

11th Episode

How work unfolded, under the pandemic

Welcome to Doorstep Revolution, a project emerging out of the heart of South Riverside in Cardiff and run by gentle/radical, an arts organisation based in the neighbourhood, and interested in connecting up culture, community, politics, spirituality, and healing justice.

Supported by a grant from the National Lottery Community Fund, this sound archive was born out of the pandemic of 2020 and 2021.

We spent time knocking on doors, hearing people's stories and finding out how our thinking about the future might have changed under COVID.

From homeschooling to weddings under lockdown, from acute isolation, to finding new forms of togetherness, these conversations with neighbours reveal questions and profound reflections on recent times and how we might wish them to be different.

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The first lockdown caused massive disruption to all of our working lives. Many were made redundant or put on furlough, workplaces changed and adapted, and many found themselves working from home. It also prompted so many of us to think about work, and the weight and balance of work within the rest of our life. Reflecting a variety of experiences in Riverside in this episode, we hear from Sara, Tim, James and Andy, Rob and Abby, then later from Marc, Joanna, Beth, James, Rhys, and Jordan.

Sara

I was on furlough for seven months, from May to October, and then I got made redundant. So that was quite a difficult time, but also kind of nice to just not have to do anything (laughs). And I really kind of explored, doing bits of different parts of volunteering and some studying, but also it was just very uncertain, because I was hoping I'd get to go back to work. And then it became clear that wasn't happening. They were making redundancies. But then that was dragged on for quite a few months while they were figuring out how long they could keep us on furlough for. So yeah, I guess that kind of professional had a real impact on my kind of personal well being then. And then yeah, I was looking for work. When everyone got made redundant at the end of October. I work in the charity sector doing fundraising. And that was quite a difficult

time, I got like seven no's in a row with interviews, which obviously just yeah, knocks your self esteem but I did get a new job in December. So it's kind of a nice end to the year which was really good. I also feel like time has been really weird over the last year, because in a way, it feels a lot longer than a year, because I feel like new experiences make the time go quicker. Whereas it was kind of quite a Groundhog Day, a lot of the time. But also, I keep thinking last year is 2019 rather than 2020 because it feels like it didn't happen at all in a way. Yeah, so it's strange how weird time has been and that has been something that a lot of my friends and families are saying as well, actually. In one way, it seems really long, in one way really short.

Tim

Everything happened very, very quickly with my workplace. On the Monday we went in as normal, you know, Tuesday, there was kind of more talk about what are we going to do? And then Wednesday was like, the offices are closing tomorrow. From tomorrow. So basically, it was a bit of a panic, you know, because I had to suddenly, in a day, kind of arrange all of my affairs so that I was able to set up a virtual office from home, you know? Make sure I had all of the files and information available. And it seemed like a novelty at first. You know, I think we all thought in my workplace... so three weeks, and we'll be back. You know, quick lockdown and get this problem licked. Let it burn itself out and see you in a couple of weeks sort of thing.

So I think it was a slow kind of dawning really, that we were really in, you know, a long, long haul, and in my mind, I think it went from three weeks to OK, maybe three months. I remember on my last day at work, because I deal with a large client group... Normally we would visit a client and if we've got to call an agency, you know, they give permission over the phone whilst I'm with them. So I printed off consent forms, you know, for all sorts of things like utilities, internet providers, Department for Work and Pensions, all that sort of thing to send out to all of the families to sign and return to me, and rather generously I put: "and I want this to be the case for six months." Thinking like, you know, I'll go for a long period of time, six months, thinking like six months and it'll all be over won't need these, after that. And, you know, lo and behold, six months later, I was thinking - damn, why didn't I make it a year, you know?

James

The office had given me a computer to do training at home, which was moving appointments, and I had a big bit of a ball out with them. And I said, "That's not training, that's work. So if I'm being furloughed, you're not supposed to be working." And they said, "Think of it as training and topping up on your training." And I thought, "Are you taking the..." I'm not an 18 year old idiot. Like, no, I don't work for free. Like it's a 20% reduction on what I'm earning and you're expecting me to do it anyway.

So then, Andy, will tell you I'd get up in the morning, and then they might phone me and say, "Your computer's not on, we can tell," and I said, "Well, I've only just got up, I said, I've got to have brunch first." (laughs) I said, "I'll put it on and check the emails in a minute." You know, and then they're like, "Oh, James you're so funny." And I was like, "Oh yeah, well, okay, I'll talk to you by email, bye." And I'd be thinking, technically, that's work, don't phone me! (laughs) Look, just leave me alone, I'm pissed off as it is.

Rob

In my job, I was furloughed for a few months, but then we kind of got back up and running on filming. I work at the BBC on Pobl Y Cwm, the Welsh language soap opera. And so we shut down production filming, obviously. But then we gradually came back and were able to start filming again. But it was very different. Obviously, it was... I work in the art department with props. And suddenly, we couldn't have anything, I couldn't touch anything that the actors were then going to touch. And we had to sterilise all of the sets, made to stay two metres apart, even though we're all together filming in one area. But it worked surprisingly well, because we just adapted and worked to these new rules and rescheduled and I think that's been something that has been surprisingly impressive across all areas, like people just are able to get on with it. Yeah it was strange, and I remember, seeing reactions from the fans like hoping it'll be back and we started reducing the episodes that were being aired to try and bridge that gap of lockdown as far as we could. Yeah, I remember it being like, they were very determined to get back on air as soon as they could, and how that looked was sort of completely alien at the time.

Abbey

I work for Newport Mind, the mental health organisation. To be honest I really like working from home, I'm not a fan of commuting, even if it's half an hour to Newport, just you know, being in the car, and traffic and all those kinds of things. You know, I don't think it's anyone's favourite part of their day. But it has been nice to just be able to literally roll out of bed and to my laptop. So that's been a positive. And also I work more efficiently, I suppose, when I'm on my own. But also I get the quiet space rather than being in quite a busy loud office space where I'd normally be putting my headphones in and sort of trying to zone out from all of the noise around me. It was quite nice to get that space really. So. It wasn't until really the following December, like a year after lockdown when I started to think that things feel a bit too samey. And I wasn't enjoying working from home quite as much.

Marc

I mean it impacted incredibly heavily on my living which is, you know, primarily performance, in many different ways and genres. I mean, it just went from, you know, a pretty full life to like zero (laughs) apart from, I suddenly had to learn to teach on Zoom and Skype and WhatsApp. But

that was fun as well and challenging. You know, I've got to that stage in life where I only teach people that really want to learn and are enthusiastic. So, you know, I don't have any sort of unwilling little kids to teach. So you know, it was all very different, and impacted me very, very differently.

Jo

So I'm self employed, and I can fortunately work from home anyway, it doesn't make a big difference. The biggest difference to my work life was that my one day a week at the university was always now on Zoom. And teaching over Zoom, and I'm sure being taught over Zoom is even worse, but teaching over Zoom is just an absolute drag, like trying to keep up with the energy is very draining. And these poor 18, 19 year olds having to endure it, I just can't imagine what that must be like for their experience. So that's been the biggest change.

I went into the university a few weeks ago, just because they started allowing the students back in a few months ago, just briefly, they'd have to book a slot to come and use the studios. Myself and another colleague went in to sort of be there as question answerers if they had any struggles or queries. And I was sort of reignited - oh, yeah, I do like teaching (laughs). I just don't like teaching on Zoom. So yeah, it was sort of out of our hands. This will be fine. September will be good, right, right? That's what is in my head at the moment.

Beth

In early March, I left the country for two weeks because I was one of the very, very lucky few and I had a holiday in New Zealand. And, and then one day, I opened up BBC News. I was in a hostel in Auckland, and the very first image I see are two of my colleagues, BBC News headline, and it was two of my colleagues in virology just doing their job, just looking as I see them every day. And clearly the news cameras had been into the laboratory while I was away and had been filming the Coronavirus testing taking place in Cardiff. And it's like, "Oh, crap, sh*t's going down back home." And all I could think of was that I need to get back home. I need to get back to work. Clearly they need me. So I get home and first thing I learned is the bacteriology staff have been, our workload has gone, just completely tanked. Very few people are coming into A&E, all the elective surgeries have been cancelled. That was a large portion of what we get. Anybody who thinks "Oh, maybe it could wait" has decided to wait. And so a lot of things that we would have been getting in through routine procedures, MRSA screening, pre op, all of that just completely went out the window. And all of a sudden I had all this free time at work, while knowing full well that down the other end of the corridor, the you-know-what was hitting the fan.

And it became common practice for, if you had nothing to do, we'd go to our senior and go, "I'm heading down the other end" and we'd go down virology, and we'd help them. A lot of us had never worked in virology before. And so there were some days I would work a full shift on a

Saturday, and then I'd go down virology and then carry on working for another four hours, helping them with the COVID response.

It just felt weird. And I had colleagues whose partners had been furloughed or had been made redundant in all of this, so they were picking up even more overtime, I had colleagues that were doing insane hours, and the people in virology, a lot of them were doing 12 hour days, six days a week for weeks on end. I mean, I remember Hannah, one of my colleagues, she did 24 hours over two days once and it was necessary. That's I mean, it's kind of the ethos in the lab. It's kind of yeah, that needs to happen... we do the work because we have to. We know that the worst thing that could ever possibly happen to us is that we do not provide a service.

And evidently, the COVID testing service has evolved quite significantly since then. The department has quadrupled its staff numbers, including myself. I got offered a band 4 position with virology in the August. So I interviewed for that and got offered the permanent post there. And in my first week in virology, I saw a trainee position, and I've been wanting to train as a biomedical scientist for at least a decade. And I went for the training and I got it. So when I say career opportunity, I mean, I graduated uni in 2011, ready to go into a trainee position and I only got one this summer.

James

I hoped, you know, when everything kind of stopped, like flights and things and everything kind of came to a stop. I hoped people will take a breather, and they might... But the kind of people dying to rush back to all that, is a bit... it kind of gives me palpitations. I drove through town the other day, and the amount of people I saw marching through town and so serious, but so full of purpose, and the suits and the briefcase and everybody going to their jobs and like nothing happened and I had slight palpitations and I want to get out of this moment for a minute. I was hoping that wouldn't go back, maybe it won't, maybe it will be a bit of a novelty for people, things like flights, you know, constantly going on holiday and flying and moving around. And that kind of thing we're going to of course, I know. That's not always the case. But you know, there's a huge amount of people who can't work from home, I think I just mean, that sense of purpose, that sense of loss and get me out, I need to go back to how things were, maybe that'll be a novelty for a lot of people, and maybe they won't feel the same after a while.

Rhys

In one way it was really good to finish the day. So I tried to finish at say about five, half past five, finish my work day and I'm literally... I was lucky I had the office in the spare room. I had that room for working, and I can kind of close the door on that room if you like, and forget about work for the day. But then it was weird for a while, when you're used to having that half hour commuting back and forth, that does give you time to think about stuff and kind of maybe switch off from work. So maybe that sometimes that crept in where it was quite hard to kind of

switch off from work as it was literally just the other side of the door. I mean, that's not the best then, not the best situation. But on the plus side, it was really good to be able to finish the working day and then you're home straight away so you can get on with doing your hobbies or doing your dishes or whatever, kind of got more time. For me, it was at least an hour extra a day to kind of do other things.

Jordan

There's a girl who lives on this street, and she lost her job. And she ultimately started making money off making cookie dough and cakes. So then she got an Instagram profile. So I see that she was on Well Street. So I was like well, we got kitchen fitters in, this was the summer, I'll just buy a lot of cookie dough pots, bring them in and the guys can eat them on their lunch or whatever. And then I found she was like two streets away, and then to see her last summer, lose her job, she was furloughed, and ultimately got laid off, she started this little small business, and now she's turning into, she's got three people working for her in less than a year. So that's a positive actually. I turned the negative into a positive! So I think the negative was obviously people have lost their jobs. But I like the fact that people have come out of this. So keep that as a positive (laughs). I can't believe I did that, how did I spin that?

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We hope you enjoyed hearing from some of the voices in our community. Doorstep Revolution is an ongoing project. So if you are a Riverside resident and want to get involved, do get in touch with us at gentleradical.org. In the coming months and years, we'll be continuing to build a resource of stories, perspectives and dialogues exploring the realities as well as the dreams of people living on our doorstep.