



Project: Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences

Title: Oral History Interview with Ryan Kani -Transcript

Narrator: Ryan Kani (RK)

Interviewer: Chris Kretz (CK)

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Summary: Ryan Kani ('21) is an English major who transferred to Stony Brook in spring 2020 after spending two years at Binghamton University. In this interview he relates his experiences with COVID, including the shift to online courses and his activities during home isolation. He also details working at Costco and interacting with the public during the early months of the pandemic.

00:00:00

CK: Today is April 6, 2021. This is Chris Kretz for Stony Brook Libraries interviewing Ryan Kani for the COVID-19 Documenting Stony Brook University Experiences project. Ryan, first of all, thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

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RK: Thank you, Chris.

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CK: And can you tell us to start, what year you're in now at Stony Brook and what you're studying?

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RK: Sure. So I am actually in my last semester at Stony Brook. I am an English major, and I am a hopeful MAT [Master of Arts in Teaching] English graduate school student come fall.

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CK: Okay. Great. So right now we want to go back and actually, if you can think back to the fall of 2019—so even before COVID was on anyone's mind—where were you at? What were you doing in the fall of 2019?

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RK: So in fall of 2019 [Kani clarification: fall of 2018], I was actually just beginning my second year of college. I was at SUNY [State University of New York] Binghamton at the time. I was dorming up there with some very, very fantastic suite mates, and I was a part of a volunteer service where we would go out and do different community service tasks and all of that.

And it was an engaging and great time for me to learn the values of public service and, you know, interacting, communicating with everyone else. So that whole year at Binghamton was dedicated toward that. And then at the end of that year, I ended up transferring out.

00:01:32

CK: Okay. So what led you to transfer to Stony Brook?

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RK: So I transferred to Stony Brook for a couple of reasons. For one, when I was actually deciding upon where I wanted to go to college, my sister sort of roped me into going to Binghamton because she was an alumna there. So she kind of persuaded me, but when I went to go visit the school, I did enjoy it. It was very welcoming. It was a very open campus.

However, after I spent two years there, after the end of my sophomore year, I felt as though a, I wanted to be closer to home, and b, I just felt that when it comes down to it, I think Stony Brook was the better option of a university for me to study at for what my goals were, which are to graduate with a BA [Bachelor of Arts] in English and do—hopefully receive a teaching certification in New York State for high school students.

Now, I did like Binghamton. However, when I'm thinking about what I really wanted out of a university, I did not get that out of Binghamton my first two years. And so I thought that it was appropriate for me to transfer out.

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CK: Okay. And where are you from?

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RK: So I am on Long Island. I currently live in Centereach, New York, and I grew up in Plainview, New York.

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CK: So Stony Brook was not unknown to you.

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RK: No, I—no one in my family went to Stony Brook. I had a couple go up to Binghamton. I had one go to Oswego. I had one to Albany [Kani clarification: one family member attended Binghamton but none attended Albany], but no one ever went to Stony Brook. But it is a university that I knew about when I was first applying to colleges because I spoke with my guidance counselor, and he recommended that as one of the schools because I wanted to be an English teacher back in high school. So that was one of the schools he recommended me to apply for.

00:03:31

CK: Okay. So let's talk then about when you were transferred in. What do you remember—your first contacts coming to campus? Maybe orientation in the—early 2020.

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RK: Sure. So the semester that I transferred in, I had actually taken a semester off from school entirely before I came to Stony Brook. So that fall—sorry, uh, the fall 2020 semester [Kani clarification: fall 2019] I was not in school at all. And then I transferred to Stony Brook that upcoming spring semester. Now, when I had come to Stony Brook, I had known a couple of people who were currently attending there. One of them was actually at the same orientation as I was. We were transfer students because they transferred out from a university out of state.

And I also had another friend with whom I worked, and they were also a member of the university. So they kind of gave me guidance on what to expect. Now, in terms of the actual orientation, it was relatively short, but I met a couple of very nice students whom I still talk to.

And I was able to get a good understanding of what not only Stony Brook expects from the students but what students will expect to get out of Stony Brook. So those first initial contacts were both the orientation staff and those couple of people whom I already knew before I had actually transferred to Stony Brook.

00:05:07

CK: Okay. So just to clarify, what was—what semester are we talking about, your first semester at Stony Brook?

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RK: Okay. So my first semester was spring 2020. So last spring was my first semester at Stony Brook.

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CK: Okay. So just to, you know, you have to (laughs) think in a different mindset, but that orientation—that was still being physically held on campus?

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RK: Yeah. Everything there was in person. It was—everyone was grouped together in a packed room. We were in small groups, interacting with each other and walking around campus. We had a whole performance at the end of the orientation where they showed resources and they had different, like, comedy acts and games for us to play and other students for us to interact with.

All of that was held in person at the time.

00:05:56

CK: Okay, great. So what's your earliest memories of being aware of COVID?

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RK: So the first time I had heard of COVID was probably around my second month of being at Stony Brook. So that would have been, I think, around mid-February of 2020. You know, there were these things coming out in the news saying that there's this potential virus that's coming from another country that might be dangerous to us here and alongside that, uh, someone that I knew actually got sick.

And got tested for several things and were all negative. So the doctors had no idea what my, uh, the person whom I knew, what they were sick with. And a few months later, we kind of deduced that it may have been COVID because all the other tests were negative and the symptoms that were coming out for the virus were what that person was experiencing.

So I kind of had a physical interaction with someone early on, but my earliest memories were just hearing it from the news and seeing things online. At that point in February, I don't think there was really much understanding of what it was, especially on campus. No one was speaking about it from what I heard. And it took those several weeks through March for everyone to really understand what the stakes were in this virus spreading.

00:07:41

CK: Yeah. So what do you remember of hearing as you got closer to spring break, I guess—when the reaction of the campus was coming out? What do you remember hearing about the changes that were coming?

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RK: So I actually remember one specific event vividly. I was in my earliest class of the day. It was a Tuesday morning. I want to say it was that Tuesday before spring break in March where our professor pretty much came in and said, "Yeah guys, I think that we might not be returning to in-person instruction." The professor was hearing a lot of things from upper administrative people saying that, you know, We see this virus spreading very rapidly.

And at the point we had—we still really had no understanding of what it was or if there were any possible cures out there. So I remember that professor pretty much telling us that, you know, we might be transferring to some sort of hybrid or online learning. However, they expected it to not be as long as it's been. But I do remember, sort of, that week before spring break before that transfer. The campus itself, as I was walking around, I heard nonstop conversations about it. I heard rumors, people saying, Yeah, we're never going to go back to in person or, This whole thing is a hoax.

I'm hearing all these different things as I'm walking to my classes, but it seemed that the campus community itself was just sort of—it's kind of a bad word to say, but I want to say "obsessed" because it was a thing that they didn't know. It was a thing that they were sort of anxious about, seeing what Stony Brook was going to do and seeing how we were supposed to continue our education with the prevailing uncertainties that were coming with the virus's progression.

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CK: And you were commuting to classes?

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RK: Yeah. So I've always been a commuter to Stony Brook since I started attending there in spring of 2020. I don't live relatively far. It's maybe a ten, fifteen minute commute, maybe twenty if traffic's bad, but I would just—I would commute there in the morning. I'd stay all day, and then I'd go home at the end of the day. I had classes on only a couple of days of the week.

So I wasn't on campus every single day to begin with. I believe that semester I was only on campus Tuesday and Thursday—maybe an occasional Friday—but I wasn't fully and physically invested on campus every day of the week.

00:10:24

CK: So do you have memories of the last day you were on campus then?

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RK: Yeah. So the last day I was on campus, I mean, one of those memories was what I was talking about earlier, about the professor telling us what was going on. But the—I remember just getting lunch with my friend that day. I think it was probably around two o'clock between the break of two of my classes. And we were just talking about, you know, what's going to happen if Stony Brook does end up shutting down. What's going to go on, and how are we going to sort of navigate through the uncertainty that was coming in the days and weeks that were proceeding spring break and through spring break. But that whole day, the last day I was on campus, was just flooded with people talking about the virus, all my professors telling us what was going on, trying to give us as much info as we could.

We received several emails throughout the day—not only university staff but our own professors trying to give us updates. But the last in-person contact I had on that day was with that friend when I was, you know, when I just said bye to them and we were going our own separate ways for the rest of the day.

And after that day, I have not been back on campus yet.

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CK: And so when you—we all had to go into lockdown. Do you want to describe a little of what that experience was like for you?

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RK: Yeah. So when we were sort of—when we were told to sort of go into a quarantine and isolate ourselves and try to protect ourselves, I was actually—I was still working.

So I was a frontline worker. So I was in constant interaction with people, and I didn't go out besides that. I stayed at home the whole day, but then when I had to go to work, I was there. And that was, again, that was probably about mid-March when around the spring break was of 2020.

But even at work none of us knew what was going on, and there were no instructions or guidance from any health department or any disease prevention to tell us what to do. So while we were at work, it was just business as normal. Now, when I wasn't at work, I was saying I was just at home. It was sort of a little—it was kind of disconcerting because I missed campus. Because I did enjoy being there. I enjoyed being physically in the classes. I also enjoyed going out once in a while, hanging out with some friends.

And to have all that stuff sort of stripped away for the time being—because we were not only trying to figure out the dangerousness of the virus but trying to follow protocols and guidances from the appropriate sources to tell us how to protect ourselves. So for me, the beginning parts of isolation were a little difficult to cope with, mainly because, again, I like being out, and I like being active, and to sort of have to restrict myself, aside from just being at work—it was a little difficult to accustom to. And even now, over a year later, it's still very difficult.

Even as some sort of restrictions are lessening and people are trying to return to some sort of normalcy, it's still a little—it's a little bit difficult to try and maintain that lifestyle that I had previous to the beginning of isolation, even today.

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CK: Yeah. So in terms of that isolation, were there routines or things that you found that helped you get through it or distracted you or—

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RK: Well, when we went into isolation, I actually began writing a lot more. Now, I am an English major, so I have always enjoyed to write but not really free write. I never really delved into free writing. I sort of just focus more on, you know, the scholarly, academic papers. So that's the stuff I enjoyed, but one of the things that I always tried to do each day to sort of ground myself and relieve some anxiety at the beginning months was I tried to write something.

It doesn't matter if it was a poem. It doesn't matter if it was a short story or some sort of literary work. I have this whole file—this whole folder, rather—on my computer that has the dates of the days that I was writing and a short title. So when I look back on it, I see, you know, pretty much every day I have some sort of writing.

It may have just been how I was feeling for the day, but I found that as one part of my routine to kind of comfort myself in the time that was being taken from my ability to be, you know, out and about on campus and interacting with other students.

One other thing, in terms of routine that I was doing, was I began to cook a lot more. I have enjoyed cooking. I always have. Before I chose to go to school to be an English teacher—back in high school, I actually wanted to go to culinary school to gain the credentials of being a chef and working in a restaurant, possibly owning my own. So I used that. I used that time at home to sort of work on cooking and developing different recipes and just cooking meals for my family. And I found that very enjoyable. And it did take away some of the distraction of those proceeding months of being isolated. So I just tried to focus on a couple more hobbies and find a couple more hobbies. And I really tried to integrate those into my everyday routine to—and sort of make everyday life a little bit more enjoyable than it was at the time.

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CK: And just to go back for a second, you mentioned work. So where were you working and how long were you physically going in?

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RK: So at the time, I was working at Costco Wholesale in Nesconset right off Middle Country Road. I was—at the time, I was probably employed there about a year, and I was a cashier, I worked in food service, I worked at the doors—you know, checking receipts and interacting with other members. I did a lot there and the hours were very staggered. So some days I would work early morning through three. Sundays I'd work till six. Some days I would work through 10 or 11:00 p.m.

At the height of the virus, probably in April when we started to have all the mandates of masks and, you know, six feet apart, all those mandates, I was on a little—uh, at work I was mainly doing the doors. So I was checking receipts and answering members' questions. That's what my job was for pretty much that entire month of April. And as the virus kept progressing, you know, the work began to adopt some more mandates such as not letting as many people in, trying to provide some protection for the cashiers by putting up some plexiglass barriers, and, you know, wearing gloves, sanitizing a bunch of things.

But I—at the time I was there, before and after—the virus sort of hit all the smaller and larger businesses, kind of forcing them to adapt to the changing scenario.

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CK: And we've talked to a number of people—and myself included—about, you know, getting supplies and food. What was—how did it feel at Costco, or how did it change as the situation developed?

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RK: It was, for lack of a better word, it was stressful. We had, even today—I'm no longer employed there, but I do know today we still have limits on certain things. Back in March through April, corporate—the higher ups—forced limits on a bunch of essential things like hand sanitizer, and paper towels, and toilet paper, and waters, and stuff.

There was a limit of one of whatever. So it could have been one bag of rice, one case of water for an entire family. Those were the limits we were supposed to abide by. And it was stressful because those areas, they were situated in the back of the store. So we had the paper next to the water next to a bunch of drinks that were all limited. Every day, that back few aisles were just saturated with people, with people trying to get all of the things they were being told to get.

And there were several fights. There were several arguments, and there were hundreds of times throughout the day where members come up with more than one [item] and we would have to tell them that, Hey, you can only get one because that's the limit that's being imposed right now so everyone can get some.

And most people were understanding, but there were a select few people who really threw a big fuss about only being able to get one. And some people tried to go in and—later in the day—and get another. Or try to come in multiple times in the day and grab some more. And sometimes I went through—sometimes we were able to catch them. The store itself was, in my opinion, slow in trying to accommodate everyone in the products that they were trying to search for.

There were many days where we just didn't have stuff. There were—back in April there were a couple weeks where we had no water at all. The water room entirely was empty. There were no water bottles anywhere for a couple of weeks. And we had so many folk coming in throughout the day, giving attitudes and, you know. Given, I think it was at the time, it was a little—it was justified because people were anxious about getting these things and the fact that a store that they always frequent didn't have it, it's a little bit—it's a little stressful for them, and I understand that.

However, after a few months of that, the job was so stressful. It was—every day was just embedded with new anxieties and new anger from members and a management staff that was trying so hard to not only protect the workers but try and provide them some sense of both normalcy and a work environment that they still enjoyed working in, despite those increasing

complaints and anxieties and anger from the members. It became very difficult to deal with at the store because again, as I was mentioning, just every day it was like that. There was no day where everything went well.

And that's the nature of a retail store in general. Retail stores are very, very customer oriented and the fact that the customer service kind of had to take a back burner during the height of the virus back in April, it was hard to try and do your everyday job. And it was hard to work in an environment that was so, in my opinion, was very negative for those first few months. But that's pretty much what the environment was.

And it still sort of is today. Even over a year later, we still—I say “we” as though I'm still there, but I'm not—but the store is still like that. There are still members coming in and giving attitudes for them not being able to get some certain things and complaining about those restrictions that are still in place.

And the store is just as it was a year ago.

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CK: Just to switch back to the classes—how did you take to doing them online? Was that something you had done before?

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RK: So I've never actually taken classes online. However, at the beginning I did not think it was going to be very difficult because I understood that a lot of teachers were trying to be accommodating because they understood that a lot of students were stressed out. And I know I keep saying that word “stress,” but I think that's really—that's a defining word of that time, is “stress.” The teachers understood and I commend Stony Brook for doing what it did with the online classes. I thought the transfer over was very, very simple. It was very easy.

Now, being on several Zoom conferences a day—it's a little bit much after a few months of it happening. But those first few weeks I found really no qualms with being online. It really just felt as though it were an in-person class, given there was sort of—there was slightly less attendance, and there was slightly less participation. That normally comes with an online class.

However, those first few weeks of the moving of everything to online, I didn't really have a problem with. I found it, the situation itself, to be very manageable. But now that I've been a part of strictly online classes for three semesters, it's—as I reflect back, I just, it's a lot. It's a lot to try and—a lot to try and handle.

I don't like being in front of my computer multiple hours of a day. That's just my opinion. I know some people who love it, but I very much enjoy in-person instruction because I feel that you develop those bonds with the teachers and the students around you. And those bonds sort of are missing in online classes.

Especially because I've had several classes with the same professor that I would have loved to have had in person, but with the situation I've not been able to. So I've always found the, uh—at the beginning, the online classes were okay. But as it's been that same situation every semester, I found it a little bit, a little bit burdensome.

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CK: Have you had any physical classes, either last fall or this spring?

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RK: I have not had a single in-person class since those first couple months I was first at Stony Brook, before we transferred to online. I've had every single class—even summer and winter classes—all that stuff has been online since the transfer to online.

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CK: And how have you been able to keep in touch, outside of class, with people? Or keep up with news from Stony Brook?

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RK: So I've—in terms of friends and such, you know, we—I text occasionally back and forth. We have some Zoom conferences. But it's just—it's not the same as if you go out somewhere to hang out with someone.

Today I am going out once in a while to hang out with people, but we are following the protocols. We're not doing anything we're not supposed to be doing. But those first few months where we were pretty much told not to have large gatherings of people, I tried to remain in constant contact with my phone and with the computer.

Because that seemed how everything was progressing. Everything was progressing towards a almost fully digital world, in a way. And so I use those sources to try and keep in contact. Now, I have lost some contact with certain people because of it. And I understood and expected that to happen because it is very hard to, you know, have as close a relationship if it's strictly over text and over online platforms. And I understand that. But I've been trying what I can to make sure that the people around me know I'm still there and know that I'm safe and I'm healthy and expecting and wishing them the same.

In terms of, you know, Stony Brook news, a lot of it's done through email. I read all the emails that the university sends, letting us know of any reopening procedures or any sort of news. Just today, we—I received an email from the president saying that in fall 2021, she expects us to be almost fully in person on campus which I think is nice. And I do hope that the trajectory stays on that course, but just both in terms of news and talking with people, all that stuff, I pretty much found to be done exclusively online.

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CK: So you're on track to graduate this semester?

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RK: Yeah, I will be graduating in, uh, next month actually, in May. And I do know that it is an in-person ceremony, which I am very appreciative for.

However, at the same time, at the moment we're not allowed to have guests which is a little—it's a little sad, but I understand the circumstances, and I know the graduation will be livestreamed so they will sort of be there. But yes, I will. I will be graduating if all goes well in, I think, about six weeks.

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CK: And how does what you've experienced now for the last year, year and a half almost—has that affected what you're planning for the future at all?

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RK: In a way it has—not in terms of my physical goals. However, the—well, the last year and a half, roughly, give or take—it's really shown me the importance of keeping in touch with people and making sure that you're there for them if something happens.

Now, when I was—I was sick with COVID in the past, and I had a very strong group of friends and family around me who supported me, and I very much appreciated that. Since that point, and through today, I found that it's so important to try and develop those bonds with individuals. And in a way, it's sort of strengthened my desire to be a teacher because I want to be someone who can have an influence—a significant and lasting influence over other people and provide them support, and care, and guidance in whatever it is they need. And I think that's what the foundation of a teacher is. It's not just teaching material. It's really being a source and pillar of support for students.

And my desire to be a teacher has grown throughout the last year and a half. But I've never—I've not really thought much past that. I'm sort of just going with whatever's going on. Like I—I take it day by day at this point. If I want to do something, I don't really think of it much in advance.

I'm very in the moment, and that has not really changed—either before or during the pandemic.

00:32:07

CK: And Ryan, just as a way to sum up—besides what we've been talking about—is there anything specific you would like people to know about this time in your life and what you went through?

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RK: One thing I will say is that, I mean, it might seem very basic, but—it's not a joke.

The time that we've had in isolation and wearing masks and, you know, with the advent of the vaccine and all that stuff, none of this stuff is a joke. It's the people who are recommending things to do [who] are truly looking out for people and their health and safety, and really what I've learned is that it's so important to listen to the people, the appropriate sources. Like, I'm not a doctor. I'm not good with science. I never have been. I never will be. I'm not going to question guidance from someone who knows more than me in the field unless I have some rational idea why it's not supposed to be that way.

So just respect the advice and just follow the protocols, follow the guidance. And I think—just think of the virus as just really another obstacle for all of us to overcome. And I think we will overcome it soon if we are able to follow all the support and guidance from the people who have been guiding us for the last year or so.

00:33:58

CK: Great. Well, Ryan, thank you for talking with us today. Congratulations on your imminent graduation. And again, thanks for contributing to our project.

00:34:07

RK: Thank you, Chris.

[end of interview]