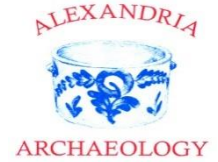




City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Chronicling the Pandemic COVID-19 Project*

Title: *Interview with Dana Wedeles*

Date of Interview: *August 20, 2020*

Location of Interview: *Online via Zoom*

Interviewer: *Daniel Lee*

Transcriber: *Kristin Butler*

Abstract: *Dana Wedeles talks about growing up in the Washington, DC area, moving to New York City, and then returning to the DC area over a decade later. She works for the City of Alexandria on open space planning. Dana describes first hearing about COVID-19 and how it affected her job with the City and the impacts it had on Parks Management and Maintenance. She discusses balancing work and her children's education during the pandemic and how her neighborhood worked to ensure that children on their street are able to safely socialize outside. Because of the pandemic her job assignment changed and she is currently working for the City's Emergency Operating Command Center. Dana shared the stress of her grandmother's illness with COVID-19 and the relief at her grandmother's recovery. Dana also describes talking with her children about the protests after the killing of George Floyd in May 2020.*

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.

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Introductions (00:00)	
Daniel Lee:	Hi. This is Dan Lee. It is August 20 [2020] at 10 o'clock in the morning. I'm here with Dana. Yeah, so Dana, perhaps can you introduce yourself?
Dana Wedeles:	Sure. I'm Dana Wedeles. I work in the City Manager's office now and I have been working with the City for the past ten years.
Dana Wedeles Background (00:34)	
DL:	Okay. And on your survey you talked about growing up in Alexandria. Can you tell us a little about that?
Dana Wedeles:	<p>Sure. So I grew up on the West End [neighborhood] of Alexandria just off of Seminary Road. I lived here until I was eighteen and at that point said "I'm leaving Alexandria. This is not where I want to live anymore. I'm leaving Virginia and I'm moving to New York City." So I moved to New York when I was eighteen to go to college and I stayed there until I was thirty and never in a million years would have thought that I was coming back here. I don't know that I really felt like I had a strong connection to Alexandria growing up. Just never really, I didn't really connect with kind of the suburban feel that I had over on the West End and didn't have some of the community connections, I guess, or the urban life that I was looking for. So, I moved to New York and said "I am never coming back."</p> <p>And then sure enough, twelve years later, I had met my husband, he had applied to graduate schools down here, and we kind of realized that New York was not where we were going to raise a family at some point. So we moved back, and what we thought was we would just be moving back to the [Washington] DC area. We started looking at apartments in DC and realized that what we could find in DC just wasn't going to meet our needs and I begrudgingly looked at Alexandria. And sure enough, we found an apartment. The irony was strong, and we—not only did we take an apartment in Alexandria, but the first job I applied for down here and got was with the City of Alexandria. And so, ten years later, actually ten years this week, we've been here and it was probably one of the best decisions we could have made for ourselves and for our family—all of my opinions about being from Alexandria when I was eighteen have completely reversed themselves.</p>
DL:	So do you feel like—where did you go to high school?
Dana Wedeles:	I went to high school in DC at a small high school called Edmund Burke on Connecticut Avenue.
DL:	Oh. I actually live right next to Edmund Burke.

Dana Wedeles:	Oh. Funny.
Working for the City of Alexandria (03:20)	
DL:	So can you tell me a little bit about your work with the city?
Dana Wedeles:	Sure.
DL:	I mean, just very generally, considering that people will be listening to this many years later.
Dana Wedeles:	They are just places that bring people together and so my role for the past ten years has been seeking to 1) find additional open space for the city and 2) looking to improve our existing open spaces, and by doing that, to work with the community to understand what they would want in those spaces. Um, and I've also done a lot of work with our department in terms of employee organizational development and ensuring that we are, we have a strong mission and vision in the department and that everybody is working towards the same goals.
First Hearing about COVID (06:15)	
DL:	Okay. Cool. You know, in a little bit we will talk about how COVID[-19] has affected your job. But let's talk about COVID just in general. Like, when was the first time you heard about it? What did you hear about it? Maybe we can start with that.
Dana Wedeles:	Sure. I guess the first time I heard about it was probably in December on the news. I remember being in a staff meeting one Monday morning and somebody on our team sneezed and somebody else in our group kind of jokingly said, "Ooh, I hope you don't have that thing that, you know, that's happening over in China," and we all kind of [were] like "huh, yeah, no big deal. Its over there." That was December. And then I remember in January—its January or February?—a friend of mine, who does a lot of international work but lives in Denver, came to visit and she said she was here doing work but she was supposed to be in Wuhan. And we were all like, "Oh you're supposed to be in Wuhan? Oh gosh. Good thing you're here." And little did we know that only a month later we would be on lockdown.
DL:	So when you first heard about it in the United States, I guess, like what was your reaction? Where did you hear about it? Yeah. How close were you paying attention to it?
Dana Wedeles:	I guess, you know, I watch the news every night but I didn't really, it didn't really register that it would be here. It was, you know, on cruise ships. It was on the West Coast. The country's big. It didn't really cross my mind how quickly it would be here. Obviously if we had all known, then we would have prepared differently. But it

	<p>just didn't even register.</p> <p>I think—so we went—I have two kids. One is in elementary school in Alexandria so, you know, March 13 [2020] we all got the email, “Come pick up your kid. We’ll see you in a month.” And so that was really the first time it registered that this was, this was something. And that night we ordered pizza to the playground that’s near us with three other families and it was like our going-away pizza party. You know, we were all, we didn’t quite know if we should be keeping our distance, or what we should be doing, but we figured, “Alright, this is it, we’ll see you in a month, guys.” We had our pizza, and had some fun, and retreated back to our houses. Now its August.</p>
<p>Where We are in the Pandemic (08:55)</p>	
<p>DL:</p>	<p>Yeah. So for people who watch this many years later and for whom this is fuzzy, we have been in lockdown for how long?</p>
<p>Dana Wedeles:</p>	<p>Since March 13 [2020]. So, what is that, seven months? Six months?</p>
<p>DL:</p>	<p>Five.</p>
<p>Dana Wedeles:</p>	<p>Five months. It feels a lot longer. [laughs] I’ve lost track.</p>
<p>What Areas of Life have been Effectuated by COVID (09:17)</p>	
<p>DL:</p>	<p>So you’ve talked about this kind of like going-away pizza party. Like, what areas of your life has the, did the—or has the stay-at-home order effected the most?</p>
<p>Dana Wedeles:</p>	<p>Gosh. Just having kids and trying to balance work, kids, teaching them, general sanity in the household. From March until May we really didn’t leave the house much at all. I’ll talk about my grandma in a minute, I guess, but just life inside the house was so chaotic. I mean, I look back at that time and don’t understand how we made it work. So I would work in the afternoons and watch the kids in the morning and my husband would do the opposite. But, you know, that only got us four hours of work a day, so, you know, I would have to come up with a lesson plan, teach the kids in the morning. I have a seven-year-old and three-year-old. The seven-year-old was a little easier. The three-year-old, he could not be contained in the house all day. And so, you know, after watching them, then we would, I would work for four hours. Then we’d have dinner and the kids would go to bed. Then I’d go back to the computer and put in another four hours, while also trying to figure out what I was going to do for a lesson plan the next morning. So there was not a second of breathing room during that time.</p>

Grandma's Illness and Recovery (10:53)	
Dana Wedeles:	And then on top of that, on the last week of March, my grandma who's in New York, she was um, started coughing, and we thought, "There is no way you have this because you haven't left your apartment in two weeks." And then the next day she had a fever. And again, we thought, "there was no way you have this. You haven't left your house in two weeks." And I guess I'm getting to this story now because, you know, it was chaos at our house at the time, trying to figure out how to work and handle the kids, and then all of sudden this happened. And, you know, everything turned, turned upside down. On top of, on top of trying to manage at home.
DL:	Can I ask again, like, what the is the time frame of your family's—?
Dana Wedeles:	So this would have been, this was the last week of March. She is ninety-nine. She turns one hundred next Friday.
DL:	Oh wow.
Dana Wedeles:	Which tells you that she, she made it.
DL:	Yeah.
Dana Wedeles:	<p>But, so she, she went to the doctor that day. Her doctor said, "We don't think you have it because you haven't left your house in two weeks." Again, you know, people just weren't prepared or thinking about how to treat this or, you know, what the right symptoms were at that time. She's in Manhattan. When I said that she hadn't left her apartment in two weeks, she had somebody that would come into her apartment to drop off food. There was a housekeeper. Otherwise, she would go down to the lobby every once in a while. Which, you know, she had to take an elevator to do. She's on the forty-fourth floor of a building in Manhattan. So that was her only exposure.</p> <p>And then, so she went to the doctor. By the time she got home from the doctor, she just went into bed and she couldn't get out of bed. My cousin arranged for somebody to pick her up and take her to a hospital in New Jersey because, watching the news, we knew that if she went to a hospital in New York, she wouldn't have made it. It was just chaos. And I don't think that she would have survived if she had to go through the local hospital in Manhattan. And so she was driven to a hospital in New Jersey, which is where my cousin lives, and he happened to know the ER [emergency room] doctor who was on that night and we are so fortunate that she was able to do that.</p> <p>She was—she really couldn't speak, or she had trouble breathing for probably about a week. And we would call and just listen to the</p>

sound of the oxygen tank. Thankfully she never had to go on a ventilator. The fortunate thing throughout this was that her vital signs were always good. And so that gave us hope and you know, I was trying to do work and manage the kids, and, you know, keep things somewhat normal here. But it was very challenging, obviously, and then we would call, my daughter would read her books without much reaction and then one day, we called and we heard *Morning Joe* playing in the background on MSNBC, which is her favorite show. She is, for better or worse, a cable news junkie and has very strong political views. And she, she still couldn't talk but we knew the tv was on. That was a change. The next day we called again and she could start to speak. And each day she just got stronger, and it was about three weeks later that she came home.

And she happened to call me by mistake while she was getting in the car with somebody to drive back to Manhattan. There was a nurse that she was meeting who would take her back and stay with her in the apartment. She was completely independent before all this at age ninety-nine. She never had a nurse or anything. And so she called me by mistake and I heard the nurse say "You're an inspiration" and my grandma said, "Well I just want to make it to one hundred." Next week on August 28 [2020] is her one hundredth birthday.



Dana Wedeles' Grandmother in New York City

DL:	Wow. In the picture that you sent us of your grandmother, she's standing. Does she, does she not use a walker?
Dana Wedeles:	No.
DL:	Or a wheelchair?
Dana Wedeles:	No.

DL:	That's amazing.
Dana Wedeles:	She used a walker when she came home from the hospital. She hated that she had to use a walker. It was probably about six weeks of recovery in her apartment. And she had an aide and she had a walker. And now at this point, she is back to herself. She has an aide in her apartment but, I think at this point, it's to keep her company. You know, there's a silver lining to a lot of what's happened, and one of the silver linings, is because she was sick, she has somebody with her now and otherwise she would be on her own and extremely lonely, because it has been five months without seeing anybody.
DL:	Right.
Dana Wedeles:	So we are going, we are going to go up there next week, even though Virginians are currently banned from New York. We are allowed there if it's under twenty-four hours so we are going to make a quick trip and stay less than twenty-four hours and then turn around. But we got to see her for her one hundredth birthday.
COVID Among Personal Contacts (17:17)	
DL:	Okay. Great. A couple of things first. Do you know anyone else who had, who got infected?
Dana Wedeles:	<p>Yes. Nothing like this, though. So we had a bit of a scare in our cul-de-sac. So we are—another one of the silver linings in all of this is, we are just so incredibly fortunate to live in a cul-de-sac in Alexandria where there are twenty-two kids, and we are all incredibly close, and at some point in, I guess it was mid-May, we just said we can't, we can't keep the kids in the house anymore. We're all losing our minds. And so, we started letting the kids on the cul-de-sac play together outside. And all of the adults kept our distance. But we just couldn't keep the kids in anymore.</p> <p>And then one of our neighbors wanted to go visit her parents, and would be in close contact with them, so she decided before going to visit them that she would have a COVID test and that would just give peace of mind while she went to see them. And it turns out, that sure enough, she tested positive and it was asymptomatic. We have no idea how she got it. She had a headache, which was not that unusual. But it lasted a week. Because our kids had been playing together, there were seventeen of us on the cul-de-sac that all went and got tested. Nobody else had it. It was just her. Not even her husband or her kids. So I guess you could say we've experienced the two complete extremes of how this disease can impact somebody. And we are incredibly fortunate that in both cases, everybody is okay and healthy five months later.</p>

Regular Activities (19:27)	
DL:	You talked about earlier about how you and your family were in lockdown pretty much until May, and you've just discussed like going out onto the cul-de-sac. For future viewers or readers of this transcription, like how do you do basic things, like, you know, groceries? You know, yeah, that kind of stuff.
Dana Wedeles:	<p>A lot of Amazon packages. And I remember, you know, for those two months, if we went to the grocery store, we would go to the smaller grocery store on Mount Vernon Avenue called <i>Streets</i> because it was somewhat empty. And I wouldn't go to a regular grocery store. Or if I did, it was pre-order online and then pick it up. But if we had to go somewhere, we would go to <i>Streets</i>.</p> <p>And I remember wiping, holding wipes to open the door to go in. You know, very, very cautious about touching anything in the store. Getting to the car afterwards and wiping down everything that, in the car after I got in. Wiping down the door handles, wiping the key, wiping the steering wheel. It all seems so silly now.</p> <p>But, you know, we just didn't know how this was being, how people were getting this at the time. I mean, it's only five months ago. But we didn't know if it was in the air. We didn't know if it was through surfaces. You know, we would get home, and be very cautious about putting food and groceries away and leaving them on the counter. My parents are still doing that even though the science has essentially said that you don't need to. But they, they're still doing it. I think they are still letting their mail sit on the, in the mailbox for three days before picking it up too, just in case. We stopped doing that a while ago. But for the first few months we would let our Amazon packages sit for a little while or at least wipe them down before emptying them.</p>
Parents (21:33)	
DL:	So speaking of your parents, do they still live on the West End?
Dana Wedeles:	No. They moved to Bethesda just after I left for college.
DL:	Okay.
Dana Wedeles:	But they're relatively close. We see them probably every other weekend or so at a distance. And on the deck. So that they can still see the kids, but uh, nobody is allowed inside the house at this point. Everything is still outside. And you know, they are extremely fearful because of pre-existing health conditions.
DL:	Okay.


The Effects of COVID on Work (22:08)	
DL:	You talked about how, you know, your job, you had to like, do four hours while, um, when you weren't managing the kids and then you would put the kids to bed, and then you would do another four hours. What are some other ways in which COVID affected your job?
Dana Wedeles:	<p>So one of the ways was that city staff during emergencies, some are asked to take off their regular city staff hat and become part of the EOC, which is the Emergency Operating Command Center. And so I was asked to join the EOC, and uh, I was asked to join the EOC and help with staff availability, which means that staff who couldn't fulfill their regular jobs because they worked in a rec [recreation] center or a library or some function of the city that wasn't currently operating, we were trying to reassign those staff to other roles where there was a need. So we needed a lot of staff to help with rental assistance. We needed staff to help with contact tracing. And so my assignment, in addition to park planning, was to find available staff and reassign them where they were needed in the city.</p> <p>And it was like rapid fire [snaps fingers]. You had to get somebody and get them into their new role pretty immediately. And then we also, on top of that, would have, every day there was a 9:30 a.m. meeting to help coordinate the Health Department and Department of Community and Human Services and some of their needs, whether it be PPE [personal protective equipment] for essential workers in DCHS or—what were some of the other assignments? You know, just helping with logistics. Oh, there was a—there were some testing sites. There was an outbreak at one of the clinics and we had to quickly figure out the logistics of putting up tents and getting entrance and exit signs and cones and everything for a testing event, very quickly.</p> <p>And then at 4:00 o'clock every day, and this still happens, but only, it's not as frequently, I think it's only once a week now, there's a regular check in to, with everybody in the EOC to make sure that there's full communication, everybody knows what's going on, and prepare for the next day.</p> <p>So when I think back on that time, you know, I had the job in the EOC, my regular park planning job, mom, housekeeper, cook, teacher. I'm sure there was another— you know, worrying about my grandma, you know it was seven jobs at once. It was a lot.</p>
DL:	You seem much more relaxed now.
Dana Wedeles:	Yes.

COVID Impact on City Employees (25:33)	
DL:	It does seem like, like, it was really hectic for a, for a couple months. You talked about perhaps like reassigning city employees, um, and I don't think I've actually asked this on an oral history interview yet, regarding this part, but what did, in terms of, you know, obviously there are some city employees who work in, like you said, in situations where they would normally have to be in contact with residents. How many of them got laid off?
Dana Wedeles:	[Overlapping] Nobody.
DL:	What kind of redundancies—?
Dana Wedeles:	[Overlapping] Nobody. The City manager—.
DL:	Okay.
DL:	[Overlapping] And is it that still true today?
Dana Wedeles:	[Overlapping] Yes. Yes. I don't know what the future will hold in next year's budget. Hopefully it will remain. But the City manager made it very clear that we would do everything possible to ensure everybody had a job and everybody who was, who could not work because their facility was closed, that they would be reassigned to help where they were needed.
DL:	Okay.
Dana Wedeles:	There were a lot of budget cuts in other areas but, um, staff was the priority.
DL:	And—.
Dana Wedeles:	[Overlapping] We were very, very fortunate. I would just to add to that—.
DL:	As far as—.
Dana Wedeles:	[Overlapping] Sorry, I just want to add to that I have been so proud to work for the city during this time. Um, in the past ten years everybody who works for the city experiences bureaucracy and experiences some frustrations at some point. All of that went away during this crisis. Everybody put on their emergency hat, worked together, silos went away. I'm sure the silos will come back. They probably already have as we've started to go back to our normal, our normal lives and jobs, um, well as normal as they can be right now. But it was just amazing to see people work together in capacities they never otherwise would have. My partner on staffing, um, staffing assignments, was somebody from the city court office—[unclear]
DL:	[Overlapping] Was it Linda O'Dell?

Dana Wedeles:	Yeah.
DL:	Okay. Yeah. I used to mentor for her.
Dana Wedeles:	Oh!
DL:	Or in her mentoring program.
Dana Wedeles:	She was, she was great! I would have no reason to have worked with her before this and since then I've been assigned a couple of projects in my new role and need somebody in court services and now, I know who to call. You know, I've made connections throughout the city and we all have and also just thinking about how we, as a city, came together and got people fed. You know, figured out how to work with our community partners and distribute food and distribute, how schools distributed laptops. It was just amazing. And hopefully, and hopefully again, one of those silver linings that these new connections have been made and it will make us a stronger city government going forward.
Communication During COVID (28:51)	
DL:	So you briefly talked about how you were able to talk to your grandmother on the phone. How have you been able to keep in touch with other family members and other friends?
Dana Wedeles:	Um, so we, in the beginning, we, it was all on FaceTime or Zoom [video calling platforms.] Again, until probably May, when we started seeing light again outside. And I think one of, one of the best things about this has been connecting with neighbors. So, you know, friends who don't live nearby, we FaceTime, Zoom, it's all virtual. But our neighbors, every Friday and Saturday night since May, we bring our lawn chairs out into the cul-de-sac, we keep our social distance, but we are all physically together.
DL:	Mhmm.
Dana Wedeles:	And, you know, our neighbors, we've certainly been close, but nothing like this. I mean we, every Friday night we all just look forward to seeing who's going to be the first one outside, then we all rush out with our lawn chairs and a beer, um, get through it together. So that has, that has been what's really gotten us through, I think, making those social connections. I mean, Zoom, and it's great that we have this technology, but the social connections just aren't the same when you're looking at a screen. And we are so fortunate that we are able to do that. We live, we live in a cul-de-sac which makes it easy. If anybody is coming down this cul-de-sac, it's because they live here so we can put our lawn chairs in the middle of the street and uh, be safe.

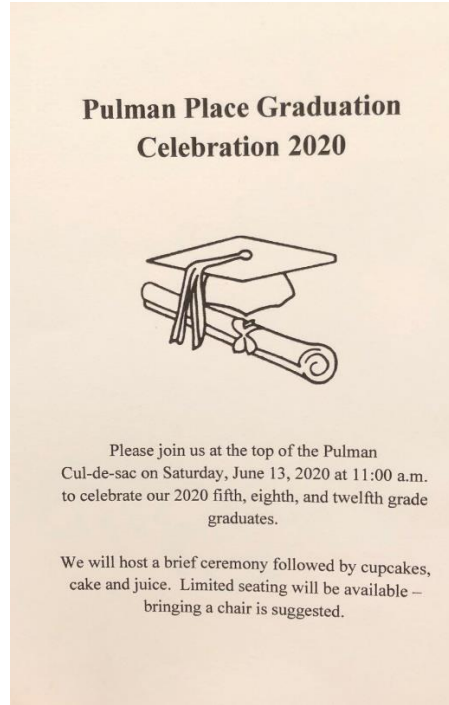
The News and Media Consumption (30:40)	
DL:	Uh huh. You talked about watching the news every night, which is how you found out about COVID in the first place. Um, what kinds of television or radio do you listen to and has your viewing pattern or listening pattern—?
Dana Wedeles:	[Overlapping] Yes.
DL:	—changed during this?
Dana Wedeles:	<p>Yes. Um, so I, in the beginning, I would be watching cable news, MSNBC most nights. Or not MSNBC, I'm sorry, that's my grandma. She has her MSNBC shows. I would be watching CNN in the beginning, particularly because I was watching Chris Cuomo and seeing what was happening in New York. However, I would watch it all with a grain of salt, knowing that it was also there for entertainment, not necessarily the best news source. I, you know, I would watch him because he had COVID, and it was at the same time that my grandma had it. So I was kind of watching how it was playing out between the two of them. And also watching him debate with his brother, Andrew Cuomo, on MSN—on CNN.</p> <p>And then I always listened to NPR in the morning and my doctor—I had a physical, an annual physical, probably in late May, early June, when doctor's offices started opening up for in-person patients again. The first thing she said was "Just turn the news off. Turn the news off. Or you are just going to drive yourself crazy. And what you are seeing on the news is not what I am seeing in my doctor's office. You need to turn it off." So I took her advice. And I have cut back on that quite a bit. I do listen to the radio every morning still and we listen to nightly news, but most of the time it's hard to have the news on when the kids are, um, around because there is just so much bad stuff happening. We did watch a lot of the news during the protests in early June—.</p>
DL:	[Overlapping] Okay.
Dana Wedeles:	<p>—and wanted our kids to see what was happening. So we, we had it on then.</p> <p>What I've also been listening to a lot though are podcasts. And, uh, you know, you listen every night. I don't know how I fit this in back in March and April, but every night, after the kids go to bed, before I would start working again, and I still do it every night, I would walk around the cul-de-sac about fifteen times while listening to a podcast. And I've been listening to "Social Distance" on <i>The Atlantic</i> which addresses COVID issues and it has two hosts and I feel like they are my friends now because I listen to them every single, well, now, it used to be every night but now it's just</p>

	once a week that they broadcast. But I feel like Jim [James Hamblin] and Katherine [Katherine Wells] know me and I know them. [laughs] So that's gotten me through.
Social Media (34:03)	
DL:	Um. Do you read or participate in social media?
Dana Wedeles:	Um. Yes? I guess I have become a lot more cautious about it though.
DL:	Okay.
Dana Wedeles:	So, you know, I'm on Facebook and Instagram. I use it more sparingly, although I think I check it more than I— I'm checking it more and finding articles, you know, news articles that pop up, that are more emotional. It seems like they are there to get a rise out of me, so it's not healthy but I can't stop looking at it.
DL:	Okay. Have, like, do you feel like your habits have changed because of COVID?
Dana Wedeles:	Habits in terms of?
DL:	In terms of social media.
Dana Wedeles:	Social media. Uh, I have found it to be less social And more, uh, hyper alert news. It's not, it has shifted to be more political as opposed to social.
DL:	Okay. So more sensational.
Dana Wedeles:	Yeah. Yeah. Which I still doesn't stop me from checking it, but I think I'm more aware of that.
COVID and Selfhood (35:37)	
DL:	Okay. Um. Has the situation with COVID changed the way you think about yourself?
Dana Wedeles:	Um, I think, like a lot of people, we are more in tune with the silver linings and more aware of inequities. And, um, and just more, more appreciative of what we have. You know, I kept, in those first two months we were losing our minds inside the house, but we were so fortunate to, you know, have a backyard and have our neighbors to support one another. And you know, have the silver linings of being able to pull out a lawn chair and connect with the neighbors. So I think we've just been a lot more appreciative of what we have.
Mature Conversations with Kids and Finding Normalcy (36:51)	
DL:	Okay. You briefly mentioned having your children watch the news when the George Floyd situation came out. Can you expand on that a little bit further?

Dana Wedeles:	Sure.
DL:	[Overlapping] Because it's obviously going on at the same time.
Dana Wedeles:	<p>Sure. So we, you know, I think, in terms of having our kids watch it, we wanted them to be aware of what's happening in the world, why people were getting upset. And also understand the inequities and how COVID really brought that to light and really start having conversations about race and social injustice at an early age. I don't, you know, my daughter's six, she started to really understand it. I'm not sure that we would have had some of those conversations with her that young if it wasn't on the news, and it wasn't a movement happening now. I think we probably would have, I don't know, I don't want to say "shelter," but I'm not sure it would've been such a strong conversation.</p> 
DL:	Mmhm.
Dana Wedeles:	About people of having different, being impacted differently, and how COVID really brought that to light. They're very mature conversations to have with a six-year-old.
DL:	Yeah. Do you feel like—?
Dana Wedeles:	My three-year-old didn't quite get it.
DL:	Fair enough. Do you feel like, because of COVID, you've been having more mature conversations with your children?
Dana Wedeles:	<p>Yes. Yes. And I think them having experienced my grandma going through it, you know, they understood it more than they would have otherwise. You know, they heard her on the phone when she couldn't breathe. And so I think some conversations we probably would have held off until they were older, we went ahead and had. That being said, they, my daughter is, I'm sitting outside and she's on, I can hear her on the other side of the cul-de-sac right now with some of the neighbors. She has had—since we opened the door in May, she has had an awesome summer. So some of the heaviness that we experienced earlier in the spring and early summer has been</p>

	a little bit lifted just because the door is open. She can be with the kids on the cul-de-sac and really be a kid again, which has made a big difference. My son's back in day care.
DL:	Okay.
Dana Wedeles:	They wear facemasks and are six feet apart in the classroom and we are so fortunate that he is able to do that, for everybody's sanity and for his social connection. So that's been a lifesaver for us. He's been back since the first week of July.
Communities Coming Together (40:13)	
DL:	Ok. Um, you talked briefly about how proud you were, like how this [the City of Alexandria's response to COVID] has changed your view of working for the City of Alexandria, the way that people have come together. And you've also kind of talked about how your cul-de-sac has come closer during this—.
Dana Wedeles:	Sorry, there's a helicopter. Hold on one second. Part of living in Alexandria.
DL:	Yeah [laughs]
Dana Wedeles:	All right. Sorry. Go ahead.
DL:	Um, yeah. So you talked about how your cul-de-sac has come closer during this crisis, as well as your appreciation for working for the City of Alexandria. Are there other ways in which you've changed the way you think about your community, both like in the larger or in the micro, yeah, I guess, like in the macro and micro sense?
Dana Wedeles:	Like so how I, how I think about the community?
DL:	Yeah.
Dana Wedeles:	Um, I think we've gotten very creative. Going back to our cul-de-sac itself, and then I'll talk about the broader Alexandria. But in the cul-de-sac, I sent in a picture of us celebrating graduation. So I said that there were twenty-two kids in our cul-de-sac. And six of them were either graduating from middle school or high school, and because graduations were cancelled, we put up pop-up tents in the cul-de-sac and held our own. Three of the – three of our neighbors are teachers at TC [Williams High School in Alexandria], so they orchestrated it, they gave speeches, and we all sat in our lawn chairs crying. You know, it was a very creative way of handling it. And you know, I think when we all went through the COVID scare ourselves in the cul-de-sac, there was a trust that came around, that we all trusted we would be in communication with each other throughout the two weeks where we all had to be tested. We all understood that we were in it together. We all made the decision

that our children would be playing together and we took those risks together. You know, I can't imagine having gone through that with any other group of people. There was just an immense amount of trust and sense of community.



Neighborhood Graduation Celebration Invitation

On a larger scale, you know, I've just been so proud of how the community has come together and supported one another, whether it is in your cul-de-sac, or, you know, working with—through the city knowing that there's a need for thermometers, as an example, in Arlandria, and residents in Del Rey gathered together and found a hundred thermometers, donated them. You know, everybody is kind of looking out for one another, and supporting each other's neighborhoods as needed through this. Just the generosity has been huge.



Neighbors socializing outside while maintaining distance

	<p>I should also share that one of the projects I've been working on has been some residents in Alexandria—some wealthy residents have fundraised money to help city staff who make under a certain salary and has provided those staff who need it with gift cards for food, gift cards for gas, helped pay medical bills—and these are city staff who kept their jobs. However, a lot of them had second jobs or their spouses had jobs that they lost and they were really on the brink of, in some cases, homelessness. You know, city staff, but these are city staff who, you know, pick up the garbage or custodians or work in our rec centers where the hours were cut. You know, just because they kept their job didn't mean they weren't struggling or kept their employment. And it was incredible to see that residents in this city recognized what city staff contribute and what a difference they make and banded together and said we're going to help staff because they help us.</p> <p>And so that's one of the projects I've been working on for the past month and staff have just been so unbelievably appreciative. A lot of them said that they have never, never dreamed of being in economic hardship they have now because they budget in such a way each month based on their salary, and their two jobs, or their spouse's job, that they're going to be okay. However, this put them on the brink of economic hardship that they have never experienced, and they—when they called about this assistance fund, they just broke down and said, "This \$250 is going to help me buy food because I've prioritized rent this month." And just the fact that people in Alexandria cared enough to recognize these staff speaks volumes of our community.</p>
<p>Impact of COVID on Society (46:07)</p>	
<p>DL:</p>	<p>So, piggybacking on that, do you, how do you think this experience with COVID is going to affect society as a whole when we're done? I mean, if we ever are done.</p>
<p>Dana Wedeles:</p>	<p>It's going to take a long time. It's going to be years before we can get over some of the economic hardships. I'm incredibly worried about students and the mental health component that children are going to develop now that could last years, of being isolated, of not having those social connections, of being fearful.</p> <p>You know, again, I think my situation, we're just so fortunate that, you know, my daughter's playing in the cul-de-sac right now. That's not the case for many. And, um, you know, I'm very fearful of what this will bring, not just in this upcoming school year, but in years to come when the effects of it show as some of these kids become teenagers, and later on, adults. The effect it could have on them.</p>

	<p>On the positive side, the silver linings side, I think a lot of people are also going to be more appreciative of what they have and the social connection that they can make and the outdoors, going back to my job in Parks.</p>
<p>DL:</p>	<p>Yeah.</p>
<p>Dana Wedeles:</p>	<p>That has been the—one of the greatest components of—the greatest silver linings of this all is that people have discovered the outdoors again. They’re walking to the park that I’ve been working on for years and discovering them now, even though they might have lived down the block and never realized it was there. On the weekends, you know, finding outdoor spaces in the northern Virginia area they didn’t know existed before. So perhaps, perhaps, that’ll help my job going forward, people will have a greater appreciation for open space and parks.</p>
<p>Changes to Parks Management and Maintenance (48:38)</p>	
<p>DL:</p>	<p>To kind of talk about that in a little bit more detail, kind of, what is the maintenance like. what kind of changes, I guess, have city parks made during the crisis?</p>
<p>Dana Wedeles:</p>	<p>Yeah. So in the beginning again, when we didn’t know if it was being transmitted through surfaces. For those first two months, playgrounds were closed. Obviously, our rec centers were closed. Fitness areas were closed. Basketball courts were closed. Tennis courts were closed. I think we spent the first two weeks making, producing hundreds of signs that said “CLOSED.” And it was just so disheartening because we were taking away the one thing that people could do, which was get outside. You know, you couldn’t go to school. You couldn’t go to work. You couldn’t go to the movies. You couldn’t do anything for entertainment. But you could go outside. And here we were, putting up signs saying “You can go outside but don’t use the playground.” So it was a little—it was pretty heartbreaking to be, you know, working on that and trying to count how many signs we needed for each park.</p> <p>And thankfully the trails were open and you would go—and down the street from us is Four-Mile Run Park, which is a park that I’ve been working on renovating for almost the past ten years. Every year we do a little, either a small project. Last year we did a major project of installing a bridge there. So a looped trail was created throughout the park. And we did that back in November, which was perfect timing, because every time I would walk down there in March or April, people were discovering it for the first time. And we were just so happy to have that trail and be outside and have some respite. And it was also interesting to see people from different neighborhoods and different backgrounds using the park</p>

	because that's all there was to do.
DL:	Yeah.
Dana Wedeles:	Thankfully in June the decision was made that the playgrounds and [basketball] courts could reopen. I think people are still a little cautious to be using them. No gatherings more than, what are we at? Twenty now? Thirty? I can't remember what the number is at the moment, but people are definitely getting outside more now. It's great.
Closing Thoughts (51:30)	
DL:	Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think is important?
Dana Wedeles:	Um, I'm sure I will think of something later. [laughs]
DL:	You can definitely add that later.
Dana Wedeles:	Okay.
DL:	Um. Ok. Well with that I'm going to stop recording now. This has been Dan Lee with Dana Wedeles on August 20. Thank you so much for your time and for talking to me. I'm going to stop the recording right now.
Dana Wedeles:	Okay. Thanks.
Recording Ends (52:08)	