

Interviewee: Bekah Henn

Interviewer: Hannah Feuker

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Abstract:

Bekah Henn currently lives in Eau Claire, Wisconsin where she attends the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire as a full-time nursing student. Bekah also works part time as a certified nursing assistant at a nursing home in one of the surrounding towns. In this interview Bekah discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected her job, education, health, family, and community. Bekah describes her experience with testing positive for COVID-19 and quarantining. She shares her personal experience of working in a nursing home that had a COVID-19 outbreak, while simultaneously taking classes online during the pandemic.

Hannah Feuker 0:03

Hi, my name is Hannah Feuker and I'll be conducting this interview that is focusing on the impact of COVID-19 in Western Wisconsin. It is April 22, 2021, around 4:31pm. In the United States, there have been 31,666,546 cases of COVID-19 and 566,494 deaths. In Wisconsin, there have been 592,994 cases, and 6,725 deaths. In the United States, 26.4% of the population is fully vaccinated. Can I ask you what is your full name, and do you mind sharing demographic information for the study such as race, age and gender?

Bekah Henn 0:51

My name is Bekah Henn. My race is Caucasian. I am a female, and I'm 21 years old.

HF 1:03

What are primary things that you do on a day-to-day basis such as job, school, and other extracurricular activities?

BH 1:10

I am a nursing student. So I do classwork and attend classes for that. And I also work at a nursing home.

HF 1:21

Okay. Where do you live and how would you describe what it is like to live there?

BH 1:28

I live in Eau Claire, Wisconsin and for me, it's kind of a bigger city feel than I'm used to, because I grew up in a very small town. So, it's been interesting to get to see that and live in a town that has a university and Walmart and all these big businesses.

HF 1:51

Do you remember how you felt and what you first thought when you first heard of COVID-19?

BH 1:56

Yes, I remember, actually kind of seeing memes about it at first when it wasn't in the United States. People kind of joking about it, but as it spread more I got more nervous about it. I remember last spring when my roommates and I saw that there had been a case in Pierce County, which is very close to here. And that scared me, for sure, because I didn't know anyone that had had COVID, yet. We really didn't know a lot about it. How deadly it was, what kind of symptoms that caused any of that. So, I remember that day that made me very nervous and then, as the cases came into Eau Claire County, and people I knew started getting it. It was definitely scary.

HF 2:51

And how would you say those thoughts have changed now since it's been going on for a while?

BH 2:57

I would definitely say I'm less scared of it now, but it's still a threat and still affecting people every day. But I have had it and I recovered, and I know other people that had it too so because of that I'm less frightened by it. But it still has a huge impact on all our lives.

HF 3:21

So, you mentioned that you had COVID, would you like to elaborate on your experience with that?

BH 3:28

Sure. So, I got it- let's see- I think it was the end of September and at the time that I got it, I really didn't know anyone else personally that had had it. So, I was pretty freaked out and the reason I found out I had it was because we were testing. It's changed a lot with the guidelines, but I think at the time we were testing once or twice a week at the nursing home I work at and I tested positive there and I just remember I came out of class one day and had a bunch of calls from my boss and a couple texts. And there was- she had said that it was about my COVID test and I just knew it was positive. And I was really nervous because I had been in class that morning. I had been to clinical that week. Like and I just felt bad that I had exposed a lot of people to it, and I really just didn't know what to expect too so it was kind of scary.

HF 4:32

Did you experience symptoms then?

BH 4:35

Yes, but I- my symptoms were pretty minimal. I was very tired. And I had some back pain. It was really weird. It was kind of like my upper back and neck. I would sit up and try and do homework and I just- it hurts so bad I had to lay down. That was definitely the weirdest thing that I hadn't experience before, but otherwise, it was just kind of a lot of fatigue. I didn't have a fever or anything. So, it wasn't too bad for me.

HF 5:11

So, do you think if you hadn't been getting tested regularly, you would have known it was COVID or you would have suspected it was COVID?

BH 5:21

I think at some point I would have. A couple days after I tested positive, I started feeling pretty tired and having that back pain and just feeling kind of off. So, I think maybe at that point, I would have went and gotten tested just because I knew that COVID was, you know, in the community. But at the time I tested positive I wasn't having symptoms yet. So, no, I had no idea.

HF 5:54

Did you have to quarantine then? And For how many days were you required to quarantine?

BH 5:59

Yes, I did. I believe it was 14 days from my positive test. And I had actually tested positive on a Sunday was when I got the test, but they didn't get the results until Wednesday. So, I wasn't quarantining for those first, like three days. So, then I think I finished out the 11 days, I had left of quarantining. Believe my roommates also had to quarantine because I had on unmasked contact with them. And also, my family because I had been home that weekend.

HF 6:38

So where did you stay during quarantine?

BH 6:42

I actually went home, and I stayed in my parent's basement, because then I could have my own bathroom and they have kind of a big finished family room down there. So, I could have a decent amount of space to myself, and also go outside. My other option was to stay at my apartment in

Eau Claire. But I would have had to stay in my bedroom and be masked when I'm in the bathroom. Have my roommates bring me food. There's not really a good place for me to go outside here, so I figured especially for my mental health would be better to just go home even though I couldn't spend time with my family, either. At least I had more space.

HF 7:29

Yeah. And like, how would you describe that feeling of like being by yourself in quarantine, and just kind of like isolating?

BH 7:37

I was really sad when I left the apartment that night and I knew I was going home, but I had to stay away from everyone. And it wasn't even the full 14 days, it was like 10 or 11 but it was still really hard and I remember being super nervous because I was going to have to miss work and miss clinical and I had to contact all my professors. And I also felt like I needed to let everyone I was in contact with know so they could watch for symptoms. So that was kind of just a very overwhelming day. And I was pretty sad that night when I knew I was going into quarantine and couldn't really have much contact with people.

HF 8:22

Did you know anyone that had contact with you that got COVID? Or-

BH 8:29

So, none of my family members got it and none of my roommates got it at that time. But a couple other girls in my clinical section got it. At the same time, I did so I'm not sure if they got it from me or I got it from them or if we all came into contact with it at the same place. But there was three of us in our clinical section that got it.

HF 8:54

Okay, so then you mentioned also that you worked as a nursing home as a CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant]. Do you want to talk a little bit about that experience as being a CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant] during a pandemic?

BH 9:04

Yeah. So last spring, I think we started with cloth masks at first actually and then we moved to surgical masks. And I remember at one point we would put our masks and paper bags when we left for the day and I think we had to have the same mask for about two weeks. Because at first there was such a PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] shortage and I remember them being worried that we've run out of gloves. It was really sad too because the residents couldn't see their family members. At some points they've had to stay in their rooms and not come out to even eat meals. So, all they really get to see is their roommates and the staff that come in to help them.

And at one point, we had a COVID unit and I worked on that, because I had already had COVID. So, we had even more PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] there, and we wore N95. So, the guidelines and regulations for the PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] has really been all like- it changes constantly with the positivity rate in our county. And it's just been difficult because we've been short staffed at times, too, with people getting sick. So, it's been hard.

HF 10:39

So, like, when the pandemic started, how did you feel about going to work, because just knowing that you're out in public, and your residents were probably more at risk?

BH 10:51

I was a little scared to pick up shifts at first when, especially when, we transitioned to all online learning for my classes, and they kind of just told us all, go home and do all your classes online and just stay home. And the nursing home I work at kind of reached out to me and asked if I could work more hours since we went online and I was a little nervous at first because I knew it was definitely more of a risk to be out and working with people and in contact with many people. But I decided that there was a lot older people working there who were at much higher risk. So I decided to pick up some shifts and help out.

HF 11:47

Like mentally, how do you think your residents handled the pandemic with like not being able to see their families as much? Is there a lot of like, mental health issues that you saw going on?

BH 12:01

You could definitely tell it was hard for them and it was really sad that they can't see their families for such a long time. Like, especially when it was their birthday, or their family member's birthday, I remember a couple of them telling me how much they wish they could just see them or give them a hug. And we'd have a lot of people that would call to talk to them and that just made their whole day because they weren't able to see them at all. But yeah, you could definitely tell and especially when we had to have them eat in their rooms, instead of coming out and have communal dining that was really hard to you could just tell that they were really mentally exhausted from it. And, you know- I would be too just staying in one room all the time. So, I always tried to stay in their rooms and talk to them extra if I had any extra time just so they could spend time with someone.

HF 13:04

Did you find that kind of emotionally draining too just like seeing that impact it had on them? Or was it- I don't know-

BH 13:14

Yeah, it was, it was hard to watch for sure. And I understood some of it because like I was really trying to stay home. So, I was really only seeing my immediate family like I couldn't go see my grandparents. And I was sad about that. But then I thought about the residents how they couldn't go out to see anyone. And I just felt for them a lot. It was hard to watch and hard to go through.

HF 13:42

And you mentioned earlier that you had a COVID unit in your nursing home. Like what was that like seeing the residents actually ill and-

BH 13:54

That was hard to see too. I had already had COVID at the time, so I knew how it affected me. But I didn't necessarily know how it would affect someone that was much older and in worse health than I was. I remember being kind of nervous the first day that I went and worked on the COVID unit. And that ended up being a really hard day because we kind of had to expand the unit that day and I think I worked like a 19-hour shift. So, that was really tough. We were kind of- the unit was kind of just starting at that time. So, everything was new, and it was just me and one nurse that were taking care of the residents. And we had a lot more PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] than we had working on the floor. So, I had to get used to that and just being very warm [laughs]. And the N95 masks and everything. It was just difficult because they needed more help than normal because they were so tired and weak. So-

HF 15:17

So, like what- Like, how would you describe the experience of wearing all that extra PPE [Personal Protective Equipment]?

BH 15:24

It was definitely a different experience, it almost felt like being in a movie, because usually we didn't have to wear all of that we only- you know- if someone was on isolation, we'd wear that. But it was never, for a whole shift like we would on the COVID unit. I definitely got used to it as I wore it more, especially the masks. The first shift I wore and had to wear the N95 mask for the whole time was pretty rough, it gets hard to breathe and very warm. And your mouth just gets so dry, all you want is water because you're just so warm and everything, but you get used to it though I definitely got used to it after working on the unit.

HF 16:14

For people- what is an N95 mask? Because I'm not familiar with that, and I'm sure many people aren't. [laughs]

BH 16:20

Yeah, so, it's just much more protective than like a surgical mask. So, it's much thicker, much tighter fitting, we actually had to be measured for it to get the right size because they want such a tight seal. And it has the surgical mask just goes around your ears. But typically, the N95 will have like multiple strings that go all the way around your head. It's just a lot more effective at keeping something like COVID out. But definitely more uncomfortable. [laughs]

HF 17:01

Yeah, and you mentioned earlier that you were also struggling with staffing issues or short staffed. Like, what was that like? Or what did that add stress to everything?

BH 17:14

Yeah, I would say especially on the COVID unit, we were struggling because a lot of the staff at that time hadn't had COVID yet and they were kind of hesitant, hesitant to put people on the unit that hadn't had it. So, I was still taking classes at the time, but I remember a couple weeks where I'd work almost every day of the week on the unit because they just really didn't have anyone else. And sometimes it would just be me and one nurse and that was very difficult with all the care that the residents needed and everything the nurse had to do, she couldn't help me a whole ton because she was so busy. There's just some very busy days. And at one point, we actually had some people working the COVID unit that had COVID. The guidelines allowed for them to be able to work on the unit, even if they were an active COVID case, because we got so desperate for staffing, so I was working with residents all day that had COVID and my coworkers had COVID. And some of them you could tell they were fatigued and not feeling well. Even if they were starting to recover, they weren't 100% yet. So that was really hard, and I can't imagine how hard it was for them.

HF 18:46

So overall, do you think seeing these residents gave you a different perspective on COVID-19 that you might not have had if you weren't working with these people?

BH 18:56

Yeah, for sure. I just think it showed me how seriously we should really take it even though the death rate isn't super high. It's still causing people to get really sick, keeping people from seeing their families, you know, causing complications after the sickness. But I think definitely seeing it firsthand really put it into perspective for me, and I definitely think it would be hard to see it the same way if you haven't had to deal with it firsthand like that.

HF 19:40

Okay, and so you also mentioned that on top of all this CNA [Certified. Nursing Assistant] work that you've been doing at present you're a full time nursing student, what has it been like to go to school during the COVID- 19 pandemic?

BH 19:53

That's been interesting too, for sure because typically a lot of the nursing education is hands on and in person with skills labs and clinicals. But we had to go all online for a couple of semesters and had very limited clinical experience during that time. So that's been really difficult. Finally, this semester, we were able to go back to clinical full time, like we normally would. But that was hard going into that though, because, at this point, we should have been going to clinical for two semesters already. So then to jump into it, it just kind of felt like we were a little bit behind, but I was very thankful to actually get to go to clinical and kind of try and catch up and make up for those hours that we had lost early on.

HF 21:00

As you like, mentioned, it's like a lot of hands-on work, what have you been doing in classes that kind of substitute for that?

BH 21:08

We have done a lot of case studies, they've found kind of little computer games for us to play like to work on med pass, or like which patient would you go see first, kind of get us thinking in that clinical mindset. A lot of our skills we couldn't do in the lab, so we would film videos at home. Sometimes that consisted of giving a piece of fruit an injection or inserting a catheter into a water bottle. Just really whatever you had. So, it's definitely been good for our critical thinking skills, I think, but it's been hard to learn those skills in a different setting.

HF 22:03

Do you think working while like during the pandemic is also giving you additional skills that you otherwise wouldn't have had?

BH 22:11

Yeah, I think it's taught me a lot about the precautions you need to take and being extra careful, especially when COVID started to not cause the spread. And it just makes me think about some of the things that we would do before COVID happened, like is this really good practice? How can we do better? I think it's really taught me a lot about disease spread and containing that. And yeah, just taught me the skills of working in a stressful environment.

HF 22:55

Do you think like the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how you think about your future career as a nurse, like seeing them on the front lines and having to work they haven't been able to stay at home during the pandemic? Just things like that?

BH 23:09

Yeah, I would definitely say it scared me at first. Because going into nursing school, I had no idea that I'd be doing nursing school and nursing clinicals during a pandemic. But it's also really shown how important nurses are and it makes me excited that I'll be working as a nurse one day and how much they are really needed.

HF 23:42

So other than that, like how is COVID-19 has affected your family or like your family's day to day activities?

BH 23:52

It really- a lot of things that I kind of took for granted we haven't been able to do. Like I remember, we usually go out to eat every Sunday night. We couldn't do that for a while. Church was even canceled. We usually do that- go to church every Sunday. And to not do that just made me super sad. And we couldn't have family gatherings like for birthday parties. We couldn't have my grandparents and uncle over. It was just really hard not being able to see anyone in my extended family. My grandma actually lives next door, but we were even nervous to go see her because we didn't want to bring COVID to her. I remember sometimes we would go and sit out on her desk or her deck with masks on and we'd sit like on opposite ends of the deck and talk with her because we didn't want to go in her house or bring her in our house just because we didn't know when we didn't want to spread anything to her. And my siblings have had their sports seasons canceled. My brother graduated last spring, and they weren't really able to have a graduation ceremony they did a virtual one. But it was just very different and very difficult. I can't imagine graduating during the pandemic and not having, you know that last month with your classmates and graduation and everything.

HF 25:43

So self-isolation and flattening the curve and two key ideas during the pandemic, like how have you or your family and friends respond to the request to self-isolate?

BH 25:54

I think overall, we've been pretty good about it. Especially my immediate family, because my parents also work in healthcare. So, we've been very careful. And we're very good about masking and staying home, not going out to unnecessary things. I think my roommates did a fairly good job of it, too. And they had to quarantine a couple times with me having COVID and another one of my roommates got COVID. But they- they followed the guidelines they were given. So-

HF 26:35

Overall, like, what do you think would have been your biggest challenges that you faced during the COVID-19 outbreak? Just-

BH 26:44

I think working in it was definitely challenging, and just trying to stay positive and kind of see the light at the end of all of it. Especially at the beginning, like, there wasn't an end in sight. We don't know if we'd be getting a vaccine or how soon. So, I think really, the biggest challenge has been just trying to stay positive and focus on positive things instead of, Oh, I have to do class online, and I have to wear all this extra gear to go out or to work. So, I've just been really trying to focus on what I've learned through the experience.

HF 27:28

You mentioned the vaccine, were you did you receive a vaccine? And if so, were there any side effects?

BH 27:35

Yeah, I got the Moderna vaccine. I believe my first dose was in January, and the second was in February. And I actually had a pretty strong response to my second dose. But it seems like that's common in younger people and people who have had COVID usually have a stronger response to it. I got pretty sick for a couple days after I got my second shot. I actually felt worse those couple days. And I felt when I had COVID. But I still was very relieved that I got the shot. And I'd get it again, even if I did have to be sick for that couple days.

HF 28:26

Do you remember like, what were some of the symptoms you kind of felt from the vaccine?

BH 28:31

Yeah, I had a very sore arm. Even after the first dose, I had a little bit of a sore arm. But I remember after I got my second dose, the arm soreness just started right away. And I also felt very nauseous after getting it and I just kind of felt worse as the night went on. It was kind of like flu like symptoms. I was very warm and very cold. I was shivering. I just felt very weak and achy. And for most of the next couple of days, I just kind of slept and stayed on the couch. I really didn't have much energy.

HF 29:14

But then you said they went away after a few days?

BH 29:17

Yeah. Then it went away after a few days. And I haven't had any problems since then.

HF 29:22

And what was your experience getting access to the vaccine?

BH 29:28

I was excited to get access to it. We were able to get it through work. And at the time, not a lot of people had access to it. So, I was very lucky to be working in healthcare and able to get it so early. And now it's actually become a lot more accessible for Eau Claire students so I'm excited to see that, but I feel very lucky that I was able to get it so early.

HF 29:59

Yeah, So like, how do you think like the COVID-19 outbreak has affected your community?

BH 30:09

I would say that it's kind of main, the community have to come together to protect each other. Like, with the masking and social distancing, like you're doing that for other people, everyone has to follow it in order for it to work. So, I think people have come together to work on ways to decrease the spread. A lot of events have been moved virtual when they can be. And I think that's just everyone's kind of been putting in work to improve the circumstances that we're in and kind of do the best we can to keep the virus from spreading, but also make services available to people and, you know, just help people with their mental health and know what you're there for them.

HF 31:07

So, have you seen like, COVID-19, change your relationship with family, friends, and like the community a lot, in what ways?

BH 31:16

I would say somewhat like there's definitely people who take it a lot more seriously than others. And I feel like I'm one that takes it pretty seriously with working in healthcare and being a nursing student. So, it's been kind of difficult when some of my friends and family don't take it as seriously as I do. But it's also I can understand, because they haven't been in the position I have. And I think it really changes your whole perspective on it to see it firsthand. And if you haven't had those experiences, I can see why you may feel differently about it. But it's been hard for me to understand their perspective on it. And I know it's hard for them to understand mine. But yeah, it's been a little difficult. When you have different views than the people, you're close to sometimes.

HF 32:13

Yeah. So, like, what do you think your biggest concerns have been throughout the pandemic, with all that-

BH 32:21

I think I've been concerned a lot about my family, or people I know who are more vulnerable, getting COVID-19 and having serious complications from it. And also, I've worried a lot about the residents that I work with at the nursing home. I've worried too, about the education, we're able to get going all virtual, and also the teachers too, and professors and what a hard position they're in as well.

HF 32:59

Ok, Thank You, do you have any other experiences you'd like to share about your experience with the COVID-19 pandemic?

BH 33:11

I would just say that it's been challenging in many ways, and for a lot of people, but that we just need to keep trying to see the positive in it and see what we're learning from it and just help each other through it.

HF 33:27

Okay, well, thank you so much for your time and sharing your story with me today.

BH 33:31

You're welcome. Thank you for interviewing me.