC: Did a lot of your neighbors have signs up?

AT: A fair amount of people in my neighborhood had signs up that I noticed. All around Sartell I noticed the hearts in windows, and I thought that was kind of cool.

PC: Do people still have the signs and hearts up?

AT: No, I haven't seen too many.

PC: Okay.

PC: Did you take your hearts down?

AT: Yes, we took them down a while ago.

PC: Alright. Why did you put the signs and images up when you did?

AT: Well, we put up the hearts to show solidarity with everybody else, because it was a hard time, and everything had changed. But when a lot of people had hearts up in their windows, I felt like I could relate to them or that I knew they understood what was happening to everyone and how everyone's lives were disrupted because of the pandemic. For the Joe Biden sign, that was

different. Sartell is a more conservative area and our house and some of my neighbors' homes had Joe Biden signs up and it showed people, mostly people who were fellow liberals, that other liberal people existed in Sartell, and that they were not afraid to share their opinions.

PC: Yes, it seemed like more people put up liberal signs in Sartell this past election.

AT: Yes, and in the last election, I think that it was vital to get the word out about supporting Joe Biden.

PC: What are some of the other signs and images that you saw in your neighborhood or in Sartell?

AT: Recently, I see a lot of vaccine and medical freedom signs (see figs. 20 and 21) when I am on my way to school. There are a couple on that drive that I see every day. I also remember seeing a lot of positive chalk art messages on driveways and sidewalks.



Figure 20. Stop the mandate, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 21. I stand for medical freedom, Sartell, Minnesota

PC: Okay, did you do any of the sidewalk drawings?

AT: No, I don't remember doing any.

PC: Thinking back to when we started social distancing and spanning the time to the election, do you think that you saw more signs during that time than you normally do?

AT: Yes, definitely because when there was more restrictions and rules in place, people wanted to communicate to others and having those signs up was an easy way to communicate, even for rules, when the stores were closed, or the school signs.

PC: Okay, for me, I looked at the signs to communicate during a time when many of us were social distancing. Did you make any unique connections to any of the signs? You talked about the hearts of hope, but were there any others that you had unique connections with during the pandemic, while we were social distancing?

AT: Well, I was trick-or-treating, and you know that sign with Governor Walz? I saw that sign and I was like “WOW!” and I thought that a lot of people must really not like him. I saw it on a billboard too. That sign made a huge impression on me. The sign was over by DCI [North St. Cloud] and all I could think was how people must really not like him if they are printing these signs off and displaying them. They were mass produced and they were either giving them away or selling them, and I found the whole situation kind of interesting. Especially since the sign was such a vulgar image (see fig. 7).

PC: Yes. I know what you are talking about. Did you make any other connections with signs you encountered?

AT: No, I do not think so.

PC: Can you think of any other original signs or images that you recall, during that time?

AT: No, but one thing that does come into my mind that was kind of original was [St. Cloud Superman](#) (Gerdes), do you know him?

PC: Yes. I have an image of his truck with flags (see fig. 9).

AT: Whenever we saw him, my mom and I would point him out. He was hard to miss, and it seemed like he was around all the time.

PC: Molly even noticed that he got a new car. Did you ever see him in Sartell?

AT: Yes, I do not know where we were driving, but that was when I noticed that he got a new car. We were driving right behind him, and he had all these bumper stickers on his vehicle.

Come to think of it, it was by the Blue Line when we saw him.

PC: Did you say that you saw bumper stickers or flags or both?

AT: Well, on his new car, we saw on bumper stickers.

PC: Okay. When you saw these kinds of political signs or images what did you think about them and how did you feel about them?

AT: Well, when I saw the Joe Biden signs, they made me think that even though Sartell is a conservative place, I was happy to see that other people, at least, I think, might be politically correct, and they have good morals. But with the Trump signs, I guess I respect their different opinions. But some of the signs, like the one of Governor Walz or other more risqué signs or sayings I did not understand why they had to put up signs of hatred in their front yards.

PC: Okay.

AT: Why would they want to show hate?

PC: I guess everyone feels differently about the signs or flags when they see them.

AT: Yes, I agree. I thought since I had a Joe Biden sign up in my yard, that others should be able to put up signs for their candidates.

PC: When you saw protest or social justice signs or images, what did you think and how did you feel about them? Those signs started to appear right after the killing of George Floyd. Did you see any signs or images?

AT: Well, like I said before Sartell is a conservative area, and when I think of conservatives, I usually think of them being politically incorrect. So, when I saw images of social justice starting to appear, it made me happy. I have said this to you about fifty times already, but I was really happy that people were expressing how they felt, and I also think that maybe when other people saw those signs, it was possibly a wakeup call for them that what they were supporting or believing might be wrong if all these people have these other signs up. If somebody saw a Black Lives Matter sign in a yard they might think, what does that mean? Because I think that a lot of people were kind of blindsided before George Floyd's death. For instance, I knew what the Black Lives Matter movement was, but I did not really know anything about it.

PC: Then the All Lives Matters and Back the Blue signs started to appear as well. Did you see any of those?

AT: I noticed one on Pinecone Road. It was about a week after George Floyd was murdered, and I thought to myself "how could you put an image like that up after somebody was murdered, and how can you defend that?"

PC: As far as you know, was it a new sign?

AT: Yes, I never noticed it there before.

PC: Do you believe that people in our community will continue to use signs and images to convey their messages?

AT: Definitely. Right now, on the Pine Meadow fence there are Sartell Dance Team posters displayed. I think it is easy to put them up and it is easy to communicate with other people. Yes, that is why I think that people will continue to have signs up.

PC: So, you talked about the new sign that you saw at Pine Meadow Elementary, have you seen any other new signs or images recently that share messages about politics, the pandemic, or social justice, or even the school images?

AT: Well, I have not noticed any political signs because it is not that season. I think I already mentioned this but, on my ride home from school I see Medical Freedom signs. Oh, I also saw a Veterans Health Care Crisis sign (see fig. 22). I guess the medical freedom issue is a hot topic right now.



Figure 22. Veterans Crisis Line, Sartell, Minnesota

PC: Wikipedia defines rhetorical power as the power to persuade, shape, and affect civic life, communities, and citizens' character. Did the signs or images have persuasive power for you?

AT: Yes, I think so because when I saw the signs with images, I did not really know what they meant, like the one about Governor Walz. So, I asked my mom why people thought like that, and it gave me a new perspective. I think that is what a lot of the signs did for me, they gave me a new perspective on how people think and why they think that way.

PC: Do you think other people were persuaded by the signs?

AT: Yes, I think some signs can persuade people and some signs do not. For some issues, people are always going to think the way they do, but if they see something new and they have no idea what it is or what it means, they might look into it, and when they find out what it stands for, they might think that that makes sense, and they might want to support or not support the cause or issue on the sign or image.

PC: I think at your age you are in a unique situation because I think people who have perhaps voted in a few elections, might already have a mindset and they are not going to be persuaded no matter what. People are basically inundated with messages, and they are not persuaded by the normal means that used to work in the past. We can see that on social media and it is interesting.

AT: Yes, definitely.

PC: Well, I am at the end of my questions. Is there anything else you want to add?

AT: No, I do not think so.

PC: Do you think, in the next presidential election in about three years, that people will put up as many signs as they did during this past election?

AT: No, I think that this year the tension was high, and people were trying to put their thoughts out there and persuade other people. Every election people put up signs, but this year, I think that there was more than I have ever noticed in the three elections I have been alive.

PC: Okay, well, thank you for answering the questions, I really appreciate it.

Chapter 5: Oral History of Chuck Carson

Sartell, Minnesota, March 2020 through November 2020

Interview Sunday, February 27, 2022, 7pm

The pseudonym Chuck Carson will be used for this interview to protect the narrator. Chuck immigrated in 2000, the same year he moved to Sartell, Minnesota. Chuck spent 20 years in the active-duty Army National Guard, retiring in December 2018. At that time, Chuck started working as an office manager at St. Cloud State University, where he received his bachelor's degree in Graphic Arts in 1998. Chuck is married with three kids.

PC: Did you display any signs or images during the pandemic or political season of 2020?

CC: Yes, just a Biden yard sign.

PC: Can you tell me why you displayed it and where you got it?

CC: Typically, we put out yard signs for whoever we are supporting during the political presidential campaign. This year, I went a little further, because I went to the DFL head office in St. Cloud, and I helped them unload the signs plus I picked up some additional signs to distribute. My car was full. I helped distribute some of those signs, which was a little unusual for me because of my previous occupation in the military. I always got to vote for who I wanted to, but I did not really make any kind of outward display of who I was supporting or what my political leanings were. That would have not been looked upon favorably.

PC: So, when you were in the military, were you still able to post a yard sign?

CC: Yes. Certainly, historically, putting up a yard sign for the political candidate of choice was much like putting up a Vikings or a Packers sign in the front yard. It was not really a big deal

because it was just a show of support. But that seems to have changed in the last couple elections and the political system seems to be more polarized. So, the yard signs are more than this is the candidate of choice, it is more like a battle flag.

PC: When you say battle flag what do you mean?

CC: Well, what is the purpose of putting a yard sign up? Is it to show that this is the candidate who someone supports? Is it to try and convince others perhaps to follow suit? It seems to me that in looking at the last two or three elections there are not a whole lot of people changing sides because they are entrenched in their beliefs. And it does not seem to me that people are basing those decisions off anything political either.

PC: Okay, what other signs and images do you remember seeing in Sartell during the election period and during the pandemic?

CC: During this period, there were quite a lot of signs, and they fell into several different categories. Obviously, there were signs that were related to the pandemic, and they had a message of support. They were supporting those people who were on the front lines, especially hospital staff and nurses. Especially before the vaccine was available because these people were putting themselves and their families at risk, initially anyway. People wanted to show their support and there were messages of encouragement and messages along those lines. I think that was good because it was positive to display the messages. Then later, the signs and images seemed to go in a different direction. I started to see the conspiracy theory side of the pandemic and vaccines coming out, like the anti-mask and anti-vaccine people. You know, those people who think the whole thing is a hoax? That was a little different. Once again, it was like they were planting their battle flags on their front yards. I think the whole Trump campaign changed the

idea of putting a sign out front to show who they are supporting because after all it is a free country, and it is supposed to be a democracy. But driving home from work I saw Biden signs that were not just removed, but purposely vandalized, and then left like that, sending a message to the homeowner displaying the sign “I am going to come on to your property and vandalize your sign and leave it there mutilated instead of just stealing it.” If that was my sign and somebody came on to my front yard and did that, that is what I would think. So that was what I saw and thought. And people drove by and saw the sign in that state and the message was “how dare you support that candidate.”

PC: You said that you went to the DFL office, and you helped unload Biden signs and you came home with a carload to distribute. What did you do with all the Biden signs?

CC: I took them home and my wife and daughter passed some of them out to friends and neighbors. I took some to campus and a few faculty members came and took a sign. But I got the impression that there were only a few faculty who were willing to take signs and display them again because they seemed to have a degree of anxiety about not wanting to upset their neighbors. I am an immigrant and most of the time that I have lived in this country, I was involved in the military, and I went along with what their values were and what their philosophy was about regarding race, color, creed, sexual orientation, whatever. Because when you have people in your unit who are perhaps not citizens, or they are not necessarily the same race, or they might be a different religion, or they might have a different sexual orientation, it was important that everybody felt that they were a member of the team. If the team did not function, or if one person felt like they were not part of the team, because these people hate Mexicans and I am a Mexican, or they hate African Americans and I am a person of color, the whole thing fell

apart. Any mission that they might be performing, if one person who at that moment in time happened to be in a critical place at a critical time and they had a critical role to play in that mission, that might have involved them putting their life on the line. They are not going to do that if they felt like they joined for just the college money plus these people hated them because they were different from them. The whole mission would fail. I have always felt that the military should reflect society, but I think I was mistaken when I thought that society reflected what the military held as its values which was fairness for everybody.

PC: It is interesting that these issues were better in the military than in society.

CC: If someone was in a leadership position and they did not actively support the policies of the Department of Defense, at a minimum that would have ended up on their evaluation report if not something even more serious like action taken against them. People lost their jobs for racist comments. I have seen people post stuff on social media and I thought to myself “it is one thing to think something, but do not post it and share it if it is not in line with what your job in the military is.” But people seem to get away with it.

PC: Did you see any other images or messages in Sartell during that timeframe?

CC: Yes. Another big event early in the pandemic was the murder of George Floyd. There was a lot of support for Black Lives Matter. Well, not necessarily a lot because we live—according to the signs anyway—in a conservative area, and I saw more signs for Back the Blue (see fig. 7). However, there were a few Black Lives Matter signs, and they were noticeable. Not necessarily because of their quantity but, nonetheless, because I think they were unexpected from my point of view. But I did see people putting them out in white neighborhoods in Sartell. There really is no other way to say it, and I think that for the most part, they were conservative white

neighborhoods in Sartell. So, I thought that was a good sign that people felt they had the conviction to make a statement, because it was a bold statement considering where we live. I think even St. Cloud is more diverse because I think the community is more cosmopolitan than Sartell. Historically it is conservative, but there were signs and some chalk drawings too. My daughter made a BLM chalk drawing on our driveway (see fig. 23), and she was proud of it, but I noticed a few pickup trucks that drove by, and the drivers did not seem overly supportive of her Black Lives Matter artwork.



Figure 23. BLM chalk art, Sartell, Minnesota

PC: When did this happen and was your daughter outside when the cars drove by?

CC: Yes, she was still working on the artwork when they drove by. To the best of my recollection, it was right after the killing of George Floyd.

PC: During that time in Sartell when you saw the Black Lives Matter signs, did you have any neighbors that were Black or anyone in your community that you remember who was Black that displayed those signs?

CC: I do not remember. I cannot comment. Wait a minute, one day in the fall I was biking around in neighborhoods further from our house with my wife and we came across two Black

Lives Matter signs in one yard and across the street there were multiple signs and flags for Trump. My wife stopped to talk to the homeowner with the Black Lives Matter signs and she asked him where he got the signs and what he thought about the signs across the street. The homeowner was a person of color, and he said his wife got the signs from Amazon, and he just shrugged at the signs across the street almost as if to say, “what can I do?” He said he was on friendly terms with the neighbors and that he tried not to let the signs bother him.

PC: For me, I looked at the signs to communicate during a time when many of us were social distancing. What unique connections did you make with the signs about the pandemic and social distancing? What original signs or images do you recall?

CC: I remember there were signs, but I do not particularly remember them specifically. There were a lot of signs that seemed to be generally supportive of healthcare workers.

PC: Did you see any original signs or homemade signs?

CC: Relating to the pandemic or in general?

PC: In general.

CC: I think a lot of the pandemic signs seemed to be cutout homemade hearts in windows. On driveways and sidewalks, kids made chalk artwork with kind messages and messages of hope. People got creative with their political signs. That was interesting to me. Some of the Trump signs were supposed to be funny, I guess. But in some cases, there were derogatory signs about the opposing candidate. I saw and continue to see the Trump truck on a regular basis in St. Cloud, which is driven by none other than the former St. Cloud Superman. I do not remember if he has a confederate flag, I know he has displayed confederate flags in the past. I think he currently has a flag, pardon the expression, that says “Fuck Biden” on it. I have seen some

images especially flags with profanity, and I think that is taking the first amendment a little too far because nobody wants to see that. If that is how they feel, I do not want to see it and neither do kids on their way to school. That is offensive language, and I would not display a sign or flag with that on it. Sure, I used that language in the military, but it is not appropriate for the real world. Neither was the sign with Walz with his head stuck up his rear-end. Maybe some people thought that was funny, but it was offensive, and we started to see what our fellow Americans were really like. Traditionally Americans view themselves as being individuals, they like to think of freedom, but there is a lot of things that Americans do not have that they certainly have in Europe. I consider displaying these signs as immature behavior. Americans want all the freedoms but when it comes to an unpleasant task like wearing a facemask, getting a vaccine, or serving their country, they do not want to do it. They have not had to do a single thing for the benefit of the community in their entire lives unless it was something they wanted to do, and they are not going to start. These are the same people who display big American flags and the Don't Tread on Me signs. But when it comes to making a small sacrifice, they are incapable of doing it, and I find that disappointing. The whole pandemic has dragged on forever—it is like if a Minnesota winter lasted two or three years—and the lack of actions speak loudly about who people are and their moral character. I think a lot of people view Tim Walz as a bad governor because he has had to make decisions because he is in a leadership role and that might be actions that not everyone wants to take. The difficult choices were based on benefitting the greater population or protecting those who were the most vulnerable in the community. It was like people did not care and they would rather go out to eat and continue to live their lives like they always had, and they were not prepared to make sacrifices for others. That whole mindset

seemed to snowball with all the conspiracy theories and storming the Capitol on the sixth of January. For me, quite honestly, the last couple years have highlighted a side of Minnesotans, the local community, and the United States in general that I did not know existed. Maybe I was blissfully unaware, but this was not why I served in the military, to protect everyone when so many were unwilling to do their part, and that is a disappointment. I expected more.

PC: When you talk about the pandemic and people not making sacrifices, do you think that was political? Do you think that both sides were not making sacrifices or just one side was not making sacrifices and the other side was making all the sacrifices?

CC: So, that is a good question. I think now it is spread across all political parties. I try to be objective about it, but it certainly seems that people look for an excuse other than I do not want to do this, so they do not seem to be just a selfish person. For example, there are the conspiracy theories about the vaccine, and today the number of people who are not vaccinated is a disappointment to me. I had to roll my sleeves up and get jabbed with everything from yellow fever to anthrax, so others could have their freedoms, and they cannot get this tiny little vaccine because the life they might save is not theirs; it might be somebody else. The justification that they find is religious or it is political or some other complete nut job idea that gives them that peace of mind that while they are not doing it because of their trumped-up issue—pardon the pun—and not because they are selfish.

PC: That is interesting. In the interviews I have conducted so far, the vaccine has not been mentioned much. I am interested, are you vaccinated?

CC: Yes, I got the vaccine as soon as I could. Was I taking a gamble because the approval process was rushed through? There was a chance that I might have side effects, yes. But people

do not seem to buy into the scientific leadership, they think that Fauci was on the other end of the conspiracy theory, and it seemed that they were missing the big picture. I was of the generation where I got vaccinated for this, for that, etc., when I was a kid. I had to show my shot record and I had to have medical tests before I was allowed to immigrate to the US. Then I had to have all the shots before I could go to St. Cloud State, and I had to get more shots when I joined the military. I gave my consent for that; I knew that I was giving up that freedom. But I am just surprised that other people are so anti-science. I remember going to school in England and the teacher talked about Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution. It was a few years earlier that they had landed a spaceship on the moon. I was surprised when my teacher said that at the time it was a controversial theory and there were a lot of people who did not believe because of their religious beliefs. They believed the Bible said that man was created in the image of God, and the concept that humans evolved from Neanderthals was unfathomable. The pandemic did not start off political, but it ended up being that way. People started to politicize the vaccines which is unfortunate because we could have potentially wiped out the virus, but it looks like it will be back again next year since so many are unvaccinated and those infected can be reinfected after a certain amount of time. It is a shame.

PC: How about masking? Masking and vaccines seem to go hand in hand. You spoke about the sacrifices you made when you when you were in the military, do you think that it is a sacrifice for people to put a facemask on?

CC: It is a small sacrifice. Some people say they cannot we breathe, but they should try wearing a military gas mask while carrying sixty pounds of equipment. Then it is hard to breathe, but a

facemask is nothing but a minor irritation at times. I think people weaponized facemasks as well and some would not wear a facemask because they did not want to appear weak.

PC: When you saw protest and social justice signs or images, what did you think and how did you feel about them?

CC: I was a little bit shocked initially by the by events, because the killing of George Floyd was something that I expected of police in other states, and not in Minnesota. But it happened here and based on the events that we saw unfold over the past few years, unfortunately the police in Minnesota, especially in Minneapolis, are racially biased just like they are in other states. To think someone would be murdered by the police for passing a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. If I had a counterfeit bill, chances are I would not even know I had it. I certainly would not think twice about checking money I got from a store as change. But I guess that is what it boils down to is that George Floyd's life was only worth twenty dollars. That is what he was killed for by the police. The same police who are supposed to be there to serve and protect the community. So, I think that the protesting put pressure on the community as they tried to seek change and hold those individuals responsible.

PC: So, what did you think when you saw the social justice signs? Did you have any connection with the images?

CC: I think those who put up signs in their yards were making statements about their views on the social justice, making their standpoint on racism clear, and making it clear they were not people who were motivated by hate. As a country, democrats and republicans are so polarized. I think that is intentional to keep people divided. Republicans are trying to convince their constituents that equal rights for people of color will somehow diminish their slice of the pie.

That adds to that division, and I have been disappointed because I thought we were further along than that. So, I was impressed with those people who had the conviction and courage to place those signs up because I think a lot of people also displayed Blue Lives Matter or Back the Blue signs too. I looked at those images and thought to myself “why do you have that sign in your yard? What is your message? What does that really mean to you?” Once again it seemed like the police were weaponized to a degree as an instrument of systematic racism. That is what those signs meant to me when people stuck them in their yards. I understand that the police have a purpose but often I see squad cars parked and they are waiting to give somebody a speeding ticket. In Italy nobody gets pulled over for speeding. You would have to be going a million miles an hour before the police would get in a car and chase you. They do not bother. They have computerized machines that capture the speed when drivers enter a speed zone and if the device determines the driver was going too fast, it takes a picture of the license plate, they track the driver down with a fine in the mail, and people pay it. I understand that local police departments use the money as revenue, but I think there are other issues they could be working on. When I was at Camp Ripley, there was a highway patrol state trooper academy and I would see them training, and the training looked a lot like military basic training. I do not see the need for military training if they are training to be police officers.

PC: Do you think that people in Sartell will continue to use signs to convey their messages?

CC: I see stuff on social media, but perhaps some people are old school and they do not use social media, but they want to make a statement that everyone will see in their neighborhood. I think about how it is to live next door to someone, and occasionally exchange pleasantries when outside, cutting the grass or whatever, but it is another thing to know their darker side that they

might be a Trump supporter. It is like the wheels in my head start turning. Have they always been a republican? Do they only support Trump because he is a republican? Or is there something about Trump that appeals to them? I am sure that it might work the other way when neighbors discover that I am a Biden supporter based on my yard sign. I am sure it works both ways. But I think about republicans, and Bush was no saint either. He committed this country to two wars that lasted decades and ultimately nothing came out of them, but Trump has a whole new following, and they are not just republicans choosing to display standard political yard signs.

PC: Have you seen any new signs or images recently?

CC: There is probably a season for yard signs and if they are up, they are probably buried under a few feet of snow, and we cannot see them now, but they may appear in spring. So, no I have not noticed any new signs. I am sure that as the snow melts people will get outside and start thinking about signage again.

PC: Wikipedia defines rhetorical power as the power to persuade, shape, and effect civic life, communities, and citizens' character, what kind of persuasive power did any of the signs or images have for you?

CC: I think, for me, my answer to that is biased because I did not grow up here. I grew up in England and I do not think that there was ever much emotion tied up in any political campaign. It would be information and discussions seen on TV trying to get people to vote for this person versus that person. But as far as a tool to persuade, the yard signs seem to be more tools for those who display them who might be looking to show others who they support, or they might be looking for comradery from others who support the same issues or candidates. The persuasion is

used less for the general public but more for a public of like-minded thinkers. People do not look to candidates anymore for their best interest or the best interest of the country. They look for the candidate of their party and they are unwilling to listen to the other candidate's ideas. I think this has caused the country a great deal of problems and division. The same approach was applied to the pandemic, which became a political tool. Neither side was willing to budge. It is like Putin in Ukraine, right now, he disagreed with what the West was doing, and consequently he has committed to war. These entrenched ideas of "I am right, and you are wrong and there is no middle ground" brings out the dark side of people. Maybe they believed that all along but kept quiet because it was not socially acceptable to voice those opinions but after Trump it seems that he empowered those opinions. So, some of us feel ostracized when we go into a store with a facemask on or we display a yard sign, and I find that annoying. People have the right to vote for Trump because it is a democracy. I feel at times that all the years I served in the military I was propping that view up and I am disgusted with many of the things we have seen during Trump's presidency and during the pandemic

PC: Well, thank you for your perspective, your story.

Chapter 6: Oral History of Kathy Muntifering

Sartell, Minnesota, March 2020 through November 2020

Interview Thursday, March 10, 2022, 10am

I have known Kathy for many years. Growing up, we attended the same schools in St. Cloud, and Kathy was my sister's friend. Years later we both live in Sartell where we raised our families. I often run into Kathy in the community, mostly in the grocery stores. Kathy is married and has raised three children, and she works as an early childhood educator in St. Cloud. I admire Kathy for her progressive, liberal views, and for standing up for her beliefs; and I was sad to learn in the interview that she feels like she should have done more because sometimes I feel the same way.

PC: Did you display any signs or images during the pandemic or political season of 2020?

KM: Yes, we had a Biden sign out, and we had a Black Lives Matter sign on our house. Our Biden sign was stolen twice, so, I stopped putting it out.

PC: Okay. Why did you display the signs?

KM: I think, because I live in a very conservative community, I wanted people around me to know that I did not feel the same way that they did. I thought, maybe if I display the signs then maybe other people who felt like I do would also display signs. Kind of a strength in numbers philosophy. It felt empowering to have a small voice in displaying my signs.

PC: Did you see any neighbors put signs out?

KM: Yes, down the block, I have one neighbor who did. I knew that she and I felt the same way, but we had maybe four houses with Trump signs on our block and then the two Biden signs. One

neighbor still has his Trump sign up, as if that is going to help anything. Every time it snows, he is very diligent about taking it out of the snow and putting it up a little higher.

PC: Okay, interesting.

KM: It is interesting.

PC: What other signs or images do you remember seeing in Sartell during the 2020 election period during the pandemic?

KM: I remember the sidewalk murals, or the sidewalk messages and I remember thinking I wish that I would have known about that because I would have participated in making those. I saw lots of vaccine mandate signs, and those did not make me feel comfortable. I was working in-person most of the time, so I had a direct route to work, and I was also caregiving for my parents, so I did not explore Sartell as much as you did. I stuck mostly to the main roads.

PC: Did you work throughout the entire pandemic?

KM: We were home twice, once for three months, and once for two months, but we were in-person for the rest of the time.

PC: Since you work with young children, can you talk a little bit about that?

KM: I do work with the unvaccinated population of five-years-old and under, so it was unsettling. Daily kids were pulled out of school, and I did not know if they were coming back. It was like there was a veil of secrecy, and it felt like I never knew who or what I was exposed to. And there was a constant facemask battle. Every day, I told kids “cover your nose” and parents sent their kids to school without facemasks and there were bus drivers who would not wear facemasks. There were even some teachers wearing facemasks down around their chins if they were, for instance, in the hall talking with one another. It felt like I did not know what to expect

and I was caregiving for my family and for my parents, at the same time. The time I spent with my parents was really limited because I did not know what I was exposed to. I was trying to keep them safe.

PC: For some generations, during the pandemic, it seems like we missed a large amount of time with family in trying to keep them safe.

KM: Right, and I really can see the cognitive decline in my mom because of the pandemic and social distancing. I think that isolation, and even now that she is home, she is alone because my dad is in a care facility, was harmful because I was not always available.

PC: I think that technology was a struggle for some people too. They were stuck in their house all day and they did not have the technology at their fingertips like I did.

KM: Yes, they could not understand it. My mom would never been able to do this Zoom conversation. She has vision issues herself and it would be impossible for her.

PC: Yes, I completely understand the limitations. Did you notice more signs during this timeframe?

KM: By the VA golf course there was a Black Lives Matter sign along with an All are Welcome and Biden signs. Their yard was lit up and it was comforting to drive by that house every day. I know that their signs were also getting stolen, but they were relentless, and the signs were replaced every single day. Those messages were so nice to see coming and going to work every day. Especially since right across the street from them was a host of Trump signs and flags. I would flip off one side of the street and applaud the other side. The billboards of Walz with his head up his butt were hard to see. They did big billboards across St. Cloud, and I hated seeing those, and I felt like it came from very undereducated and narrow perspectives. I cannot quite

understand why people were taking a stand on this when they willingly wear seatbelts, they are willingly licensed drivers, they are—well mostly—willingly licensed gun holders. We do all these things because we are supposed to, but this one little thing that keeps the world safe and could have ended—in my perspective—this pandemic so much earlier. Why is this the card that people were playing?

PC: Are you talking about vaccines or facemasks?

KM: Both. The facemask mandates. But the vaccines, too, in general. But probably the facemask mandates more. It was such a simple act, they did not have to put anything in their bodies, and all they had to do was cover their goddamn mouths and noses. And they probably could have saved themselves from a couple colds and flu by doing it if nothing else.

PC: Do you still wear a facemask at school?

KM: No, I stopped mostly because nobody is wearing facemasks anymore and I do want to be the odd person out. But my kids are so happy to see my face. I work with the ELL [English language learners] population, so they rely on facial expression and watching my lips to try to enunciate words. You know, I was really conflicted when the email came out. We got no notice. We got an email at 9:00pm the night before, and then the next day, no facemasks. So, I really did not have any time to even consider it. I did not even have time to reach out to my families and find out what their preferences were. I was wondering if I should tell their kids to take them off. Because they still had to wear them in the bus at that time. I did not have time to ask if they should take them off after the bus or if they should still wear them all day. Nobody knew what to do. I felt like that was handled very poorly and I hear Sartell did it similarly by sending out a message the night before and the next day it was optional. I think that was a slap in

the face to educators—who have worked diligently to keep kids safe and who have shown up for work every single day, knowing that they could get sick—not to share that with us or ask us our opinion. I did not like that.

PC: I think that educators, especially K12, have really been political pawns during the pandemic.

KM: For sure. They had all these things on paper, these protocols and everything, but then nothing was enforced. One day I had 13 out of 17 children gone. The classroom was not closed. They claim they contact traced, but then we were relying on parents to be honest about the illness. Missing work was a concern for families. I know kids were sent to school with active Covid symptoms.

PC: You said that you are not wearing a facemask at school because, basically, peer pressure?

KM: Yes, it kind of is, though, it is also facemask burnout and I am so hungry for joy again in the classroom. We had some joy, but it was not the same with the facemasks and not seeing faces. I want some normalcy. It has been almost two years, and that is a long time to teach in that manner.

PC: Especially with the population you work with. I think about my 14-year-old daughter, and I do not think wearing a facemask has been too much of a burden for her.

KM: No because everybody basically speaks the same language and looks the same. Except I would imagine, maybe some students might not be so kind about her continuing to wear a facemask if she is choosing to.

PC: Unfortunately, we cannot control those people. For me, I looked at the signs to communicate during a time when many of us were social distancing, did you make any connections with the signs?

KM: I guess I did not make any connections. But just knowing that there were people who felt like me, even though the opposite side was much more vocal, in my opinion. They had more flag-waving behaviors. I made judgements about who I wanted to associate with and who I did not want to, and that sort of thing. On some level, I was surprised with certain people who I would not have expected that kind of response from. I was not wishy washy about the pandemic. We did not go out, we did not go out for dinner, we did not go to any social events, we did not go to people's houses. We took every precaution we could and I just I know that there were many people who did not. I also learned about certain businesses I want to support. I did not want to support DB Searle's after seeing their anti-shutdown Facebook posts and their Blue Lives Matter flag in front of the restaurant. I loved going to Old Capital Tavern and they made some snide comments, and I felt like, I am done with you.

PC: Yes, I agree, Donella, who owns Jules' Bistro was good during the pandemic.

KM: My gosh, she went above and beyond to be safe. So, I will support her business. I would not go to places that did not require facemasks when things were bad. I never went so far as to wipe down my Amazon packages or put them in quarantine. We had instructions to ring the bell and we did not greet them at the door. Everything was paid for, including the tip, online. I felt like if businesses were coming into my home, and I was paying them that they should respect and honor my wishes in my home. They do not know my story. They do not know if I am battling breast cancer and they do not need to know.

PC: So, I assume that you are vaccinated?

KM: Yes.

PC: So, you mentioned that you do not wear a facemask at work. Do you wear one anywhere else?

KM: I will wear facemasks in stores. It is hypocritical since I do not at work, at school, but when I head into Costco, my facemask goes on.

PC: I think sometimes we must have faith that if kids are sick parents want them at home.

KM: And the numbers are significantly lower now and that is a comfort.

PC: I hope we are a point where transmission is manageable for most people. After all we do not stay home to avoid the flu.

KM: No, you are right. Unless I actively had the flu.

PC: When you saw non-political signs, what did you think and how did you feel about them?

KM: I think the Blue Lives Matter signs were the most annoying to me and the most frustrating. Then I saw every single telephone pole in town wrapped in a blue piece of tape. I do not know if you followed the [Sartell police cars issue](#) (Dalman)? They had Blue Lives Matter flags on their police cars, which was against the Hatch Act, and they had that on a government vehicle. There was a queer woman from Sartell, and she actively tried to get them to remove the flags from the squad cars and she was met with such resistance from our mayor, from the police chief, from the police department, and from the community. I cannot think of her name, but if you join that Benton/Stearns County progressives Facebook page, you can always go back and search for her name. She kept pushing to get them to take those decals off and they finally did under duress. Then suddenly overnight all those blue tape poles and signs came up.

PC: I saw the blue tape and I had no idea what it meant.

KM: They are still there, and nobody from the city is going to take them down.

PC: Well, when I get on my bike out this spring, I will take them down.

KM: Good.

PC: You mentioned that the mayor did nothing to stop this. I asked him to do an interview, and he agreed to, and he never showed up.

KM: That does not surprise me.

PC: He did not respond to my email or my Facebook message. I do not know where it will go. Maybe he looked through the materials and decided he did not want to deal with it.

KM: I guess he is probably thinking here comes another one. He is not an effective mayor whatsoever. He has no training, and he has no background. He probably thought this looks good on a piece of paper. Patrick, my son, knows him quite well because he was a volunteer firefighter with him.

PC: I saw that his term was coming to an end in 2022.

KM: Interesting that we have not heard anything, but maybe it is too early for a small-town mayoral race.

PC: I noticed a lot of the local signs in the last political season, but local politics are tough because you do not know their political beliefs on issues. In Sartell I assume that most candidates are conservative. I am disappointed that he backed down from the interview because I was hoping to get perspectives from all sorts of angles. He was mayor during a pandemic, and he must have something to say about that.

KM: Right. I always struggle with the school board races because I do know enough about them, so I understand.

PC: When you saw protest or social justice signs or images, what did you think and how did you feel about them?

KM: I felt like I wished that I was more like that, I wished that I had the courage to put some more signs out, and I wished that I would have protested. I did not do any of that. I felt like I had strong feelings, but I kept them to myself. So, I do not feel like I was an ally or an advocate. So, now in hindsight, that was one thing I wish I would have done differently.

PC: I feel the same way. It was still during the pandemic, and I did not know how safe it was to participate. I was scared.

KM: Right, and then I saw these huge crowds of people and I was not ready to participate in that.

PC: Do you believe that people in our community will continue to use signs and images to convey their messages?

KM: If the events are not polarizing at the time, I am going to say no. But if we have more Covid situations come up or if there ever is another—I am hoping there is not—murder of a Black person by police. But I do not think so. I take that back. If Biden runs again, and I am assuming he will, or if the democratic race is favorable, then I do feel like we will see a lot more republican signs. It is like they think go big or go home with their ginormous billboard type yard signs in their yards. Like that is going to sway a vote. It did not make very much sense.

PC: Have you seen any other images recently that share any messages about politics, the pandemic, or social justice?

KM: There is a house by Westwood. The guy who lives there had practically covered his house and windows with all these big signs that were mostly about no prayer rooms in school and anti-Muslim rhetoric. I do not know if it is still up, but he has had it on his house for years.

PC: Wow.

KM: I find it so silly that people are willing to go to those lengths, yet they just sit in their house and are not vocal about any of their beliefs. It is cowardly to put the sign up without sharing your position with anyone verbally because they are afraid that they will not be able to substantiate their argument.

PC: I think about cognitive dissonance.

KM: Yes.

PC: I have just one question left, and then if you have anything that you might want to add. Wikipedia defines rhetorical power as the power to persuade, shape, and effect civic life, communities, and citizens' character, what kind of persuasive power did these signs or images have for you?

KM: I was strong in my convictions, and I do not feel like these signs or flags swayed me one way or another. I felt more supported seeing more liberal signs that validated my opinions. I do not think any sign gave me pause and made me think that perhaps I should look at it in a different way. My biggest takeaway was that I thought, wow, a lot of people are really invested in this election in one way or another.

PC: Is there anything else that you want to add?

KM: I think about how people went above and beyond to help one another especially at the beginning like the cheering for the frontline workers and that sort of thing. It was affirming to

see that, but then it was sad that that declined so quickly. I think also about how hard teachers worked to try and keep education normal for kids, even though it was on a screen. Teachers dressed up in costumes and did elaborate lesson plans and created little classrooms with pictures of the children in the classroom, so the children still felt like they were connected to the teacher. I think it further affirms that teachers really are in it for the kids. They had their own struggles at home, but for their students they had their game face on to make it normal when it was not normal. It has been hard for all kinds of professions including those in education, healthcare, the restaurant industry, and more. They were thrust into the environment, and they wore facemasks serving people, but their patrons did not wear facemasks while they were eating. I think that there were certain groups of people that had it harder than others.

PC: Right, I feel so fortunate that I have been able to work from home.

KM: I would do that 365-days-a-year if I could.

PC: Thank you for your interview. I appreciate the conversation.

Chapter 7: Oral History of Lynda Schulte

Sartell, Minnesota, March 2020 through November 2020

Interview Saturday, March 12, 2022, 10am

I met Lynda at work when we both worked for Liturgical Press at St. John's University. Lynda was friendly and outgoing, and we often walked together over our breaks. Our friendship continued when I quit working at LitPress, and we kept in touch over social media. On a few occasions, we disagreed on political and/or pandemic issues; however, we respect one another, and we listen to each other before making judgements. Lynda told me that she changed churches and she is now attending The Waters Church in Sartell, which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

LS: So, what I would like to share with you first is about the pandemic. When it was first announced that we were going to be home from work, I was excited about having the opportunity to work from home. I have always wanted to work from home. But the more I heard about the pandemic, I was confused by the information. At first, it sounded like people were going to die if they got Covid, and that was the whole basis of people working from home. But then more and more people survived Covid. Once summertime arrived, people really wanted to get out, and so did I. I would go for walks, play pickleball with people, and do normal activities like getting together with my friends' group every couple of months. I never stopped living life. A lot of people were scared to get together with people, and I had faith that God was going to protect me. If I got Covid, I felt like I would get through it because I knew a lot about my health and how to stay healthy. I had confidence that if I got Covid I would be fine. My granddaughter

was born in June that year and we saw her every single month. When my daughter-in-law's sister had a baby in October, she had all these rules so then my daughter-in-law implemented all the same rules with everybody, including us. I was not able to see them very often. I saw them for Thanksgiving. My husband and I got Covid tests, and they were negative, to make sure it was safe. I told my son our tests were negative, and he told me later that day that he was not sure if they would come. I told him that we jeopardized ourselves getting these tests and they were negative, and fortunately they did come for Thanksgiving. They came over for six or seven hours which surprised me. I thought they would come and go after a short amount of time, but they stayed the whole day, which was great. But I did not celebrate Christmas with them that year. I celebrated with my daughter and her family, and then my son and his family came on Zoom. We sent all their presents to their house, so we could watch them open them on Zoom. That was quite different. Hopefully, I will never have to do that again. Then in July last year, my office told me that I had to come back but not everybody had to come back. Some people got to continue working from home. Only customer service had to return in person and since I was in customer service, I had to come back to help run the show room with Diane. I do not like the show room because I cannot even find the books. I was not happy. Plus, since I did not have the vaccine, I had to wear a facemask. I would be one of the only ones wearing a facemask. I asked if I had to wear a facemask on the phones or in my cubicle and they said yes. I started to look for another job. There had been a lot of transition and I had put up with quite a bit over the past 31 years while I was there, but to me this was the last straw. I did not want the vaccine. I felt like it was going to be required when college students started to come back in the fall, and sure enough two weeks after I left, the vaccine was mandated. I feel like God moved me to another job

because he knew. I started a job at Meduit in Sartell, and there were no facemask requirements there. It was great and I felt like I could live life like a normal person. I do not believe in all the mandates that were coming out, so I was happy there at first. Then I ended up getting Covid in November. I thought about this long and hard before I decided not to get the vaccine and I spoke with my doctors to see what my options were with my asthma. They said I could get monoclonal antibodies if I got Covid. But when I got Covid, it was a low-grade fever, and I had a cough for about a week, and I was fine after about 10 days. I went back to work, and at that time, they started requiring facemasks when employees were not at their desks. I assumed a lot of people were getting Covid because they had someone come in spray for Covid. There was approximately 200 people who work there at that time. When I started there were not that many employees, but while I was there, they hired a lot of people. Everyone was sitting in the building and the doors were locked so everyone was coming and going from the same place with lots of germs and I am sure that was where I picked up Covid. So, after I recovered, I thought now I could see my granddaughter because I had the antibodies and I also got some monoclonal antibodies, so there should be no excuses. My son did not want me to visit until January because he and his wife wanted to make sure that I did not give them Covid before they went to Christmas with her family. We got together in January. It was nice; this was the first time we had Christmas with everyone in two years. I also saw him the week after because my granddaughter was given a slide for Christmas and they could not fit it in their vehicle, so I was able to deliver the slide and visit. We all had a great time. But in February, even though it was within 90 days since I recovered from Covid, he would not let me come over because he said that people with the vaccine and people who recovered from the Delta variant were getting the Omicron variant.

He did not trust that he and his family would not be exposed to Covid. So, we did Duo calls, which was like video chatting, so my granddaughter could see me. She is 18-months now, and hopefully by summer I will be able to see her more.

PC: It sounds like things are getting a little bit better. It sounds like your kids' risk levels are higher than yours and that is hard. Covid is dividing families when they do not agree on what measures to take in trying to mitigate the virus, just like people in society who do not agree on politics and social issues, including health and science. When we were scheduling the interview, you mentioned that your daughter is getting married in March, is that still taking place?

LS: Yes, she is getting married next Saturday. She has been great about Covid, and we have gotten together throughout the year. I had her two kids for the whole weekend, and I am glad to have that connection with them because relationships are so important.

PC: Right.

LS: My granddaughter is only 18 months. I hope and feel that the pandemic is over or getting toward the end. As summer approaches I want to live my life again and get together with friends and family, and we can even hang out outside. My granddaughter might not remember much because she is a baby now and the best years are still to come.

PC: That is a good way to look at it. Now I am going to ask you a few questions about the pandemic, political, and protest signs we saw in Sartell. Did you display any signs or images during the pandemic or political season of 2020?

LS: No, and I never have. That is not something I would typically do.

PC: Okay. What signs or images do you remember seeing in Sartell during that time?

LS: Well, I saw a lot of political signs, of course, with the election. But there were also signs that people hung up about not tolerating hate, that they welcome everybody, and those types of signs. I really did not notice too many signs about the pandemic because I did not want to believe that the pandemic was still here. I dismissed those sorts of signs because that was not something I wanted to acknowledge. Sometimes I saw people had chalk drawings on their driveways, which was cute. I enjoyed seeing those sorts of images because I thought that they were getting outside and having fun.

PC: During that timeframe, did you notice more of these kinds of displays and images in our community?

LS: The one I remember seeing more of is the George Floyd signs. People were posting more about Black Lives Matter, and other social justice issues that I did not see much of before. Yes, I noticed more signs than before.

PC: Okay, these were the only signs that were new to you?

LS: Yes, I saw Stop the Mandate signs, but not a lot of them. I have always believed in medical freedom. What works for one person, does not necessarily work for another because everybody is different. I strongly believe in global medical freedom.

PC: How did you feel when you saw those new signs we never saw before?

LS: I agreed with the Stop the Mandate signs because I did not feel it was right for employers to mandate vaccines and employees would lose their jobs if they did not comply. I can understand for the medical workers. I asked myself, why are so many people opposed to the vaccines? There must be something, and nobody knew what the long-term effects were because they were new. And I also asked myself, why do so many employees not agree? Day in and day out I heard

about people who were in the hospital from the vaccinations. I believe the vaccines should not be mandated and it should be a choice because some people should not get the vaccine because they have certain health conditions.

PC: Okay. For me, I looked at the signs to communicate during a time when many of us were social distancing. What unique connections did you make with the signs about the pandemic and social distancing? What original signs or images do you recall?

LS: I really did not look at the signs for communicating. I know people were looking for support for Black Lives Matter. After all we are all connected, and it is good to be aware that there is disparity between different cultures but that was about all I connected with regarding the signs.

PC: When you saw political signs, what did you think and how did you feel about them?

LS: Well, I thought they were like any other year. I have always known the democrats wanted more of a socialistic world, which I do not agree with. My sister-in-law, my only sister-in-law on Tim's side, she totally did not agree with me on Facebook regarding our political views. I tried to tell her that we do not have to agree on issues and that we do not have to even discuss those issues, and that we love one another because we are family, and our opinions should not divide us. But she unfriended me on Facebook a couple months later.

PC: Well, I know that you and I have disagreed, but I will never unfriend you on Facebook, okay? Because sometimes we learn from one another when we hear someone else's side, and we can think about it critically.

LS: Yes, thank you. Tim's mom died in 2020 and we had a memorial and funeral this year because we could not do it during the pandemic. It was in September, and I remember being in church and my sister-in-law approached me and said that she would not hug me because I was

not vaccinated. I thought that might set the tone for the whole weekend, but we went to the Mall of America the next day and we were all wearing facemasks and hanging out and having a good time. Then before she left, she gave me a hug. All I could think was did she forget I was not vaccinated? I don't know... it seems like the rules change every day. Even in church, I would wear a facemask inside and then when I was in the pew, I would take it off. My daughter-in-law kept her facemask on the whole entire time, which was fine but then we went outside, and we were in close proximity I put my facemask back on, but they all took their facemasks off because we were outside. I thought, what the heck, we were still exchanging air outside. I get confused by all the changing recommendations.

PC: I think that we did not get clear recommendations about how face-masking really works until recently. Other countries had the face-masking information down and the facemasks were available. I think because of the mixed messages we got, it might have something to do with the hesitancy some people have about wearing facemasks and their effectiveness. Did you ever wear a cloth facemask?

LS: Yes, but I did not wear those much. I wore the ones with copper in them or the ones that were purchased from a store.

PC: I think it is also based on time spent with people and the exposure without face-masking. It sounds like you are compliant about wearing facemasks. Are you in favor of the facemasks or not?

LS: No, I am not pro-facemask because I have heard from the beginning that they do not work. There were not even enough facemasks at the beginning for the healthcare workers and they were reusing them. Then the science was that they work so we were supposed to wear them. But

I heard that they work maybe 10% of the time. I just do not have a clear understanding. With the facemasks, people are breathing in their own oxygen, and I heard mixed messages about that, so it just is not clear if they help or not.

PC: But if you are required to wear one, you will put one on?

LS: I will do it if I am required. Coborn's wanted customers to wear them, so I did out of respect, but the last couple months, I have not. I am working at a new place, and we do not wear facemasks, but we are six feet apart. It feels normal. So, when I go to the store I am reminded every time that people are still wearing facemasks that there is still a pandemic. I am all about getting on with life and moving forward because it probably will never fully go away.

PC: Are you okay with other people wearing facemasks?

LS: If they want to wear facemasks, that is up to them. I have friends who do, and it is totally their choice. I do not care what they do, but do not force it on me.

PC: Do you believe people in our community will continue using signs to get their messages out?

LS: Yes, I think they will because for so long we were told not to get together in large groups and now some people are still apprehensive. There will be 125 people at my daughter's wedding. My daughter-in-law is coming to the wedding, but at first, she was not sure, and she would not come to the bridal shower in January. I think people will still use signs because they want to communicate with people who are perhaps still too scared to gather in large groups. There are all kinds of people. You know, my son wants his 18-month-old to get the vaccine, but few kids have issues with Covid at that age. He said he does not want to take a week or two off work to care for

her if she gets sick. I said that they both have vacation, and they can take turns. He is also working from home two or three days a week.

PC: Is she in daycare?

LS: Yes, she is in daycare. I reminded him that at daycare he has no idea where the other parents and their kids had been, and I asked him why was I the threat? He let us come visit during the pandemic once a month when we could quarantine for two weeks because I was working from home and Tim was laid off. But then when I started working back in the office that all came to a stop. Now he has to go back to the office this week, and facemasks are not required so he is a little bit anxious.

PC: He could wear a facemask if he wanted to though, or not?

LS: I imagine he probably could, but if no one else is wearing a facemask, is it really going to make a difference? I do not know.

PC: I think that wearing a facemask sometimes might give people comfort or it might be a coping mechanism. We have all had to become more resilient and if that makes somebody feel better, maybe that is not bad. Do you know a lot of people who got Covid?

LS: I do. Almost all my friend circles did except one. I had a friend who had some medical issues and her doctor told her if she got Covid she probably would not make it. She said that God was going to protect her, and she was out more than I was, she traveled three times on airplanes, she attended a few vendor events in the summer, and she never got Covid. She wears a facemask if she has to but if it is not required, she does not wear a facemask. God protected her and he kept her safe.

PC: The other friends who got Covid, did they all assume they would survive?

LS: I do not know anybody who died from Covid. In my family of 10, only my brother, my sister, and I did not get vaccinated; and in my immediate family, other than my grandkids who are too young, I was the only one who did not get vaccinated. So, I have a lot of pressure from family. They get on my case about getting vaccinated. But I prayed about it and God steered me away from the vaccine every time. I decided that I need to pray and obey. God kept me safe through having Covid once. I know people who have had it twice. I know a man who was on a ventilator for eight weeks, and eventually he got off and he was in a rehab facility for a while. Now he is at home, and he is recovering, and he could do physical therapy for the first time last week. I spoke to him last night, and I asked him if he wished he had gotten the vaccine, and he said no, he will never get it because he does not believe in it. He went through hell and back, and I would have probably wished I had the vaccine. But you just never know because there are so many people dying from the vaccine after they get it, there are people getting sick from the vaccine; it is a crapshoot. You are damned if you do, and you are damned if you don't.

PC: You said that your husband is vaccinated. Do you respect each other's decisions regarding the vaccine? It is interesting that one person is vaccinated, and other is not.

LS: Well, I have been in the health and wellness arena for approximately six years. I have learned a lot about how to take care of my body, health, and wellness. On the other hand, my husband does not follow a health plan. He likes to drink sugary drinks and eat junk food. I know he will pay for it one day. He does not get sick very often but when he does, he gets very sick. I keep telling him, one day this is going to catch up with you, but he tells me he will be well preserved from eating all the preservatives.

PC: So, you respect each other's decisions?

LS: Yes, although he said at the beginning after he was vaccinated that he wished I would get vaccinated. I told him I wished he would take supplements and care about his health, and he never brought up the vaccine again.

PC: Agree to disagree. That is good. Did he get Covid when you had it in November?

LS: No, he did not. He owns a comic store downtown St. Cloud, and he would work at his store in the basement during the day while I had Covid. During the whole Covid shut down, he did curbside delivery. He was laid off from Pepsi during that time.

PC: I did not know.

LS: Yes, for approximately two months. So, he would go to the store and work there because he could be by himself. He had time to organize our basement which was awesome. We have a different take on health, and he does not pay attention to his health as much as I do. I try to get my exercise, eat healthy, and take supplements so that my immune system can handle illnesses. He probably has high blood pressure; he will not tell me his numbers. He is probably at higher risk for serious illness.

PC: I am glad he did not get Covid even though he was living with you. Did you think that maybe the vaccine works?

LS: I do not know because there are so many people getting Covid who are vaccinated, like half of my family; of all my siblings that got the vaccine, every one of them got Covid, even my nieces. Maybe it helped so they did not get severe cases. At the beginning, vaccines were supposed to help stop transmission, but the more variants that came out, I feel the vaccine became less effective, especially with the last variant, Omicron.

PC: Do you know which variant you had?

LS: I got the Delta variant. I think it sounds like the Delta was the worst of variants. But I did not have to go to the hospital. I had my diffusers with my respiratory oils running all the time because I knew I needed to keep my oxygen levels up with my asthma. So, I had tools to keep me going.

PC: What did you say that you took, monoclonal antibodies?

LS: Yes, monoclonal antibodies. They were huge in Florida, and they were raving about them for months and months. With Delta, that was how they kept people out of the hospital. If people had any risk factors, they qualified for the treatment. The doctors told me I would qualify for it if I got Covid. Back then they could prescribe it. I feel like now there are more worthwhile therapies than last year.

PC: Did you take the monoclonal antibodies?

LS: I did. They can be taken up to 10 days and after 10 days, they will not work. A nurse told me that at day 10, patients either get much worse or they are over Covid. I did not have any of the congestion or coughing, I had a low-grade fever at first and I thought this is nothing, but by day six the congestion and coughing started, and that is why I took the antibodies on day eight. It still took a couple of days for my fever to break. Then I went back to work. My fever came back a couple days later and I went to the doctor to find out why and to make sure I was not contagious. He said I had the start of Covid pneumonia, he did an X-Ray and a few other tests, and he gave me medication. After two weeks I had another X-Ray to make sure it was better, and I felt fine. I felt like after not taking medication for years, that it took a toll on my body, so I started to double up on probiotics because after that I got a cold. I turned a corner a few weeks later and I was feeling fine.

PC: Are you feeling good today?

LS: Yes. I exercise. I lost my smell for two weeks, but I have no lasting effects from Covid. I can do everything I did before, I have energy, I play pickleball, and I can do other exercise.

PC: I am glad it did not affect you long term. Now it seems that transmission is low.

LS: Because the cases were going up in December and January, we were not sure what the Covid rules would be in March 2022. About a year ago my daughter saved the upcoming March date for her wedding, and she made sure she could cancel if necessary because earlier in the pandemic, people lost money and they did not have options to make plans when events were postponed. So, she is very blessed that she can have people together again. It feels like Covid is winding down. For the last couple weeks, I have been paying attention to where I go and who I spend time with because I do not want to go to the wedding and be sick or contagious; that is in the back of my mind, but it is not dominating my life in any way, shape, or form.

PC: I am glad you are feeling better. I have one last question, Wikipedia defines rhetorical power as the power to persuade, shape, and effect civic life, communities, and citizens' character. What kind of persuasive power did any of the signs or images have for you?

LS: When I saw Biden signs, I thought I hope he does not get voted in because this world is going to go in the wrong direction. I see that happening now. So, for me it was frustrating to see his name plastered on different people's lawns. As for the Stop the Mandate signs, I hope they were persuasive for some people, and that they investigated the vaccines. Did you know that people were not allowed to talk about supplements or other treatments that might help people? The government basically said that was spreading misinformation. That was frustrating. As for political signs, I got frustrated. I know that people do not like Trump, and they were just voting

for Biden because of that without really looking into the issues and what the candidates believed in. I had my mind made up, but I tried not to worry because I knew that Trump was not going to be elected because there were so many people who did not like him. My sister said she would vote for anyone as long as it was not Trump.

PC: I think that that happened in the past two elections. It seems like politics cycle; throughout our lives we have had republican and democrat presidents rotate regularly. If it was always one or the other, there would be upheaval and one side would never be satisfied. I think that is democracy.

LS: Yes. It seems like every four years the politics cycle depending on who is in office.

PC: Thank you for your oral history. I appreciate it.

Chapter 8: Oral History of Tara Berger

Sartell, Minnesota, March 2020 through November 2020

Interview Thursday, March 17, 2022, 10am

Tara lives in my neighborhood with her husband and two children. We are close friends. Tara graduated from St. Cloud State with a biomedical degree last semester. Throughout the pandemic we had a few get togethers, bike rides, and by-chance visits. During the interview I could sense how much these events affected Tara and her family, and there were a few emotional moments. When editing this interview, I also had a few emotional moments.

PC: Did you display any signs or images during the pandemic or political season of 2020?

TB: I do not think that we did. We live in a part of the neighborhood that really does not get a lot of traffic. When it comes to local signs, people do not stop by and ask for us to display their signs. But I think there is plenty of traffic with the schools right there. What we had was supportive chalk drawings. My kids are both in hockey and hockey season is usually crazy. They practice four nights a week between the two of them, they play two to three games a weekend between the two of them, and we feel like we just go, go, go from November until March. In March 2020 we were at a tournament for my daughter when we heard that Covid was in Minnesota—it was in Rochester—and we were in Rochester. Everything was shut down, and we headed home before the state tournament started, which was sad. A lot of people, mainly parents, thought the government was over-reacting. I just held my tongue. There were too many emotions. When I first heard about Covid, I thought it would not make it to Minnesota, like when SARS did not make it here. I was not going to get too worried about it. Unfortunately, that did

not happen this time. As a scientist with a biomedical degree, it would have been foolish of me to think that this was not real, but I could not convince other people. We packed up and we came home, and we went from go, go, go to nothing but sitting in our house. All four of us, which was a little bit stressful for our kids because they were worried. They were very worried. We were worried. There were so many unknowns. Our kids were yanked out of school. My spring break was extended multiple times, which I was grateful for because I needed a break. I went from being in school eight hours a day in four different classes, and studying with these groups of people, doing our homework together, helping each other out, with tutoring services available, teachers available, to I was at home, and I had to figure it out for myself. My kids were the same way when they did not go to school. It was hard on them socially, even my son who is not extremely sociable. He was 11, almost 12, and it was very hard for him not to see his friends. We had an old iPod, and we set up an email account for him so he could Facetime with his friends, and he could text them, and talk to them, because we did not think he was ready for a phone, but we felt it was important for him to be able to communicate with his friends. My daughter had a phone, so she was also able to communicate with her friends. I am a very sociable person, and I spent a lot of time on Snapchat with my classmates, because that was the platform that they used the most, to just check in on them and see how they were doing. We were just trying to figure out how we were going to move forward with school and life. When it got nice outside, we started taking walks and we started to see the hearts everywhere. We saw hearts in all the windows, and we even saw them in senior homes. I thought about how people could be so lonely. A lot of times seniors were without their significant other, who might have been at home, or they might have passed away, and it was very sad for me thinking about how lonely and

isolated they were. [This was an emotional moment for Tara.] All the hearts were uplifting. They made me feel better inside. The hearts made my heart feel things that I had not felt for a long time. Because I think the last time, I felt this feeling of coming together in our country was after 9/11. I remember being so moved by how our country came together because our country is such a mixture of different ideas and thoughts and tolerances. So, seeing everybody come together after 9/11 was very moving and powerful for me. And 20 years later it happened again for a different reason, and I felt that same powerful feeling inside of me. I was so proud of our country for coming together. People were trying to lift each other up, even though not everybody believed Covid was even real. But people saw all the good coming out instead of just the negative. The negative always gets the most attention. And even though the positive is there, no one sees it unless they were looking for it. Our kids really wanted to help spread joy. The kids made chalk drawings on the driveway that went out to the street. If the drawings were rubbed off, the kids would go back out and fill them in with chalk. It gave them a purpose. They felt like they were helping people feel better about everything that we were going through as a community, and I think they saw how I felt about it. That was most of the signage in our yard. I am trying to think if we had any signs for the local elections, but I do not remember. We are not yard sign people in the first place, I guess, and I do not know why. I guess maybe because we grew up in the country and nobody could see the signs out there. It was just not a thing people did where we grew up. Sometimes we are asked to put up a hockey registration sign, but I do not really go out and look for signs to display.

PC: One of the reasons I decided on this subject was because I was overwhelmed with the thought that the whole entire world was experiencing the pandemic at the same time. Every single human being on this planet was dealing with the pandemic at the same time.

TB: When thinking about the whole world, thanks to technology I saw signs and images posted on social media from all over. A friend from my gym has a daughter living in Spain and she sent her mom a video of people out on their balconies clapping for the health care workers. It was very moving and touching. I did feel like I was connected to someone who was halfway across the world, even though I never saw them before, and I did not know them. It really felt like we were all in this together and I do not think that happens very often. That was why that was so powerful, and I would like to see that happen more over good events.

PC: What signs or images do you remember seeing during the 2020 election period, during the pandemic?

TB: Well, every election year, especially presidential elections, I am always amazed at how one party has the most gigantic signs in the whole wide world. And the other party is ok with medium-size signs that fulfill the same purpose. I am amazed. To be honest, I have only voted down one side of the ballot once. I usually vote for who I think is going to do the best job. Politicians do not get my vote just because they are of the political side that I prefer. If I do not think that they are going to do the best job, and I think someone else is more in the middle, they will get my vote. They do not just get my vote because they are a democrat. With that said, I have voted for democrats mostly in my life. I think there was twice where I did not in presidential elections. I find it interesting, and I am not judging what people like and what they believe in or whatever, but I do not understand these giant flags. I only saw Trump flags. I did

not see Biden flags or Hillary flags, or anybody from Congress. The flags were unavoidable. Oh, and I love internet TV. I love streaming because I do not have to watch ads because they are just negative. Please give me the true facts. I do not want to hear all this trash talk. It is not helpful. When ads get over the top, I do not even listen. Fair media sounds like something that does not actually exist. The ads do not inform people like the media is supposed to inform people and be non-biased. That is hard to find now, especially in the age of the Internet. So, it is hard to find the real issues regarding the candidates that I might care about. I saw a lot of presidential signs. There were way more presidential signs than local signs for congress. I barely remember seeing any because our community was taken over by Biden and Trump signs. And not just signs, and not just flags, but bumper stickers and decals. I would be driving down the street and I would see—again my kids are older and can read—decals on the back of the truck that said, “Fuck Biden.” Wow! I had kids in the car, and it was not like they had never heard that word before but do all kids need to be subjected to having to read that vulgar language on someone's vehicle? If someone does not like Biden, fine. I am not going to argue that they should think differently. That is up to them, but I just find that wrong. I did not see anybody with a “Fuck Trump” bumper sticker or decal. Although I think a lot of people probably felt it as much as people felt it the other way. I feel like democrats did not put up vulgar signs. I did see the signs that said “Bye Don” (see figs. 24 and 25) and the sign with hair that said “NOPE” (see fig. 26). But those signs were not offensive or vulgar, they were light humor and to the point. They did not come out as nasty. Or the sign with Governor Walz with his head up his butt. My kids were like, what the heck was that, and there was no way to avoid it because it was on a giant billboard by the MAC. Some signs seemed to just go off the deep end and I as soon as I saw them, I did

not even want to know what they were talking about because I did not believe it was going to be good information. I felt like it would be distorted information that would discredit the other candidate. Facebook, the Internet, and social media exacerbated the situation, and they tore people apart after everyone was together. Then George Floyd was murdered and that also divided people. What else happened? I feel like there were three things that happened in this short period of time... We all came together as a country and a community, and then suddenly we were torn apart. Then as the pandemic continued, people got sick of being stuck in their houses and not being able to go anywhere and see each other and it affected their mental health. People seemed to display more and more signs because that was the only way they felt like they could communicate. I am trying to teach my kids tolerance and to be good people and to give people the benefit of doubt and to always look at the whole picture. We cannot look at something, especially social media, and see it at face value. That does not exist anymore for the most part. And then I would drive by a truck that said, "Fuck Biden." Seeing that displayed was the total opposite act so I talked with them about people's freedoms and how we can do it in a different manner. I also had a discussion with my kids about that when George Floyd was killed. We had the news on, and the kids could not help but see what happened. They knew that an African American person was killed by a police officer... Wow! I was not ready to have that conversation with them because I felt that they were not quite mature enough for it yet, but I could not avoid it. I felt like it made them grow up too fast. The Black Lives Matters and the "In This House" signs, we started seeing those around and then we would tie those together with what was going on in the world. Then there was hate crimes against a lot of people just because of who they loved or what color they were or what they believed in. All these signs opened a lot

of conversations that we had with our kids. We were always together too, so we had more time to explain. That was another thing with the pandemic, we were together all the time, and we started to spend that time together not staring at the TV or our phones. We had board games out every night, and we thought about what was important in life. My kids are super important in my life. I stayed home with them for ten years. I thought about how when I was in school, and I hardly saw them except for when we were doing homework in the same room. They are going to grow up, and I do not want to stop them, but I think the pandemic helped me realize what I was missing in my life. I love to be social, but it is the quality of the friends that I have that matters to me versus the quantity. My friends each brought such a wonderful piece to my life, and that is why I love them. Not being able to see them and not really communicating with them other than talking to them halfway across the street while I was at the end of my driveway. During the pandemic that brought me so much joy. I really took it for granted that I could go out for a beer, or out for dinner, or sit on the deck, or go for a walk with my friends. So, these were good learning opportunities for our kids. I would go to a store and see a sign that facemasks were required (see figs. 27 and 28) but people were not wearing facemasks, or they were not wearing them properly. I did not go out for three months, I did not even go to a store. Andy went to the stores, and he picked stuff up. Someone told me that one time someone was yelling at people because they were wearing facemasks and telling them they did not need to wear them like they were above the law. The sign was there for a reason, and it needed to be followed whether they believed in it or not. It was a rule. It was no different than not shooting a neighbor because that is the law! That is a bit drastic, I guess.



Figure 24. Byedon with hair, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 25. Byedon 2020, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 26. NOPE with hair, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 27. Face Mask Required, Coborn's, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 28. Face Mask, Edward Jones, Sartell, Minnesota

PC: I think about seatbelt laws.

TB: Yes, but people do not like being told what to do. I do not know if people felt that way about all the other signs that were out: political signs, Black Lives Matter signs, We Love Everybody signs, and inclusiveness signs. When I finally started going back to stores, it was as if people were like I am not going to wear a facemask. I walked into a store and there was a person walking around without a facemask on, and it was obvious they did not forget. I have forgotten and then I noticed that everybody had one on and I would pull it out of my pocket and put it on. It did not take me long to realize that I forgot. Yesterday, I went back to campus for something, and the sign said facemasks were required so I put the facemask on, and I walked into the

meeting, and everyone said you do not have to wear a facemask anymore. So, I took it off. I felt comfortable taking it off.

PC: I think that was a problem with facemask requirements. So many places have old signs up and the masking requirements were hard to figure out. When we went to Philadelphia for Thanksgiving we could not tell if they were required or not, so we wore them. Molly's friends' parents have told her she does not need to wear a facemask because they were not required but she wanted to wear one, so I had to start explaining to them that if she wants to wear a mask that was okay and that she knew what the requirements were. I think that we need to learn to accept that some people are going to continue to wear facemasks.

TB: Yes, for whatever reason. Maybe they get sick easily, or maybe they are scared, or maybe they have gotten used to the facemasks. It took Nicholas two weeks to stop wearing a facemask at school before he felt okay. Also, he wore a facemask for so long that when he came home from school, he would still have it on. I would say "take your facemask off, you are in the house now." But when Ella came home from school, she tossed it in the trash right away and that was it. When they stopped requiring them at school, Ella did not think twice. She said she did not want to put another facemask on. They had to wear facemasks when they went back to play hockey. I cannot imagine trying to breathe through the facemask because it was thicker than a surgical mask because they were not available, and these hooked into their cages so they would not have to worry about taking them on and off. But they would have rather played hockey wearing a facemask than not being able to play at all. It was their choice to try to go back to a somewhat normal life.

PC: Kids were way more adaptable than adults during the pandemic.

TB: Yes. It was a few months ago and Nicholas said to me “Mom, I feel like life is getting back to normal” while we were sitting there together playing a game. “You do not have homework, I can play hockey again, and I do not have to wear a facemask when I am playing hockey.” He added that he was going to school every day and he felt that life might be normal again. Wow! It had been almost two years. It did not go by fast, but at the same time it did. It was interesting to hear that he felt life was not normal. Some of us got used to it and I thought this was how life was going to be. Not him. He was holding out for life to be normal again.

PC: I think it was particularly hard for kids and those who live alone. We kept Molly home last year while all her friends attended school in person when they could. Sometimes I regret it, but we were just trying to keep her safe because she was too young to be vaccinated.

TB: Yes. My friend is a doctor, and her son plays hockey with my son. Their team was exposed to Covid, and we all felt guilty. We were all trying to do what we felt was right for our kids as far as like their mental health and what they needed. She said that there was no right answer, and that we were all just trying to do the best we could. She was right in the thick of Covid, seeing people die daily, but she felt for her kid that it was best for him to be back with other people trying to be as safe as possible with facemasks. But there were times when they did not have their facemasks on properly, or they were on the bench close to someone who had Covid, and they did not even know it. We all tried to do the best that we could, and I do not think we should judge one another.

PC: I think I took more precautions than a lot of people and that was because I could, and my life was set up so I could work from home. When I go to stores, I run into people and I have my facemask on, and they ask me if I want them to put on a facemask too to talk with me. It is

weird, I do not care if they wear facemasks or not, and I am not going to judge them. I think there is guilt to do what is right, but at the same time, it is hard when not everybody is doing the same thing. I respect that people do not wear facemasks. I do not really care. I think everyone is so uncomfortable about facemasks because they were politicized along with the vaccines.

TB: I agree that people do not know if they should wear masks when others are, or they feel people are judging them if they are wearing a facemask or if they are not wearing a facemask. I was in my capstone course in January, so Covid had been around for nine months, and my group was assigned a disease and it was Covid. We had to present on a Monday, and right before we presented over the weekend, the vaccines were given emergency use authorization. So, we had to quickly change our project and our research. Two incidents happened, the Johnson & Johnson got approved over the weekend and so we had to change some more research in our slides for that half of the presentation. I felt like I was very informed because this was a two-day presentation. I was as in-depth as I could be about a disease that had been around for literally one year. I felt like I had to know a lot about it. But still when it was time for the vaccines that we were all eligible for, I had to step back and think about it. I saw all these signs that vaccines were available here and there, and then the vaccine mandates started. And I felt like, hold on a second, I thought we had freedoms, and I was thinking of medical freedom and the right to die with dignity, people have the choice to write their own living will if they do not want to be left on a ventilator or be resuscitated if they have a heart attack. But now we were told that we must have this vaccine that was still under emergency use at that time, or some people might lose their jobs. I was very conflicted because I had all this information and this knowledge. I support childhood vaccines 100%. I also had an infectious disease class and I learned about how fast

measles came back when people did not get their kids vaccinated, and I learned how dangerous measles can be to a child. People make decisions without being completely educated. I think a lot of times it is also false information. People are scared because of the unknown. I think people felt that about the Covid vaccine too, and I felt that way too. I thought, as a person who had medical and scientific knowledge, I was struggling trying to decide about the vaccine, and how did others feel? Although, I felt like it was my duty to help the world because I know a lot of my friends in healthcare felt it was their duty to help fight Covid. In the end that was what I ended up choosing; I had to be part of the solution. I have a medical condition and I spoke to my doctor about it and there was one vaccine that there was not enough research on the risk of blood clots, and I have a high risk of blood clots. I took a few weeks to think about it. I am on medication to prevent blood clots, and I wondered if that would be enough. I also did not know what to think about the mandates and I felt that people needed to make their own decisions. Then I also thought if people had not waited so long, maybe we would not be where we were right now. But it was hard for me to justify forcing someone into something that they were not comfortable with.

PC: I know that people in the medical field had to get the vaccine, but the other mandates that I know of were like at St. Cloud State where they gave employees the option to get vaccinated or test weekly. I also know of a few people who had the option to get vaccinated or wear a facemask at work. I know a woman who quit her job because she did not want to do either. But I do not know of any mandates outside of healthcare, but I do not doubt they exist.

TB: I have a friend whose employer was under federal regulation, so he had to get vaccinated or test weekly. He spoke to his wife, and they were on the fence about vaccines, but they decided to get vaccinated.

PC: At St. Cloud State, the testing for unvaccinated employees was on campus and St. Cloud State paid \$59 for each test for approximately 200 employees.

TB: Yes, I know a business owner who said it was going to cost thousands of dollars a month to test the employees who decided not to get vaccinated. That is a lot of money if you are not a large corporation. So, I think that, you know, there was a lot of financial strain on businesses probably with that too. I do not know how many private businesses were requiring people to be vaccinated. Andy's employer implemented one because they have federal contracts and employees have to travel to all these cities that required vaccination. If they could not travel, how could they do their jobs? Some people got exemptions for religious reasons. They probably had not been to church in 20 years, but some people found ways around it. I heard of one healthcare setting where if employees were in the birthing years, they could ask for an exemption. I asked my doctor why people were worried about pregnancy and the vaccine, and we got into a conversation about other reasons that were causing reproductive issues such as chemicals, not from the Covid vaccine, and I enjoyed the conversation. For my capstone course we had a debate about whether we supported the vaccines or not. It was interesting that I could not find any information about anything negative about the vaccines, although I heard something about it on the news. It sounds like a conspiracy theory, but I could not even find information about blood clotting, which I knew I heard about on the news. So, it was interesting to try to debate the side I was assigned to when I could not find anything to substantiate my information. I was not thrilled

to debate that side of the subject. I ended up looking elsewhere for vaccines that came out and were not studied a long enough and had negative effects on people. I think it was for malaria in Africa many years ago with kids. It was unsettling.

PC: There was a big push to get misinformation off social media.

TB: Yes, I agree with that, but this was like real data.

PC: Could you go to the source that you heard it on?

TB: I do not remember what station it was on because I was listening while doing my homework. But I remembered hearing it and I searched Google for days and I could not find it anywhere. I appreciate getting rid of misinformation because that is a huge problem, but this made me uneasy. I am not into conspiracy theories, and I have an open mind about everything, but it was a little weird. I know I got off topic there. We were talking about facemasks and people feeling uncomfortable. Going back to that, I decided to get vaccinated, but winter came, and cases started going up and I decided to wear a facemask to protect myself during the peak season just in case, even though I was vaccinated. I felt a little better about wearing the facemask, but I also felt like people looked at me like I was wearing the facemask because I was not vaccinated because the signs on many doors said no facemasks required unless you are not vaccinated; please follow the CDC guidelines. But I thought to myself if I was going to buck getting vaccinated, I probably would buck wearing a facemask and following the guidelines.

PC: Yes, and now it does not matter if you are vaccinated or not. No one has to wear a facemask in most places. It was not until recently that we could even get the facemasks that were recommended.

TB: Oh, that was another thing that really touched me. I was really surprised how many businesses stopped what they were manufacturing to produce PPE for healthcare workers. Even St. Cloud State used old transparencies to make face shields with their 3D printer. I emailed the university and said I would help if needed but they had enough people. I was so proud of my university for finding a way to help protect people that I cried when I heard about it. And they were also finding a way to reuse all the old transparencies that were sitting around for 30 years that no one was going to use. People became very resourceful when suddenly we did not have access to the items that we typically had access to. I think that was a good reality check for us to remember that at any moment everything could change, and we might not have access to some items anymore.

PC: Very true. I looked at the signs to communicate during a time when many of us were social distancing. I am wondering if you had any unique connections with any of the signs or images?

TB: Yes, I really loved the chalk drawings that the little kids made. Who does not love little kids and their drawings? It was a hot and heated emotional time during the election period where there was a lot of hatred and ignorance coming out from people. And I did not want to forget about what happened to George Floyd and Black Lives Matter. My parents live out in the country and at the end of their road there was an “In This House” sign, and it was so great because they live at the end of the road, and no one would ever see it except my mom and me when we went walking. I loved it that they put it up anyway. Love is love; science real. Science is real people! I believe there is a God and there is science. God put doctors on this earth to take care of people. There are many shades of gray in the world and people can believe whatever they want. For some people, it is either God or science. It is either God created the world, or it is

a big bang theory. Why can't it be both? Why didn't God create the Big Bang theory? Because it isn't in the Bible? That is how I think. The "In This House" sign also says "Black Lives Matter; women's rights are human rights." Women have different parts. Why are we treated differently? Why are we sexualized? Why are we afraid to walk down a street at night? Why are there dress codes for our daughters, but not our boys? That is a whole other story. All these phrases on this sign ["In This House"] are good. Everyone matters. Gender, religion, race, who someone loves, be kind to people. I have been told that I am a happy person. I smile a lot at people.

PC: I understand that. I feel like we are a lot alike and that is why we are friends.

TB: It is genuine when I see people and I smile at them. As a healthcare worker, I had patients who told me that my smile brightened their day, and it made them feel better about their situation of being in the hospital. Good manners are underrated, especially now two years into the pandemic. It is a challenge, and I think the pandemic divided us after it brought us together. For instance, my biggest issue with Trump running for president was about him as a person. I did not want him to be the leader of our country and a role model for my kids based his behavior. It had nothing to do with politics. Some people hated Hillary Clinton because of her track record, and people argued that it was the same, but it was not the same, both candidates had issues I considered "wrong," but they were wrong in different ways. Back to the signs and images, I have a Facebook page of hearts around the world where people post pictures of the hearts that they see from around the world to lift one another up. It is very positive with only pictures of hearts like handwritten hearts, rock hearts, hearts in coffee, a kid making a heart with their hands through the sun in a window, and it is cute. Then I think about teachers and the thank yous and

signs of support. When I was a Reading Corps tutor, I was amazed at how many kids in our school district were behind in reading in a wonderful school district. All the money did not exempt kids from not being able to read at grade level by fourth grade. Back to school signs, I saw signs along the street out to the high school with positive messages thanking teachers (see figs. 29, 30, and 31). Then seeing the 2020 graduate signs was moving. I remember being a senior. I remember my senior year and it was so amazing. I felt so bad for them. At first, I thought they are going to be okay. Then I thought that maybe they never went to prom. They missed out on some of these fun life experiences that they will not get another chance to have. I thought the community found a good way to support them by putting up all these signs and having an outdoor graduation. I am 44 and if my graduation did not happen last winter, I would have been devastated. I worked hard to finish this degree. I told all my professors that I would pay them to stand in the hallway and hand me a fake degree if I had to. So, it was nice to see the community support because a lot of people had signs out for graduation.



Figure 29. Thank you teachers and staff, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 30. Let's have a great school year, Sartell, Minnesota



Figure 31. Keep calm you're back to school, Sartell, Minnesota

PC: When I interviewed Kathy Markman it was a turning point for me because she talked about balancing mental health with the risks we take. This came from a friend, a nurse, from someone who recovered from Covid, she is so wise. I think we all look to her for wisdom. We were living

a secluded life and I started to think about Molly and how important it is for young people to attend these social events that you mentioned. I was so proud of you when you graduated.

TB: I wish that I could have celebrated with you guys because you helped me get through it all. I was very fortunate my parents, Andy, and Ella were there. When you talked about doing what is right for our mental health, for me that was letting my kids play hockey. I thought there are rules in place and then I felt guilty because Nickolas got Covid, and then I got it too. Then I thought was this worth it? But I think people were just doing what they could to survive and get through. I became very isolated because I never went back in person to any of my classes. I knew someone in every one of my classes because we were all in the same program and we were going through it together. But then my last semester, three people in my small study group graduated, and I did not have anyone. I took a class in another school. I went from feeling isolated to feeling even more isolated in my last semester. As my kids went back to school, I started feeling better about their mental health. But I started thinking about my own. I was so burnt out. I was so tired. I was not drinking enough water, eating enough food, and probably drinking too much wine, I was not sleeping well, and I could not get up early if I wanted to anymore to study because I was so exhausted. Six weeks into the school year I was laying on the floor crying at six in the morning after I had been studying for two hours. After many thoughts I realized I could withdraw from my classes. But I got up and I went to my office, and I worked for another 12 hours straight. I did not withdraw from those classes. But I had a breaking point. It was hard to be a non-traditional student. It was hard to be a college student. It was hard to be kid. Covid made it all harder. I was happy with the grace that people were giving.

PC: I think that people everywhere decided they would concentrate on what was crucial and important. This is the last question; do you believe that people in our community will continue to use signs and images to convey their messages?

TB: I think so. I do not know to the same extent that we did during Covid and the last election, but I think people like to be heard. I think one way that people feel like they can be heard is by advertising their thoughts on a sign in their yard. There was another other issue that was going on in school about “[Support Our Sabres-ISD 748](#)” (Facebook), and there were signs about that last fall. I feel like people will still use signs to a certain extent to get people's attention, especially political signs. I think we will see more and more of them, and maybe they will just keep getting bigger and bigger or more creative. I hope that we see more uplifting signs, maybe that is something we can concentrate and start up again now that people can do more activities and be more sociable because it was nice to see those signs of hope and signs of happiness with uplifting thoughts. I also loved driving by the lights and images around Lake Frances in winter. It made me happy to see it and when I thought about the people who live in the senior community, I thought it must be uplifting to see that every day from their windows. I hope that more positive signs and social justice signs appear and continue. I think it is important for people to know it is okay to think like this and maybe the signs will start conversations and people will learn that it is okay to have science and religion at the same time, and not one or the other.

PC: Well, thank you so much.

Conclusion

During and after the interviews, I gained an understanding that the average person-on-the-street's oral history was just as important as my personal narrative where I applied theory and rhetorical analysis that I learned about as a graduate student, in understanding how people reacted and connected to the language used in these yard signs, which emerged in Sartell during the pandemic through the 2020 election. Events in the rhetorical situations are constantly changing and evolving, making it complex.

Before writing rhetorical analysis of the yard signs, I interviewed the narrators. This method was due to time constraints and availability; however, it worked in my favor as I learned more about applying rhetorical theories in the interviews. In two chapters the narrators were moved to tears while talking about the yard signs and the rhetorical situation of the signs: context, audience, and purpose. In Chapter 4, I was taken by surprise by the power of rhetorical decay in the Governor Walz yard signs and billboards. Annabelle Trombley was 12 years old when she saw these images and it changed the way she viewed political materials. She called the signs "vulgar," she said they made a huge impression on her, and that they gave her a new perspective on yard sign messages. In Chapter 3, in my interview with Anderson Henry, it became clear to me that the Trump materials were part of a parasitic public that made many people feel so uncomfortable that they felt like they were not welcome in the community. Trump signs were tools that also used rhetorical decay to shut out anyone who did not agree with these messages or the issues of the campaign. I saw these signs in a different light after the interview, that they were not just political signs but signs of terror for anyone Trump alienated throughout his four years in the White House and during his last campaign. The wisdom of Kathy Markman

in Chapter 2 changed my personal life and the way I looked at the rhetorical appeals of pathos, ethos, and logos when she explained that we need to weigh our mental health and the risks of the pandemic. She was the first person I interviewed, and I thought a lot about this afterwards. Her ethos as a healthcare worker helped me see that I needed to let my daughter do normal teenage activities even though we were still in a pandemic, which brought some happiness and light back into my daughter's life.

The oral histories help round out the rhetorical situation of the recent past in understanding how individuals, the community, and the publics within experienced this historical time that everyone in the world endured. These oral histories give us a snapshot of what people were thinking, doing, and learning during Covid-19, the divisive Trump campaign, and the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. There is more to discuss and reflect on regarding the rhetorical situation of yard signs during this historical timeframe than I offer in a master's thesis. Yard signs have been around for a long time even though their messages change, they have reached their peak and the concept of yard signs does not seem to shift even though the Internet made it easier for political messages to reach large-scale audiences. Yard signs are here to stay. How they are used in the future will be interesting to see after witnessing the yard sign craze of the Covid pandemic in Sartell, Minnesota.

Notes

1. Cheugy Wikipedia definition: the term is commonly claimed to have been popularized by Generation Z, as a pejorative to describe lifestyle trends associated with the early 2010s and millennials. This aesthetic has been described as “the opposite of trendy” or “trying too hard”. The term has been co-opted by some who identify with the aesthetic.

2. Dr. Alex Layne made sense of this “chaotic neutral” situation of rhetorical appeals in her class lecture on the article about rhetorical decay.

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