

Evan Schneider:

Hi Ares, how are you? Thank you for joining us.

Ares Alivisatos:

Good. How are you?

Evan Schneider:

Good, good. You're here to represent PFARS but you're a member of the class of '21, so this is a really interesting interview and I'm excited to see everything you have to say.

Ares Alivisatos:

Thank you.

Evan Schneider:

Can you tell us what is PFARS and how does it serve Princeton?

Ares Alivisatos:

So, PFARS is the Princeton First Aid and Rescue Squad. We're the ambulance service for the town of Princeton and that actually includes the University. We're an independent non-profit, so we're not part of the town, but we do serve the town and we're also a combined volunteer and paid agency, meaning that we have volunteers, such as myself, that also serve as officers on the squad. But we also have full-time paid members and we all work together. Anytime someone calls 9-1-1 and is having an emergency, we would come in the ambulance or we have a rescue truck where we can get someone out of a situation, like being stuck in a car if they were in a car accident, or something like that.

Evan Schneider:

Great, thank you. How did you come about this work? How did you get involved with PFARS, and what sustains you, especially right now, what sustains you?

Ares Alivisatos:

Sure. So I actually started in high school. I started when I was 16 years old. We have a cadet program, so there's a program where people that are under 18, from 16 to 18, can actually take the EMT class and get all the same training and riding experience on the ambulance, taking patients, but under supervision obviously. So they just get all the same training as any of our other volunteers, and then when they become adults, they end up transitioning into taking patients by themselves. And so that's what I did, I started in high school. I'm from Princeton and I ended up having the great luck of staying here for the next four years after that. I'm about to hit my five-year next month, actually, as a member of PFARS.

Evan Schneider:

Wow, do they give you an anniversary gift or?

Ares Alivisatos:

We have an installation dinner in January. We have a dinner installing our new officers every year. And so that's when we get the sort of certificate saying, oh, you've been a member for five years. So I am looking forward to that one.

Ares Alivisatos:

But in terms of what sustains me, I mean, I first got into it because, honestly, I had a friend who was a member and it was just amazing to see the kinds of things that they could go and do and be involved in. And honestly, just in general, during this time, but also all the time as a member of PFARS, really it comes down to seeing someone on their worst day and in that very specific moment doing everything you can to make it better, which is really an incredible feeling that is like no other. And so getting that training and being able to use it to actively improve someone's situation in that moment when they're calling. Because when someone calls 9-1-1, it's never a good day for them. And so being able to help out with that.

Ares Alivisatos:

And then right now, honestly what sustains me is the other members of the organization. I think we're really, really fortunate that our volunteers and our paid staff are all just wonderful people, and right now volunteering and continuing to ride has definitely been a great source of comfort for me, actually, just because it's when I get to be with the people that I really, really enjoy and feel supported by the community, the Princeton community at large, but also very specifically the PFARS community.

Evan Schneider:

So, tell us a little bit about what you're seeing on the ground and then, kind of as a followup to that, what's the most important thing that you feel like people need to know right now with the crisis at hand?

Ares Alivisatos:

So, we are seeing a lot of people getting sick. There's a huge change to the way that we are generally, and all of sort of the healthcare systems are, are generally practicing. So for example, we are extremely cautious. Any call that we have, we're going to be wearing an N-95 mask. Then also we have a plethora of other protective equipment, PPE, like we have gowns, we have these masks, we have fluid shields. I mean we're really being very, very cautious and you can see that in the emergency department, everyone has all this equipment to try and keep safe. And then generally the hospital at this point, Princeton hospital, and then also the surrounding areas, they are not at the point where they're not accepting people. They've been able to keep up, which is really, really good. But really, we're just seeing an increase in the volume of people that are sick and that end up having shortness of breath and needing to go to the hospital.

Ares Alivisatos:

I would say the biggest thing for people to sort of think about is, and we've seen these, this idea of lowering the curve, it's sort of been everywhere. But honestly this thing does tax the entire healthcare system, like we've seen in New York, what's happening. And actually it is pretty heartening to see that they had more discharges than people coming in.

Evan Schneider:

That was great news.

Ares Alivisatos:

Which is really great news. And New Jersey has always been lagging a little bit behind New York, so the hope is that will continue and that trend will make its way here.

Ares Alivisatos:

But ultimately this thing taxes the whole system, it taxes resources, supplies, it taxes just generally human resources too. There's a high likelihood, even though we're overly cautious, people do get sick who are working in healthcare because they're exposed. And so that's something that is pretty dangerous, because eventually when you get not enough staff and not enough equipment, that's when you lead to the disaster of even more people suffering than need to.

Ares Alivisatos:

And so honestly the most important thing is for people to follow the recommendations that the CDC is laying forward, following the recommendations that the state is, the governor, and staying home, limiting travel and really doing what we're all supposed to be doing right now.

Evan Schneider:

Right now COVID-19 is raising concerns about grief and stress and anxiety levels being increased, just generally in the population. So, especially for people like you, who are providing vital healthcare services and support, what advice or suggestions do you have for people experiencing those kinds of impacts?

Ares Alivisatos:

So, I would definitely say that I'm not any more qualified than anyone else sort of dealing with this situation. Everything is turning a little bit upside down, and we're all finding our own ways to deal with it. I can say that personally, my biggest thing is just sort of taking care of myself and finding little things that make me happy that I can do. I'm lucky in that I can ride plenty of ambulance shifts, which sort of provides me a lot of comfort. But even though it is also the thing that is very different right now, just because of the risks associated with it.

Ares Alivisatos:

But outside of that, honestly, just picking that one thing that sort of makes you happy. Like for me, I have an elliptical and I go for runs in the morning and I listen to my music and that's what sort of centers me and calms me, but I really think that's going to take a different form for everybody. But just carving out that time and finding that thing that centers you.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, I'm a very routine-oriented person and I struggled, quite a lot actually, at first to adjust to this new normal of working from home, living at home at the same time. And I'm trying to figure out how to balance all those things, and one small thing that I found helpful is I've begun, and this was from a colleague of mine, I've been going for walks in the morning, and thinking of it as I'm commuting to work. So allowing that mind shift to happen. So then when I get back from that walk, I'm at work. And then at the end of the day I go for another walk, yeah, and I commute home. And then when I get back I'm at home again.

Ares Alivisatos:

Right.

Evan Schneider:

So that just sort of little mind shift it's huge. It makes a really, really big difference in how I experience time.

Ares Alivisatos:

Yeah, absolutely. It gets crazy just staying in one place. I know with classes, it's very similar because obviously, classes have still gone on and so I might have to try that. Just getting into the, oh, I'm walking to class and trying that.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. I'm shocked how helpful it's been. It's just that little thing. So, I want to give you an opportunity to talk about PFARS from the perspective of what needs you all are experiencing. You mentioned that it's a small non-profit in the Princeton area, that you rely heavily on donations and what are you seeing in terms of needs right now, in the midst of this crisis, especially given you're providing such a vital service.

Ares Alivisatos:

Yeah, so there's really two main ones. Like you said, we are an independent non-profit. We're not funded by the town and we do rely on people's donations. If people want to go to www.PFARS.org, there's a donate button, and you can give to support what we're doing.

Ares Alivisatos:

And then our other need is supplies. Right now, we've been doing really well in terms of just the supply of PPE, but things do change, and there's not an insignificant chance that we're going to really need more, and it's difficult to order more. So really those two main things just generally support through donations.

Ares Alivisatos:

But then if people do have... we've actually had some companies donate some masks to us and some gloves, which I think they were doing sort of research, and now they don't need them anymore. And so that was also really, really great.

Evan Schneider:

Great. Thank you. So I'd like you to do a little bit of an imagining right now, and thinking about a kind of a post COVID-19 future world, hopefully sooner, rather than later, but it's not clear when that's going to happen. But what do you expect will be different and what do you hope people will learn from the crisis we're currently experiencing?

Ares Alivisatos:

Yeah, that's a great question. I really hope that people will honestly learn not to panic. I think that overall there has been a phenomenon of just people really following the instructions, but then also panicking and buying out all the toilet paper and buying out food maybe to an excess.

Ares Alivisatos:

I think that we all do need to work together to make sure that we can all be okay. I think it's important to take care of yourself and your family, of course. But then also keeping the community in mind. And I think that people are doing a good job. Like we've seen people that, that did panic or happen to have a lot of supplies on hand, then turn around and choose to donate those supplies to hospitals or to organizations like ours.

Ares Alivisatos:

And also I think that there's been a real outpouring of support from a lot of different people that has been really, really heartening. Sort of this idea that we do really need to take care of each other right now, sort of on an individual basis. But then also like there's a street in town, or there's a fence where people put up signs thanking healthcare workers and the police department and us. And that was just really, really, really nice to see, and I guess this idea of everyone realizing the part that they have to play to keep the whole community safe and realizing that we need to take care of each other. I hope that that's what people sort of learn and internalize after this is all over. So that we keep doing that.

Evan Schneider:

So in uncertain times like this, it's often helpful to sort of think about instances or things that you're seeing that bring you hope. Are there things like that, that you're seeing and if so, what are they?

Ares Alivisatos:

Yeah, I sort of mentioned, really those signs really made my day. It was like, love you PFARS, it was really nice. And for all these different organizations in town, that gave me hope.

Ares Alivisatos:

Also, honestly, just seeing the people that I work with every day, we have a lot of different people on all sort of levels of this, making sure that we can be ready and we can be here for the community. So one of our officers is sitting in on the briefings every day that the governor has, and giving us an email every single day with exactly what the updates are for New Jersey. Our protocols change every day, or have the potential to change every day, as we get new information and the new guidelines change. And so it really gives me hope how sort of organized and prepared that is, and how also there's a little inspirational quote at the end of that email, which is always fun to see at the beginning of every day.

Ares Alivisatos:

And also, so, seeing the people that I work with, seeing how we're all coming together and I'm still riding shifts. Our paid staff is still coming into work every day and they're doing so much for the community. But then also our volunteers, many of our volunteers are just local in town, but also we have a substantial amount of Princeton students like myself that volunteer.

Ares Alivisatos:

And we've had more than a few of them actually elect to stay here and ride on the ambulance and fill these essential crew spots on an ambulance, because there's really a need. And so that's been really, really inspiring to see. This is my hometown, so I was always going to sort of stay and do that. But to see people who could have gone back home to their families decide to stay here and continue serving the community has been really an amazing thing to see.

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Evan Schneider:

Well, I can say as an employee of Princeton, I was really happy to see that the university allowed those students who aren't local to stay and continue to be committed to PFARS.

Ares Alivisatos:

Absolutely.

Evan Schneider:

Well, Ares, it's inspiring to talk to you. You are an amazing example of Princeton's motto, "in the nation's service," and maybe there should be something in there about, in your community's service, or something like that too.

Ares Alivisatos:

Yeah, maybe make it a little less broad. No, I mean, thank you. I really love this, and this is something that I find a lot of personal joy in doing and many of my best friends are members of the squad. And it's something that we all really love to do, so.

Evan Schneider:

Thank you so much for joining me today. It was a pleasure to talk with you.

Ares Alivisatos:

Of course. Thank you.