

Chris Bertolotti Interviewed by Isabella Bertolotti
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Scarsdale, NY

My name is Isabella Bertolotti and I am interviewing Chris Bertolotti. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Chris Bertolotti: I do.

IB: Where are you from?

CB: I was born in Teaneck, New Jersey and I've lived for the most part in New York my whole life.

IB: What was your opinion of police before the protests began against police brutality in May 2020?

CB: I think my view of the police was generally actually, to be honest not a whole lot different than it is now in the sense that I think a lot of the police are good people. They're doing an important job for the public. I have lived through 9/11, I actually was in the city that day not far from where it happened. So, I saw how brave and how important the police were in dealing with that situation. But unfortunately, there's, as, in pretty much all walks of life, there's a portion of people that are bad if you will, and do things wrong there's corruption. There are people that abuse the power that their position affords them, and I think it's a mixed bag. Unfortunately, have some bad actors that can drag down the reputation of an entire group of people.

IB: Do you have any stories that you are willing to share about encounters you've had with the police either before or after May 2020?

CB: Sure! I really haven't had any encounters with police to speak of after May 2020. But I will speak of an encounter I once had, this was quite a few years ago. And truthfully if you pressed me I couldn't even tell you the exact year but, I would probably guess it was early to mid-2000s. When I was driving along in Pelham Parkway in the Bronx, and I hit a pothole and got a flat tire. Pulled over to the side of the road. As I was pulling over a police officer pulled up behind with their lights on. I got out of my car, which apparently the police officer didn't like cuz when they got out of their car, they had their hands on their guns. And of course, I got a baby in a baby seat in the back seat. I had your mother in the seat next to me and I was like "Really guys?" They were like "Get back in the car right now" so I got back in the car. But to me, that's an example of sometimes, I don't know, I think they overreact and maybe the badge and the gun goes to their head a little bit. I don't think I represented a threat but I guess they felt threatened, felt the need to have their hands on their guns.

IB: What was your opinion of protest movements before May 2020?

CB: I'm always a supporter of peaceful protests if people have something that they feel upset about and it's a basic U.S. right to be able to gather and express your opinion about something and when it's peaceful, I fully support protests.

IB: How has that opinion changed since May 2020?

CB: It really hasn't changed. I certainly feel that the protests, in this case, brought about by the death of George Floyd, are certainly valid. I think that there are a long-standing problem and issue that those protests are trying to address. I just have a problem when things get violent. I have a problem when people maybe go over the edge a little bit and start to damage personal or public property, loot stores. I don't necessarily agree with that approach. I think the civil rights movement originated with a peaceful movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King and I believe in peaceful protests.

IB: How has the coronavirus changed your life?

CB: The coronavirus has changed everybody's lives but it's changed my life in the sense that I'm working from home now. I personally have a little bit of a risk factor in a heart condition. So, it kept me very much insulated. I've stayed in my house quite a bit more than usual obviously, rather than commuting to the city every day. I am now working out of my house and I don't leave here much really just because of the concerns over the risk involved with contracting the virus.

IB: I'm not sure if I skipped this question, so let me know if I did or not. Why do you think these protests erupted?'

CB: You did not ask, um, I think there are a couple of contributing factors to why the protests erupted this time more so than any other occasion. Unfortunately, there's a long list of reasons and unfortunate deaths related to police violence particularly against people of color. I just think at this moment in history there's just too many happening too often and story after story. We keep wanting to make a change. That change doesn't seem coming at all. I think an exacerbating factor is that everybody is a little bit on the edge, whether they know it or not, what's going on in the world. The coronavirus has caused tension for people in their lives for financial reasons, health reasons, many reasons. It's changed the fabric of our lives and I think it has a lot of people on edge. So I think that contributed a little bit extra in terms of the intensity of a reaction. But, I think overall Americans, particularly Americans of color, have just had enough of this behavior by the police.

IB: How do you think the coronavirus has impacted these protests?

CB: I'm not sure honestly, other than what I just said which is it added some intensity and some emotion and tension to cause people to overreact in some cases, a little overboard with things that they were doing. Other than that, I don't know that it really contributed since it didn't stop a lot of young people from getting out in the street and

assembling and expressing their disgust and feelings about police violence against people of color.

IB: Were you involved in any protests since May 2020? If so, how so, and if not why not?

CB: I was not, I have not attended any protests and really the reason for that mostly is my concern over health and obviously it's not the wisest thing to get together with a bunch of people at this time. We, as New Yorker, seem to have turned a corner in the last month or two at the height of this. We were still in the middle of a very serious problem, and I could not risk going out in a crowd like that. I don't know when I'll ever go out in a crowd again, to be quite honest, for anything.

IB: What would it take for you to get involved in these protests?

CB: Well, I have to say sincerely I hope that I don't need to protest on this particular subject. I hope that we can really finally see change and that police will be held accountable for their behavior when they misbehave. But, for me personally, I would just have to feel that I could do it safely and not risk my health. Perhaps, if a vaccine comes out, or some kind of cure treatment that would help reduce the severity of coronavirus symptoms. I think that's what it would take unfortunately for me to attend a protest.

IB: What do you think about the cops' response to protests that began in May 2020?

CB: God, I think it's a mixed bag and obviously there's been some severe overreactions on the part of the police. I mean you've seen all the images from around the country of people getting pushed down, people getting sprayed with really no reason or apparent reason with pepper spray, unleashing tear gas on crowds, not everybody was looting and violent. There were peaceful protests and they were treated overly aggressively by the police. So, I have a problem with that because it is a right of American's to protest, and it's also hard for the police when you have people yelling God knows what at you and getting in your face. It must be really hard to just sit there and take it but, at the same time, it doesn't help to overreact and treat people badly when they're exercising their right to protest.

IB: What do you think about your mayor's response to the protests that started in May 2020?

CB: Well, I almost feel like we have two mayors, we have a mayor where we live, who I think overall has done a good job. And then, of course, we have Mayor De'Blasio in the city where I work and spend a lot of my time. I don't know, I don't really agree with some of what Mayor De'Blasio has done. I don't necessarily agree that the answer is cutting police budgets and eliminating certain anti-crime units. But, he's certainly done a better job with sympathizing with the movement than the president has. So, on that score, I guess I would give him an average to slightly above average grade.

IB: what do you think about our governor's response to the protests?

CB: I think the governor himself has been okay on it. Obviously, he was also dealing with another crisis at the same exact time. I think generally he was a pretty good voice of calm in the movement and supports peaceful protests. So, I actually would generally give Governor Cuomo a higher score than most public figures at least the ones who are relevant to me on a daily basis.

IB: What do you think about the Congress' response to the protests?

CB: Ah the congress. I think obviously it varies-somehow they manage to bring politics and everything they discuss. So obviously, democrats tend to be more sympathetic with freedom and the right to protest. The black lives matter movement, and generally with black people to begin with. And typically you find a bunch of republicans that will side with the president and claim law and order, and these protestors are violent. That's just not true, I don't think you can paint all protests and protestors across America as being violent or stepping over the line. So I think unfortunately our environment in congress right now and Washington in general, everything seems to be painted with a partisan brush. It's rare that they act on anything without having political overtones.

IB: What do you think about President Trump's response to the protests that began in 2020?

CB: Unfortunately, I'm not impressed with President Trump in many ways. And certainly, this is probably one of his worst and weakest areas. I think unfortunately he does nothing but inflames racial tension. I think he has been doing it for a long time before he got into office. I think it was part of his campaign, part of his strategy to get elected and he's sticking with it whether he believes the things he says as a person. He seems to believe that's what's going to keep him in office. Honestly, his credibility on the topic goes all the way back to how he responded to what happened in Charlottesville at the University of Virginia when there was that whole white supremacy versus other people down there. He basically had a chance to come out on the right side of history and say the right thing. Instead, he sided with the wrong people or tried to stay on the fence. And that was a mistake. Everything with that guy from "build the wall and try and shut out immigrants" Unfortunately, I think he's done nothing but fan the flames of tension and it doesn't really seem to me to have any credibility on this issue.

IB: How have protests in the context of coronavirus shifted the way you think about race in America?

CB: I have to say, I don't really connect the context of coronavirus to the context of race and what is going on. It's really sad but coronavirus is a new problem of race in this country goes back forever. It just seems like we passed the civil rights act and was subverted by the Jim Crow laws and I just feel like we've never achieved the ideal of equality and equal rights and treatment of all people that the country was supposed to be founded upon. So, I think the issue of racial inequality in this country is a much older

and more difficult issue to solve. I don't connect it to coronavirus to be truthful. I'm hoping we can start to see some real change and I don't think corona will have anything to do with it one way or another. Unfortunately, it does seem to be that communities of color and seniors and prisons people that are obviously unable to help themselves as much or living in worse economic conditions do seem to be more affected by the coronavirus. Seeing more deaths I think that unfortunately also has to deal with economic and social inequality. Their inability to access the same kind of healthcare that wealthy white people can access. So in that context, corona only amplifies the underlying problem.

IB: How would you like to see this movement resolved?

CB: There's a lot of pieces to resolve this movement. The way to resolve it is to recognize the systemic problems that have brought about the movement and the need for one, and finally address them. Obviously I'm from the North but I've traveled all over this country and I've been in the south. Therefore, there's no place in this country for confederate symbols, flags, and statues. So I personally am on the side of "it's time to get rid of that crap". If you really want to unite this country, let's start with that. It's going to take real systemic change. The police are important because obviously they keep people safe when they're doing their job and doing it correctly, enforcing the law and not unfairly taking the law into their own hands. So, there have to be more significant punishments and there has to be more accountability for police when they act inappropriately, and obviously, it's never appropriate to do the kind of things that have been done. Shooting people as they're running away, putting your knee on somebody's neck until they die. This is never acceptable, I don't care what decade you're in and I don't care what color is involved either, it's not acceptable to anybody. But obviously it seems to, unfortunately, be affecting people of color. It has to stop, and the way to stop it is when you throw people that do it in jail and hold them accountable. Whether it takes a federal task force under the guidance of the FBI, it has to be non-partisan because if politics are involved that'll create its own problems. There has to be some kind of body like the internal affairs department which is basically policed police, but none of that seems to be working and bringing about systemic change. They have to face justice just as common criminals when they do the things they're not supposed to do. There's a lot of opportunities underway economically, in the job market, for access to college, all of these areas are areas where we need to try to do better and try to stop keeping people who have traditionally been kept down by economic or socio-economic conditions. We have to try to finally resolve and bring about more equality in all of these areas. That's what's going eventually hopefully erase the need for a movement of this kind.

IB: How do you think people living in the United States should be handling the coronavirus?

CB: Excellent question and I guess my answer here would be that it seems like New York handled it well in the sense that by a large, New York as a population did an excellent job of bringing this under control by following the rules by social distancing, wearing masks, doing what they were told to do to try and control the spread and bend

the curve. And it seems like many other areas refuse to act, because of the president not caring it trickles down. For instance, look at Florida, look at Arizona there's a reason they're all out of control. Other states too that were too anxious to open thinking it's a New York problem and a northern problem. Well, it exploded that there and many states in the country are on fire with it now. We Americans love our freedom, we don't want to spend our summer indoors isolated from all of our friends and family. And I have to say, unfortunately, it's a social discipline problem where you want to do what you want and don't want to be told you can't do it. But, the greater good dictates you must do what's necessary. The virus doesn't care that you had a party you want to go to, it's happy to infect you and 30 other people there. Everybody has to have some conscious and for the greater good you need to wear a mask and not go out.

IB: The last question is do you think the NYPD is trying to become a better system after everything that has happened with police?

CB: I would say that I think probably many police departments are looking at this and trying to process how they can better serve the public and get a better handle on not allowing these things to happen on their ranks. In New York, they cut almost a billion dollars from the police department. This is not good for the police and people who work for them obviously. Nor is the general swell of public hatred and distrust towards many police, which is unfair to the good cops. However, I think a lot of them don't feel very good about being put in that position and in a position where they feel because of public perception people might be more bound to hit or shoot an officer, which I don't think is good for anybody. I'm hoping that the police departments and criminal system is taking a look at this and evaluating what they can do to improve the situation and not respond with tear gas, riot shields, and a force that's unnecessary at protests that are valid.