

Interviewees: Kathy Volkmann

Interviewer: Megan Schaefer

Date: May 7, 2021

Format: Zoom recording

Location of Interview: Wausau/Eau Claire

Additional Transcription Equipment Used: None

Project in Association with: University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire

Abstract: Kathy Volkmann works at a credit union towards the center of Wisconsin. She also volunteers at a museum through the Marathon County Historical Society. In the interview, she discusses the ways that Covid has changed the way she works and communicates with people around her. She also considers how museums in the present and future could be shaped by the virus. Additionally, she contemplates the ways that Covid has changed the way she looks at her community based on people who have not been cooperating with mask mandates and CDC guidelines.

MS 0:04

So today is May 7, 2021, just after 1pm. There are 32,356,034 total covid cases in the US. 601,603 total cases, I'm Wisconsin and 6877 deaths in Wisconsin. Currently 32.8% of the US population is fully vaccinated. So today I'm interviewing Kathy Volkmann. So Kathy, do you mind sharing some demographic information for this study, such as race, ethnicity, age and gender?

KV 0:41

Sure. I am a Caucasian American of German descent. I am 50- almost 58 years old. Did I miss anything?

MS :56

You're good. Where do you live?

KV 1:00

I live in Wausau, Wisconsin.

MS 1:02

And when you first learned about Covid, what were your thoughts about it and have your thoughts changed over time?

KV 1:09

Well, you know, when you, I think when most people first heard about it you thought, well, that's a bad thing to happen in another part of the world. And when it got here in the United States, it

was a little scary, and I distinctly remember being very concerned when there were like a dozen cases, you know and what, what we wouldn't give for those days again. And then of course, the more people who got it and the closer it got to Wisconsin, the more scared I got. Because, as someone who's interested in history I absolutely knew about the 1918 pandemic. And what have that brought to the country. And how many people died.

MS 1:57

I'm curious, do you see any parallels between that pandemic in this one?

KV 2:02

Well, you know I am not a history professor or in the medical field. From just from some bit of reading that I've done, I think they're, they probably handled it a little bit better than we did with the resources they had. My mother was alive during that she was very very young. She did not have a memory of it. But you know even reading the newspapers so many people died. You know what's what's the parallel other than it swept through really fast and I think a lot faster than people thought it would. And even then, I know there were disbelievers. And I think, just like now that only perpetuated the spread.

MS 2:52

Yeah, that's great, or not good but- [laughter] So where do you work, can I ask.

KV 3:00

Sure, my full time job is at Cloverbelt Credit Union in Wausau, I am the Vice President of Operations and compliance. And I also have a volunteer job that I've had for almost 40 years at the Marathon County Historical Society here in Wausau.

MS 3:20

Yeah, Covid must have really impacted your work, both at your credit union and the museum. I know it's some work is being able to be done online and others know how is online working changed what you do on a day to day basis.

KV 3:33

The credit union?

MS 3:34

Yeah, I you, the credit union or museum or-

KV 3:38

Well, as you know what the credit union, but just like in most places are our closure of our lobbies came very suddenly you know we had been talking about it, and then thinking it was going to come someday and then that day was today. And it happened very quickly. You know, working, having people working remotely was not something that we really did it all. And it was, it was a challenge. You know, you don't plan to need laptops for so many people. Luckily we were able to secure summit Best Buy before the rest of the crowd gotcha. But it turned out that working remotely worked pretty well you know what a financial institution everybody can't work remotely. The tellers have to be here, people have to be here to answer the phones. So it was a challenge but i think i think we met the challenge, and it worked out okay. As far as the Historical Society is concerned. You know that's not a place people have to go like going to your financial institution. We did close the Historical Society back in March of 2020 to the public. We still have a skeleton crew staff who works. So, there really wasn't a lot of remote working going on. You know that we needed to still support our customers because you really don't have that at the Historical Society.

MS 5:00

Do you think, like looking to the future of the museum, like, is it, is it open or it's still closed, is there any plan, like for how you're going to proceed with the museum, after Covid kind of starts dwindling down to subside.

KV 5:15

We are still closed. We are working on a reopening plan, I don't know when that is going to be implemented. And, and, you know, we really don't have a large staff. There's only a handful of people who work there anyways, probably half of them if not more than half are still working in the office. Some people are able to do some things remotely. But it's, it's going to be interesting I think when we open the historical society, to see if we have a huge influx of people because they finally, you know they have a place to go and something to do or if people are still going to stay away. And we have, the Historical Society has really gone digital during this whole, during this whole pandemic because we really have no way to connect with people otherwise.

MS 6:07

Does that include like a lot of Facebook groups that are online?

KV 6:12

Mhm, you know we have a research library that helps a lot of people doing historical research, family history research, things like that. And we also had a series of programs called History Speaks that were live programs that we did where people can come to the Historical Society. Usually once or twice a month, we would have, you know, 100 people at each of the programs. And that just totally stopped. And really the only way we have left to connect with people wants to do it digitally. So we, Historical Society staff, and we engage some outside speakers to do YouTube and Facebook live videos with us and to do some recorded programming that we share. And it's going over really well. So, you know, before where if you missed our program on a

Saturday afternoon you just kind of missed the program when it was live. Now those programs are archived so people can watch them anytime they want, so we kind of took a bad thing, a hard thing and turned it into something that really made it better made us better than we were before. We now have a pretty strong digital presence present.

MS 7:22

That's, that's, I love to hear that. I remember you mentioned archives and I'm very curious, how do you think in the future, maybe a museum exhibit would handle looking back at Covid?

KV 7:34

Yes, a very good question, and I know a lot of museums, large and small, have been trying to figure out what to do with it, you know, typically our museum does not collect things as an event is happening. But I think this is going to be probably one of the first time that we're going to do that because Well for one and I'm the curator of artifacts there so my job as that volunteer, volunteer position is to make sure that we are collecting the history of our area. And I've been saving my own things, as we've been going along to add to the collection. And I really think it's important, exactly what you're doing here collecting the coven stories from the people who are living it while they're living it is really such an important thing to do. You know people who are in the 1918 pandemic who were interviewed at years later, probably have lost a lot of the in the moment emotions and feelings and memories. And those have been lost forever so retaining the history is really good. I going to say we're probably not going to do a huge amount of collecting right away, because just like all other historical events people save their stuff from it. And I would not doubt that as the years go on we will be offered many many donations of masks and plexiglass shields and all the other things that go with a pandemic.

MS 9:06

That's very good insight I'm, I'm curious about mentioned like the stuff you do on a day to day activities. How is Covid changed on what you do like recreationally like at home?

KV 9:22

Don't do much anymore. You know it's, I've had my second shot so in, on Sunday will be two weeks from when I have it so I'll kind of consider myself a little bit freer from that day forward, I have done a lot of staying inside, especially in the early days of the pandemic. Usually my boyfriend and I went to a lot of live music events, and we instead pivoted to, you know, watching Facebook live concerts and tipping into their tip bucket that way. So we did that for a while but it kind of gets old. There's nothing like live music. We still, you know take walks, things like that we go to the grocery store. We might go to Target or something like that. We have not traveled to any great extent, usually would take several trips a year, haven't done any of that. So hopefully this summer, will be able to loosen up and feel a little bit better about maybe staying in a hotel overnight but we don't know yet.

MS 10:29

It's difficult to try to read the future, definitely.

KV 10:32

It really is.

MS 10:35

Yeah, do you think, what was your like one of the biggest challenges you faced throughout the pandemic so far.

KV 10:43

Oh geez, I'm probably just, not continually being angry with people who are not following the guidelines from the CDC. In my personal opinion, they have only extended this and made it worse for everybody. And I, I try not to be an angry person. But there was there's a lot of people to be angry about.

MS 11:16

Yeah, I agree. Has Covid changed kind of how you view your community based on how they've been reacting to the virus?

KV 11:23

Yes, there are and I've had this conversation with a number of people who share my view. There are a number of people who I, and I hate to say this but I like used to really respect them and think they were intelligent people and kind of had to reconsider that in light of coded and how certain people have responded to it and thought they were conspiracy theories and, you know, shared totally inaccurate information that's been debunked by experts.

MS 12:00

Yeah, I think there's a lot of room for that like on social media groups, people took really polarized sides on, it was politicized almost, has it changed your relationship at all with people you you know you used to be close to kind of like you mentioned?

KV 12:16

That, well luckily nobody I'm really close to has gone that way, which is good. You know I have kind of some, you know, friends on Facebook who I have snoozed repeatedly, because I just can't look at what's in their Facebook feed. But, luckily my core close group of family and friends really, are scientifically minded. And they understand what needs to be done. We might you know who likes wearing a mask, who like staying home but if you don't do it, it's not going to get any better. It's small price to pay in the long run.

MS 12:56

I agree. Do you think like municipal leaders or government officials, like in your community state, country level, I, do you have any feelings on how they responded to the pandemic?

KV 13:09

I think locally, you know there's there wasn't a lot that could be done. You know in Wausau, the mayor put out advisories about, you know, what they would like people to do, but there was no enforcement with it, so of course people who didn't want to do any of it just didn't do it. I think on the state level, the governor tried and was met with resistance at every turn. And that really showed in the numbers of positive people that we had in the number of deaths that we had. I think if more had been allowed on the state level, we would not be in such a dire situation and federally, our president sucked at this and I don't know what else to say.

MS 14:00

There's not much else to say there. [laughter] Have you or anybody that you know gotten sick during the pandemic?

KV 14:06

I do know several people that got sick, they got Covid. Some were asymptomatic. Some had mild symptoms, I don't personally know anybody who got horribly sick. I have family and friends who know people who did though I have friends who lost, parents and other relatives, grandparents, to coven. I have a nephew who works in a covert ICU in Iowa. And he saw many many many many people die from Covid of all ages.

MS 14:42

It was so difficult to know like with, you know, being symptomatic you can kind of maybe gauge if you are sick or not but that a lot of people were asymptomatic that was really difficult to try and respond to, to try and flatten the curve or isolate to maybe didn't even know if we were sick. So, I think that probably took a toll, do you think on like people's mental health. have you noticed anything that, if you're comfortable sharing like with yourself for people you know, who were maybe impacted like with mental health.

KV 15:10

I, I personally think I'm fine. You know, I, my boyfriend and I live together so I always had him, and even when I was working at home most days of the week, I could still come to work and I would have human interaction. I have a sister who lives in Oshkosh, who totally was working at home. She was high risk, so she stayed in, she really didn't go anywhere. And it really has taken its toll on her, the lack of human contact. You know, we talked every week we had zoom calls in

our sister group to try to stay connected but there really is no substitute for being able to touch another human.

MS 15:55

Yeah, I agree and with the vaccine, I know you mentioned you got it, so there's, there's hope on the horizon. And I'm, I'm curious how did you, what was your experience getting access to the vaccine?

KV 16:07

As I was not eligible for it until they until the last group. The last big group that they opened up before they made it available to everyone. I was kind of scared that it was going to take a very long time for me to get my vaccination. But I, the day I became eligible I signed up with the two local hospitals online. I think it was on a Tuesday that Saturday, I got a call from one of them asking if I could come in the next day. So I was shocked because other people I know who were in the original group because they have their age, we're still waiting to get a shot. So, I was, it was kind of a conundrum for me of do I get the shot when people who should have had it three months ago haven't gotten it. But ultimately, and I guess I don't think it was selfish. I took the shot. Yeah, I agree that's not the more people, the more people who get it the better. And, you know, I kind of had a brief moment of Do I really deserve this when there are so many other people who are ahead of me but I took it.

MS 17:18

I would have, too. Did you have any side effects with it I know, was it one that were there were two doses or one dose to dose?

KV 17:22

I got Moderna, first one I had absolutely nothing to second one I had a sore spot in my shoulder just like you would with the annual flu shot I had no other symptoms. I was very lucky.

MS 17:38

That's good to hear. I know I've heard of people, like on different spectrums, like some people say it's fine and other people I know get really sick so yeah. Good you didn't have any bad side effects. What have been your primary like news sources during the pandemic?

KV 17:55

Mainstream media, you know I'm not a huge news hound I watched the morning national morning news show on TV every day. I watch you know look at CNN in my Facebook feed my boyfriend shares important things I do every day look at the numbers that the state puts out to see what the trends are doing.

MS 18:20

Yes, that's something that's changed with, like your news sources now there's something new to look at with like Covid and its numbers. Do you think they're important issues with the media and what they might be covering and not covering and how that's changed people's opinions over the course of the pandemic?

KV 18:37

Like about Covid specifically?

MS 18:45

Yeah, or wherever I mean with- We talked a little bit about increased polarization and how it was politicized and do you think the media could have been done a better job handling that.

KV 18:58

Well, yeah, I'd like to think they've done what they could, you know, the media is just as polarized as people. I think the the not mainstream media. You know some of the things media sources that have popped up from you know people on Fox. I don't know that what you can even call what they report to be the actual news, because it's not fact based. But media is just as polarized, and even, you know, I will read the CNN Facebook feed. I trust them, people on the other side will not trust them so it doesn't matter what people report. The other side is always going to not believe it.

MS 19:47

That's a good point. Do you have any thoughts on how this experience overall has just transformed your life, maybe looking to the future and how you might look differently because of it?

KV 19:58

I just had this conversation with my boyfriend. Earlier this week, you know we talked about what life was going to be like when we were given the all clear by the CDC or the state health department, and we kind of concluded that we'd probably will still mask for a while, you know, who knows how long if we're in a large crowd. You know, we usually go to the concerts on the square which, which is the big summer concert series in Wausau, where you know 2000 people might show up for an outside concert and you're all just sitting in your lawn chairs. I don't know that I wouldn't even be comfortable sitting there even though I'm outside without a mask, even though I'm vaccinated. I'm looking forward to being with small groups of my friends, again, you know, having people over for dinner. Being able to go out and see live music, but you know, I think in the back of my mind is always going to be is always going to be how big is the place that I am going to, and is this the kind of event that would draw people who are not vaccinated and will not wear a mask.

MS 21:03

I think this is probably going to impact us for a while into the future. [?] Knowing what you do know now how do you think we, this is pretty much what we just covered but are there any other final thoughts you have on like what individuals, communities or governments should keep in mind for the future. And if anyone's ever faced with is kind of challenge again.

KV 21:27.000

I guess the big thing is preparation. I don't think this is going to be the last time something like this happens, hopefully it won't happen for a long time but I think, you know just looking at how ill prepared so many, not just people but businesses and governments and all over the world were for this. I think there's going to be a lot more put in place. Just in case something like this happens again. So, so it doesn't you know grow to be something unmanageable. That maybe in the future, we'll know enough about the science will have enough supply stuff piled there won't be millions of people dying. And we'll just have a better handle on it from the start.

MS 22:16

So I think we've exhausted, pretty much all the questions I've had Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share it all.

KV 22:24

Not really, aside from wear a mask. You know I say that to so many people. We have to work together to get things like this under control, you need to trust the science. You need to not, you know, there are so many people who became Facebook scientists that it just astounds me. And we really just need to look to the experts to handle it when things like this happen.

MS 23:05

I think that's a very good note to end on, I'm going to stop the recording. Thank you so much Kathy.

KV 23:10

You're welcome.