

1st Episode

Our initial reactions to the pandemic

gentle/radical Introduction

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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In this episode, we invite Riverside residents to cast their minds back to the first lockdown of 2020. What were people's memories of this time? What were some of the disruptions local residents faced? And in light of these challenges, how were people feeling? In this episode we hear from Seun and Tess, Peter, Gillian, Sandra and Andrea, Bree Anne, Hana, Kanaya, Edna and Dylan, and Priti, Isha, Phil, Derek, and Helen Marie.

Rabab

Can you remember the start of the pandemic and what kind of stuff was coming up, particularly between you? We've tended to interview people singly or in pairs, but like what were the kind of conversations you were having at the time? But also, what were the kinds of stuff you were individually thinking about, what was going on around you? What were your recollections of what you were feeling at the time back in March last year?

Tess

I feel panicked, even hearing that question. My heart is speeding up and I feel stressed. It was bad. It was really scary. It was scary because I was already not in a good headspace. I left Glasgow in a kind of

escape mission, like in the dead of night, didn't tell anyone that I left. I came to Wales to kind of recover and was living with my parents quite ruraly, in Laugharne, or outside of Laugharne. Then just as I started to get better, the pandemic happened, and my brother and my dad are both really high risk, so there was a lot of fear in the house and lots of very intense conversations about them dying, which is horrific. Yeah, and just the feeling of being trapped and static in rural places is not good. Because I'm a very big people person, so it was really scary.

I think at the time, we did well to make it okay though thinking about it retrospectively it was bad. But we were quite positive and trying to make things as good as they could be. I'm so grateful that it happened in the summer and we had that good weather. I think it would have been so much worse if it had happened in the wintertime. I don't know, for me personally I have gained a lot of resilience. Like when we went into the second one it wasn't anything like the first. Because there was just so much uncertainty wasn't there? Like, no answers.

Suen

This had never happened before I guess, so no one knew what they were doing. Everyone was just kind of looking to everyone else like, what are you doing? Okay, I'll do that too, is that what we should do?

Tess

On the global scale, wow! It wasn't just like here in Wales. It was like the whole planet. That's so heavy. That was heavy.

Peter

I remember being on campus, just before the Christmas, New Year break, hearing the news coming in from China, thinking, you know, first of all, Blimey! Is this gonna get serious? And actually being quite concerned. And then all that talk of Wuhan being locked down, I thought, Oh my God! There's talk of a city being locked down, how are they going to manage that? Let alone you know, what we've now become used to.

I didn't voice that concern with anyone but, you know, I'd sort of watch the news in work, read the news online in work, and thinking, this is just just before Christmas, you know, the New Year break, thinking blimey, is this gonna get serious? Is this gonna get big? And being quite, yeah, I'd say worried at that stage.

And then, of course, being in work again, reading news and reading about the first UK people to contract the virus, beginning to get more worried at that stage. And then really, you know, when Boris Johnson addressed the nation, and sort of said, "a lot of people are going to lose their loved ones before their time." Forgive my language here, I thought, sh*t, this is big! This is real.

...I mean, as you can tell, I'm getting emotional now thinking about it. But I didn't at the time come across like this to my family, and certainly not to my daughter and so on where I thought, sh*t, am I

going to get this? Am I going to die from this? You know, are my family going to get this? Are they going to die from it?

Sandra

I was really upset because I had to stay in because I was in the age group that had to stay in, and I stayed in for the three months wasn't it? Was it three months? I had to rely on people, which I have never done in my life but I had to. You know, my family more so then, and then the next lot then I relied on Andrea and Gill. We all looked after one another. But the first one I think was really frightening.

Andrea

Yeah, we didn't know what to expect.

Sandra

We didn't know what to expect, you know, I'm in that group and it just scared me a bit. But I was scared because of my age and things like that. I was quite nervous. And knowing that you can't see your family I think was the worst part for anyone, anyone at all. But please God, we'll all get over it.

Andrea

No offence, my kids loved it! They didn't want to go to school, anyway.

Gillian

I was grateful because I'm thinking, a couple of months off work. But then bringing it into reality, it wasn't that great, wasn't that great.

Sandra

It was scary because you could not go anywhere.

Andrea

Especially cos you had to wear the masks then.

Sandra

Yeah, but it wasn't nearly enough because you kept hearing in the news that people was dying, and being ill. And how many deaths that you know, that have happened since it... it was frightening.

Gillian

Not able to hug anyone. That's hard.

Peter

Myself and our daughter, she's now just turned 11, we didn't go out for nine weeks. Not because we were scared, as such, to go outside, we just thought, well look, the more we do at home and the absolute minimum we do outside, it's just going to be better for us, it's going to be better for others and so on.

We'd already built up a Brexit shelf so we'd had shelf after shelf. I mean financially lucky to do that, don't get me wrong I totally realise that, we already were anxious about Brexit and so on. So we'd sort of built up a Brexit shelf. The last few days before we realised we were going into lockdown, you know, bought as much fresh veg as possible, peel that, chopped it and chucked in freezer bags, so we were prepared, in effect, to stay in. So we didn't go out to shop. All exercising was in the house or in the garden because we were blessed with reasonable weather around that first lockdown. Not sort of to the extent where we were frightened to step outside the door, but we thought no, this is it, we are staying put! We're going to stay put actually in the house and in the garden as much as we can for as long as we can.

Bree Anne

I remember when the pandemic first started, I was planning a trip to go home to visit my family. My sister just had a baby that December and I was home in November for her baby shower and the baby actually came three weeks early. So she was on her own mini lockdown before lockdown, and that was to end at the beginning of April.

So I was planning a trip to go back to America and visit my family, and started to hear murmurings of, maybe I shouldn't be travelling. Things might not be, you know, moving in a couple of weeks, because this was I guess in March when everything kind of started. And so there was this moment of like, it's only going to be a couple of weeks, it will just be a delay, and I feel like I held on to that much longer than I should have.

But yeah, that was kind of what I was doing, was planning my trip home and just working. And I remember, it was absolutely beautiful, that time of year, like unseasonably beautiful outside for March, and April, I was just very warm, very beautiful, and just wanting to be outside, you know, not being able to which felt like, oh, my God, how are we going to get through this? You know, just not being able to go outside not realising what we were really in store for.

Hana

At first, for me, because I'm a housewife, I'm used to being at home. So it goes fine with me. But I find it a bit stressful for my husband, because he usually went out everyday to work, and then suddenly he needs to be at home. I mean, you feel less motivated, right? Because you need to find some things to make your mood better every day. But I live in a good neighbourhood, so we can just go for a morning walk and also can bring them to the playground. So I think it goes well.

Kanaya

Initial feelings when we went into lockdown was, what's going on here? Really, I suppose, you know, I've never seen anything quite like it in my lifetime. So it was very much strange, nervous, anxious times, really, for everyone.

No one really knew how it was going to pan out. Some people were still denying the whole thing at the time, if you remember, it was just a really strange time. And then all of a sudden, we just went into lockdown. And then, you know, frenzy shopping started and a real strange vibe around things, I suppose.

Edna

My street in particular, you know, we're quite a social street, and our neighbours were quite interactive with each other and I think that took a lot of it away, and I think because the people were scared, initially of what, you know, we didn't know what this virus was coming with. So I think there's a lot of fear.

So again, it was a lack of community, communications amongst my neighbours on my street, when I look out... when I open the door, it was just quiet. It was quiet. It was really, really quiet. And I suppose the last year what it also brought up for us as well, you know, obviously, because it was quite nice during the summer, and people spent a lot of time in their gardens. And so I suppose, what it brought up, was the importance... it made me reflect on family. What really mattered.

Kanaya

We've all got loved ones. I've got elderly parents and uncles, aunts, neighbours, etcetera, etcetera. It is also a very faith based community in Riverside, you know, every Friday at the mosque, every Sunday at the church or the Sikh Gurdwara. So, you know, very interactive, very social, sociable community. So it was just that sort of abrupt end to those types of interactions caused some concern and a bit of unknown. No one really knew for how long then, and what's gonna happen and how we're going to get out of it. So it's just that general anxiety in the air at the time really. It was the unknown. And anytime there's things that people are unsure about or don't know about, it causes some anxiety.

Tony

And what things stood out for you in terms of the changes you have to make initially, if anything?

Kanaya

Well, there were the main changes around not being able to interact with people, not being able to see people, not being able to mix within your local community, nevermind outside of your own area. And that did have an impact, initially, in terms of communication, in terms of just checking in on other people's welfare. And it was good for my own welfare and other people and you know, my own family's welfare. We quite often go and see family, friends and interact. So it was just strange not being able to do that.

Dylan

My memories of March 2020, are a lot of surreal feelings. First of all, seeing the buildup of coverage of COVID over the news, it did feel, it's cliché to say this at this point, but it did feel like something taken out of a film and kind of put on our screens. So in that way, even though it was reported about those who have lost their lives and those who lost loved ones, for me was a little bit difficult to fully comprehend, and I guess even take seriously at the beginning because of how kind of outside the norm it was at the time.

And a friend told me, "Oh, this will probably mean places locking down, some firms locking down" including the place I'm working at. The office I was working at or the other companies and even countries at that point, and I thought that was just hyperbolic. I didn't think that could happen. Then as time went on, the first country I remember locking down was Italy and it felt like a big shockwave to hear an entire country has had to tell its citizens to stay indoors effectively.

And then I got furloughed from work so I was on similar pay but we had to stay home and just kind of fill the time by watching TV or whatever. And to be honest, I felt I was in a very lucky position there because people had lost their jobs and careers were a little bit shaky for a lot of people at that point, especially in more freelance or creative fields. So I felt very fortunate for, between March to July, when I was on furlough just kind of hearing the news in the background about how serious it actually was. So, for a long time, I didn't really fully get to grips with the severity of it. Come July 2020, when I'm asked to start working from home, and then I listen more to bits of the news, what's going on and in the last 12 months, and hearing more first-hand accounts of how it's affecting people and how even in the local community, not specifically Riverside, but just around Cardiff, it is tangible. People are suffering from this, I got a better handle of it, but in terms of just March 2020, one word I use is, a bit naive. So that was my experience.

Priti

I described the scenes, as, I don't know what the name of it is, I can't remember but you know, these kind of cult type horror films, where you see sparse buildings, and nobody around and everything is empty. It's almost like eerie, eerie being the operative word. You go out and you suddenly look around, there'd be no people anywhere there'd be no noise. There'd be hardly any cars. It's almost like we've had some kind of spooky... you know, where's life?

Isha

Initially, I personally didn't know what to expect, what it's going to entail, how the journey is going to be, what's going to be open, what's not going to be open? We never expected it's going to obviously go on for that long. Because normally when this kind of thing happens, you know, the government or the people generally are able to sort something out. And things kind of go back to very, very normal very quickly.

But this time, that didn't really happen, so I think I didn't really have any initial thoughts. It was mainly as we went along the whole process kind of kept changing, rather than a specific initial thought of, oh my God, what's going to happen? Initially, there was a part where I enjoyed the lockdown, then obviously, the frustration started kicking in, then the enjoyment started again, that, okay, you know what, it's going to be temporary. So it was all up and down.

Phil M

So I started 2020, undergoing chemotherapy, as a preventative measure, rather than the cure. And so the start of the lockdown was absolute bliss, there was like, I could just suddenly stop, you know, I'd been through so much back and forth to work, it was just nice to have a period of calm. So the first month or two, I was really enjoying it. I sit in my front garden reading, doing a little bit of not a lot. So that felt like a real luxury really. I will say there were worries about getting food and stuff. But a few neighbours rallied around in the area, Nick, you know Nick, don't you? His partner was doing some shopping for me and stuff. So I made connections with other people and lots of other people in the street were very supportive as well. So that was quite good. And then, because I was on chemotherapy, I was put on the social isolation list. So then I was given priority bookings in Tesco. So then everything in terms of getting food in was resolved. So yeah, so the first couple of months, it was great.

Derek

It was quite strange, wasn't it? When this happened, was it around December in Asia? And then you can hear the stories over there building up and building up and building up. And then we knew it was going to come here, eventually, because no one stopped flights from coming in and all that and people were still freely, you know, entering countries and all that.

And you hear about deaths in China in Japan, and then it was a ship, it was like a floating petri dish. People getting infected, dying on cruises. So you can feel a dark cloud, sort of coming over, slowly but surely, and you can't do anything about it. And then in the end, we got lockdown, didn't we? And then businesses stop. Luckily enough, in Britain, I think we were kind of lucky because we had furlough. So from March, April, May, was it June I think? Four months we were, we were furloughed. So that sort of tide us over?

Rabab

Can I ask what was happening in your life at that time? Was it changing significantly? Were you having to respond or react to what was going on around you?

Derek

Yeah, I think initially the fear was there and then you get news about people stockpiling and all that tissue, toilet paper, toilet rolls and all that, we started to do the same thing more or less (laughs). Yeah,

and then... There's a lot of the fear now that you're going to be like, the whole country is going to grind to a complete halt, that of course didn't happen, but they didn't help everyone panicking. And then you know, like, if you go over to shops, you can only buy like one item per person or whatever. If you want eggs you can't buy two dozen you can only get half a dozen, something like that, you know? Yeah, quite strange.

And to be honest, and I think the fear as well, initially because of my age, I felt, should I go out, shall I not? So I stayed home most of the time to be honest, I even abandoned this plot for a good six weeks. So March, around this time, end of March was the last time I ever come here. And then when we got locked down, I just stayed home. And of course first thing in the morning six o'clock off to Tesco's, grab your stuff, get back home. The kind of feeling, you know I only go there once a week anyway, grab whatever you need, back home and then lock yourself up. It was quite strange for a few months, and now you realise life has to go on isn't it?

I started coming back. It was all full of weeds like over here. Yeah, strange situation. But there's something positive about this whole thing, actually, I would say, because it lets you think about what life is all about, isn't it? And of course, if you have been working all your life, you know, this incident, this pandemic, basically, opens up your eyes and you ask yourself serious questions again, yeah, about how you want to lead your life from then on, you know?

Helen Marie

My memories around March 2020. This is quite a mixture of memories and a mixture of emotions actually. So, at the time, my partner, Ian, he was in America, because he was doing his flight training. So he was away, I was in the house with my daughter. And I was also working in a gym in Canton, where I still work now.

And I remember there being a lot of panic and fear, not necessarily physically around me, but just through... I was looking at the news a lot more than... I'm somebody who has for years, not listened to the radio, or hardly ever listens to the news, hardly ever read newspapers or Google the news. Hardly ever done anything like that. It's just not been part of my life. And then all of a sudden, I was daily, not even daily, sometimes hourly, checking it as things were building up.

And I remember being in a conversation with a group of friends actually at one point, this is more the beginning of March, where some of them were just saying "Oh, it's just like the flu it's fine." And then it's going to be okay and then other people going "No, I'm really worried about this, we're going to be eventually locked down". So remembering those people's different opposing views of it and some people really relaxing and... but then I remember... I'm pretty laid back when it comes to things in general, but I remember having this push and pull of not wanting to read the news, but then getting almost sucked into it, and then getting sucked into say WhatsApp messages where people were quite fearful as well.

That's what I mean by things became quite fearful. It was like reading the news, and then also friends saying things to me like, this is not at the beginning of March, this is towards the end of March, and

they've gone shopping or they're worried because people are panic buying and then should we panic? I remember having a conversation on WhatsApp with my friend, and she would say I don't know whether to go and panic buy basically. And I said I'm not going to do that but I have stocked up on a few extra things, but let's try and leave stuff for everyone.

But seeing the images as well of people in the shops and in the meantime, just wanting my partner to get back from America, and just say he was doing a really quite stressful flight training course. I didn't want to bother him but at the same time, I just wanted him back here. But then his flight got cancelled and I think we decided in the gym then we decided to close the following week. Or, maybe we hadn't decided to close actually but, in the gym I had a lot of clients cancel.

And then I had a client actually send me a lovely message because, at the time I was caring for my mum a lot, and she's got MS, so a client sent me a lovely message because I didn't know whether to cancel clients or not and she just sent me a really lovely message. So you know, "I consider you a friend and I hope you don't get offended by this message, but I really think that it would be important to look after your mother and not come in and do the sessions." And then maybe you should really consider that. And it was a really nice message. And it was a reminder that I was in control. Because there's a part of me that was going, oh, gosh, I don't want to let clients down. And I don't want to be fearful, but it was just a reminder.

So I decided to cancel my clients for the following week. And then I think the following weekend, we went into lockdown anyway. So I didn't cancel them, as in just not have them, but a lot of my clients changed over to zoom. So yeah, and my boyfriend did make it back and everything was okay. But when he did phone me and say my flight's been cancelled. And then when I got off the phone, and he said he's trying to get another flight, but he has to get off the phone to try and do that, I did actually cry! Because that was the moment I was like, this is not nice! And it's all so stressful.

And, and I'm really lucky, I have a nice house, supportive family and things like that. But it still felt very stressful and very new. And, you know, especially because we were looking at the media and things like that as well. And so, but then... and then when he was coming back then I was looking at... So he got another flight, was on his way back, but I knew he was going through Germany, and on the same day, I had read that Germany was shutting their borders. And again, I was like, well, please... So I was so happy when I saw him because it made me realise how he's such a part of our family unit. And actually, it felt good that the family unit was together in it. For whatever we... it was all very new... for whatever we had to face that we were doing it as a family unit.

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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're 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.