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## **Dominic Vigliotti, Oral History Interview, 2022**

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Oral History Interview with Dominic Vigliotti (DV) conducted by EMU undergraduate Victoria Smith (VS) on November 14, 2022 for You Li's Journalism 313 course.

Transcribed by Victoria Smith

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VS: My name is Victoria Smith, and I'm currently here with Dominic Vigliotti to discuss unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is November 14, 2022, and just to introduce yourself, can you tell us some things about yourself?

DV: Hi! My name is Dominic Vigliotti. I'm twenty-two years old, currently a student at Eastern Michigan University majoring in Communication and minoring in Journalism.

VS: All right, thank you. Can you tell me about your employment during the beginning of the pandemic?

DV: Yeah. A few months prior to when COVID-19 was officially declared as a pandemic, which I believe was early March 2020, I started a new job. It was at a hotel in Water Park called Splash Universe. I was working, they started like a new game room where, you know, kids would come, and they could just play games for like an hour, and I just sort of

kept track of everything, made sure that everything was running smoothly, things like that. Kind of like an arcade, but a little more modernized.

DV: So, I had been working there for a couple of months as of March 2020, which was when they decided they had to finally shut everything down. At that time, I was working not quite full-time. I was working roughly like twenty-eight to thirty-two hours a week while attending school. I got laid off from that job, and I couldn't file for unemployment because I hadn't been working enough, so I had to find a new job pretty quickly in order to pay for bills and things like that, which led me to returning to my prior job which was managing at my local Jimmy John's. I did that, for, prior to the job I just started at, for a couple of years out of High School, so I didn't really want to go back, and they didn't really want me to come back, but they needed the help because they couldn't really find anybody during the pandemic, and I needed the money, unfortunately. So, that's where I ended up back working again.

VS: So, with regards to the layoff process, how were you notified about it?

DV: It was pretty abrupt in my case. I typically worked four days a week, and then I would have three days in a row off. So, during that three-day break, I didn't even know anything was happening. I returned assuming I'd be working my next shift after the weekend, and they hadn't, I'm not sure why, but they hadn't called or reached out to me in any way to contact. So, I just arrived for work that day, and they told me that I was no longer going to be employed under them, and they sent me home, so it was pretty sudden. I wasn't

really prepared for it. I had no prior notice or anything. It really took me by surprise, and it was a little bit of a difficult process.

VS: If you don't mind telling me, what emotions did you experience in the moment you found out you were being laid off? And why did you, why do you think you felt that way?

DV: At the time that it actually happened, I'd say I hadn't really even processed what was happening yet. I was just so surprised, I really didn't know how to take the news, and I was, you know, immediately just thinking about what I was going to do, how I was going to, you know, make the money I needed to to pay my bills and things like that. So, it was, it was really difficult. Having gotten some more time to process it, it definitely made me pretty angry that I was treated that way regarding, you know, the layoff process. It was a place that I had enjoyed working, and a place where I really didn't feel the greatest about the management in charge. I felt like they didn't treat people very well in general, and I definitely didn't think I was an exception to that. The news was pretty hard for me. It was a lot of anger, a lot of sadness, and it definitely was something that stuck with me for a while afterward.

VS: Okay, were many other people in your company laid off, or was it just kind of, that one area of the business?

DV: That area, it was actually something that started pretty recently with my hire, and aside from the room that I worked in, it was also attached to like an escape room that the

business had started at the same time. We were all kind of one team who would work in both areas, so in total, it was probably only about ten people who worked in that area. As far as I'm aware, everybody got laid off who worked there, and they shut both the room I worked in as well as all of the escape rooms down.

DV: During that time, I actually, when I got hired there, I got hired with a friend of mine, and she was working full-time. Unlike me, she was working the one extra day that I wasn't every week, so we both actually got the news at the same time as we both showed up for work at the same time. A lot of the time, we would just go to work together. So, we both showed up, and we both got the news, but since she was working full-time unlike me, she got the unemployment benefits associated with that. So, I also had to see, as she was basically getting just as much money, only not working while I was struggling for a while to pay my bills. So, that was pretty difficult on me, and it did make the layoff process harder because I knew a lot of the people there closely, especially her, and seeing how I had a lot more difficult time than some other people did, it was pretty difficult on me.

VS: What are your thoughts on the unemployment benefits requirements as someone who was working twenty-eight to thirty hours a week and didn't qualify?

DV: I think the system that is in place does make sense, but it can also leave a lot of people in very difficult situations. In my case, I live with one other person, and we pretty much pay everything on our own, all of our own bills and everything. And while I'm going to school and working just under part-time, she works full-time, so my income is pretty

important for us to be able to pay everything that we needed to pay, and it felt kind of unfair to me that, just for working those, you know, five-ish less hours a week, I didn't get any of those benefits. It was pretty difficult on me, and I didn't really know what I was going to do about it for a while. I would say I understand why it's the way it is because unemployment can also come with a lot of downsides, and, you know, it's also not beneficial just to give it out to everybody, but as somebody who is both going to school full-time and also working just under full-time, it felt like, despite me doing everything I was trying to do for my future, I was kind of getting the short end of the stick, and it was making a lot of things a lot more difficult on me.

VS: What do you think employers could have done to, maybe not necessarily just your case but in other cases, what do you think employers could have done or implemented to help their employees, even if they were being laid off?

DV: I think I could actually relate this to the position I was in at the time. As I mentioned earlier, the business I was working for was also attached to a hotel and water park, and the rest of the building didn't shut down. When we did, they continued to be fully operational for a while longer until COVID-19 got worse. I know at the time they were always looking for people to fill in those other spots, but despite laying us off, they gave us no opportunity to fill in any of those positions that they were hiring for. So, despite us already knowing the business and being familiarized with a lot of the practices and people, they didn't really do anything for us. It kind of felt like a hopeless situation, and I know a lot of the people who got laid off with me felt the same way.

DV: It was definitely a bit of a surprise, and it, at least to me, it showed me how much the business I was working for really didn't care about me. It was a bit of an eye-opener, just seeing, you know, some places try to treat you like you're more than a number on a page to make money, but that definitely wasn't one of those cases for me. I felt like I was only there to be a body filling a role, and when they didn't need me, they didn't care to do anything to help me. So, it was a little bit difficult to deal with that, and it definitely left me with some feelings of anger towards the business as a whole.

VS: Were there any life plans that got kind of derailed or made harder as a result of the layoff?

DV: Yeah, so just to give a little bit of an idea of everything that came to follow after that, as I mentioned, after I got laid off, I returned to my previous job as I, you know, was pretty short on time and needed to find something to do for money. During that time especially, all of our money, me and my partner, who I live with, was pretty much going to our bills, so it was a little bit of a change in plans.

DV: It was definitely a pretty hard period for both of us in general. It required her to temporarily work a lot of extra hours in order to help us get by. Following that, I ended up returning to that previous job, where I managed at Jimmy John's, for roughly six months until I took another job. It was at a new like upstart, liquor store and wine tasting business. I left my job because, as I mentioned, I didn't really want to be there, and also the job that I went to paid more. So, once I left that job, it felt like things got a little bit

easier. We started to have more income, and we started to feel less tight on money all the time. So, at least especially in it, it was a roughly nine-to-ten month span we were a lot more tight on money. We had to be very conscious of all of our spending, all of our bills, our heat, things like that a lot more than we were used to. So, it definitely was a little bit of a wrench in our lives that took some time to adjust to.

VS: How did the constant stress of worrying about making ends meet affect you mentally?

DV: It was definitely pretty hard on me, especially as it felt like I was the one who wasn't doing my part for a while.

DV: Me and my partner moved into a house together, which we currently still rent, a few months before the pandemic and lockdown began. It was actually during the time where COVID-19 had already started to gain a little bit of traction, but wasn't so widespread yet, and the World Health Organization hadn't declared the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, at the time, we unfortunately needed to find a new living situation. Prior to that, we were staying temporarily at my mother's house, and that wasn't very sustainable long term. So, we had to figure out something pretty quickly. That led to us moving out right before the pandemic started. And then, when the pandemic did start, me losing my job, it made me feel like I was struggling to do my part. Our original plan being, as I sort of mentioned, that I would be going to school full-time and working part-time to pay what needed to be paid for past my partner's income, and then, once I get my degree, she would return to school and work part-time while she got her degree, and I would be



working full-time. This put a little bit of a change on that. It made me feel like I was failing. It put a lot of extra pressure on me. It was definitely a tough few months, but, you know, it all worked out, I guess. So, yeah, it was definitely difficult, and it definitely made me feel like I was kind of failing to contribute the way I had planned to.

VS: So due to the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment rose to 20.5 million Americans in May of 2020. Having experienced a layoff yourself, how do you think an experience like yours having happened to so many individuals affected the nation itself?

DV: I can only imagine how people who were further along in their adult life than I am were dealing with the situation. Already experiencing what I had during COVID-19, it was very difficult on me, and it's something I don't feel like I can fully relate to as again I wasn't working full-time, and I, unlike some people, wasn't supporting a whole family.

DV: I do know some people who were also laid off during this time, who were really struggling to get by, who were doing anything they could to make money to provide for the people they needed to provide for. Seeing it was, definitely pretty hard and definitely kind of a life realization of how things could get, and it honestly made it a little bit easier for me and my situation, because we were never at the point where we felt like we weren't going to be able to do what we had to do while we were tight on money. We were still able to pay our bills, and we still got through. So, seeing so many other people who didn't even have that, who couldn't pay their bills, who couldn't feed their families, it was

definitely kind of hard to see, and kind of made me a little bit more appreciative that my situation wasn't worse.

VS: What are your thoughts on the stimulus checks that the Government sent out to help individuals? There were a total of three. They were, I believe, 1200, 600, and 1400 dollars.

DV: Yeah, the stimulus checks were, in my opinion, the absolute least that could have been done to help people who really needed that money. In my case, we actually didn't get our stimulus checks right away. We ended up getting the money that would be from our stimulus checks when we filed for our taxes at the end of the year. And when we did receive that money, it was extremely helpful for us. It helped us kind of get our financial situation back on track. It was a huge benefit and a huge safety net.

DV: While we did get by prior to that, it had taken essentially all of our savings that we had had up to that point, so the stimulus checks were sort of the first step in our lives for getting our savings starting to build back up and sort of feeling like we were financially stable for the first time in a long time.

DV: I can imagine that that money was hugely impactful for many other people as well. I saw some people in my life, such as some friends of mine, who, you know, they got free money, and they would just blow it as soon as they could on whatever they wanted to buy with it. And I saw a lot of other people who really needed that money just to be able to

survive, so I think it was really important for a lot of people, and I'm glad it was at least what it was, if not more.

VS: Do you think the Government did the best it could in helping its citizens during this time of layoffs?

DV: I don't think so. I think COVID-19, the whole pandemic and the whole lockdown, turned largely political, and I think it wasn't a place where it should have turned into that. I think it was something where politics shouldn't have really been involved in the first place, and I personally wish that they wouldn't have been. I think that we should have been listening to medical professionals much more so than we were often listening to politicians during that time. I think a lot more definitely could have been done to help a lot of people who were struggling, and I wish that would have been the case, but politics seemed to be the only thing that mattered to a lot of people rather than caring about the many people who were dying every day. It felt like, to many people, those deaths were just numbers on the newsfeed the next day. I think it was a lot more than that, and a lot of people didn't take into consideration how many lives were actually being affected.

VS: Do you think the discussion of politics got in the way of any financial help or emotional help, or any help that could have been provided to people? If so, how do you think so?

DV: Yeah, I think definitely it was a major impact. I think it got in the way in many circumstances. I think, as I sort of mentioned, I think a lot of the time was spent listening

to politicians rather than people who fully understood the extent of COVID-19, such as medical professionals. So, I think, yeah, it really could have been handled a lot better, and I think it turned into something that it wasn't. Everybody felt like, at least from my perspective, it seemed like everybody felt the need to take a side rather than just working together to make things better for everyone.

DV: I think help was not as accessible to many people as it should have been. I think many other things outside of finances were also not taken into consideration. One example of that, as you sort of mentioned in your question, was mental health. COVID-19 obviously had a huge impact on mental health for many people around the country, around the whole world, and while I would occasionally see bits and pieces of places offering to help people who were struggling with mental health during COVID-19, I thought it was far less than what should have been available for people who really needed that help. I think a lot of that was due to the political nature of the pandemic, and I wish it wouldn't have been that way. I think, had everybody just worked together instead, it would have been a lot easier for many people to get through.

VS: Do you think that that period of unemployment will have lasting impacts, whether that be on individuals or the country itself? And that's even if unemployment balances back to pre-pandemic levels.

DV: I'm sure that it will definitely continue to have a large impact. All of the people who were laid off due to COVID-19 aren't just going to get their jobs back now that things are starting to get better. It definitely changed the lives and lifestyles of many people.

DV: Later in the pandemic, actually just about a year ago now, I started working with someone who actually was, prior to where we worked then, he used to be, I believe, a defense lawyer. He lost his job due to COVID-19. Luckily, in his case, he was receiving money from the Government from his time in the military, but he took a large pay cut and took a large lifestyle change, and it was kind of shocking to see somebody who used to be in such a highly regarded profession now just working a low-paying retail job similar to my own. He actually started at the same time as me, and I ended up being his manager, despite his being so much more qualified than I was. I know in his case, he has no intention of returning to what he used to do for work at this point, now that he's been laid off from his previous position. So, I'm sure there's many other cases like that where people have been laid off, and it will drastically affect the rest of their lives. I definitely don't think that it's ever going to fully go back to normal.

VS: Speaking of people transitioning back into lower paying jobs and everything, what are your thoughts on the fact that a lot of businesses, whether that be, you know, barista coffee shops and all that, like they were doing hiring freezes where they weren't hiring anyone during the pandemic, really. What are your thoughts on that happening while everyone is, well not everyone, but while a lot of people were losing their jobs and there were less jobs available?

DV: Yeah, I spent a lot of the pandemic looking at job openings. As I mentioned, I ended up returning to a job where I didn't necessarily want to be, and I didn't really want to spend as much time there as I could. But during that time, finding a new job felt much more difficult. Opportunities felt a lot more sparse. I would definitely spend a little bit of time pretty much every day looking at new job postings available, and there was a huge decline in what I saw. Prior to that, it was pretty easy to find jobs working, and you know, any different retail store or any different food business, places like that. At least especially early around in the pandemic, it got a lot more difficult. I ended up looking with some success for roughly half a year, until I found a job that I was actually interested in taking. It also felt like a lot of the jobs left were ones that were paying barely over minimum wage. So, finding anything that was actually sustainable for a lot of people became really difficult.

DV: I also know, in the case of my previous co-worker, who I mentioned earlier, who was receiving unemployment at the time, she spent months looking for a new job and being unable to find anything despite looking again pretty much every day. So yeah, I definitely think it got a lot harder during the pandemic.

VS: What is something you learned from such an experience? Did it shape a part of you?

DV: I would say a lot of the pandemic is something that will definitely stay with me for the rest of my life. I mean, it was something that nobody was prepared for, and it was

definitely very hard, I would say pretty much on everybody in some way or another. It's something that I don't think anybody will ever fully recover from. It was definitely, I think, an experience that will shape my life a lot more than many others will. I think a lot of people also feel that way, whether it be again because of job loss or loss of loved ones, just the time spent in isolation during the lockdowns for so long. I think the pandemic affected everybody differently, but that impact is definitely going to stay with everybody for at least a long time to come, if not forever.

VS: Do you think it's kind of made you more, I suppose, anxious in a way about the world of employment?

DV: In my case, I would say it made me take my education more seriously in order to make sure that I would be able to find opportunities when I was older. A couple of years ago, I was actually trying to figure out what major I wanted to be in. I ended up settling with Communication, not necessarily because it was something that I felt I had a lot of passion for, but it was something that I felt content with, and it was something that I saw would give me a lot of job opportunities in the future. I think I definitely looked for that stability a lot more due to the pandemic and seeing how fragile employment could be. It made me want to make sure that, regardless of anything else in the future, I would be able to find jobs and not have to worry about being unemployed and not knowing what to do. So, I think it is definitely something to consider and definitely something that I realized a lot more during the pandemic. So, it even shaped my college, and I think it is definitely something that had a been a big impact on me.

VS: Would you say that was positive, in a way?

DV: I mean, it's something that I have mixed feelings for. Prior to the pandemic, well, I wasn't sure what I was planning on majoring in. There was a lot of things I considered, and a lot of things that I had more of an interest and a passion for. For example, the main thing that I spent a lot of time planning on majoring in prior to Communication was Psychology. However, Psychology is a field where you often need more than a Bachelor's Degree in order to find a job, and even then, job opportunities can be pretty few and far between. The reason I ended up not doing that is because Communication was sort of somewhat related, and it was something that I felt I would be happy enough doing, and it was something where I felt like I'd be sure to find a job instead of not. So, I think in some ways, it was beneficial to me because it sort of gave me a more realistic outlook on what to expect in the future, but it also sort of pushed me towards something that I didn't care as much about as sort of some other things.

VS: I see. Well, I believe that's all I have. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I do appreciate it, and yeah, thank you.

DV: Thanks.