

In the Eyes of an Educator in a Global Pandemic

Interview by Emily Tran

This interview delves into the life of Stacey Carusi, a kindergarten teacher in Cherry Hill, and her experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. She discusses some of the biggest obstacles, emotions, and events that were notable to her. It is important to be able to understand that everyone may experience different emotions and opinions about a pandemic depending upon their situation. This interview will give a perspective on how this particular educator experienced the impact of the global pandemic

What was your daily routine like before the start of the pandemic?

A regular day would be getting up, getting ready for work, going to school—I teach kindergarten in Cherry Hill. It's very busy working with children from 8 to 5 while the kids leave at 3:30. I would do the rest of my school work, run errands, then come home and eat dinner. On the weekends, I go out quite often to Philly or just around town, and socialize with friends. My life is generally fast paced, but not necessarily stressful.

How did you first hear about the emergence of COVID-19 (news, social media, word of mouth?), and what was your first impression upon its emergence in Wuhan and rapid spread from country to country?

In the beginning, I wasn't that alarmed. I first heard of it around the very end of February to the beginning of March. I was supposed to meet my extended family in New York City actually, and some of my family members canceled because they were just hearing about it and didn't want to ride on public transportation. I honestly didn't know that much about it. I understood the situation, but I was sort of dismissing it in a way. My general thoughts were just: "We'll be fine, we're in the United States," you know, because it was so far away at the time. I did end up seeing my sister and my nieces and they were telling me more about the virus—they seemed a little bit more paranoid about it. That was only my thought though—in my mind, I *thought* they were being paranoid, but in reality, they ended up being a step ahead more so than I was. In general, I just didn't know too much about it in the beginning, and I didn't expect it to hit the United States the way that it did. I really heard about the virus through word of mouth, *then* ended up hearing more about it through the news.

How did your impression or thoughts on COVID-19 change as it arrived to the United States, and eventually made its way to New Jersey? Was there any additional information you learned about the situation that made you change your impression?

Yes, because it impacted my job so quickly. For me, I heard more about it as the weeks went on in March, and then for school, I was actually so surprised to hear that they were closing it down. That's when I thought, "Oh, my goodness, this is getting really serious because we don't just close school for any reason". I was watching the news more and more, and I saw that there were more cases occurring especially nearby the area, and I was getting more scared. It just seemed so different in the way it affected depending on the groups of people that were infected. For me, it was odd that we left school on a Friday the 13th, and in my district they informed us that we were to come back on the following Monday, and then we never did. After that point, there was always so much going on in terms of starting school because we started virtual learning on that following Monday, with essentially no preparation. We were only given the day before Friday, knowing that we were probably coming back to school—by word of Governor Murphy—on Monday, and that they were not closing schools. It around later that Friday or Saturday night we learned that the

state of emergency was closing down all schools. We probably only had the morning of the one to two days before to prepare, but we still had students to teach at the time too, so basically there wasn't any time to prepare for the full shift to online learning. The experience was definitely scary, crazy, and even sad because I felt bad for my young students. There were so many moments where I couldn't help but get emotional. They didn't truly understand everything about the situation, and I missed them so much— they're so adorable. I just missed going to work and this entire change was just so much to take in at one time. My own kids came back from college and stayed home, so I was glad that they were home and safe with us, but it was just such a strange and odd thing we've never encountered before.

What was the biggest change you experienced upon the arrival of COVID-19 to the U.S., and the start of the lockdown and state of emergency in New Jersey?

Honestly, in my mind, there wasn't any other choice but to prepare for lockdown, so I reacted relatively quickly in preparing to go into lockdown mode. Before we went into lockdown, I tried to get as many things in the house as I could, like supplies, but again, I was shocked as I realized we couldn't get our normal supplies like toilet paper and other necessities because of a surge in many people stocking up as well. Overall, it was mostly my career that was largely impacted because I didn't know how to reach my students in this new platform that we've never done before. They're only 5 to 6 years old so I don't expect them to know how to work a computer perfectly. Thankfully, many parents stayed home, which was wonderful, so I got to work with them to get the kids started. The virtual learning platform also kept changing and improving as time went on and we figured out more ways to make the learning go smoother, from March through June. I completely understood the need and sacrifice to be home all the time, but at times it was depressing and even lonely although my family members were home too. I think everyone in the house was feeling sad and scared about the way our lives just came to a halt. A lot of our fear came from how varied the COVID-19 cases were and how hard it was to pin down the symptoms because there were some people on ventilators and other sources telling us that it wasn't always a case of extreme reactions. We had a friend-of-a-friend in the neighborhood that was really fighting for his life, but although I didn't know him personally, some of my friends did; and having it be right here in the neighborhood made it so real and scary. He ended up being okay afterwards, thankfully. There were a lot mornings where I just couldn't help but cry because I missed my job and the students I worked with. I also just wanted my own children to be okay too because one of them suffers from depression and anxiety— I was worried about the effect it would have on her. But in the end, I was glad I was with my husband and my family because we were going through it together at least.

How did you adjust or adapt to the changes made in your life? Were there any techniques you used to cope with the changes?

That was interesting— I tried reading, but I honestly just felt too distracted by all that was going on, but I finally got through a book by the end of the summer. It was a stressful time for me as far as work goes because there were 4 of us (my husband and I, and my two kids in college) trying to find our spot to work. You sort of run out of space and places to go to help your work ethic, so that was hard to adapt to although we adjusted as time went on. We did a lot of cooking with the free time we had inside— interestingly, I think we actually ended up cooking healthier than we did before, which I know some people that went the opposite way. I think a big reason was because we didn't do any ordering in really, we just stuck with home-cooked meals. This wasn't really a hobby, but I focused a lot of my time trying to find better ways to reach my students since I wasn't familiar with it at first. I ended up putting in a lot more time to work late in order to accommodate the parents that would reach out to me at different times— I was basically ready to

respond to help someone 24/7 if they needed me to. The whole thing was maybe a little hard for me to adjust, but I felt bad more so for my children and students because I feel that when it comes to my husband and I, it's easier for us to stay home if we needed to; I think younger people at my kids' age are more used to going out and about to do what they need to get done. I reached out to friends more and spoke to them. We ended up doing some fun zoom sessions and I saw some friends from high school and cousins I don't get to see very much— that made it easier to pass the time by and feel comforted. We tried to make it a weekly thing with my high school friends and college friends, so that was fun.

What did you think about your experiences when having to leave the house?

That experience was definitely a little scary with the whole waiting in line to get into a store and being very careful with masks. Just the whole process was so eerie and surreal with the such small numbers of people outside the house. It was scary that some of the supplies we needed, we couldn't reach, because the house is usually fully stocked. I didn't think that shortage was going to happen but the thought of not even having the basics was concerning when I realized the reality of it. My daughter suffers from anxiety and tried to accompany me once, and she ended up having a panic attack, which was hard to deal with. We would be very careful with getting back into the house— taking off some layers in the garage, throwing the laundry in the washer, and washing my hands like 15 times a day. To try and minimize the risk there was to leaving the house and going to the store, I tried some ways to get food and supplies brought into the house (delivered) without leaving if we could, but I was still scared about the risk of having it brought in from delivery or takeout so I mostly stuck with doing and making things and meals myself. Obviously, now I'm a little more used to it and it isn't as bad as it was, but there was so much uncertainty with how we should conduct ourselves leaving the house— like there was that whole debate on whether you should wear gloves or not, and which practices lead to more harm than good when avoiding getting infected. It was such an odd, scary experience.

During the span of quarantine, can you name any events that transpired, whether it be from the news or in your personal life, that specifically caught your attention?

I really felt for the elderly population and people that were losing family members from the nursing homes because those numbers kept growing and growing— especially in north jersey and manhattan, which is where a lot of my family was. I was thinking of my own mom that passed a few years before, and I just can't imagine her being all by herself in a facility during a situation like this, where none of her family members couldn't visit her or make sure she was doing alright. It just breaks my heart to think about other people going through that.

With all the changes in that occurred with the pandemic or throughout quarantine, what do you think the future holds for the nation after COVID-19 pandemic dies down?

I honestly hope it dies out soon because I feel like there's no end to it right now. I'm just worried that that won't happen for some time. We're talking about bringing the students back from remote learning. As a teacher, I am very passionate that in-person teaching is the only way I can most effectively teach my students— but again, I know it's not the safest way. If there are any circumstances that support in-person teaching, I'm going to try those first anyways because it's so important to get that better communication for young kids like I teach to really absorb what they're learning. I hope if a vaccine ends up coming out— I want to think realistically as possible — that it's effective. I don't think I'd be eager to run and get one first until I know it's been truly proven to help with the COVID-19 infections. In general, I think people will reluctant to go to

public events like concerts because I know that I wouldn't like to go to one in these circumstances. I think there's a permanent change in how we'd interact with people in general—for example, I'd feel okay seeing my close circle of friends, but for people I usually don't see I'd definitely be a little more cautious since I don't know what they're day to day is like. I trust the people that I'm close with that we're all on the same page on how we approach this pandemic.

Below you will find a photo of Stacey Carusi with her husband, and a photo of her kids

