

Interviewee: Kathleen Harcourt

Interviewer: Kelly Liao

Date of Interview: 5/31/2020

Transcribed by: Kelly Liao

Edited by: Sarah Kong

Audio Track Time: 33:17

Background:

The special oral history collection is created in response to COVID-19 that started in February 2020. Kathleen Harcourt, a chemical engineer who just received her MBA from Rice University, spoke about her experiences during the pandemic, particularly about her involvement in the “Snacks for Med Staff” initiative she co-founded with several other Rice students. She also talked about her views on the rising anti-Asian sentiments under the pandemic and the future of Houston community.

Setting:

The interview took place via Zoom, a popular video conferencing app (and the official app for Rice University) during COVID-19.

Key:

KL: Kelly Liao

KH: Kathleen Harcourt

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

KL: Today's May 29, 2020. Thank you so much for your time, Kathleen. To start, would you please briefly introduce yourself like your name and your background?

KH: Oh, yeah. So my name is Kathy Harcourt. My background, so I am a chemical engineer. Just got my MBA from Rice University. I live in here in Houston, Texas, and I'm currently working for Exxon Mobil. Uh yeah.

KL: Okay, that's great. So, we know since March, we have moved on to classes online at Rice. I don't know how has that impacted your studies, even though it's like last time at Rice and also your life or your work?

KH: Yeah, I mean, it's it was a lot more challenging at first. I think I've certainly gotten more used to it. So to start from a class standpoint, the camaraderie of seeing the other classmates spending time together the physical sort of contact piece, it's been hard to not have that. I miss it. And I'd say in classes too, it can be challenging to focus all the time when it's on a camera versus on the professor. So I think those pieces have been challenging. With work as well, there can be challenges of having a successful meeting. When you're not always able to see everyone, people don't always know when it's time to talk or you know, who's talking so that can be complicated. People's internet goes out and their dogs bark and their babies cry. But I think that there's also some, some advantages I'm starting to see as well without the commute, I've gotten a lot of extra time back. And I would say another advantage is just I've had a lot have time to think, think about who I am, what I'm doing. There's a lot less hustle and bustle outside. So I think it helps me focus more when I was studying on my studies or on my work because there's not necessarily another place I'd rather be than present where I'm at. So overall, I think it's a challenging time, but I see a lot of silver linings.

KL: I see. So what about your job? Has it also be affected by coronavirus pandemic?

KH: Yeah, so, yes, it has. So my day-to-day activities are the same. Yet as an oil and gas company. There's a lot less gasoline, diesel, etc, petroleum products really being sold. So, Exxon Mobil is such a large company where I would say it doesn't- We're definitely not struggling as much as some of the other companies but, you know, for everybody, there's a lot of earnings that have, you know, been affected and there's just a lot of different, you know, costs that need to be relooked at, to figure out, you know how to best weather the storm, especially when there's just not as much demand. As an employee, I think what's really changed for me is, you know, first was the working from home. So not coming into the office every day was a bit challenging, getting used to that and the new schedule, creating our own schedules. But now we're starting to go back into the office. And there's challenges there with, you know, trying to be safe while still being around other people. So, wearing masks constantly, using hand sanitizer, always staying six feet of social distance, really limited in what we're able to do with the fridges and the you know, all the facilities we share, so it's definitely been different.

KL: I see, have you engaged in any response to the outbreak yet?

KH: Yeah. So my personal engagement was I co-founded a nonprofit with a classmate from Rice named Coco. So me and Coco started Snacks for Med Staff, which is a small nonprofit where we take donation money, and we buy food from small local restaurants to help them out during this challenging time since they weren't seeing as much revenue, especially during the shutdown. And then we deliver it to hospital staff who are combating COVID-19 to help them, you know, have some food because usually they're

just so busy, they don't have time to stop. Also, a lot of the places around them tend to be closed. So it's not always easy for them to grab food. And it's also really big morale booster for them just to let them know that the community is thinking about them. We leave nice notes with them from the restaurant from us. So the overall goal is to really boost morale of medical staff while also helping the economy and with Snacks for Med Staff, we also had a couple of the individuals at Rice who used to serve us our food who were not working because Rice was closed, we were able to hire them to do the driving their catering service. And so that was really nice as well, because we were just helping a lot of people. It felt like in the community, business owners, hospital staff, and then too I think the donors also get something out of it because all of us have a desire to, to help and to do something and to make a difference. And I felt we were able to also build an outlet for those people to have something to, to give to so that they could feel, you know, emotionally a bit better during this really challenging time that there was something they could do.

KL: That's really great. So what has inspired you and your partner to start this initiative?

KH: Yeah, so Coco's got a really great background and you'll get that soon, but for me, I think my heart really goes to the business owners a bit. So when I was first going to college when I was you know 18, I had to pay for my own college. And I had a minimum wage kind of job, I worked at a vitamin store. And I just remembered how challenging it was to not know how I was going to pay the bills, you know, how you know what, what was my next week going to look like, you know, and just not having enough funds where I was worried about, you know, food bills and all that. I can only imagine what it's like to be in that situation right now. I'm really fortunate that you know, I went to college and I got a good, good job and I'm, it's pretty stable, and I'm not in those shoes anymore. But I really wanted to do something for the community. In particular, I wanted to help those who were scared about their income. And with the restaurant industry, you know, a lot of these small business owners, it's not just them who are afraid of losing their business. If they don't get enough money, they can't pay their staff. And so those are a lot of people who are really relying on that. Typically, you know, somebody in that position is not going to have a massive amount of money just waiting in their bank account to help them float during the time if they get furloughed. So we wanted to do something and even to that front to Coco. My partner, she is really passionate about the hospital staff. Her mom works in a hospital in China. And so she came up with the idea of "Hey, you know, in China, we, it's really common for us to just send everybody food, why don't we just do it here?" And I told her it was a great idea. And we should start. We originally didn't necessarily think we were going to make a nonprofit. All we wanted to do was just spend a couple hundred dollars of her own money to help a couple of restaurants, local restaurants, and then think the hospital workers. So we talked to a couple of classmates who knew, who either were in the hospital or they knew people who worked in the hospital that with COVID. And then we organized

sending them food. And then once people heard about what we were doing, we started to receive a bunch of donations and get a bunch of money. That's when we decided to start a nonprofit was so we could make that transparent.

KL: That sounds a very inspiring experience. So is the initiative only limited to Houston area or also other parts of the country?

KH: Yeah, so we've expanded to five different states and 23 different hospitals. So our goal was definitely Houston just simply because it's our home. And you know, we love our home. But we also wanted to go to some of the hardest hit states and cities. So we particularly went out of our way to try and figure out you know, how to get to New York, we had some hospitals in New York, in Detroit, Philadelphia, LA. So we try to look at the COVID cases and say, "Okay, where was it particularly hard hit, and then can we find some hospitals there?" As well as just we expanded to a couple of other places that maybe weren't as aggressively affected by COVID like San Antonio or things just because we had contacts there and there was still that need, just because they didn't have the highest amount didn't necessarily mean that they that the need wasn't there. So we kind of expanded to all those areas. But Houston's always been probably our biggest presence where we have the most hospitals just because that's where we're from.

KL: I see. So how did you establish connections with like hospitals in those areas?

KH: Yeah, so interestingly enough, it was a lot of our own networks, we just kind of started to help. And as we started to help, people started to give us contacts, either with like family members or friends or people they knew. And that's really how we got most of our contacts. We did once we built website, get a couple of contacts from our website, we made a page where you could recommend a hospital, but honestly, the vast majority of them were through word of mouth.

KL: Okay, that's nice So what kind of progress has the initiative initiative made? Like what are the reactions of the medical staff or business owners?

KH: Yeah, so we'd had a couple situations and like, I remember one in New York where some of the ladies just started crying because they were just overwhelmed. They were working so hard and to just suddenly get like a big package of food and a bunch of these letters that, you know, say, "Hey, you guys are doing great. The community supports you." They really appreciated it. So I think the medical staff really felt like they were getting that morale boost. And the the restaurants we worked with, we ended up—at first we started to just do like DoorDash and just send local restaurants. But then we learned a

little bit more and found out things like Uber Eats and DoorDash take a big percentage of the cut. And so then we started to do partnerships with specific restaurants. And then we also hired our staff here in Houston, which would do the deliveries. And all of them would tell us how grateful they were, particularly there would be weeks where they would be really slow and there was just no business. I don't want to say that we saved them from, you know, demise or anything we spent, we raised a total of \$20,000. So spreading that out between the 23 hospitals, I can't guarantee we made or braid- broke a company yet, I think we really did help in the most challenging times, and give them that extra income when they needed it. So they also told us that what we were doing was wonderful, and they were super appreciative. And we, on our Instagram, we have lots of photos, mostly from the hospitals, but even a couple from our restaurant partners, showing everybody just been super excited about what's going on.

KL: That's wonderful. So, how do you feel about this process?

KH: Yeah, I feel really good about it. I think at the end of the day, I really always want to make a difference. And I know Coco does too. And you know, you can't... Rome wasn't built in a day. We couldn't necessarily help everyone but even still the amount of help we were able to give and how much we heard the hospitals tell us "Thank you so much, you know, because you did this, it helped us get through the day. We look forward to, you know, the days when we get packages from you guys." Or, you know, the restaurants who told us "Hey, you know, we've really appreciated what you've done and helping us continue our business. You've helped us pay our staff." Like that kind of that that kind of feeling when you know that you've done something, you've made a difference it, it makes it all worth it. So all the hours we spent organizing things and figuring out what the next steps were. It was, it was all worth it. It was really good.

KL: I see. Have you ever involved in other kind of activities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

KH: Um, so this one's kind of been my main activity. I guess like as a personal note, I do. I'm a yoga instructor for fun. So I used to teach yoga classes. I'm not teaching right now, but I have been taking a lot of yoga classes at home. And just like you know, watching the videos, so that's been kind of a hobby of mine as well as spending a lot more time with my dog. So, yeah, I think the nonprofit is taken up most of my spare time between school and work, but I think it was really well spent.

KL: Cool. Um, I guess my next question is, how did you feel hearing about assumptions made about Asian community as being more prone to the virus? Or how do you feel about like the recent attacks to Asian people in the States?

KH: It's horrible and it's, it's really something we need to educate people on because a lot of it comes from misinformation and fear. And one of the things I find so challenging too is there are certain people I feel who really take advantage of the fear to then pointed at minority groups. And I feel that that's been done, especially during this time. There's been a lot of political pieces to this where I feel there is a, there is a desire by some political parties to really particularly try to make China look bad, which is a shame because I felt, I feel they're willing to put their own citizens at certain kind of risk. Even if it's not necessarily guaranteed violence, right, prejudice. It can be challenging when folks are trying to just sell food or you know, just go do their daily job. My grandmother grew up in New York and she's Japanese. And my great grandparents came here from Japan. And my grandma actually, because she was there after World War Two, people used to beat her up. Like actually like as a kid like actually beat her up just because she was Japanese. And it's like, she never did anything wrong to anyone. She didn't do anything to deserve it. But just because of her, you know, heritage. These people were being brutish to her and they would insult her and they treated them just awfully and my grandma used to tell me stories when I was growing up. And it's a shame to me because I feel like we've made progress and then during times like this, I feel like we go back on some of that progress, right? Like it, it's unacceptable to show violence to people just because they have a different background than you. And it's there's no science that shows that somehow being of Asian heritage makes us more prone. So it's just to me I feel we as a community need to correct this, this misinformation for our own citizens. It's it's mind blowing to me that we do this to our own people. And even if they're not like direct citizens here, even if it's just people visiting like we're all still people, it's just the wrong way for humanity to go.

KL: I'm sorry to hear about the stories of your grandma.

KH: Yeah. Well, the good news is she's still around and you know, she she overcame that. And I think that just shows how resilient she was. She's an amazing woman. And she didn't get to go to college. So she worked really, really hard to make sure my mom and my uncle and uncles did get to go to college. And because she did that, you know, my mom went to college, I was able to go to college. So through the hard times, it also shows you how incredibly resilient people can be and even communities. So I've talked—I'm personally half Japanese and half American so I would say I go less noticed. And you can probably hear more from my, the other co-founder Coco but her actually came from China. She's received a lot harsher treatment than I have. And that's also surprised me because we have similar backgrounds, right? We're similar people, we have similar interests. And to know that I'm treated slightly better, just because I'm only half Japanese. You know, I'm half Asian, and somehow she's been treated poor because she's full. That's really hard for me to hear as well.

KL: Yeah. So how do you think we could come out of this epidemic stronger as a community?

KH: I think the ways we can become stronger, are a couple of things. One, I think that we need to make we need to ensure tribalism doesn't get to a point where we start to exclude groups. And what I mean by that is, I think before the pandemic, there was a lot more view of globalism, you know, let's just do what's the cheapest thing. Let's just do what's kind of the biggest thing for everyone. Now there's a little bit more tribalism. Okay, let's help the community. Let's be a little bit community oriented. Let's be a little bit more, you know, around our own, you know, group. And I think that can create some good things and that you care more about those around you. And you might even be able to build a little bit more culture in that way by not just going to what all the big trends are by focusing on the small local trends, if you will, other small, local cultural. I think we can have some really exciting sort of creative and innovative things that could come from that. However, that can only happen if we don't create exclusivity along with that kind of tribalism sort of view. So to not fall into the trap of assuming that because people are different, they're threatening. I think other ways we can come out of this a lot stronger is—I think there's a lot of innovations and movements happening right now in technology, and in bio technology, specifically too. I think once we overcome this, the fact that we have progressed those two fields more, you know, the medical field and the and technology. I think that's going to be better for the human race, and I think we should be open to accepting just some of the technological changes that are likely to come from this. For example, I think more people are going to start working from home, maybe not as many as are right now. But I think it's going to become a more acceptable thing. And I think that could be really helpful particularly for a lot of couples nowadays, both the the, whether you're hetero homo, whatever you may be, when you're a couple taking care of a baby, it's, it's more likely now that both partners are working, as opposed to the traditional one staying at home. If we have stay at home work, for example, that might allow those people to project their careers. Still at the same rate, even though they have a young child at home, we might not have to have somebody feel like they have to, you know, put, put their career behind, you know, temporarily on hold so they could raise their children. So I see this also as potentially with technology allowing us to integrate things better, which will help with career projections.

KL: I see. Since you mentioned technologies, I'm wondering how much of your work or studies or social experiences has been conducted via digital communication tools such as Zoom or FaceTime? Like how do you compare it to in-person experiences?

KH: Yeah, I think the best. The answer is the vast majority of my interactions now are through some sort of, you know, technology versus in person. And it's not exactly the same. And there's definitely some challenges, it's hard to read the subtleness of people's faces as much. And body language is a lot harder to read because you can't actually see anyone's body. So I think some of those cues which are

really helpful in person have been lost a bit in translation. Yet, I think once again, as we talked about a little bit earlier, there are some of the advantages the convenience of not having to travel as much. The simplicity, it's less challenging. I don't- when I have a big meeting, I don't have to book a room and have to figure out, you know, where in the building, could I physically fit all these people, I just put a call on people's calendars. So I think that there's a balance. And I think too, hopefully, we will come up with different ways for technology to help us adapt to some of the things that we're used to more in person that we don't have now. One of the hardest things is I miss hugging people, maybe not my co-workers as much but especially my friends and, and just seeing people. There's a, there's definitely nothing so far that I've seen as far as technology can quite make it feel as intimate as when you get to be with someone in person and give them a hug.

KL: Yeah, I can relate to that so much. I'm going back to the pandemic itself. What do you think this pandemic has revealed about the structural equalities of our society?

KH: Well, I think one of the one of the biggest things that shows is I feel when times are good, people are a bit better behaved. But as things get more challenging, sometimes we regress. And I think this is a situation where we've regressed a bit, you know, the amount of, you know, violence and just, you know, verbal, physical, all that on Asian Asians in general here in the US has increased since this has happened, right? And I think it's happening because people are scared and people want someone or something to blame. And it's just a lot easier to point a finger at somebody, and that's different. So I think, yeah, it's just shown a regression due to fear. And I think the way we can combat that the best is through education to fix the misinformation, because the misinformation is causing both the fear and also the inaccurate blaming.

KL: I see. So I guess my next question is will be more personal. Have there been any changes in the structure of the life at home with your like significant parents or friends or yeah?

KH: Yeah, so I live by myself I have my my significant other right now is my dog. [laughs] So I would say I spend a lot more time with him. So he's probably the only one that this is like the best thing that's ever happened to him. I think- Mr. Fox is my dog's name. He loves, he loves what's happening, but most of us don't. But I'd say in general with my other relationships, I found that it's just in general people are a lot more depressed. I feel a lot more people are struggling with how do we redefine who we are when our activities change or we lose a job, you know, or things are, we have to reshape our habits. So I think in general, I've spent a lot more time talking to friends, but it's been a lot more almost like a therapy session than just a, you know, typical, "Hey, how are you?" People are really struggling to get through this new definition of the new world, if you will, where we are right now. I think humans in general

have a lot of challenge with big changes, especially when it comes to habits. So we've all been forced to completely reroute our habits. Once again, I think it's and this amazes me too—once again I'm half Japanese, and I'm half American, and you would think that that shouldn't make a big difference, but it makes a huge difference. When you talk to my co-founder Coco, you're going to hear some really sad things. She's has one friend for example who she got a fight on a with a fight argue with and Facebook and they told her to go back to her COVID-infested country. And she, you know, she belongs here. So it's just it's really sad that these lines are being created and even amongst friends and family. Once people are afraid, they do silly things that don't make any sense. And that would be an example of one of them. I've been fortunate and I haven't experienced them but I know people who are personally experiencing it, especially being Asian where the misinformation is such that not even just strangers but even potentially people who are once friends are mistreating them.

KL: So will you consider a change in your like your career or future direction of business, or even like, places to live as a result of pandemic?

KH: So not places to live, because I don't think anywhere in the world is safe from this per se and I don't think I don't think moving away from a problem is necessarily an answer. I think the one thing I have really taken from this though as far as what I want to change is I definitely see the future of technology has always been there. And we've always known it's the future. And I think this has accelerated it. I think people and companies are going to push for technological innovation even more and and same thing with biotech and just, you know, medical field, I think this is gonna change. It doesn't change where things were going, but it's making it go much faster. So I definitely from a career standpoint, really want to prepare myself to get a lot more experience in technology. And utilizing that to benefit people. So I think that's just really woken me up of, you know, I need to do this. So I'm going to take over- now that I finished my classes and I have a little bit of time, I'm planning on taking some sort of coding course, whether it's R or Python, not to be an expert, but just to know something. I'm thinking to myself, this is like the language of the future. You know, my children will like be learning this in school. This will be just like, how I took Spanish class, you know, so I think it's important to move in that direction. Yeah.

KL: Yeah, that's good. Um, so what do you think the future of Houston community looks like in terms of social interactions and returning back to normal?

KH: So I'd like to say that we'd be very cautious and we would come together a bit more slowly to try to reduce the spread. That's not really what I'm seeing. I do I have not seen I think in some places like a grocery store, you see most people wearing masks. But if you drive by, like a bar, for example, you can

see a bar's got a bunch of people there. They don't look like they're social distancing. They're not wearing masks. To some people, I think they just so desperately want life to go back to the way it was before all this happened, that they want to pretend like it didn't happen, and they're trying to act like it hasn't. So for some people, I think they're still living in the past a little bit. And they're not being because of that they're putting themselves and others at risk. I think moving forward, though, what we can learn from this is I think we can learn there's a lot of value in patience for all of us just having had to do isolation, having to separate out you know, how do we benefit from that. And I think for Houston, we're also very lucky in though although we're a big city, we've had a lot of space, I don't think we've been as affected with COVID and hasn't been as big of a point in our life as some of the cities I've already talked about New York, you know, city and you know, Detroit and things. So I think for us, we may come, we may have another wave of this coming before people take it seriously, and I hope people do. So I think our future still looks bright, but I think we may have a little bit more learning to do. And then just kind of from how we've treated some of the people in the community. I think we just need to, to re-educate people and be very careful about misinformation, because just a small amount of misinformation can really create waves that affect large amounts of people to make really poor decisions.

KL: Cool, so I go going back to your initiative. I'm wondering what do you think of the future of your initiative? [KH: Yeah.] Will it go on or will you end it?

KH: Yeah, so we we're now a board of five. So me and Coco brought on three other Rice students to help us it's been so much fun. But I think what we've all decided is it makes the most sense to close down the nonprofit for a couple of reasons. One, the economy is starting to open up. So the need is not there as much. Also in not all the cities, but a lot of our cities, for example, like New York and Detroit, a lot of the hospitals are actually converting some of those COVID units back into normal units. So there's just less of the needs out there. So for us, we're seeing that the need is is not there as strongly as it was before. And I think we also are finding that we want to move on with other things in our life as well. Some of us will be starting new jobs here soon. And with that, we want to make sure we have time to do the best we can in those jobs and then to another piece point as well, we've found, though the nonprofit was a lot of fun, and we did a lot of good. And once again, raising over \$20,000 is something to be proud of. But we really struggled to grow outside of our network outside of the Rice community and friends and family. And I think there's enough need in this space where if we really want to keep doing good, we might do a lot more good by joining a larger organization that's, that's fitting these needs. We kind of created ourselves because we wanted to be very nimble. There wasn't really anything like what we were doing at the time. Now there are other organizations already doing what we were doing. It was a good idea, you know, and so it just we think it makes sense to push resources towards those organizations that are a bit bigger. Now that that this has caught on and it's a much more popular thing,

than to necessarily continue to push on our own. But that's not to say that we are, we are ashamed of what we've done. We're incredibly proud. I think we've done really good for our community. And I think it's also taught me that when you have a good idea, things just kind of happen. They grow life on their own. So you just always have to be constantly trying to innovate and do new things. And as you find things that work the world around, you will notice and help you along your way.

KL: That's great. It's so wonderful to see your active involvement amidst this very difficult time. So I guess, yeah, these are all my questions for today. Do you have anything else to add?

KH: I'm just that I think that this is a great initiative. I think it's important to capture the voices of people and to understand cultures. I think as time goes on sometimes the cultural differences become smaller and smaller because we do become a more globalized community. And while that's there are some good things in that too, I think that there's a lot of value in diversity. So I think it's great that you guys are capturing the diversity to share for, you know, future generations.

KL: Cool. Thank you so much for your time today, Kathleen.

KH: Thank you.

KL: I guess yeah, this is the end of the interview.

KH: Yeah, no problem.

KL: Okay, bye.

KH: Bye. Thank you.

KL: You're welcome.

[Interview ends.]