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Interviewee: Dr. Pat Connolly
Interviewer: Gillian Demetriou
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Gillian Demetriou:

Okay. Hello?

Doctor Pat Connolly:

Hi.

Gillian Demetriou:

My name is Gillian Demetriou, and I am a research assistant for the Paradoxical Paradise: An African American Oral History and Mapping Project of Asbury Park. Today is Tuesday, May 4th, and I'm here with Doctor Pat Connolly, a chiropractor in Asbury Park. He has agreed to be interviewed for the oral history portion of this project. This interview's being recorded with the permission of both parties. Thank you very much for joining me today, Pat.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Thank you, Gillian. Good to see you.

Gillian Demetriou:

Good to see you, too. Well, I'll get started with these questions. Can you tell me a bit about your early life? Where were you born and raised, and if you were a lifelong resident of Asbury Park, what was it like growing up there?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

I was born in New Brunswick. My parents lived in Old Bridge at the time. I lived there until I was nine, and then we moved to Point Pleasant Beach when I was 10. I grew up pretty much in Point Pleasant. That was where I went to five through high school. Worked in town and pretty much only came to Asbury Park for concerts, back when I was in my early twenties going to college. So I really had very limited knowledge of Asbury Park at that time in my life, growing up and being raised. Other than that, there were some issues that I really wasn't aware of, or the impact fully, at those ages, at different times in my late teens and early twenties.

I guess maybe the first time my parents took me on a drive through Asbury Park to show me, that was probably the mid-'80s, and there wasn't too much to see at that time. I did cut class in high school to come up to the concerts on the beach that they did every Memorial Day, on Friday. Other than that, really not too much. A few concerts here and there. That pretty much sums up my Asbury experience before 2005, I would say. So there was probably about a 10-year gap there, between Asbury Park before and now.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about your educational background?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Sure. I graduated from Point Pleasant Beach High School in '91. Went on to Wagner College, where I studied biology. After that, I worked for just a few years, maybe a year and a half, even, and then I went to chiropractor school down in the Atlanta, Georgia, area, a town called Marietta, and got my doctorate in chiropractic. We do continuing ed still, on a yearly basis. That's where my background comes from, education-wise.

Gillian Demetriou:

How did you decide that you wanted to be a chiropractor, and how is it different from other medical fields?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

When I was playing football in high school, I got hurt, and nobody could do anything for me. The team doctor, the athletic trainer, school nurse, they were all like, "Well, you're just sidelined." I believe I was a freshman or a sophomore, and Point Pleasant Beach, really small high school, like Asbury Park school. In fact, those two teams play each other, I believe, now. At the time, we were even smaller than Asbury.

So I got hurt, and, really, nobody could do anything for me. Some of the guys on the team said, "Well, why don't you go see our local chiropractor?" Within a few adjustments, my arm was back to full function. My neck stopped hurting. I was back playing again shortly. I kept going at the encouragement of the chiropractor at the time, and I noticed other things change, just acuity, awareness, acne, allergies, things change within my own body because of chiropractics.

So I got interested in it, and then my chiropractor, Doctor Mike Warner, who is a Monmouth grad, as well as his son, Doctor Tim Warner, he kind of encouraged me to explore some of the different things. Then, going to undergrad, biology was a lot of the prerequisites required for chiropractic school. So it started when I was pretty young, to start thinking about becoming a doctor of chiropractic.

It's different from other professions in the medical field. We're not really even in the medical world because we don't prescribe drugs. We are inherently tied to the nervous system and the function of our nervous system and how well that nervous system functions is in direct correlation to our own health. That's a big difference. We're not prescribing drugs. We're looking for the source of nervous system interference and the release of that interference, and when you do that, a lot of times your body is free to heal itself naturally and get you back on track feeling good, performing better, whether that's mental, physical, or emotional.

Gillian Demetriou:

Good stuff. No, I love coming to see you.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Absolutely. We'll get you back in soon.

Gillian Demetriou:

Trust me, I need it. When did you open your practice in Asbury, and why in Asbury specifically?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yeah. It was the winter of 2007. I had looked in 2005, about a year and a half into practicing with Doctor Mike Warner in Point Pleasant, and I had some other commitments. I was part-time coaching football at the Point Pleasant Beach High School, and I wanted to fulfill those commitments. Then I started looking more seriously in '06, and then it happened really fast. I got up and running in Asbury in '07. I did a little part time for as long as I could. It was a few months I was doing double duty and then realized that I needed to be in Asbury full time. I've been here full time ever since.

Gillian Demetriou:

Same building?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

No, actually, I started on Cookman, inside the Fitness Lifestyles building. Leo Clark was the owner of Fitness Lifestyles. Still is. It's in Neptune now. He went to college with my brother-in-law. That was very fortuitous because, like I said, it happened pretty quickly. At the moment I realized that he had some space to rent, I certainly got my ducks in a row, and, with the help of family, I got going there. I was there until 2015. I actually did help run the gym that was upstairs in the same building, for about almost two years. It was a good way to meet people and introduce more people to chiropractic.

In 2015, I moved over to Summerfield and Bond. The parking was getting to be a little bit of an issue, being in the direct heart of downtown, so it was a pretty good move for me to shift just on the edge of downtown. After I moved my business, which had already been established, a couple other health-related businesses and good businesses moved into that same block between Bangs and Summerfield, on Bond. There was the massage ... Kur is the massage place. The acupuncturist, we share a wall within the same building. Talking Heads Barbershop. There's yoga down the street. There's a lot of cool businesses. Pasta Volo.

Gillian Demetriou:

One stop self-care block.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yeah. It was pretty cool. Because mine was kind of a just paste and move kind of business, I was the first one there. But Kur was doing their build out, I think, or at least the finishing touches, when I moved. So I got in under the wire to be the first business to reopen in that area just down the street from Asbury Hardware.

Gillian Demetriou:

Cool. Very cool. What would you say your main demographic of patients are, if any?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

No. It's pretty much all over the place. I think the visual accessibility of the practice being on the corner, windows, not being inside the previous business, inside Fitness Lifestyles, being on the corner has lent itself to more diversity. So it's all different races, religions, ethnicities. There's no particular one demographic which I like. I sought out diversity.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yeah. Would you say that you usually just ... like some people come in after an injury or is it people ... how often ... Okay. I have to phrase my question properly. Started thinking and then I forgot words. When do you usually get to see people in their ... Some people go to a chiropractor right after an injury. Some people go just to get adjusted. How different do your patients usually range? Does that make sense?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yeah. No, I think I understand what you're saying because I do get all the different types of people. You get some people who just did something, and then they come into my office in acute pain. I do have people who come in with chronic pain. Oh, this has been bothering me for years. I know I've had this problem in my hip, in my shoulder, in my neck. But I also get the people who are a little bit more aware of health and wellbeing. So I get people who are like, "Hey, I feel great, but I knew that if I got adjusted, I would be working and functioning better, and that's what I wanted," that individual wanted.

I think one of the other things is that there is a little lack of education about what chiropractors do. We're all very different within our own practices, because we have the choices and the freedoms to practice whatever way we would like to, meaning if you wanted to bring in more physical therapy and do more stretching and exercise, rehab, those things lend to different practices. I don't see anybody who's been in a car accident unless they've been previously established. I don't seek those cases out, and, in fact, I generally don't accept those cases.

But, on the other hand, when people have acute problems, I still let that be up to them, the frequency at which they come and the duration. A lot of times, I'll make suggestions on those things. But I don't have somewhat of a mill type of practice, where it's just people in and out constantly, on a really regular basis. I often think that if I'm not helping them with their pain and issues, then maybe they have something greater or more underlying. At that point, I'll try to encourage them to see a medical doctor as opposed to a chiropractor, to go in that direction.

Again, it's diversity of types of people, people that I see only when they're hurt, people that I see when they're hurt and because they know chiropractic helps them with just things that aren't my neck hurts, my low back hurts. And then I see those people that just every once in a while will stop in to just get adjusted. So it's a really pretty diverse ... I'm all hands-on. I recently brought in a gun for massage-type action to help with some soft tissue injuries. That's been something new that I use in conjunction and after, usually, the actual hands-on chiropractic adjustment. So that's something that's a little new. Other than that, you don't see people sitting around with ice packs or in traction machines, or doing exercises. Not that I don't encourage people to do all those things at home. It's just not something that I wanted to have in my practice other than just my table and my hands and the ability to listen and try and see someone through the issues that they're having.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yeah. That makes sense. I've been to a couple different chiropractors. Now that you're pointing it out to me, that everybody's practice is a little bit different, it's so night and day.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yeah.

Gillian Demetriou:

What was your business like prior to the pandemic?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

It was good. It was ever growing. In the profession, there's some different things that go on behind the scenes that you have some control over, but not a lot. With insurance companies, I forget what year it was, but the electronic health records came on board. Some of those things cut your expenses, increase your expenses, like your overhead and those kinds of things. All of those challenges that you try to meet within the practice can set you back. So, even with growth, you're working harder, getting paid less. You think you're doing better financially, but maybe it's the same, or not. Or it's less than you thought it would be.

But I would say, within the last five years of my move, like I said, the exposure has increased. It was on the upswing before the pandemic. Just more people living here in Asbury Park always helps, and that word of mouth that gets around to say, "Oh, who do you go to?" And then they'll say, "Oh, I got to Doctor Pat. You should check him out." So it had been getting better, that whole stretch. Since I've gotten to Asbury Park, it's been a build. And so you hope that just continues to build.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yeah. Thinking back, what are your earliest recollections of hearing about COVID-19?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Well, we were supposed to go to Italy in March of 2020. I don't know if it was some time during the earliest phases, I think, that we were privy to here, in January or February, and, of course, monitoring to see if we'd be able to go on our trip. As February rounded out, it pretty much wasn't going to happen, and we knew it. We had resigned ourselves to the fact that we weren't going to go to Italy. So it was probably a lot sooner than most people who maybe weren't traveling or don't travel for a living, and so that was pretty much ... Yeah. Maybe February at some point.

Gillian Demetriou:

Did you think at the time you had any idea of the sheer ... how bad this was going to be?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

No. I don't think that I was aware of how vast and how quickly it would travel throughout the world. Again, having Italy on the radar specifically, we were going to Venice first, so Northern

Italy. I think Milan was having a really tough time. That was part of it. But I don't think many people thought that this would be quite as widespread as it had become. With the different things that SARS and some other major diseases that have popped up around the world, you always thought, oh, it's going to get somewhat contained, or they're not going to let people in that have it. But it was so different than anything we'd experienced before that. It was a little hard to get in front of it.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yeah. How have you had to change the way you run your practice because of the pandemic?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

I took six weeks out just to stay safe. There was a concern that people coming to see me, and feeling like, wow, I'm a pretty healthy individual, and been underneath chiropractic care for most of my life. I felt like I might be okay being in the office, but that might be a false sense of security that perhaps I might be passing it along to people who came to see me. And there were so many unknown variables, what we did not know and what ... I mean, even to this day, we're still finding out about the different variations now and other things that are going on with it. I didn't want to be responsible for getting other people sick is the bottom line, so I stayed out for about six weeks.

I had people calling me and asking me, and I just said no. It was gut-wrenching to do, but I felt like it was the responsible thing to do, which was against everything that ... You know, you go to work. You do what you do, and this is what I do. So it was weird not to be able to do that and to tell people no. It's one thing if I go away or if I can't be in the office at the time someone wants me to. But it's one of those professions that's slightly like, hey, I need you now, so let's see what we can do. And so that was a little awkward.

When I did finally come back, one of my patients said, "I'll wear a hazmat suit. I got to come see you." And I was like, "Well, all right. That's pretty extreme, so let's make this happen." I went in and did our thing, got them adjusted, and then I shut the lights off and left. I didn't want to encourage people to come to the office, which is so opposite of what you do. I realized that I needed to come up with a system where there wasn't an overlap of people. A lot of times, it was a first come first serve, or no appointment necessary, walk-ins. That had to change because I couldn't have people waiting in my five- or six-person waiting room that's not the biggest area. It's a little tough to social distance.

What I did was I went to a scheduling app, which I think had become more and more popular. I know to get my haircut I gotta go on the app and put in my time and the guy I want to cut my hair, and on what day. So I thought, well, why not do that with my profession? It was something that takes a little doing, a little on the patient's part to change their normal procedures. I was changing, and because of COVID, people were more willing to change, and I went to an online scheduler. It's been actually great. I love it, and I'll never go back to having a walk-in practice. It's really been good for business. It's been good because people can go on, middle of the night, first thing in the morning. They don't have to wait, leave a message, and call back and all that kind of stuff. They can go at their leisure. People book a month out. People book 15 minutes before the time is available. So there's a ton of flexibility there, and it's been better for business, to be honest. It's a positive that's come out of COVID, that change, so that's been good.

Gillian Demetriou:

Cool.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yeah.

Gillian Demetriou:

I love the scheduling thing. I'm a little biased, but it's so easy because I can book it from here, and then I like, come see you.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yeah. It's perfect.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yeah. I'm glad it helps you out. It sounds great.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yeah. It's life-changing in that I waste less time sitting around in my office. Now I can be doing other more productive things, or just not doing anything at all if I choose. That's kind of nice.

Gillian Demetriou:

That's great. And how do you feel the city ... You live in Asbury, right?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yes. For 10 years now. The practice now is 14 years, and I've lived here for 10. A little over.

Gillian Demetriou:

Okay. How do you feel the city of Asbury has handled the pandemic so far?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Very well. I think the downtown specifically, because that's where I've been, most of the time I'm here, at least I've been full time, living and working downtown, but the different things that you have to try to do to get the restaurants viable during the summer months, which is what we led into last spring and early summer, was trying to figure out. I think they did a pretty good job with that. That's not an easy task, to rework the cityscape and lose the parking, which has been an issue for many years now, to lose that revenue, but also with the understanding that keeping the lifeline of the city, the restaurants ... The people come here for the restaurants. They shop in the stores. They visit the galleries. Those kind of things are truly important. One of the reasons why I came up here in the early 2000s was to visit some of the restaurants and the music scene and stuff like that. So I think they did a really good job in that aspect, of helping. And the vaccination program that the city was able to lay out was a really big thing for the city to do for all of the residents, to try and get everybody to get as healthy as possible.

Gillian Demetriou:

Good. Have you done anything personally to help the community?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

I think just staying safe. Just having people not spread the infection has really been pretty important. I think we've done a pretty good job of keeping our distance and just trying to stay as safe as possible.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yeah. That's all you can ask of anybody.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Sure.

Gillian Demetriou:

Just a couple more questions. As a business, have you received any outside funding from government agencies at all?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Just unemployment. I was able to collect unemployment for the time that I was out. But otherwise I didn't. I'm a one-man show, so there were no employees to think about other than myself. I didn't take any sort of business loans or any of those types of things because I didn't feel like I needed them, and I'd probably thought other people would. So my landlord, I had paid my rent. The trip to Italy actually set me up to sustain the time because I had paid a lot of my bills ahead.

Knowing that I was going to be, as a self-employed person, if you don't work, you don't get paid. I knew that I wasn't going to be here for two weeks, so I tried to pay as many bills forward as I could. I didn't have a lot of bills to pay during that first month of COVID, from mid-March through mid-April, and, subsequently, when I came back, I was able to just pick right up and get rolling. My landlord was very nice. He realized that I had paid my rent, and he said, "Were you in the office?" I said, "I missed six weeks." He said, "Well, take a month off," and that was great. So that was really nice of Howard to do that. But, other than that, it wasn't so bad for me personally. So I was blessed in that respect.

Gillian Demetriou:

That's great.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Didn't get to go to Italy, though. Yet.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yeah. Yet.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Right. Yet.

Gillian Demetriou:

Traveling soon. Hopefully.

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Yeah. For sure.

Gillian Demetriou:

How has the pandemic impacted you personally?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

I guess just not seeing family and friends has been a weird ... or at least minimally ... the holidays. I have a big family, so not being able to get together, that's probably the biggest personal hardship, I would say, from not being able to make contact with those loved ones on a regular basis. And the friends, too, to a lesser extent. I've been able to see some of them just being around here, friends that live local and have been in the bubble, so to speak.

Gillian Demetriou:

What are you most looking forward to when this is all over, besides your Italy trip?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

Friends and family, of course, but then, concerts, baseball game this summer. Football in the fall. Sea.Hear.Now Music Festival here in Asbury Park. Yeah. Just getting back to that little bit of normalcy I think is the biggest thing that I'm looking forward to happening. And travel, of course.

Gillian Demetriou:

Yep. Well, that's it for all my prepared questions. Do you have anything else that you'd like to add? Anything that we didn't cover?

Dr. Pat Connolly:

No, I don't think so. I think it was pretty thorough.

Gillian Demetriou:

Cool. I'll just stop recording.