

Interviewer: Brian Dombrowski

Interviewee: Kevin Dombrowski

Date of Interview: November 17, 2020

Location of Interview: Knowlton, Wisconsin

Format: Video recording via Zoom

Transcriber: Brian Dombrowski

Additional Transcription Equipment used: Otter.ai

Project in association with: University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Kevin Dombrowski was born and raised in rural Knowlton, Wisconsin and currently works in retail. In this interview, Kevin discusses how his autoimmune deficiency influences his work and daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic. He shares anecdotes about customers and employees that have also been affected by the pandemic. Kevin also shares his views on the media and how the government handled COVID-19.

BD: Okay, so to start off, to kind of give some numbers here. So worldwide, there's 51.6 million cases, and 1.27 million deaths. In the United States alone, there's 10 million cases 237,527 deaths total. And just in Marathon County, where you're located, there are 7,535 cases and only 90 deaths. So, what is your name? And do you mind sharing demographic information for this audience such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, and all that?

KD: Sure, I'm Kevin Dombrowski. I am a 37-year-old white male. I live in rural Wisconsin have my whole life.

BD: Okay, and what is it like there?

KD: Um, I mean, generally quiet, you know, overall, quiet. It's very conservative country. Um, but, you know, overall, it's just your typical country living, I guess you could say,

BD: Okay, um, and a little bit about yourself, like, what do you like to do for fun? Anything that, you'd like to share?

KD: Um, you know, I'm kind of your typical case around here. I like to hunt and fish. Golf. Um, you know, nothing, you know, extraordinary. I guess I'm not racing cars or anything like that.

BD: Okay, so let's see. So, when you first learned about COVID-19, what were your initial thoughts about it?

KD: I guess I just didn't, you know, I think like everybody, I didn't understand what it was, um, you know, and what made it so bad? Initially, because, you know, when we first heard about it, it

was still overseas, it was still in China. You know, it hadn't necessarily reached Europe yet. Um, so I guess I didn't think much of it initially. And then as, you know, cases became more prominent, and it started spreading throughout Europe, then we're like, okay, you know, this, what is this? You know, what is it doing? You know, and as you know, death started to rack up, you know, then it became, is it going to come here? So...

BD: Okay, and then what issues have most concerned you about the pandemic?

KD: Um, the biggest thing is that we don't understand it, you know, everybody, I shouldn't say everybody, but you know, a lot of people say, Oh, it's just like the flu. It might be, but we know how to handle the flu. We're the biggest thing that currently concerns me is, you know, they just announced yesterday that, okay, we have a vaccine that looks very promising. But we still don't have a real good set of like, first line treatment for it, you know, and it seems like, There's no set like, Okay, if you're younger than this age, it's not really going to bother you. If you're older than this age, you really ought to watch out. It doesn't seem to discriminate that way, so that that's really concerning to me.

BD: Okay, and then is there anything that would make you even more concerned about catching it or anything like that?

KD: Oh, yeah, I have an autoimmune disorder. So, my body's already working overtime against itself. And if I catch something that we don't know how to treat Well, that's going to make things a lot harder.

BD: Okay, and then, so how about for job like what, in what ways has it affected your job?

KD: It's affected my job huge. I work retail, and I work retail it and an essential business. We serve farmers and construction workers. Those types of people. So, number one, especially when they first started doing like lockdowns, we had to be open no matter what. And so we even had forms that we got from the corporate office basically stating that, you know, I work at this business, I have to be at work just in case they were going to start like stopping and checking people to make sure that they had a need to be out and about, they never did that not at least here in Wisconsin, but we had it just in case. And then also just your around, because they never truly shut down. We were one and with us being one of the only stores that was open, because a lot of retailers that didn't have to be open, they did voluntarily close. But with us being open, and one of the only places open, we actually had higher foot traffic. Um, I remember them saying that our sales figures were up 20 and 30% from the previous year. And it was actually a little alarming because people were supposed to be staying home. But instead they were coming out and in it. You know, you don't want to necessarily judge people, but you know, when they're coming to your place of business, and they're supposed to be only coming out for essential items. But you see them buying, you know, bags of candy and things like that. It's like, you know, why are you even out, you know that none of that is essential. And then eventually, you just you almost became numb to it. You know, it didn't bother you anymore. Um, but then again, but they're also with the amount of people that were coming out. You also were worried about your safety as well. And I've I have had customers that have come through either one of my cashier's lines, or I've taken care of them at the service counter, where you knew something wasn't right with them.

Like they you could tell they were sick. Um, and you just, you shut everything down. You. You sanitize the countertops, you sanitize yourself. And maybe they were sick. Maybe they weren't. But you know, at least it made you feel better that she took care of it.

BD: Yeah, so with your with your health issues that really did, you know, cause of concern for you.

KD: Yeah, yeah. And and I've always been the type of person to use, like hand sanitizer, like after using a gas pump or going to the grocery store, whatever. But now I do it even more. And there are certain grocery stores that I know that they will have wipes available right at the door where the one down the street doesn't. So, I don't go to that one. So, it's even altered my, you know, where I shop and how I shop, you know when I need to?

BD: Okay, going back on the health? Do you mind expanding on what you have for you autoimmune deficiency?

KD: Yeah, it's, um, it's an autoimmune disorder. It's called ITP. Um, basically my um, my immune system kills blood platelets too fast. And so, it gives me a low platelet count puts me at a bleeding risk. They don't know what causes it, they only know how to treat the platelets. So, they, they they can't cure it. And because it's immune system based, literally anything a cold can kind of trigger it and make it worse. So, having something like COVID that's going to completely annihilate your body, basically, nobody knows what it's going to do to you. There's actually been very few cases, at least that I've heard of with people that have what I have that have caught COVID. So, we don't know what the body is going to do. We don't know how it's going to react and that's scary.

BD: Okay, so then, what has been the biggest challenges that you faced with outbreak?

KD: Um, I guess you know, the biggest challenges is trying to make sure that you are doing almost like doing your part. You know, making sure you're wearing your mask, trying to keep everybody else safe, washing your hands, and keeping up on all that stuff. um, just trying to be a good global citizen, I guess you could say, and, you know, it makes you change some of your habits and, and and getting more accustomed to that sort of thing. So, I guess that's been the hardest part is, you know, no, I shouldn't I shouldn't go to a restaurant because, you know, that's one of the highest places to catch it. So, You got to cook in tonight instead?

BD: Okay, so that was that being said? How do you think? Or has it affected the way you communicate with friends and family?

KD: Oh, definitely. Definitely, you know, you're, you're supposed to, you know, not have the large gatherings. So, you know, you're using social media a lot more, you're texting on your phone, phone calls, that sort of thing. Um, you know, instead, instead of, you know, going and visiting them or whatever, yeah, definitely.

BD: Okay. So how do you think the, the outbreak affected your community, so meaning community like, not even just, you know, spatial, but like, even other forms of community, like, clubs, or any kind of thing like that?

KD: Um, I think it really depends on the person that you're talking about. There definitely seems to be almost like three different types of people within the community, there's the people who are, who are very scared of it. And, you know, they're, they're not going anywhere, and they're not, you know, they go grocery shopping once or twice a week, if they have to, and, you know, they're, they're locking themselves in their homes and not coming out and not moving and not anything. And then there's the other extreme where there is people who, for whatever reason, think it's a hoax, or they don't think it's that bad. And they're out and about and everywhere. And then there's the people in between. And I think that's caused within the community, that that's caused some tension, especially between the two extremes. And you can you can sometimes feel it. We've actually had in our store, we've had customers arguing, you know, over, you know, somebody who comes in and they don't want to wear a mask, and our store policy has been, we encourage you to, we ask you to, but if you absolutely won't, or can't, we don't force you to. And so it's very obvious when 95% of the people in the store are wearing masks, and all of a sudden, there's somebody who isn't. And just last week, there were two people where we had to literally separate them, it's caused so much tension. There a month or two ago, there was a gentleman who got punched in our store, um, because people were social distancing in the checkout lines. And he decided that the spot in between two people was big enough for him to squeeze into. And he caught in front of a bunch of people in line, and the guy behind them, tapped them on their shoulder and said, Hey, buddy, you know, we were all in line, and the guy just turned around and punched him.

BD: Oh jeez....

KD: So, I mean, yeah, I mean, it's, there's been a lot of tension at times. And I think just among the community, you can, you can tell, you know, you you don't, you don't want to go triggering anybody or ruffling anybody's feathers. If you see them, you know, not following protocol, or, or even following it. Maybe a little excessively.

BD: Yeah, that's crazy. I haven't know. Anything like that. I mean, I've had people few people argue with me. But other than that, nothing too extreme like that.

KD: Yeah.

BD: So then, have you seen the people around you, like change your opinions from like, day to day activities, their relationships, in response to this pandemic?

KD: Um, like, changing my activities?

BD: No, like change theirs, so like, people around Easy things like that on it.

KD: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Um, you know, I, I work in a college town. So definitely, you know, when it first started, and the colleges closed down, you know, students went from being out all the time to not even there. And they had to a lot of them had to move. They had to, you know, leave they had to, some of them had to go back home. And you could, especially initially now, it seems like people have kind of like settled down again. And that could be the cause of the current rise again, but initially, on a typical day, um, you would, when you would normally drive down the street and there would be, you know, 100 cars around you. Initially, it felt like a

ghost town, you know, that there was nobody out. So definitely people around me have, you know, especially initially, they change their, their habits, they, they kind of change their, their, their way of seeing the world and you know, in how we're so connected. But like I said, as this is drawn on now, in months and months and months, it seemed to have settled down, people are still conscious about it. But it's definitely people are trying to be more normal. But that's that's just really difficult.

BD: Okay, yeah. So that's kind of in it goes hand in hand with the whole, like, self-isolation and the flatten the curve. Yeah. Media. Yeah. I mean, there have been two key ideas, you know, that emerged during the pandemic. Um, and you kind of answered part of this already, but like, how have you, family and friends in the community responded to requests of this? Can you think of you like specific ideas?

KD: Yeah, I mean, just changing your habits, you know, doing you know, even even if you want to order from a restaurant, you pick it up, you don't go in and you don't eat. Even a lot. You know, we we as a store at work, we started offering curbside pickup. I've been doing that a lot more with my own shopping. My parents try to only go and do their grocery shopping once a week if they if they have to. Otherwise, they try not to go anywhere at all. More online shopping. That been doing a lot more online shopping.

BD: Okay, Yeah. And even myself, I've been doing a lot more online stuff.

KD: Yeah. And it's not your typical online shopping, it's, hey, I need a pair of socks, I'm going to order them online, instead of running into Target or Walmart and picking them up. You know, things like that things you wouldn't typically buy online.

BD: Has anybody you know, gotten sick during the COVID-19 outbreak? And what was your response to that?

KD: Yeah, I've known a few people at my work that have gotten sick. In our store, we actually have about 80 or 90 employees. And we've had about 15 to 20 of them that have gotten sick. Um, some of them have been. I mean, just I think a perfect cutaway of the general population of some of them have said, yeah, it wasn't that bad. Where I've just had an employee of mine was on a ventilator for two days. So, it's kind of run the gamut. Um, and within that, when this whole thing started, um, when somebody would would get sick, they would, one of the managers would kind of grab a couple employees and pull them aside and they would read them this, you know, obviously written by a lawyer, you know, somebody you know, you may have been in contact with, has contracted COVID-19, blah, blah, blah, you know, if you want to, if you want to get tested, we'll pay for it, we'll do this. And we'll do that. And then we and they wouldn't tell you who it was, they wouldn't even tell you what department they were in. So, you couldn't figure out, okay, I've been in contact with this person, that person, maybe I should watch myself. Now, like I said, this, let this last person that I knew, was actually on a ventilator for two days, I didn't even know he was gone in sick. He was kind of a part time employee. And he only worked maybe one or two days a week. And he hadn't been to work for like three weeks. And I didn't think anything of it just because like I said he didn't work. He wasn't a regular employee of ours. And when he came back, I asked him how he had been and he said, Oh, I was in the hospital. I

was on a ventilator for two days. And we didn't even get the the little legal notice that we got with everybody else. So yeah, I've known several people who have gotten sick There's been a few people within the, I guess, outer social circle people that I know of who have died from it. Um, some people like, that my parents went to school with have died from it. Um, there's a young man from our town, that they never said what he died from, but it kind of makes sense that that's what it might have been. Because they're again, they're trying to protect people's privacy, you know, health, you know, with the HIPAA laws and all that. But so you don't always know either what they're sick from or what they died from, but it just kind of makes sense. You know, that's what's going around right now. And why else would a 30-year-old guy die? You know, if it wasn't an accident?

BD: So, do you think that kind of like that that lack of knowing, do you think that's like a, I don't know, like, like a lack of media coverage? Or like a kind of a failed like, professional acknowledgement, do you think? Or is it? You think it's kind of hard to track in that way?

KD: I think it's just, like I said, we've been at this now how many months? And we've just kind of settled into a we've settled in into a rhythm, I guess, where at first it hit and it was so surprising, and people were getting sick, especially in the larger cities. And now it's like, yep, you know, it's here. Deal with it, I guess. And, and it's just become so repetitive. And I think that's what it is, we're we're like, almost stuck in this vicious circle of it of, and we kind of know that. Mostly, everybody's going to catch it at one point or another. So, when somebody catches that it's not surprising, where at first it was. Um, so I, I think it's just, we're getting a little more relaxed with it. If that's a good thing, or a bad thing, I don't know, I think that's yet to be seen.

BD: Okay, yeah. So, we'll kind of move on to talking about the media and its coverage and all that kind of thing. Um, so in what ways do you think are important issues that the media is or is not covering?

KD: Um, yeah, they, you know, every day in your evening noon, newscasts, you kind of get the running total, you know, how many cases have there been today? Um, how many, how many people tested positive versus negative? I think that's all good. I think it's good information that we need to know. Um, there seems to be like, if a certain business seems to have a heavy outbreak of it, they'll announce it on the news. And personally, I think that's a good thing. Um, you know, I think just for your own protection, and for your own peace of mind, you know, if there's a grocery store, you you frequent, and all of a sudden, you find out that half the employees there have it, well, then, you know, for yourself that you should watch yourself, maybe get tested, maybe whatever, but then there's, like another subset of people that think that they're, you know, fear mongering or trying to shut that business down or get them in trouble for that. And, and, you know, it's not the media's fault. They're just reporting the news as it comes in. You know, so I think the media I think, overall, they've done a pretty good job at it, um, at covering it. Um, there's some areas where I think maybe they they like to twist things you know, you don't want to think that your your local news stations are politically connected or motivated, but sometimes it's it's hard, hard to deny it. And that, again, that can be a good thing or a bad thing depends on how you look at it.

BD: Okay, and do you mind sharing what your primary source for news is?

KD: Um, generally I get most of my news online. Um, I have online newspaper subscriptions. So I'm reading a lot of national newspapers and and the local news television news that we get here. You know, they've got their social media pages that they post things on my work hours tend to be a little odd. So I kind of grabbed the news when and where I can.

BD: Okay. So kind of moving on, we're gonna go into the government now. Okay. So how have municipal leaders and government officials in your community responded to the outbreak,

KD: Slow, slow, um, I think they, they, especially at like the county and city levels, they're afraid of ruffling feathers because there is such a dissonance between groups of people. And I think they're, they're afraid, like doing mask mandates and things like that, um, they, then it's like, they're afraid to do anything, so they did nothing. Um, and now we have these outbreaks that are worse than they were before. And now they're like, well, now we have to do something, you know, eight months after the fact now we got to do something about it. Where if we would have done this, six, eight months ago, maybe it wouldn't have been so bad. Um, so definitely, I'm Marathon County. And my, my job is actually in Portage County, which is just south of Marathon County, I'm near the county lines in Portage County has been very much the same where they're, it's like they're afraid to do anything. So they do nothing. And it's it is frustrating, you know, especially when, you know, if you want to move up one level to the state level, the state says, Okay, we're going to leave it up to the municipalities, and then a municipality sit on their hands. And they make no decision at all. You know, and that's just frustrating.

BD: So, so you definitely say that was more reactive than proactive?

KD: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

BD: Okay. So then, do you have any thoughts on how long the local state federal leaders are responding to the crisis differently?

KD: Um, I, you know, I think, you know, definitely doing the, the mass mandates is huge, and actually enforcing them, that that's hard to do, it really is, you know, you can't run around and give fines to everybody who isn't wearing a mask and whatever, but just being a little tighter with it. And even in, you know, here in Wisconsin, at the state level, we know, we have a democratic governor. And but our our state houses, are republican run, so they're constantly butting heads about what they should or shouldn't be doing. And the governor does a mass mandate, and then the, the State House sues him over it, and then they got to go to court over it. And then we don't know what we should and shouldn't do. You know, especially at work, okay, we we have, they mandated the um, the number of people that we can have in the store, well, then the other side sued them, and they put a hold on it. Okay, so does that mean, we still have to count how many people are in? Or do we not anymore? And it's, it's there again, it's frustrating if somebody would just make a decision. And, and, and, you know, quit fighting about it. You know, this, this isn't, it shouldn't be a political issue, and somehow they've turned it into a political issue.

BD: Right, right. Um, so has your personal experience transformed how you think about your family, friends and community? In what ways do you think that?

KD: um, some, some, um, you know, when you go especially like on social media, you know, you see a, an uncle or a friend or somebody that kind of has that extreme view of, this is fake. This will all be over after the election. You know, all that. All the stuff we were hearing from kind of that side of it, it really makes you wonder how they, how they came to that conclusion, you know? Um, you know, so yeah, you start thinking of him a little differently like it. It's kind of a weird analogy, but you know, back in, back in like World War Two, when we had the victory gardens and saving scrap metal to go to the military, that was the patriotic thing to do. And now it's like, okay, wearing your mask and washing your hands and social distancing is the patriotic thing to do. And you got this group of people who, no, I'm not going to do it. And when it's somebody, you know, somebody you're close to, you know, it changes your view of them, you you kind of, at least for me, you know, I think like, how can they not? How can they be so closed minded like that?

BD: Okay, so then knowing what you know, now, what do you think that individuals, communities or government need to keep in mind for the future?

KD: I'm trying, definitely trying to be a little more proactive. You know, I'm definitely at the, at the government level, because people are going to do what they're going to do. If you don't make them do it. You know, if the government steps in and says, look, you know, let's, let's just say in another 30 years, we there's another virus, it's something brand new, it's just like we have right now. I think, if the government takes a little bit more of a, of a hard stance on it, and says, Look, this is what it is, this is what we know. And this is how we're going to attack the situation and take care of it. It may be right, it may be wrong, but at least they tried, you know, especially at the the national level, or government just kind of seemed to brush it under the rug. And, you know, it's not going to be a problem, and it's not going to come here, even as people were catching it and dying. It Oh, no, it's not a problem. You know, we can't do that again. You know, I would rather be, I would rather try something and be wrong than to do nothing and be wrong as well.

BD: So do you think that there are other national issues that they kind of took priority that they shouldn't have over? COVID? Or?

KD: Absolutely, yeah, they were more worried about the economy. You know, they, they, they thought that by shutting down, you know, small businesses, to try to keep people safe, that that was somehow going to completely the wreck the economy. And there might be some truth to that, you know, especially a smaller business that might not have as much savings built up for the owner themselves. There might be some truth to that. But then you've got to offer some sort of subsidy or some sort of protection for people like that. And I wouldn't mind them doing that at all. But this thought that if we shut them down for a month, and they're never going to reopen, and the place is going to be a ghost town is just crazy. Economics will always happen. No matter no matter, you know, since the beginning of time, man has used some sort of economic system, whether we were trading rocks and beads for food, or we're trading money for goods and

services, there's always been economic movement. So this thought that if we shut down the corner hardware store for a month to try to, you know, snuff out a virus, and that's going to completely topple the economy is just an absurd thought.

BD: Have any places that you know, the world is smaller business of the day closed down at all. That you know?

KD: Not permanently, there. There's been places that have closed down for a couple of weeks, but nothing that's actually gone out of business. Um, not that I know.

BD: Okay, um, so are there any lasting thoughts that for any future person looking back at this and for any kind of research, like what anything that you'd like them to know?

KD: Trust the scientists, they know a lot more than us. You know, and yes, they may be wrong. There. There may be times that they're wrong, but especially When it's something that we don't know about, you know, this virus popped up so fast, they didn't have time to study it. So yes, when when they were saying one week that it's acting this way. And then two weeks later, they were saying, Oh, no, we were wrong. It's doing this instead. Don't look at that as like a failure to science. That's what science is. It's trial and error. So for you know, anybody who's maybe thinking twice about what their scientists are telling them, you know, don't, don't completely write them off because they're wrong once or twice. That's, that's the scientific process, proving yourself wrong or right, that is the process of science. Let them do their jobs. And and, you know, follow the instructions.

BD: Okay, well, on behalf of UW EC, and the public history course that we're doing here, I thank you for your time and answering these questions for us. Yeah, so I think that's going to be it.

KD: Sounds good.