

## Oral History with Erik Kristman

From the collection of the UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research

*Please note that this transcript is being made available for research purposes only. Should you determine that you want to use it in any way that exceeds fair use, you must seek permission from the UCLA Library Department of Special Collections.*

Interview with Erik Kristman  
SESSION 1 (2/7/2021)

COLLINGS: [\[00:00:02\]](#)

Okay, so we are recording now. And today is February 7th, 2021. Jane Collings interviewing Erik Kristman by phone. So, Erik, when did you first hear about the virus, and how did you hear about it?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:00:23\]](#)

I believe it was-- I kind of heard about it early on, happening kind of in China. The company I was working for at the time, I think was kind of launching products out there and had people actually going out there to do meetings. And so, I kind of heard about it a bit early on. And it was clearly this thing where these people were being quarantined and, all of a sudden--I don't remember the exact date, I should've looked that up ahead of time--but it became really clear, really fast. And we were living in Brooklyn at the time, me and my partner, and all of a sudden, we're doing that mad dash to the grocery store where every aisle is empty. People are just fighting over toilet paper. So yeah, my memory of it is it just really escalating fast and being in this daze of "What's going to happen?"

COLLINGS: [\[00:01:37\]](#)

So, I think that the Wuhan quarantine was announced on-- It was either January 22nd or 23rd, I think. Were the people from your company in Wuhan, were you suggesting?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:01:56\]](#)

I'm not exactly sure where in China they were. But I know that it became this thing where not only were they in China, but they came back to the main office. So, our team immediately was put into a quarantine ahead of a lot of my friends being quarantined. And I think ultimately, everything was completely shut down by like first week of March. That's when things really started to go south.

COLLINGS: [\[00:02:33\]](#)

Right. And where's the main office for the company?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:02:38\]](#)

Main office is in London.

COLLINGS: [\[00:02:41\]](#)

So, they came from China to London. They were--

KRISTMAN: [\[00:02:45\]](#)

Yeah.

COLLINGS: [\[00:02:45\]](#)

Okay. And so, you heard that everybody at the London office then had to quarantine?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:02:56\]](#)

Right. So, there was that, but then kind of the big thing was we were trying to-- Basically, this company, the thing they sell is kind of like a travel card, something that allows you to exchange currency. And because a lot of the team was in London, people like me and the rest of the U.S. team who were working on launching it in the U.S. were bouncing back and forth from the U.S. to London all the way up until that quarantine started happening. And ultimately, one after another, we would hear stories of someone being exposed, and then that team from that area of the world having to quarantine, until it happened to us in New York, where there was somebody who got exposed to someone, I guess, who traveled there. And all of a sudden, everyone was quarantined.

COLLINGS: [\[00:04:07\]](#)

And so, this was ahead of everything sort of happening in New York where the cases were exploding? Or was this at about the same time?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:04:22\]](#)

I think-- I want to say that it might've been a week or two before the first week of March when we were sent home. And it was like, "Oh, we'll come back in a couple of weeks." And by that point, the explosion in New York really started to happen. And all the while, like I was telling you, we were working on something that is based around travel. So, all of a sudden, not only is the world going south, but the entire business that this company fell under was just in a complete downward spiral.

COLLINGS: [\[00:05:10\]](#)

Right. Did the company fold?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:05:13\]](#)

They haven't folded, but at least two thirds of the team, including me, got laid off in first week of April.

COLLINGS: [\[00:05:25\]](#)

Very early on.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:05:27\]](#)

Yeah, yeah, it was. And it was this clear damage control--just cut as much cost as possible.

COLLINGS: [\[00:05:36\]](#)

Right, right. That must have been a bit of a shock.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:05:41\]](#)

Yeah, yeah. It was brutal. And it was kind of this thing where it's like, "What's next? Is there a career?" I was working as their sole copywriter for the U.S. And to think, like, "Oh, somebody's probably looking for a copywriter right now," it just didn't make sense to me at the time. So, yeah. And then kind of from there, the next battle was with unemployment. Getting in touch with the New York Department of Labor was like its own extra level of hell. There's literally no way-- You can see all these great articles and interviews with Brian Lehrer talking about how impossible it was for people to even qualify.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:06:44\]](#)

And what happened with me was that I received some severance package because I was kind of laid off due to COVID. But they didn't report it to the IRS, I guess. It was just this whole-- They were laying off so many people, documents get mixed up. And it became this thing where my numbers that I reported for unemployment were off. And so, long story short, it took me six months from there of just trying to make those calls every day at 7:00 in the morning and also trying to find anyone that could help me.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:07:34\]](#)

I mean, it just really boiled down to just emailing senators and assemblymen and just seeing if anyone will respond. Ultimately, it was through Senator-- I think her name is pronounced Julia Salazar. It might be Julia. That could be it. But anyways, I had messaged her maybe a good dozen times. And it was kind of this automated thing, but because I was already in touch with the assemblymen and I was calling Governor Cuomo, eventually somehow she got me in touch with someone that was able to help me. And ultimately, it meant completely redoing my application and manually inserting every single document of my income for the past year.

COLLINGS: [\[00:08:36\]](#)

And did you get your unemployment retroactively?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:08:40\]](#)

Yeah. So, once I finally got it, it was just this giant lump sum. And from there, it worked fine. But it was still this thing where both me and my partner had to make that tough decision back in April that, like, "Well, I'm not getting unemployment." And our rent in Brooklyn was close to \$4,000 for a one bedroom that's like 500 square feet. And we're just like, "We can't." Even if I had the job, the volatility of being in a market that's doing so bad-- It just kept appearing to us as a sign, like, "We gotta get out of here." And we moved back to California.

COLLINGS: [\[00:09:36\]](#)

Okay. And when did you move back?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:09:39\]](#)

So, we were able to survive until the end of our lease with my severance and stuff, and our lease ended on June 1st. So, June 1st, we got on a plane, which is like the most horrifying experience of my life. You know, double masking. And the other thing was we have a dog. So, we had to find a veterinarian that would give us the drugs to put him to sleep for it. And so, it was like going through that early COVID experience of flying with a pet and all of the stuff we could fit in a suitcase, and moving to the desert.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:10:40\]](#)

We ended up living for the first two months in Pioneertown, California. It's by Joshua Tree. It's famous for being by this restaurant called Pappy and Harriet's. And yeah, we wanted to try living as remote as possible, given the situation. And we also couldn't really sign a lease in New York-- We couldn't sign a lease in California from New York, so we used it as an opportunity to get back here in California and then figure out our permanent situation.

COLLINGS: [\[00:11:34\]](#)

Okay. So, I'd like to sort of talk a little bit about your trip over west, and flying, and what all that was like, but could we just backtrack a little tiny bit to what you saw and experienced when you were in Brooklyn at the time of the shutdown?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:11:57\]](#)

Yeah. I think the difficulty of it was-- Obviously, there's those first couple of weeks where no one was wearing masks, and then you started seeing a few people wear masks. And it was definitely this discussion of, like, "Well, do I want to be the weird guy wearing a mask in this grocery store?" to then, all of a sudden, "Well, I can't be the guy who's not wearing a mask." And that transpired over just a few weeks. I think it was kind of hazy at first what the guidelines were, really. And I think that, very astutely by the Republican Party, was used to kind of talk down what the initial guidelines from the CDC were.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:12:55\]](#)

So, that was kind of what it was like early on. And as it started to-- There was a moment where it was just crazy in that you're trying to find paper towels, you're trying to find toilet paper and food, and you're stocking up in a way you've never stocked before. And grocery stores in New York are like another kind of realm of anxiety, in that they're so much more condensed than you're used to like at a Vons out here. So, it's another thing where, all of a sudden, you have to start making choices in each aisle because maybe there's-- I remember, once I started wearing a mask, both me and my girlfriend would talk about, "Yeah, I couldn't go down the aisle for pasta because there was a guy hacking a lung out without a mask."

KRISTMAN: [\[00:13:55\]](#)

Yeah, and it was just constantly that thing. And the other difficulty with it too in New York--and to a lesser extent, even out here today--there's a lot of elderly people that I feel like just go to a grocery store without a list, and they're immediately disoriented by the experience. And so, trying to navigate around them has always been really tough, and it was especially tough in Brooklyn where it's so cramped. And I think everyone's seen it in that, especially with elderly people, they're wearing their masks down by their waist. So, yeah, that's the difficulty of it, for sure.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:14:46\]](#)

And I think the sad part about Brooklyn was that, as it really started to get bad and everyone started to get more aware of wearing masks and what to do, there's just immediate class divides, I think, really started to present themselves in a much more surface-level way everywhere. And in that vein, there was a lot of-- We lived pretty close to what I believe is a methadone clinic. And in New York, you're very close to all kinds of things like homeless shelters and so forth. And the difficulty with that is almost all of those people did not have masks and were not being informed or privileged enough to have those kind of tools, I don't know, to survive through this, in a way that many of us were.

COLLINGS: [\[00:15:52\]](#)

So, were you in fear at that time when you were in New York? I mean, things were escalating very quickly.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:16:03\]](#)

I think my fear-- Both of me and my partner's fear was pretty securely locked into our dads. Both our dads are well into their seventies. We have older dads, and they are not healthy whatsoever. My dad

has had like five or six heart attacks. Every stage of my life, he's been dealing with some kind of problem that could kill him. And similarly, my girlfriend's father was dealing with some really bad cases of-- He got kidney stones that led to him going into septic shock like a couple months before this happened. So, it's this thing where, if they got it, I think it would be a wrap. And so, that was really where our fear was, outside of just the fact that both of us were laid off. And we work in a creative field where there isn't really a path to having a career, so much as just a bunch of random instances that equate to a job.

COLLINGS: [\[00:17:29\]](#)

Were your fathers taking the virus seriously?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:17:36\]](#)

There's definitely some moments where we would get upset with them in that-- Maybe they-- Like, my mother and father would do a dine-out kind of situation, where maybe-- They would say, "Oh, no one was outside the restaurant. We'd wear masks while the server came to us." But it was just these situations where we'd constantly be like, "What? You don't need that though. You don't need to be doing those things." And I think similarly with my girlfriend's father, he was grocery shopping by himself, and-- I think that was the extent of what he was doing. But yeah, it was just kind of these touch-and-go situations that we'd have to be like, "Why are you doing this? Be more careful."

COLLINGS: [\[00:18:36\]](#)

Yeah. I mean, in so many instances, it seems like it's the younger generation that's kind of leading the way for the older generation during this pandemic, which is not really what you would expect.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:18:48\]](#)

Yeah, I agree to an extent. Where I would push back just a little bit is I think this moment in particular has really highlighted to us just how--excuse my French, but--how shitty our friends really are and how selfish they can be. We have a couple friends that have taken this really seriously. But we also have friends who are dining in at the Olive Garden. So, it's just this thing. I have a friend who is just a serial dater, in that he hasn't stopped just dating random people on dating apps throughout this whole thing. And it becomes this thing where we can have those difficult conversations with them and we do, but it just falls on deaf ears. And there's nothing we can do about it other than just kind of feel bad and distance ourselves.

COLLINGS: [\[00:19:50\]](#)

So, these were friends that you knew in Brooklyn or in New York while you were there?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:19:56\]](#)

I think it's pretty across the board. I mean, it's friends I had at UCLA, friends I had in grad school, friends I had at work. I think--

COLLINGS: [\[00:20:12\]](#)

Hello?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:20:15\]](#)

My phone muted, my bad. But yeah, pretty across the board. I think anyone my age could give you some kind of anecdote of their dumb friends finding an excuse to party right now.

COLLINGS: [\[00:20:33\]](#)

Okay, that's interesting. And is there like a political underpinning, or is it something else?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:20:42\]](#)

I have one very Republican friend where that's the case. But I think he's--trying to choose my words carefully--I think, for him, there's maybe some guilt with it. And my mostly liberal friends do not have the guilt behind it, in that they will find ways to make it make sense. Like, "Oh, well, I get tested every week" or "I'm in this pod of five to eight people, and we don't see anyone." And then you start digging. The second you dig into any of that, it's just so clearly a facade. And that has been really tough for us to deal with it. And again, it is this-- I keep going back to the thought that this pandemic has really brought the differentiations of class to the surface in that-- Like, even my Republican friend, before Thanksgiving, would text me complaining that the test you can get the results back from in 48 hours cost him 250 dollars. But it's that kind of complaining about something that, really beneath it is like, "Well, I got this test that I could afford, and it allows me to do things that these other people just aren't doing."

COLLINGS: [\[00:22:28\]](#)

Well, I think it's interesting that you're saying that the people that you know say that they're adhering to all of the public health advice, but you say that they're not actually doing it. But they have this mental construction that they are doing it, rather than just disregarding the whole thing and saying that it's a hoax.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:22:59\]](#)

A hundred percent. And I think that that's always been-- Maybe I just have a sensitivity to that kind of BS. It makes me really remember stuff like that I experienced as an undergrad even at UCLA, in that, consistently, it was always these people that would really virtue signal, that you would then see on a Thursday night where everyone's partying, and they're the ones that are the people raging in the corner. And I've always carried that with me in that there's always something beneath the surface for people who are publicly talking about how valiant they are in these tough moments.

COLLINGS: [\[00:23:56\]](#)

So, you're saying that you have a bunch of friends who are actually speaking a lot about mask wearing, and social distancing, and being in a bubble or a pod, but in fact they are not really taking it seriously at all. Is that--?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:23:56\]](#)

Yeah, 100 percent. And I think the stuff that really triggers me with all of that is a lot of these people really attach themselves to social causes, like Black Lives Matter. They'll talk about how much they support it and how people really need to stand up right now. And meanwhile, they're out there partying privately. And maybe they won't post photos of them with all their friends that are down to party right now, but--

COLLINGS: [\[00:24:54\]](#)

Oh, they don't post.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:24:57\]](#)

I think what's interesting is, as the vaccine has rolled out, I think they've started to post those things, but it's definitely been-- Like, on Instagram, you can set your Instagram stories to Close Friends. And so, I would see things in Close Friends from a couple of my friends of them going to parties. You know, you think of all those things in The New York Times about influencers throwing parties in LA. I knew people that went to those things.

COLLINGS: [\[00:25:33\]](#)

Oh, that's interesting. The house parties that the mayor said, "We're going to start shutting these down." Those parties--is that what you're talking about? These massive--

KRISTMAN: [\[00:25:50\]](#)

A hundred percent, yeah. Everything from that extreme, all the way to kind of like the more minimalist version of it, where maybe they're hanging out with a pod of eight people, but what are they doing? They're dining out three or four days a week. And the way they reconcile it is they'll take these 250 dollar tests. You think about people making minimum wage and that have been laid off and can't, like me, couldn't get unemployment for awhile--they're not going to be able to afford those 250 dollar tests, let alone that lifestyle that those people were living even throughout this pandemic.

COLLINGS: [\[00:26:35\]](#)

So, about the tests among the circle that you're referring to, do they expect each other to have had a test? Is that kind of like something that you sort of have to do to participate, and you need to like let other people know? Or is that something that they do for their own protection?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:27:00\]](#)

Honestly, I don't even think it's for their own protection. I think it's more of a clout kind of thing. I think it's so they can publicly show, like, "Hey, I'm good for it." But I don't think there's anyone out there that has a pod, and they're like, "Okay, let's all get tested before we hang out." I just-- I don't see that.

COLLINGS: [\[00:27:26\]](#)

Because I have heard of that, like leading into the holidays. Like, families saying, "We're going to quarantine, and then we're going to have a test, and then we'll get together."

KRISTMAN: [\[00:27:37\]](#)

I just feel like that's such a facade, and coming from-- I guess my other background that I haven't mentioned is that my mother, during this, is an administrator at a hospital in New York that was particularly hit really bad. And so, I guess my anger and frustration from it rests in the fact that, like, "Okay, well, I just got off the phone with my mother talking about how the morgue can't hold more bodies. And here are these people that are finding ways to socialize, being less constrained by the guidelines." And I just think every time I hear about people doing these tactics to meet up, I think it's a light veil.

COLLINGS: [\[00:28:31\]](#)

Well, certainly the case numbers would support your thesis.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:28:41\]](#)

Yeah, for sure.

COLLINGS: [\[00:28:41\]](#)

So, tell me about your mother, and what she has relayed to you, and what she relayed to you in the beginning.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:28:51\]](#)

I just-- I remember-- My mother speaks in a way that-- I think she has always tried to shield me from certain things. You know, my dad, like my first 10 years of life, was basically on his deathbed. So, I think she has always kind of had this ability to compartmentalize those things and deal with it by herself. And as I've gotten older, I've really demanded, like, "Give me the information you don't want to share." And her thing really early on was, even though she was an administrator, there were just so many people that were sick, that she herself had to leave her office and be one of those people that were helping do the drive-by tests, going into the hospital. And so, she was immediately exposed to how bad it was. She was basically on the frontlines of it, and it was tough. You could hear it in her voice. And I could tell-- She would-- You know it's bad when my mom calls crying because she hides those emotions. She at least tries to. And I think the fear of it was just so overwhelming.

COLLINGS: [\[00:30:35\]](#)

Yes, yes. I'm sure, I'm sure. And so many unknowns and just a tsunami of illness.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:30:48\]](#)

Yeah, and I hate to point out my politics, but we had an administration that was talking about it as if it was going to go away. I think that is absolutely the truth. And because of that, the progress of the aid and the guidelines were halted and I think really disregarded by a lot of people too.

COLLINGS: [\[00:31:18\]](#)

And how has your mother seen what's happened in New York since then? Has she shared any of that with you, from her perspective as a hospital administrator?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:31:32\]](#)

Yeah, I think a lot of us, including her, have just kind of been desensitized to it a bit. So, in that vein-- Like, even when I went through that holiday surge previously, it was a bit more manageable than when we were in the "great unknown" phase of it. And so, I think as the months passed, she was no longer the person that was just testing people through their cars. She was back in the office, doing kind of the administrative work. I guess, in that vein, some normalcy returned to her. But yeah, it's still tough. I mean, my parents are older, so there's other issues with--

KRISTMAN: [\[00:32:27\]](#)

Like, right now, for example, I was able to find them a vaccine appointment for my father in the Bronx, which is about like 45 minutes away from where they live in New York. And because my mother's eyesight is bad and my dad can't drive anymore, they don't want to make the drive. So, my mother

luckily got the vaccine once the Pfizer stuff came out initially. But it's still that fear that she can carry it and bring it to him. And we're in kind of this stalemate where, theoretically they could drive to the Bronx, but they don't want to because they're so afraid of driving. At least my mother is. And on top of that, there's also the social stigma of it. My family is as pasty white as they come, so to be that white family that is potentially taking a vaccine away from minority communities is also kind of a thing that has been weighing on them.

COLLINGS: [\[00:33:46\]](#)

Right. And I had read that that's happening quite a bit in the New York area.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:33:52\]](#)

Right. Yeah, that's the truth. And it's because a lot of those minority communities have had to continue working. They're not able to stand in a line of cars for five hours.

COLLINGS: [\[00:34:10\]](#)

And I think perhaps the vaccines are being rolled out in the hardest hit areas first.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:34:17\]](#)

Right, right. Well, it's also a thing where these-- My parents live in Suffern, New York, which is on the outskirts of-- It's right on the border of New Jersey, like Mahwah, New Jersey. And so, it's just a small area that doesn't really have hospitals that are giving the vaccine out. So, they're literally just waiting for it to be that massive disbursement of the vaccines to the pharmacies.

COLLINGS: [\[00:34:54\]](#)

Right, right. Okay, and let me just also ask you--you've mentioned your flight across country and how it was a horrifying experience. So what kind of precautions did you take, and what did you observe when you were at the airport, and arriving at LAX? What was that journey like?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:35:20\]](#)

Right. Yeah. I think the-- It almost feels like it was an out-of-body experience. But the thing was we had gloves that we replaced. We kind of strategized checkpoints, essentially. We were like, "Okay, after this point, we'll change these gloves." And we had two masks on, I believe. And the real difficulty was figuring out the dog because we had to give him this sedative at a certain time. So, we had to get up at like 3:00 in the morning to give him his sedative. And then from there, the worst part was that it didn't work. So, he got-- We even asked them, "What is a stronger dose that we could give him?" He's a smaller dog, so, yeah, we get the whole thing, "You shouldn't give him a ton of drugs." But we were also like, "This is going to be a terrible experience. So, let's at least get him knocked out, so we can just get through it." And that just didn't happen.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:36:45\]](#)

So, it was this thing where once we got through TSA-- I think our-- I'm not even sure if our PreCheck was a thing. We had TSA PreCheck, but I think those things were shut down because there's so few people. But once we got through that, dog was still awake. So, then we had to find-- There's these little dog bathrooms that-- At least in JFK. And you go in them, and it's like someone cut a piece of a mini golf course and put it into an airport bathroom. And so, for a good 20 minutes, while my dog is-- He can be

the worst when it comes to, like, "I need you to just pee." And it was just me, for 20 minutes, just kind of pulling him around. And he's kind of-- The sedative is working somewhat, so he's kind of in a daze. And I'm just begging him to pee. And finally, I got him to pee right before we had to board.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:38:08\]](#)

And I think the big finale of doing that whole flight was, the Delta flight we were on-- Just like all of these companies, they will talk about all the precautions they've made. And the immediate one that we saw when booked it was that they removed people sitting in the middle seats, so people could be properly social distanced. What they didn't tell us was that, "Yeah, that's not a thing anymore. We're just giving a smaller flight where the middle seat that--" Rather than being in a-- We were on a right side seat. "There won't be someone in the middle, but there just won't be a seat there." So, it was really two seats right next to each other. And luckily there were two of us, so we were sitting next to each other. But the plane was so much more dramatically smaller than they were advertising. And so, yeah, that was definitely the anxiety of it.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:39:36\]](#)

Let alone someone accidentally sat in our seat. When we got in there, we were like, "This is our seat." And you have that awkward conversation with them, where they're like, "No, this is our seat." And we're like, "It literally has this number on it." So, we had that whole experience. We had to wipe-- We had all our disinfectant wipes and sprays that we had in our bag. Did that, but it's just this hypersensitive experience, while also dealing with a dog that won't fall asleep, who's never--

COLLINGS: [\[00:40:18\]](#)

I hope it wasn't howling.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:40:20\]](#)

Yeah, it didn't bark. But he was worried, for sure. I'm not sure if he's ever even been on a flight before. So, yeah, all of that happened. It was also a really emotional experience for the both of us in that we had created a life in New York. And to just be in this moment where it was push or shove-- Yeah, it really hit us as we kind of flew away.

COLLINGS: [\[00:40:57\]](#)

Were the other people in the plane somber, wearing masks? I mean, what was the mood?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:41:07\]](#)

Yeah, I think overall-- I don't have any memory of people not wearing masks or anything. Maybe there were some people who had their noses exposed or something. But overall, I think everyone was on the same page. I think we were lucky in that we flew at a time where it was still kind of fucked up to fly. And so, I think people were taking it more seriously, whereas now-- You saw that CNN footage of people lining up for Thanksgiving flights. Those people were not taking it nearly as seriously.

COLLINGS: [\[00:41:53\]](#)

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, so you arrive in LA. And it's interesting-- And so, you said that you-- What, you looked at a map and you figured out what was the most remote spot? Or how did that go?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:42:08\]](#)

Yeah, so I think initially, back when I was working at that company, I was also trying to figure out a way to move back to the West Coast. Even when our finances were in order, paying the kind of money it costs to live in someplace like New York, or I would imagine also like San Francisco-- It just became a thing where it was like, I'm never going to be able to build anything. I'm going to be living paycheck to paycheck, even if I'm making somewhere close to six figures. All the while, carrying the six figures of student loans that UCLA and my grad program established. So, it was a decision that we were thinking about. And the thing that became more and more clear, especially as the pandemic hit and we lost our jobs, was that LA and the OC--which was the two places that were on my mind because I went to community college in Orange County and I went to UCLA. So, I was like, "Those are the places that are most familiar."

KRISTMAN: [\[00:43:29\]](#)

The issue with them was that it wasn't that much cheaper. It'd maybe be something like, rather than paying \$3,500 for a one bedroom that's 500 square feet, for that same amount, you'd maybe get a two bedroom or something like that. But we kind of faced that reality, and we started looking elsewhere. We started looking at the desert. And we have some really close friends in the desert, one who works as a park ranger at the Whitewater Nature Preserve out here. It's in Whitewater, California, which is in the desert. And we had visited a couple times while we were in grad school, and we loved it out here. And we started to look kind of around there, and we got their advice too, in that we were seeing some houses kind of in Palm Springs proper.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:44:42\]](#)

And they advised, "Well, if you're going to try living out here, you should try living as remote as possible, and see if you like it really deep in the desert. And if you don't like it, it's a lot easier to figure out places that are less remote." And so, ultimately we found this amazing Airbnb in Pioneertown, more specifically in this area called Pipes Canyon. And yeah, I mean, it's the most remote thing I've ever lived in. We didn't have running water. We had-- I guess maybe that's not quite correct. We had water, but it was from this little tank that was outside the house. And every couple weeks, there'd be this big water truck that would drive through this little collection of houses and fill the tanks.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:45:47\]](#)

Yeah, and we also didn't have-- I guess the other difficult thing was we didn't have garbage collection. So, you would have-- All the garbage you had, you ultimately had to throw in your car and dump it somewhere. Yeah, so you'd have to drive out of that area, which is a good 30 minutes out, and then find-- There were places where you could properly throw things out, but that became a whole thing, in that they'd only be open a couple hours a day because of the pandemic. So, eventually, like everyone else, you kind of just had to throw it out at a gas station. And that's this whole other thing, where it's like we're living this vagabond lifestyle and making sense of it.

COLLINGS: [\[00:46:44\]](#)

Right, right. Let me just ask you--just sort of large picture--when you look back at the year, everybody's talking about the issue of faith in institutions. And you spoke about the mixed messaging from the public health standpoint. It's been a year of protest. There's been the turmoil around the election. I mean, coming out of this year, what has happened to your outlook in terms of institutions and where we are as a country, in that respect?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:47:39\]](#)

Yeah, that's a tough question, right? Yeah, I mean, I guess my short answer would be I can't say I didn't see it coming. Just in that, I mean-- I try and explain--especially to my more center-right-leaning Democrat friends, as well as my Republican friends--just the reality that-- Even me, who-- I came from maybe a lower-middle-class family. But even then, to go to community college, I needed to take out student loans. And I feel like that, in itself, is kind of this fake infrastructure that we've all kind of invested in. And I think there's so many examples of that across the board, of how every step I've had to make to even have a career involves investing in a system that is on the verge of collapse.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:48:59\]](#)

And I think, in that vein, it's so difficult to find a way to make sense of it. Like, when we did our grad program-- We went to The New School. I got my MFA in creative writing. And it was the most liberal experience I've ever been a part of, to the point where, me, who-- I thought I was like the most liberal guy at UCLA when I was there. And this school made me feel conservative, just in that I was surrounded by people that-- Me and my friends always joke about how I was invited to a Mao club--like Mao Zedong. And I was actively being poached by these people to try and understand these communist ideals. I don't think these people represent that school by and large, but it was still this thing where I'm surrounded by these people that are so disconnected from that reality I painted, where like I had to take out loans for community college.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:50:13\]](#)

And the frustration of that too, and also the frustration that I connected with a lot of my Republican friends on, were almost all these people that were on the far left of this experience I was in were also incredibly wealthy, and their families, by and large, were connected to hedge funds and also connected to the very people they're rebelling against--the Trumps of the world. And it becomes this thing where I found myself scratching my head over how I had connected more with my conservative friends in that these people are just full of it. And the only reason why they have these views is because they've never had to put skin in the game. And I guess for me, separating from all of that-- And I don't know if this is quite answering your, but--

COLLINGS: [\[00:51:16\]](#)

No, no, it is. This is really interesting, yeah.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:51:19\]](#)

Yeah, I keep thinking about how my-- Especially with UCLA-- UCLA, for me, was about trying to find some path towards ascension, trying to separate myself from the townies I grew up with in Stratford, Connecticut, and make something of myself. And at every turn, there was a paywall. And at every turn, there's a paywall that is designed to be unaffordable. And I think, you know, people keep saying, "How did we get to this point?" And I just-- I can't help but point out the fact that someone like me even, who has every privilege in the world, still is strapped for some kind of collapse. It might not be today, it might not be tomorrow. But there's going to be someone that comes for me, whether I like it or not. And I think stuff like this is an example of, "Well, if you're living in a house of cards, all it takes is one thing to just mess it all up."

COLLINGS: [\[00:52:38\]](#)

Right. So, it's interesting what you say about this idea of pursuing education, pursuing graduate training, and calling it a "fake infrastructure"--that you're within this sort of world of attainment, but it's on very shaky ground, financially.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:53:11\]](#)

Sure, yeah.

COLLINGS: [\[00:53:13\]](#)

So, are you saying that that you saw yourself, and perhaps others that you know, as living within a house of cards before the pandemic?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:53:28\]](#)

Oh yeah, absolutely. I think even with our undergraduate degrees at UCLA, pretty much everyone I knew towards the end was like, "Shit, what are we going to do?"

COLLINGS: [\[00:53:50\]](#)

What year did you graduate, sorry?

KRISTMAN: [\[00:53:52\]](#)

I graduated in 2015.

COLLINGS: [\[00:53:54\]](#)

Okay, all right. So, yeah, go ahead. So, you were all saying, "What are we going to do?"

KRISTMAN: [\[00:53:58\]](#)

Yeah, there was nothing figured out. And I think, now looking at it as someone who's been able to somewhat build a career, and I think in some ways maybe got through a couple of doors because I had a-- Me and my friends always talk about how our degrees at UCLA are like having designer handbags for a degree, in that there there's something to be said about walking into a party with a designer handbag. You're going to get noticed in a way someone who doesn't have that would be recognized. Is that valuable though? I don't know. And I think the house of cards lies in that. I think it really is like everything is a gamble. And I think we even see it with stuff like Robin Hood this past month with the stocks. Like, you can theoretically make a ton of money. You can theoretically--

KRISTMAN: [\[00:55:09\]](#)

UCLA, for the past couple weeks, has been releasing these articles about the net income that UCLA alums have contributed to the world. And you'll see in the comments all these people like, "Proud Bruin" and "This is great for the world. This is what we committed to." And meanwhile, I just think about my friends--and to a lesser degree, me--who's like, "Yeah, but at what cost?" I think my question for UCLA since day one has always been "At what cost?" And a lot of it really boiled down to me just taking--both metaphorically and realistically--just going out on a Thursday night, taking a shot, and forgetting about it.

COLLINGS: [\[00:56:15\]](#)

So, for you--and you're suggesting a bunch of other people--the pandemic just serves to focus these kind of structural insecurities that you were living with prior to.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:56:34\]](#)

Yeah. I think these systems are designed to do one thing, and it's to make a profit. And it doesn't really care about you succeeding. It will report that you're succeeding. It'll talk about how the-- In this article that UCLA has been releasing, they'll talk about how the average income of UCLA alums is \$151,000. Yeah, and I mean, can you imagine reading that, as someone who doesn't have a job right now, that went to UCLA and got strapped with \$50,000, \$60,000, \$160,000 of student loan debt? With either-- And we have to-- I think the difficulty is we have to celebrate small successes that are helping us. Like, my student loans-- Student loans across the board right now, they've had their interest deferred until September. That's a huge win.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:57:45\]](#)

But is it though? That goes back to that question of "At what cost?" in that, no matter what, there's going to come a time when maybe things are doing a little bit better, and those loan providers are going to come knocking. And for what? I look back, especially as someone who now has an MFA-- My undergraduate degree wasn't this mind-blowing experience. And UCLA--if we're going to drink the Kool-Aid of the marketing--it's the number one public university in America. So, to walk away from that experience and be like, "Eh, that was okay," and have thousands of dollars of accruing debt, it's absurd. It's an absurdity.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:58:44\]](#)

But I will say, in that vein, to try and step out of the negativity of it all, is that I think that is the beautiful chaos that it is to be American. We're stuck in this thing that doesn't work, that has consistently collapsed in every generation. And yet we still find ways to come together on a Thursday night and rage. And I think that is the thing I look back on at UCLA, in that there were moments where none of these higher-minded questions mattered. And that's the thing I yearn for in memory.

COLLINGS: [\[00:59:36\]](#)

Well, and also you were talking earlier about the friends who are continuing to get together on a Thursday night and rage, and kind of the problems with that right now.

KRISTMAN: [\[00:59:50\]](#)

Yeah. And early on when the pandemic was hitting, one of the things that they showed a lot in the news were these kids from Florida State and all kinds of schools, and they were saying, "Well, I'm still going to go party for spring break because I bought these tickets and my friends are going, so I'm just going to take my chances." And the immediate thought is, "Wow, that's so stupid and that's so selfish." But there is that little 21-year-old Erik Kristman that looks at that and is like, "Man, I bet they had a great time." And that's the youth, that's the former self that-- As messed up as everything is, I still look back at that and I'm like, "Man, if I could just be in those shoes for a day, I would trade everything for that."

COLLINGS: [\[01:00:57\]](#)

Yeah, it's really true. So, given that you said that you-- With everything that's happened with the pandemic, you said, "I really saw it coming," I mean, is there anything that's happened that has been surprising?

KRISTMAN: [\[01:01:20\]](#)

Anything that's been surprising. I mean, I'm surprised that Joe Biden won. We were watching that funeral for that cop that got killed in the Capitol riots, and I felt myself getting emotional about it, like choked up. And I think the reason why I was getting so choked up about it was this could have gone the other way. We could be-- And just on a completely selfish level, we could have a Trump presidency where my loans are starting to accrue interest again, there's no distribution plan for this vaccine, and it's going to get a lot worse. That could have been-- Just from-- If that riot had succeeded in that weird alt-right fantasy, we could be living in that America. And every time I see Biden on TV, I'm just like, "Man, I still can't believe we pulled that win."

KRISTMAN: [\[01:02:41\]](#)

There's obvious reasons why. Like, the discrediting of mail-in voting, I think, was the major thing that got him the win. People like Clyburn, I think, are huge. But yeah, I mean, I feel like every boss I've had has been kind of a reflection of that Trump, like that need for profit at all times and that need to be prophesized. And that has always led me to believe those people are always going to run this show. And it's tough to accept, but I just don't see it changing. I see this stuff with the stock trading and how--

COLLINGS: [\[01:03:43\]](#)

You mean the hedge funds and GameStop.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:03:47\]](#)

Yeah, yeah, exactly. I just see that, once again, we're still kind of in this system that we can't really change. I think, as Democrats, the difficulty is always getting small wins, like the deferment of student loans, not the cancellation. Or we'll give people \$1,400 checks, but we're also going to concede and give billions of dollars to these giant corporations. And just the-- I think of even the Trump pardons and how people can just get away with shit, and there's nothing we can do about it. And I don't think there ever has been. And maybe that is the, I don't know, the punk rock, grungy beauty of America, in that we live in such a crazy, corrupt free market that these people can emerge and can be eventually, I don't know, challenged. But yeah, I mean, I just-- I don't see it changing. And things like Biden winning are always a big surprise to me.

COLLINGS: [\[01:05:17\]](#)

How did you see the Black Lives Matter protests in the context of the pandemic, this house of cards that people are living in, beyond the actual killing that kicked it off?

KRISTMAN: [\[01:05:40\]](#)

Yeah. I think the big thing with that was, from the anecdotal stance, we were living in this apartment complex that was right on Atlantic Ave in Brooklyn, where the major George Floyd protests were happening, leading up to the Barclays Center. And so, we would see it. You could hear it even with the windows closed, the roar of this crowd. And I saw it as something like, "Okay"-- And even outside of Black Lives Matter, going to things like the Women's March a couple years back, all those things were like, "Okay, people want change." And I think all the things that they're fighting for are valid. But at the same time, I also feel like we're in some ancient Greece, ancient Rome kind of a situation, where we're watching the collapse of the empire.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:06:52\]](#)

And I don't know how to make sense of that. I think we have to keep having these people protesting and trying to push it forward. But I also see-- I think the thing that really frustrates me--and maybe that's where I get a little bit too liberal--is that I see a lot of Democrat friends and people on the news denouncing the more violent aspects of the protest, and I just don't get it. I don't get how communities can be pushed against the wall for generations and not expected to lash out. It doesn't make sense to me. And I think it's-- Honestly, I think the elephant in the room is we hear Giuliani talk about how the presidency has to be taken out, trial by combat. And it's so messed up to hear that and then see the Capitol fall under siege.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:08:18\]](#)

But I also think there is some reality to that statement in America, in that these hedge funds, these Trumpian infrastructures that are in place--all the way from these far right Boogaloo Boys, all the way to UCLA charging thousands of dollars of student loan debt to every single student--it's just an infrastructure that is going to force us from push to shove. And again, it's something where I don't know how to make sense of it. I don't know if there is a solution that can be figured out peacefully, but I just don't see it.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:09:09\]](#)

And that's where I see things like Biden winning the presidency-- Those are surprises that make me think, "Okay, maybe there's some path to normalcy again." But normalcy is, I don't know, is just such a privileged thing. Like, maybe it's normal for me, who--despite having six figures of student loan debt--is white and has some semblance of a career. But is it normalcy for the people we lived around in East Harlem that couldn't even get unemployment? I don't know. It just seems like so many people in this country are still set up to fail. And I don't see how peaceful responses are the only way that this can be responded to.

COLLINGS: [\[01:10:14\]](#)

So, is there anything that you would like to see happen as a function of the pandemic?

KRISTMAN: [\[01:10:22\]](#)

I mean, I'd like to see stuff like healthcare and-- Just overall ways to help communities that have been given the least, just given a little bit more. I find it so crazy that it still costs money for people to go to community college. And I find it crazy that it's just so hard to get any footing into rising into a different class. It's something that keeps me up at night, even as someone who's found a job in this pandemic. Because I still know that all it takes is someone, some line manager above me to get some kind of meeting with someone who-- They'll say, "Our budget's cut, sorry." And I don't know anyone who isn't chained up by that reality.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:11:41\]](#)

Yeah, I just-- I don't know how to fix that. I don't know how they will. I think the tough reality that we've had to accept is that we get small fixes. We get the X amount of months of deferment, or maybe we only get 600 dollars this time around, but we can hope for now 1,400 dollars in a couple months. And that's-- It's tough. It's like, you gotta kind of-- I don't even know the words for it. We just gotta force our way into a new reality. And I think a lot of us won't be able to pull it off. Both people of the outside world who aren't in this collegiate expanse that we're in and also the people that I went to school with. I

still know people that have just as much, if not more, debt than me from UCLA and have not been able to find a job in five years.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:12:54\]](#)

And maybe there is some blame for them, but it's also-- It's just a crapshoot. My last job, I remember probably the hardest moment for me in New York was I was interviewing for jobs that were mid to senior level, and a couple of the jobs I was interviewing for paid the most I've ever been able to interview for. Some of them were for like \$150,000 to \$175,000 a year, with incredible benefits and all of that. And I would do-- I remember I would take the subway to those interviews. And after those interviews, I would then take the subway back to Brooklyn, into some weird parts of Brooklyn. And I would have meetings to obtain my eligibility for food stamps.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:14:04\]](#)

And I just remember that moment because, ultimately, when I got the job I had before the one I'm working now, I-- At the moment of accepting that offer, I had applied to 564 jobs on LinkedIn and had only gotten an offer from a company that I didn't even apply to. And I feel like I'll always remember that number because that number is so representative of how it could have not worked out and how-- despite the fact that I'm this guy who has a degree from UCLA and an MFA, and I have all this work experience, a portfolio, a website--it doesn't change the fact that I'm going from interviews that pay money that people in this country will never make and also participating in the lowest of low experiences of going into these New York health facilities to beg for unemployment and food stamps.

COLLINGS: [\[01:15:32\]](#)

Right. So, I think it kind of goes back to something you were saying earlier, where there's the sense of almost like a world apart, this world of educated elites who have all of these skills and expect to earn a lot of money, but it's a small world, and you're either in it or you're not.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:16:02\]](#)

Yeah, and it's really just-- Personally, from my experience, I don't know if-- Maybe you've spoken to other people from UCLA where this experience never happened, but it has always felt like a casino game to me. I'm on LinkedIn as if it's a dating app. And I'm not at-- It came down to the point, a couple years out of being at UCLA, where it's like I'm not applying to things I'm interested in. I'm just applying to everything and hoping someone accepts me. And I can't even imagine the stakes of someone who doesn't have a UCLA degree. And I feel like that's such a privileged statement in itself. But that's also how messed up the job market is.

COLLINGS: [\[01:16:57\]](#)

Right, right, right. Well, I think as we kind of get to the end of our time here, I mean, one of the things that I like to sort of ask people about is how the pandemic has made you think about work in the future. But it really sounds like, for you and for so many of your generation, the pandemic, in many ways, started with the financial collapse of 2008.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:17:35\]](#)

Right. Yeah, I-- The financial collapse of 2008 is definitely really personal to my family, in that my parents-- Once I graduated high school in 2009, I remember that my valedictorian-- Maybe this is some story I made up over time, but I've committed to it. But I remember my valedictorian got denied from

UC Irvine. And at that point I was like, "Well, there's no way I'm going to get into UCLA then." Let alone I had already been denied from Cal State Fullerton, rejected from a couple other places, but I was committed to moving to California for some reason. It was some kind of fever dream that I had as an 18-year-old. And I did it. I did it by going to community college in Orange County.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:18:45\]](#)

All the while, my parents were still-- My parents have been obsessed with me my entire life, and they were going through the the pains of trying to sell their house in Connecticut. And they got a fraction of what they probably would have if they held on for a couple years. And it was this devastating experience for them that they went from living in a house they spent my entire life building--building specifically to sell and afford my college--and not only did they not get to do that, but they lost all the money they invested in and were reduced to living in a one bedroom apartment in Costa Mesa, California. And I think the crazy thing with these crises is it just all seems so sequential.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:20:03\]](#)

I think for years now, the big thing I was working on in my MFA was writing this novel that I've been working on since undergrad, kind of about my UCLA experience, trying to make sense of those years between like 2013 to 2015. And the big thing that I have tried to make sense of as I've grown older in that moment was how it all felt like it was building up to something, and I couldn't put my finger on what it was. I think that the two big events that happened in that timeframe of 2013 to 2015 was we had the UCSB massacre, which is this shooting with that guy Elliot Rodger-- I think that's his name. And from there, in 2015, a much less reported story that was at UCLA was this this brutal murder--

COLLINGS: [\[01:21:25\]](#)

I was there in the library that day. Go ahead.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:21:30\]](#)

Of Andrea DelVesco, and it was this--

COLLINGS: [\[01:21:36\]](#)

Oh, I was thinking of something different. Okay, I'm sorry. What were you referencing?

KRISTMAN: [\[01:21:43\]](#)

Yeah, so it was right-- I believe it was the-- I might have the dates wrong a little bit, but I'm almost positive that it was on-- They have the big Bruin Bash to kick off fall quarter, and it happened the first fall I was an alumni. And at the time, I was couch surfing in Westwood with kids who were still in their undergrad. And I remember there was this moment where there was smoke, and I think the--

COLLINGS: [\[01:22:24\]](#)

Oh, and there was a fire, yes.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:22:26\]](#)

Yeah. And ultimately, this girl-- There's a lot of articles that get way deeper into maybe why this happened. But ultimately, this girl was stabbed to death, and then her apartment in Westwood was lit on fire. And I had some vague connections to this girl. I knew someone that was close to her. And it was

also, for me, it was such a bookend to my UCLA experience. Yeah. And I feel bad saying that, in that I don't want to attach myself to something that I wasn't connected to. But for some reason, the more I started to conceptualize writing about UCLA and writing about that time, those two moments, that were both these really huge attacks on femininity-- And really, if you look at a lot of the things like QAnon and all these big groups that have emerged, if you really dig into it, you'll start seeing how the UCSB massacre by this guy, Elliot Rodger-- If you really look into it, you'll see that he's become a prophet to a lot of these people. Yeah, and really-- I'm trying to think of the word. The incel movement.

COLLINGS: [\[01:24:14\]](#)

They say, "All hail--" Incel, yeah. "All hail the," I think "the grand gentleman" or something like that.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:24:22\]](#)

Yeah, exactly. And I just keep looking at those experiences and trying to create constellations out of it. And it's been tough for me. I haven't figured it out. And I wish I could create this incredible novel that encapsulates that time and shows how all of this led to something, but I still feel like we haven't seen what that something is yet. I think we're starting to see it kind of emerge, but I fear that it's not over yet. But I think the crazy part of it is that it can find itself even in a small pocket of being an undergrad student at UCLA, who graduated with nothing figured out whatsoever, except for a couple stories that keep me up at night.

COLLINGS: [\[01:25:39\]](#)

That actually sounds like a great finale. But let me just ask you if we've missed talking about anything that you would want to bring up?

KRISTMAN: [\[01:25:58\]](#)

I think we've covered a lot. Yeah, I think those are the-- I guess the most selfish thing is plugging that I'm writing a novel about all of it, but--

COLLINGS: [\[01:26:15\]](#)

Go for it. Do it, yeah.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:26:17\]](#)

But I think-- I don't know, maybe-- I guess the fear that I've always had is that--and it's especially been triggered by this whole pandemic--has been, "What if I never leave a mark on the world?" And even as someone now who-- A couple months back, I found a great job that I-- The crazy part of it is it's the first job I've ever gotten compliments at. And I've worked on huge campaigns for Nike, Adidas, and I've worked in all these different fields. I've done a great bachelor's degree and master's degree. But it's the first job that doesn't treat me like a piece of trash. And the crazy part about it though is, even though I'm making a living and I'm in a place that treats me like a human being, the novel or the aspirations for leaving a mark linger, I guess.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:27:42\]](#)

And I think that the sad part about this pandemic has been how it just feels like it punted it so many miles away. And maybe it was always that far away, but it's that tough reality that now is not my time to emerge as the great American writer, let alone as someone who is completely this arbiter of stability. I

don't think anyone is, and that's what's been tough for me. So, yeah, I guess that's the only thing that has really been on my mind with this interview, as well as just being able to encapsulate what New York was and who we were.

COLLINGS: [\[01:28:43\]](#)

Who we were. Not anymore, huh?

KRISTMAN: [\[01:28:46\]](#)

Yeah, I feel like it is this kind of thing where there was a moment that we just kind of crossed over onto a different plane. It's almost like-- It has that quality of a hallucinogenic experience in that-- Like, the first time I experimented with mushrooms when I was an undergrad-- First of all, I hate to be that guy who says that sentence. But there is this quality to that, where there's a moment where things change. It's like you're, I don't know-- It's like the roller coaster of it, where you're just in it, rather than you're anticipating it. And this pandemic had that. And I think there was a moment of just chaos and the fear of what's to come, and then we were in what we were fearing. And I don't think we've left that yet.

COLLINGS: [\[01:30:00\]](#)

So, you're still in it. And so, will you get out of it? Will there be an end? Or will this trip be permanent? Have things changed forever?

KRISTMAN: [\[01:30:19\]](#)

So, that's why I bring that up, in that I think many people have experienced that moment during a trip where it's like, "I don't think this is going to end." And you tell yourself-- Ultimately, what takes you out of it is saying, like, "This is going to end. It's going to be a couple hours." Just like with the pandemic, "It's going to end in the summer. It's going to-- The heat is going to just burn it out of our bodies, and we'll be all good." But talking about all this stuff we've talked about--with finances, and the house of cards, and the constellations of these traumatic moments--I don't know what completely takes you out of this moment. Especially because I think the tough part of it is that I feel like we were almost dosed with this experience before we even knew it. And having that-- I don't know. It's this thing that I have the fear of not being able to get out of. I don't know if it's the disease, the virus though. I think the virus is the symptom, and I don't know-- I can't identify the cause. And that's what scares me with it.

COLLINGS: [\[01:32:00\]](#)

Some people sort of think of this pandemic period as offering great clarity, and you yourself suggested that in terms of revealing class divisions. But at the same time, it's also something that's almost a kind of a hallucinogenic experience, as well.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:32:24\]](#)

Yeah, and I think especially-- Doing my MFA in creative writing put me in touch with a lot of fellow colleagues that were kind of going through the same trip in that-- Like, I don't see myself having a future that is disconnected from struggle without having some incredible success, like a bestselling novel or becoming some kind of established artist. And I mean, what is the equation to solve that? I have no idea. I guess on the surface level, it's you release something that's incredible, that's undeniable. But in that vein, with this pandemic, it just shows--and it showed to me and a lot of other friends--that everything can be taken away. And I don't see myself-- I guess the trip--if we want to stick with that metaphor--is that I don't see myself getting completely out of it without some almost hallucinogenic success.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:33:44\]](#)

And maybe that is-- I think what's been tough about looking back on UCLA has been that that was what we were promised in orientation. During our orientation, they talked about how we were the most applied to class ever and how on our shoulders is the future that we create. And we are that, and the you-- and how we were the people that ascended past all those who were rejected, I think, is the Kool-Aid that I unfortunately sipped a little too much of. And now I'm in this place where, like, "Well, if I don't get that, how can I come to terms with it? And is there a way to come to terms to it?" I don't know. Maybe that's just because I'm in my final year of my twenties and I still have that aspiration.

COLLINGS: [\[01:34:53\]](#)

Okay, I think that's very sobering.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:34:58\]](#)

Yeah. Thank you for the therapy session. I appreciate it.

COLLINGS: [\[01:35:04\]](#)

You're welcome. "Sobering," to sort of continue with the metaphor. Okay, I will turn off the recorder, and then we could just chat for a moment.

KRISTMAN: [\[01:35:18\]](#)

For sure.