



Project: Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences

Title: Oral History Interview with Valentina Marzulli - Transcript

Narrator: Valentina Marzulli (VM)

Interviewer: Chris Kretz (CK)

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Summary: Valentina Marzulli is a psychology major and was a sophomore and on-campus resident at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this interview, she describes her experiences in Langmuir Hall as students were ordered to leave. She also discusses her life at home in Queens during isolation, the transition to all-online classes, and how she kept in contact with her friends and the university.

00:00:02

CK: Today is Friday, November 6, 2020. This is Chris Kretz for Stony Brook University Libraries, interviewing Valentina Marzulli for the Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences project over Zencast. Valentina, thank you for sharing your experiences with us today.

00:00:22

VM: Of course. Thank you for having me.

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CK: Can you tell us what year you're in at Stony Brook right now and what you're studying?

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VM: I'm a junior and I'm studying psychology for my undergraduate degree.

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CK: And if we go back to the spring semester of this year, what were you most focused on going into that spring semester? You would have been a sophomore then?

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VM: You mean before COVID was a thing?

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CK: Just at the end of January.

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VM: I was just focused on, Okay, I want to make the most of my time here. I want to make it a good year because fall semester was very stressful and busy and my mental health is all over the place. As I went into spring semester thinking, I'm going to make up for that. I'm going to make it a good semester. I'm going to pay attention in all my classes. I'm going to live in the moment, and I'm going to do my best.

00:01:22

CK: What were you involved in around campus—activities or clubs or things?

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VM: I was in my building's Hall Council. I was the public relations officer. I had been doing that since the fall, too. It's a year-long position.

So I did that. I sang in choir. I worked on campus as an events assistant.

And I was also very active in my building. I was a regular, if that makes sense.

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CK: And what building were you in?

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VM: Langmuir College.

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CK: When do you remember first hearing about the coronavirus?

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VM: One thing I should have mentioned: I was also a teaching assistant for the undergraduate seminar that the first years have to take. There's a continuation of it in the spring. So I met with the professor before the semester started, just to kind of introduce myself and talk about our expectations. I remember towards the end of our meeting she said to me, "I'm looking at the attendance list for this class and I see a lot of individuals who have Chinese-sounding names, Chinese-born names. And there's this virus happening in China, so I wonder if it's going to be a problem."

And part of me was thinking, Okay, she's a little older. Maybe she's just being old-fashioned about the whole thing.

But at the same time I was like, She does have a point. We do have a very significant international population at Stony Brook. So I was thinking, That virus is probably going to find its way into the United States. Some people are going to get sick.

But I remember when the swine flu happened—almost, I guess, ten years ago now. I was like, Okay, that happened, but we got through it.

I figured it'd be something like that, and I didn't think much of it after that.

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CK: So when did you hear about the plans to close campus?

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VM: I remember it was the week that everyone was starting to panic. I don't remember the exact date, but it was mid-March. And that was when it reached New York. It was getting bad.

And I was actually off campus at the moment because it was during our spring break—the first week of our spring break, actually. We got an extra week of spring break following all the craziness.

We already knew classes were going to go online, so that was to be expected. But I live on campus, and I was really hoping they wouldn't kick us out because Stony Brook is kind of my home.

I was off campus, and I had just finished a session with my therapist. And we're doing it over the phone because of everything and I remember saying—one of the last things I said to her was, Well, Stony Brook doesn't really plan to close the dorms because they know Stony Brook is home for some people. They can't just ask everyone to leave, so I'm going to probably just stay on campus.

And then, my parents live in Queens as well. And at the time, Queens was the rising epicenter of this pandemic. And I was like, I really don't want to go back. My father's high risk—I just don't want to be around that. I am scared.

And then literally as soon as I hung up the phone and refreshed my emails, I got the email from Stony Brook saying, We have to close the dorms.

And I was like, Oh, okay. This is pretty bad, that they're closing the dorms. That they're making us leave in the middle of spring break—a two week spring break.

For me, it wasn't so much of an issue because my parents live in Queens. That's an hour away, but I felt it was very short notice.

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CK: So with your position in the hall, what steps did you have to take—or what were you involved in, any of the planning—

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VM: You mean for Hall Council? Well, I remember the last time we had a Hall Council, it was that week of—everyone's starting to panic.

And we were in a state of—we don't really know what's going to happen.

Some people were already making plans to leave campus anyway, before we knew we were going to be asked to leave—for whatever reason.

I remember thinking, Maybe I should spend some time with my significant other. He lives upstate and the situation wasn't as bad there.

And I was like, I was going to stay for Hall Council. And I remember the president of our hall council, he was very understanding. He's like, "If you guys need to leave campus, do what you have to do. Don't worry. Your health comes first." Stuff like that.

It was just frustrating because we didn't really know anything.

And frustrating and scary because we didn't know what was going to happen. We didn't know what the state of Hall Council would be. At that time, we were assuming, Okay, we're going to be back. And we're like, Is Hall Council going to be able to happen in person? What's going to be the deal?

I remember we ended it on—it was clear it's the elephant in the room. Everyone was kind of uncomfortable. We left it on a good note. Like, This may be the last time we get to meet like this and, Miss you guys if that's the case, but hopefully everything's going to be okay.

And now [fall 2020] we've resumed Hall Council. And at this point, I'm a general body member. I'm no longer on eboard because I serve on the Residence Hall Association.

But it's online. It's just different; it's not the same. Especially because Langmuir's Hall Council, we were always known—even before I got to Stony Brook—[as a] vibrant, weird community. Everyone wanted to come to Langmuir Hall Council, and it's different now because it's on Zoom. There's not as much room to do our usual jokes and stuff because this is a Zoom meeting. You can't make side jokes to the person next to you, stuff like that. And it just ends within an hour versus—we used to go on for hours and hours through the night.

So that's the state of Hall Council now, pretty much. I'm not as closely involved with the affairs but as someone who's just going to Hall Council.

And I remember also—we do our elections at the end of the spring semester, for President and stuff for the following year. And that didn't happen because we all left. And then when we started Hall Council this year it was just kind of like, Okay, we've got to do elections for the first few weeks and pick someone.

So it was just a mess, but now we're doing it.

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CK: I was just going to back up a second—could you just explain briefly what Hall Council does?

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VM: Hall Council meets every week, and it is an opportunity for everyone in the building—and everyone else is always welcome from other quads, or even people who are commuters—to just update everyone.

What's going on in the building, any events, and also—we have senators who go to the Residence Hall Association meetings. So they bring back information, and they represent our building.

And they let us know what's going on. Residence Hall Association is basically a student-run organization that basically advocates for students specifically who are living on campus.

So it's just a way for everyone in the building to get together, let everyone know what's going on, and just have a good time. And Langmuir used to have these really big Hall Councils because everyone would show up.

I remember the very first time I went to a Hall Council for Langmuir, and it was absolutely packed. There were people from other buildings who didn't—or weren't even from the quad, and they're just showing up. And I think about that. I'm like, Can't have anything like that now because, you know, you've got to social distance and keep down the capacity levels.

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CK: What do you remember about the day you had to leave campus?

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VM: The day I was leaving campus, it was a long day. I remember being in such an awful mental state. I didn't want to go, and I wasn't really looking forward to going back to my parents house either, on top of that. So that just didn't help things.

I had tried to appeal the decision because when we got the email from Stony Brook, it said [that] if you're a teacher's assistant, you could potentially stay.

And I was like, Cool. As I mentioned before, I'm a teaching assistant for the first year seminar.

And they rejected my appeal on those grounds, and I didn't say anything about my home life because—I just didn't for whatever reason. So I was like, All right. They denied my appeal. I can't do anything on this.

I was kind of defeated, almost. And I was like, I'm just going to go home.

My roommate had to go back home. She lived in Virginia. She had tried to appeal because Stony Brook is also kind of her home, and Virginia's so out of the way.

She hadn't heard back, and they said they would let you know in twenty-four hours. It had been twenty-four hours, and she hadn't heard anything.

So she was getting ready to go home, and it wasn't till after she left that she found out that she could have stayed, but it was too late.

It almost felt like there was a dark—that whole week, ever since coronavirus got bad here and everyone was starting to freak out—it was like there's this haze over everything. And it really felt that way.

When I was packing to go home—my boyfriend had come over to help with the process because he was using his parents' car. They had the big SUV, and I was able to fit everything. And that really helped me out, but it was—it was just a time, you know, and it just sucked because I was packing and saying goodbye to my roommate and our other mutual friend who lived on campus. She got to stay because she was working, but we weren't going to see her for a while.

And it was annoying for me because I have a fish tank in the room also. So anytime I have to move that, it's a struggle. I had just gotten it, and I remember thinking, Well, I have this fish tank. I'm probably not going to need to move it until the summer, because I would have to move wherever I need to go over the summer.

And now it was like, I had only had this fish tank for two months and I was already making this big move with my poor little fish.

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CK: How are the fish now?

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VM: Well, the fish in question—he's since passed away, but I still have the fish tank and I've put new fish in there and they're doing fine.

The goal is to at least keep them there until the summer. I don't really know what summer is going to look like, so who knows where they'll end up.

Because ideally—I'm an orientation leader on campus. I got that job, actually, after we were sent home and everything because I had applied to it before coronavirus was an issue. And then after the fact is when I interviewed, once we were home and everything. And that job usually results in—if you're eligible, you get on-campus housing.

Now [that]it was online, they weren't offering that as compensation anymore. I don't even know what this summer is going to look like because I'm probably going to do it again, but we already know that winter orientation for any transfers is going to be online.

So I don't really know where those fish are going this summer. It's so hard to plan for things.

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CK: And in terms of the class you were TA-ing, what kind of steps did you have to take, moving to the online after spring break?

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VM: I had a lot of respect for the professor and everything, but she kind of just—it was a hard class to be an active TA for, other than me being in the background. I have to help out with handing out papers back in person. I was another point of contact, sort of, but I didn't do as much up front because there was just not much for me to do.

And I think my professor was saying she had never had a TA before, so it was new to her. So I was understanding of that. So when we moved online, I was kind of doing even less.

And, you know, no disrespect to the profesor or anything like that, but it was just the nature of it. I would still Zoom in and I would chip in when I felt the need to share my two cents. But I just think—when I'm involved, I like to be involved. I hate just standing there.

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CK: So in terms of your own classes that moved online, how was that experience for you?

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VM: I didn't like it, obviously.

I still actually did very well in all my classes, which kind of threw me in a loop. I'm normally—I try to be a good student academically but I don't know, I guess I just expected my grades to suffer when we went online.

But I finished with close [to] straight A's in the semester. I was doing honest work. I know a lot of people might take advantage of the fact that we're online and maybe use resources that wouldn't be available to them if they were doing it in person.

But they were honest grades. I swear. It just—the first few weeks I was like, Okay this is new. We're doing this. We're online. And I was just trying to go into it with a good state of mind, but as it became clear that this is how we were going to finish this semester—I don't know. I just hated Zooming in.

Even now, it's just so hard to stay engaged in an online class when you're just sitting there and staring at a screen.

I need to be doing something. I hate whenever I have a Zoom meeting. I'm just sitting there for hours just listening to something.

I'll do a long Zoom meeting if it's something where I can be involved in, or be engaged with whoever's there.

So I didn't like it, obviously, but what else am I going to do?

It was hard sometimes to pick myself up and be, Okay, I need to do meaningful work for my classes. And I had one class that was basically meeting asynchronously, where the professor just posts the lectures, and we'd catch up on our own. I kept putting them off and then trying to go through all the lectures at once and then take an exam.

It was frustrating.

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CK: So if we talk about your self-quarantine, what was your daily routine like in home isolation?

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VM: I was back at my parents house, and I had my own room.

Back when school was happening, I would usually get up two hours before I have to do a thing.

That's what I was doing at first. But I had one morning class that I was going to, and I was like, I shouldn't get up so early for something I could just walk over a few feet, Zoom in, not even have to show my face if that was the case.

So I would get up maybe a half hour before, and then I'd try to find stuff to do—clean my room for sure because I like having a clean space. Maybe annoy my mom a little bit, attempt to do schoolwork. It was hard to get myself to study because I just didn't have the motivation. I was like, We're in a pandemic. I'm not really worried about academics.

But at the same time I was, Yes, I am worried about academics. I need to do well because I don't want to fail this semester.

I would eat because I'd be bored. There's nothing else to do. I couldn't really go anywhere, obviously, because in the beginning of it everything was closed. And I also don't drive, and I still haven't been on any form of public transportation. I was able to get away with not getting a driver's license because I'm from the city. I can just take the subway or a bus. And then here on the island I take the railroad, but now I'm not doing any of that.

Whenever there'd be something to do—if my mom had to go somewhere, run an errand—I'd be so eager to be like, I'll go with you. Because I just wanted to shake up my routine. But those first few months, it was very anxiety-inducing because I was scared of the virus.

I was scared to go places, and I'd be scared to even touch my mouth. It was just like—oh my God, I'm looking back and I cannot believe my mental state had gotten that bad. Because I'd be so scared to even touch my own nose or, if I did, it was instant hand

sanitizer because I guess my fear was [that ] if I had something, I'd give it to my parents. And then that could produce very unfavorable consequences.

Aside from the fact that they'd get the virus if I had it for some reason. Being older, being parents—my dad maybe could suffer a little worse from the virus than others. So it was just living in fear for the first half of quarantine over that summer.

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CK: Did you find anything that gave you comfort?

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VM: Keeping in touch with my friends was good. I kept in touch with my roommate and our other girlfriend. We'd do video chats and check up on each other. She wasn't really having a good time in Virginia, and I'm not really having a good time here either, but so it goes.

My boyfriend and I—we'd talk every day. I missed him a lot and I didn't see him for almost three months because of everything. Nobody was really seeing each other, and we didn't know what was happening.

I remember, he had come to visit during spring break because he was also on spring break. That was planned anyway, before COVID was a thing. And I did have the option to stay with him up in Buffalo because, one: the COVID situation was better there, so I felt like maybe it would be a little safer there, and also: home life's not that great for me.

I was thinking about it but then I remember—I came to the decision, No, I should be there for my family. I should stay with them.

And I didn't [go]. But then I eventually went to stay in Buffalo for the summer, June to August. Literally summer. Not this whole mess of what we're calling “this summer”—that was spring break that was supposed to just be a week and we never went back.

Looking back—I love my family. I'm very close to my mom. I'm very protective of her, but I almost wish I had went to Buffalo a little sooner because it was just better for me, to be around people and to do things. I guess I found comfort in the fact that I'd be going there soon.

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CK: How would you describe your general neighborhood during this time? Were you going out at all or interacting with neighbors?

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VM: No. I'd try to go out for walks or—I remember it was the general election, so I remember one of the first times I actually left the house was to mail my ballot. I'm registered in Suffolk County because I figured [since] I primarily live in Stony Brook, I should change my registration. And then we get sent home right before the election. I was like, What was the point of changing my ballot—excuse me, my voter status—because now I have to vote absentee either way?

There was a trip to the pet store that I had to make with my mom because I needed to go do the fish tank. We did the whole pick-up in the parking lot, which is one of the first times I had started to go out. But [in] my neighborhood nothing was really immediately happening. I didn't really see any neighbors. It was me spending time at home, and it was very isolating, obviously.

And on top of the pandemic, there's already issues going on at home and conflict, I guess you could say. It was just a mess. I'm glad that I am able to be a little more okay now, in terms of my state of mind because looking back I was like, I don't know how I did that. But I did it.

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CK: And how did you keep up with news about Stony Brook?

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VM: Email updates and also, a lot of people were posting on Reddit. That was something, because people would get different information and then post it to the Stony Brook Reddit page. And it would be like, Well, I got this email from this one professor who said this thing—but no one else got it. I don't know how faculty emails were getting leaked because when we found out we were going online, apparently a professor, or someone who worked at the university, leaked it to Reddit.

And it caused a lot of frustration among the student body because a lot of people happened to know these plans or this information but the students officially weren't told anything. We had to wait to hear it from administration. So it was like, Let's see what

someone has to say on Reddit [and] go with that. Keep checking my emails and checking the news. And it's all bad.

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CK: Coming back for the fall semester, has that changed your perspective on anything? Or how you approach your studies?

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VM: I feel like if anything, in terms of studies, I'm definitely at my burnout. I'd probably be around this point anyway, just given what time it is during the semester. We're getting to the end; things are getting busy. But because everything's online, I—no disrespect for Stony Brook University or anything—but I just frankly do not have the drive to really participate in any of my classes.

Except for, interestingly enough, my one in-person class is the one class where I really feel like I'm learning the most. And even that, it's a frustrating environment to be in because we have to sit apart. I have to wear a mask in class, and I wear glasses so I'm fogging up, and I can't always see the board. And I can't do anything about it because if the glasses come off, then I still can't see the board. So what am I going to do?

I have a class with a professor—I just cannot make sense of his train of thought. And I'm wondering, Is he like this when he's teaching, or is it because we're online and you get that disconnect? I don't know. On one hand, I do feel some sympathy for professors because maybe for some of them this is the first time. I know that technically during the spring they had the second half [of the semester] to do it [teach online], but now we're doing it for real. We know it's going to be a thing. It's going to be a long-term commitment, and they just have to figure it out.

I can't find it in myself to stay engaged in my class and really pay attention. It's so easy to get distracted because I'm on my computer, and I am so busy with a lot of non-academic projects. So it's so easy to be like, Let me have three tabs open in the background and multitask while my professor's talking.

I have a Spanish class online and Spanish and me—I struggle a little when it comes to listening to someone speak it because it's very fast for me, on top of it being online. I literally started taking Spanish when the pandemic happened, so that's been fun to navigate through.

I think I'm doing well in all my classes. A lot of my professors haven't really put up a lot of grades. I just want it to be over with. I'm already kind of dreading next semester.

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CK: In that vein, what are you looking forward to?

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VM: Winter break. Just getting a break from everything. Well, yes and no because I also don't know where I'm going for the winter. I am looking forward to the holiday because my boyfriend comes home. That will be good to see him. I'm excited to see my own family and his family in whatever capacity. When there's grandparents involved, obviously, I'm not too eager to see them. I have not seen an elderly person since March.

I guess I'm just excited for all the school responsibilities to stop so I could try to be more me. Not just trying to BS my way through an online class. Do more things for myself and hopefully see people. At least now we know how to safely navigate this virus, more or less. So I would feel more comfortable going out of my way to see certain people. I'm just looking forward to the break.

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CK: Finally, what would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced of it?

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VM: I want everyone to know that I am not the only one on this boat when it comes to the burnout, the annoyance of everything being online. Obviously, I'm not the only one who feels this way. I know a lot of people share that sentiment and I get it, but I'm just having a bit of a hard time right now. I know this will end. What's frustrating is not knowing when, and who knows how long it will take.

Everyone's saying, There will be a vaccine soon.

But everyone has to get that vaccine. And already people are maybe a little hesitant because it's a rush vaccine.

I know we're going to get through this eventually. This can't last forever. It's just a matter of when—how long. I can't believe it's been already eight months of this. I was talking about it with friends, and we said it out loud, and I was like, Oh. When was the last time I did something that I absolutely could not have done during this pandemic? Oh my God, it's since February. I left the country in February, and I can't believe I did that right before COVID.

There will be an end, but we don't know when. I think it's important to be patient with everyone.

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CK: Just to follow up on that. That foreign travel, was that something you were worried about, or was this before you had any concerns about—

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VM: This was in February, so COVID was a thing but not really here. I had been visiting my boyfriend and since he lives in Buffalo, he's right next to Canada. It was Valentine's Day weekend, so we spent Valentine's Day in Toronto. I just find it so funny [that] I did this right before all this craziness, because that's something I very much could not do now. The borders are closed. They are so closed. I was in Buffalo [this summer] for such a long time, and I was a half an hour away from the border and I couldn't do anything about it.

I'd like to think of that as being pre-COVID. And I wasn't worried. It was just making a trip to Canada, something we frequently do when we're both up there. I guess I'm lucky I got to go right before they decided to close the borders on us.

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CK: We thank you for sharing all of that and wish you the best. I'm sure there will be more questions at some point, but we thank you for sharing your experiences for the Documenting COVID project.

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VM: Of course. Thank you for allowing me to share my experiences.

[end of interview]