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## **Aaron Hughes, Oral History Interview, 2022**

Sara Jurca

Interview with Aaron Hughes (AH) conducted via Zoom on November 16, 2022 by EMU undergraduate Sara Jurca for You Li's Journalism 313 course.

Transcribed by Sara Jurca

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**SJ:** Hello, I am Sara Jurca. The following Zoom interview you are about to read is one where I hosted EMU undergraduate student, Aaron Hughes. The central focus of this interview is to discuss Hughes' experience with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically how it caused him to change his career to something he was truly passionate about. All right. So that during the pandemic, what was the major reason you decided to switch your education path?

**AH:** Um — So I went to college near the pandemic — In the pandemic. So I finished my high school, senior high school year, and then I'm doing my freshman year on Zoom in a dorm and doing my classroom major. And I'm realizing that I'm not really liking it and I'm getting a little worried, Oh, did I make the right decision? What should I do? Should I take New Year off? Shouldn't I change my major? I really wasn't sure what to do at all and I just wasn't liking the path I was on. I only took a couple of classes that weren't in my major, but still with those few classes, I'm already feeling like I'm not liking this. It's not really me and I don't want to go spend my life doing a career field in Exercise Science, or personal training, or in just health in general. So I was just — I just had a little moment like, Okay, I need to figure out what to do now before it's too late. And I didn't want to be in my senior year, switch my major, and we're having this crisis again.

**SJ:** Yeah, that makes sense. And so then, umm, was anything else an influence? Were there other influences that helped you make that decision, or was it solely based on the fact that you weren't liking the program so far?

**AH:** That was the main thing. I talked to — for the program, we did a few classes where we talked to personal trainers, or whatever, from other universities, and I was talking to him and I'm realizing I don't want to do what he is doing. And he's not looking like he's having fun in it either, especially because of the pandemic. And so, I didn't want to be around that for the rest of my life. And so I was talking to other people, like my advisors and friends of family, and they were trying to help me figure it out. Because they didn't really care what I did, as long as I enjoyed doing it and as long as I got a degree. And so that helped out a lot and they just gave me ideas that could bounce off of, figure out what path I should take. And I finally landed on Media and Journalism. But at first I was running through the whole thing, looking at every major available, looking at other universities, maybe to see what I should do. But yeah, that was the main thing. Talking to that personal trainer and those classes really made me realize this is not the right thing for me.

**SJ:** Okay. So you mentioned that you talked to your family and friends. How did your family, who you were quarantining with at the time, have any — what opinions and influence over that matter specifically, besides just wanting you to be happy?

**AH:** So in the pandemic, I was with my grandmother, my aunt, my mom, and my brother. My grandmother, aunt, and my brother did have too much say in what was happening because they knew, but not really. But mom, she was talking to me before. She always had an idea for me to go into Media in general, whether that be radio or news. I'm not sure why. So when I was ready to make the change already, she kept recommending this stuff to me. And we have other people in our family or friends of family who did so in regards to that. So she gave me the recommendation and when I mentioned that or I might do this instead, she was really supportive of me, she was kind of in the back the whole time. Telling me, "Oh, you should do this as well." The pandemic didn't change too much, but maybe they also saw my interest more because they're in the house more with me. So they just saw how much I was about Music and other Media related things, and because I took classes in high school regarding the Media as well. And so that made them see more of, Oh this is his thing. So they really was behind my back pushing for it and like they said, you should try this then. Exercise Science was really a thing. You should do this instead.

**SJ:** Oh, that's great. How did family members who were not quarantining with you have an influence or opinions on the matter of you switching your careers?

**AH:** So the main other two people in my family who had an influence and that they were saying was my dad and my sister. My sister was all the way in Indiana. She was the first person that talked in regards to this cause she switched her major, and she was originally in Journalism as well. So like I said, when I was having a breakdown, I was like, I don't

know what to do. So she was like, “I know you like music. I know you want to do stuff like this.” So she gave me all the options I had of all the careers I could take, and she really helped sort of pan things out for me and help me figure out what direction I wanted to go in. And she also prepared me for what I was going to do in order to be comfortable being behind the camera and all that stuff. And also that she really helped me with that.

My dad, he was amazing. He wanted me to graduate because no one else in my family, at least no other man in my family, went to college or went as far in their degree. He talked to me about engineering, because I had friends doing engineering. But he didn't really care what I did, as long as I was passionate about it, as long as I did the thing that was best for me. He was supportive as well. So he didn't tell me which major to choose. He does want to make sure I made the right decision for myself.

**SJ:** Okay. That's great. So then you were talking about your sister, how she gave you specific, um, ideas toward the transition. Can you tell me a little bit about the ideas that she gave you? Specifically.

**AH:** So she's a really organized person. So she made a whole document. She sent me a link to every possible good job I could have with this major. So, I mean, all the major options that would make sense for me. So it was a whole, it was a whole thing, a whole presentation. So she was — she sent me links, “Oh, here's how much they make or here's a product you take. You could be a host or you could be behind the camera, you can do this or that.” And then, like I said, Journalism as well. So she told me what hers is like

being a Journalism major in college. Only though, she did it for half her college career. She told me what the class were like. I was like, Was it writing intensive? How she was going to move people and interview people and all that stuff. And so she just gave me sort of a whole breakdown. And she was just telling me what it was like switching majors. So she switched her majors one or two times. So she knew plenty of what it was like. So she was just telling me that it was great that I did it now and that people who were switching majors all the time and to make sure that I did what I wanted, of course. And she was just giving me a breakdown of all the career choices that I could have. She went through the whole EMU catalog and everything. She was really on this issue, and she really helped me a lot with this and really this sort of in line with this.

**SJ:** Oh, that's great. Yeah, she definitely sounds very organized. Um, so how did umm — How did — Well, you said your sister, she switched her career path a few times. Did anybody else in your family switch their career, education or jobs during this time? And if they did, how did that affect you?

**AH:** Um, no one really in that time, no one really switched careers that much. My sister was about to switch a career from a — she did some international, umm — So — she did things with natives, native tribes, and they were — they were reservoirs with her job. She was interacting with them the most a lot, but she really wanted to be in the college campus area. She went to work with international students, so that's around the time she was ready to leave her job. She was telling me how she didn't like it. So that made me be like, Okay, I want to do something I like.

No one else in my family went to college, besides me and my sister, so they didn't have much input on this. Most of them didn't get past a year, so they all just wanted to see me make it. My mom worked in education as well. She worked in elementary school and so this is the time she was moving up in status. She was now, I forget the name of it, but now she, she sort of helped from the school. And so, seeing her switch her career also made me realize I wanted something that I wanted to do something that I love. Because I've seen her go through multiple different types of jobs and multiple types of fields and to see her finally on something she likes doing that really helped me see, Okay, I want to do something I love. I want to do something right for me and I know it's going to take a minute, but I want to do it before it's too late.

**SJ:** Yeah, yeah, for sure. So you said your original major was Exercise Science. Since it's related to health, how did the COVID-19 disease and pandemic, well, diseases itself, umm, play a factor into your decision?

**AH:** So, I was taking classes regarding exercise science and health in high school, but they sort of got cut or closed because of the pandemic. I was in a different club and organization and all that other stuff. But all that stopped because of the pandemic, and then going to school, and like I said, talking to that personal trainer as well, he's from LSU, and seeing how he had to change his whole workout and changed his whole life because of the pandemic and how much it affected his career path. I didn't want that to happen to me. My sister, her boyfriend, was a nurse as well. Seeing that, as well, being in

the health field. There's a lot of people in my life who are also in the health field, so just seeing how much that changed your life and how I didn't want to deal with that. And I know Media and Journalism is going to change somewhat, but it's not going to change too much. There's a lot of flexibility in this field when it came to, like, virtual and online stuff. When it comes to health, like you said in your thing, that you really can't do this online, you have to be in person. And I didn't want to totally have to do that. So because of the pandemic switch, just in case it happened again, I wanted to be able to have the flexibility.

**SJ:** Yeah, for sure. So is — Then is your new education path typically influenced by COVID 19? In other words, since you switched to Music Media, did you do it because of your spirits or mental health during that time? Was it a way that you could express your feelings or was it something else?

**AH:** It was a way to show the feelings at a very early time, because before I made the switch, I was already doing some stuff in regards to that, like writing blogs or doing social media, some regards of that. So it was like this expressive way, I had a lot of time in the pandemic, so I needed to do something to really get into that stuff. But mostly to expressive way — It was a way to express myself and to just clear my mind and do stuff I wanted to do —

**SJ:** Oh, can you repeat that last one?



**AH:** Sorry, I was just trying to see what you said. You said mental health, you said, you said to express myself. What else did you ask in that question?

**SJ:** Did it — did it lift your spirits and mental health during the time, or was it a way to express your feelings?

**AH:** Oh, it was both. It helped my mental health as well. Freshman year I was going through it in a lot of different ways and it's always a little nice to get a break away from that. And then I started writing as well for The Echo around my freshman year. So that really helped me realize that I'm in a career path I like, I'm talking about stuff I like, and get to interact with different people from all over the world. So it is a fun experience for me and it was just — it was a clear path. It wasn't stressful. I never had a problem with it. So that's why I liked it so much.

**SJ:** Well, good. That's great. So then looking back, do you think you made the right decision? Why or why not?

**AH:** I definitely feel I made the right decision. I can't see myself doing Exercise Science now, even though I'm big on working out and health and stuff. So I don't see myself teaching people or training people anymore. I can't see myself doing that. And because I'm so embedded now in the Media program here at the school and it feels right. I know a lot of people in this major. I've done plenty of stuff with the ECN program here to TV lab to The Echo and as well. And it's, this felt like I made the right choice now. So I have a lot

more to go through. It does feel like the right thing for me. I can't see myself doing anything else and it is such a creative field that I just enjoy it so much. I don't really have any problems. I don't feel stressed out from this. The worst is a class, but still it's not that much. I enjoyed it a lot.

**SJ:** No, that's great. So then what were any outside factors that influenced your decision? For example, the program changing your classmates dropping out of the program is continuing. Anything like that?

**AH:** So, outside influences — I knew a lot of people dropping out, so I didn't want to go into a field that was too difficult for me, especially, especially because, like I said, I was the only one in my family to go to college. I did my best, so I wasn't making sure I've made the right decision. I also knew STEM was going to be a very difficult field. I know I could do it. I didn't want to be stressed out doing it. I have friends who are engineers, who are in parts of STEM and seeing them go through it. I didn't want to have to deal with that stress. I also had another friend. She was also an Exercise Science major and, though she's still in the health field, she switched her major too at the same time. And so, that sort of helps alleviate, like, Okay, I'm not the only one doing this. I'm not the only person feeling this way. The program in general, I wasn't too worried about it, though, but when you look in the schedule and see how if I could graduate in four years, it would be very difficult. You would have to take a lot of classes each semester. A lot of summer classes as well will be required for that major or program. And when I switched to this,

it's all, Oh, I get two majors in one, and I still graduate on time. It just made this right feel like the right decision.

**SJ:** Good. That's great. So then, while you were deciding to change your career from Exercise Studies, what were some other educational path options that you were considering besides Media and Music?

**AH:** So, one of the biggest ones is engineering, because I already, like I said, I had other friends and people I knew around me that were in that field and I already had the same educational path at that time, I knew I could take a course, as it were. It didn't seem too different a lot of the time, because I did a lot of the advanced math stuff in highschool as well. So I felt like, Oh, I can do this easily if I do it. But I knew I would make a lot of money doing it. So it didn't seem like a bad choice to make. And other choices were like Communications school, well, Business and Marketing, but they seemed really basic. Those are really backup plans if I need to figure something else out. And of course, also, I got to stay in the health field as well and maybe just pick a different decision beside Exercise Science, whether that be a nursing or doctor degree. But I just knew I didn't want to be Exercise Science. Like I said, if I didn't pick Media and Journalism, it probably would have been engineering then, because they are really trying to convince me to do that. Like I said, it made a lot of money, so it wasn't a bad decision for me at the time. But I also knew I didn't want to.

**SJ:** Yeah, for sure. According to The Washington Post, they wrote that a third of Americans

wanted to change their careers during the pandemic. Like many of the people, did you view the pandemic as a chance to change and try something new or that it was some thought forced upon you?

**AH:** Um, before college, during the pandemic in the summertime, I really realized, Okay, I'm not going to get an opportunity like this. To learn more, do more for myself, 'cause I didn't have too much time. So I was really trying to learn more and to do more things that I wasn't doing in high school. And especially as well in college, I realized no one has ever gone through this before, and this is sort of a — everyone sort of froze in this moment right now and you could do whatever you want almost. So I felt like, Okay, if I'm going to try anytime now, this would have to be the time. It's my freshman year. I'm still really young, I still have a lot of growth and room to do stuff I want to, especially now because of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone's in it like a standstill. And I had the chance to do something now if I wanted to and I didn't want to waste the opportunity and look back now and have regrets. I'm big on not having regrets. So I feel like this is an opportunity for myself to do to better myself. I think that for other people as well and I didn't want the chance to go away.

**SJ:** Okay, great. So as Media Studies and — wait? Sorry. As for Journalism and Music, them being the option for being something remotely, how was that a factor in your decision?

**AH:** I — At first, I didn't even realize you could do it remotely until I started to read more

Journalism pages and more blogs and other media sites. And then, like I said, I started doing my own little thing myself and working with The Echo, and I realized, Oh, this is not that hard. I enjoy working at home. Honestly, this is way better than being in office or going to somewhere else and doing work there. And I feel like, okay, they are doing Zoom interviews, working with people from the office. You know, and other people in my family were also doing remote job as well and I enjoyed that a lot. I could be at home, rest, and do all this stuff in my day, do this remotely. So that was a big factor.

**MJ:** Like I said, I didn't want to be in a field where the pandemic completely messed everything up. Like I said, exercise science, you can somewhat do remotely. But it's not fun. I didn't want to teach people through a Zoom class. I didn't want to be wearing a mask in the gym. That did not seem fun. And so realizing I can make a career path where no matter what, I'm going to be fine, whether it's in-person, virtual or any other type of field. It seemed like a good decision to me that we helped making that decision.

**SJ:** Okay, so was having a career where you could grow and advance a reason for change?

**AH:** Oh yeah, definitely. I didn't want to be stagnant. I've seen way too many people in my life being stuck in a position that's not good for them. And seeing how flexible this career was — I talked to some, it was a little bit later the pandemic, but still, obviously people who are still saying, Oh, I work at this place but also work at this place, and I can switch whenever I want to and do all this other stuff and also do stuff of my own. It really helped me to make that decision. I didn't want to be stagnant, constantly moving up. And even

though it's not a giant field, The Echo sort of helped me realize, Okay, there's a lot more I can make in this field. I started as a writer and quickly went to an editor really fast and I realized the same way in real life as well. And so, being able to translate and go to different, different positions and moving up in life, that was big for me. And also I learned a lot through Journalism in general. I feel like I wasn't learning that much in the Exercise Science field, besides just memorizing this different body structure, memorizing this and that. It wasn't really that fun. I wasn't really learning anything. I learned a lot from the Media and Journalism field, not just technical stuff but writing in general. And so I enjoyed it a lot. I didn't want to be somewhere where I was, say it was stagnant and not moving.

**SJ:** Yeah, for sure. So how was future pay something that affected your change? Did it have any factor for you at all or not really?

**AH:** I had a hard time. I was scared because I knew if I stayed in Exercise Science, I will get paid at least well or equally good, depending where I went and what location. And I really knew when I switched to this major, journalists do not get paid that well. So I was scared by making that decision. Same with Media, as well. I saw it as a place where I can get paid well. But still it was nothing compared to Exercise Science, nothing compared to the engineering or other STEM fields. And I knew a bit about the liberal arts field. So I knew I'm not going to get paid a lot in the beginning, but I was more worried about enjoying what I was doing, being more passionate about my field and not the pay. Money, I'll get it eventually if I like — Like I said, it was a little scary at first, but I realized, I'll

suck it up, I'll be fine. I just didn't want to be stuck somewhere I didn't like. Money is something I can worry about later.

**SJ:** Okay. So I'm gonna— Actually ask this question instead. So you said you were working for The Eastern Echo. How did working there affect your decision to continue Journalism? Was it a positive or a negative thing? Why or why not?

**AH:** It was definitely positive, even though I didn't really see anybody in person until my sophomore year almost. It was still a positive influence because like being able to see, Oh, I have an article published an actual published article I could send to people online, you could look it up. It really helped my decision and maybe saying this and its writing, I enjoyed it. Before, in high school, being told to write a thousand words seemed like a little nuisance. But now, it does seem really easy to me. I enjoyed it. Like I said, I was talking about what I want to talk about and then also like being in a move up very fast and being able to interact with different people from different communities really helped me want to do this more. Like I said, The Echo was the biggest reason that made me realize I really had a career in this and a life out of this. I could see myself doing this for a very long time and it also opened the path for me to a bunch of other jobs for me later on in my life. So The Echo really helped me out with this, they helped me to become a better person, a writer and has made me really enjoy and interact with the community as well. So like I said, The Echo was a very positive reason for me staying. If I didn't stay in that, I'm not sure I'd still be in this, but I'd definitely see it affecting me in a negative way if I wasn't in The Echo.

**SJ:** Oh, wow. Okay. Um, so I'm going to take it back even a little further. So you said that you are the first male in your family to potentially graduate. I know you said that your family was very— they just wanted you to graduate. It didn't matter what you did, but as you as a person, did you still feel pressure to pick a subject or a career path that was more successful than another? Or for you, did that not matter as long as you graduate? How did you specifically feel about it?

**AH:** Always. That's a worry. I didn't want to pick a major where I just like you can't get a job in it, like some history major because even though you can sort of get a job, it's sort of difficult. I would have to get a major that was almost useless. And like I said, no — My uncle went to college for a year and then he dropped out. My dad got a year and a half, so I just want to make sure I got through this and I felt a lot of eyes were on me. Even though not everyone was happy with my career choice, they didn't say anything about, you know? You know, people are; they want the best for you, but you're not going to say it. But it was an influence on me. I like I said, I wanted to make sure I got the right career choice. I don't want huge amounts of debt. And I just want to make sure I graduate. So did they. And they were really supportive no matter what I did. But like I said, they wanted to make sure I graduate because if this is too stressful for me, if I want to drop out, because they had to go forward. And I also want to make sure I make the right major so I can get a good career, because a lot of them were like a family, all the round. So we want to make sure, like financing said, this is taken up. I didn't want to be in that same



area the rest of my life. And even though it doesn't pay that well, I know I can move up with this as well.

**SJ:** That's great. That's great. But you also mentioned that your mother works in the school system. For her, how was that working during the pandemic or was she working during the pandemic? And if so, as a woman, was she affected negatively ? Hours cut, earnings decrease, etc..

**AH:** It wasn't — In regards to that, it wasn't like the hours, she wasn't losing hours, her money I think it was a bit better than it was before. But it was extremely stressful for her. Like I said, she worked at an elementary school and that school in general was not the best when it comes to this whole district and system. And some of the students there are very wild, I would say. And so it was a very stressful time for her trying to organize how to make this stuff virtual. And then she had to deal with my little brother, who's in middle school, go through that as well. And that was a very stressful time for her. She didn't, like I said, she didn't lose any money or any hours, but she dealt with a lot of stress. She was on her laptop 24/7 almost, except when school stopped. At that time, transitioning was horrible for them. Many kids in that area, many parents in that area are not the most tech savvy as well. So switching from in-person class, the worst of all was not at all. The teachers also were a big thing. There's a lot of change and in the principal's a lot. Many of the principals of the school did not stay past a year, same with the teachers. So that whole pandemic made things ten times worse for her as well. Obviously, they're alive because she's at home as well. To make things virtually .

**SJ:** Yeah, for sure. So then how about for any of your other family members working during the pandemic? Were they negatively affected? Same thing: hours cut, earnings decreased, etc..

**AH:** For most of them — All of them, it was mostly the same thing; it was just mostly mental stress they had to deal with. None of them dealt with hours cut that much, except a few uncles and other distant family members did lose their jobs, and got employment because of that, I mean unemployment. But my sister and my father, people like that, they just had to deal with the mental stress with everything being online. They didn't have the best bosses as superiors. So switching from in-person to online was a very confusing time for them, especially for my sister. In regards to my dad, he was putting in more hours I think now because of the pandemic than he was in person. Especially now because he's virtual on a laptop already. He was in an office before, like a cubicle. So he's already on the computer 24/7. The pandemic has made it ten times worse. But even though he was home, it was a lot more mental stress that I saw from all of them.

**SJ:** Wow. Well, that's all of my questions. Thank you for doing this interview with me.

**Ah:** All right. No problem.

Recording stops.