

Interviewee: Erin Voss

Interviewer: Sierra Ramker

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Transcriber: Sierra Ramker

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Abstract:

Erin Voss was born and raised in Colby, Wisconsin, and is currently a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In this interview, Erin discusses how COVID-19 has affected her life as a senior in high school at the beginning of the pandemic and as a college student currently. She discusses COVID-19's effects on her mental health, family, and schooling. She shares differences she has seen in small town Colby compared to a large city like Madison and their responses to Covid. She touches on what her advice would be for people in the future to respond to a pandemic while keeping in mind mental health, students' ability to learn, and cautions to take.

00:02 SR

Okay, this is an oral history interview for the western Wisconsin COVID-19 archive project. The date is November 30, 2021. And the time is 1:25pm. The current cases for COVID is as follows. In the US, there are 48,160,971 cases. In Wisconsin, there are 2,622 new cases. And the total vaccinated residents in Wisconsin are 58%.

00:37 SR

Can you say your name for me?

00:39 EV

Erin Voss.

00:41 SR

If you are comfortable, can you say your age, ethnicity and gender identity?

00:45 EV

I am 19, white and female.

00:54 SR

What are the primary things you do on a day to day basis? Or like what's your daily routine?

00:59 EV

Right now, It's wake up, go to school, do all my schoolwork, come home, more schoolwork, sleep and then repeat.

01:09 SR

What do you study at school?

01:12 EV

Right now, I'm studying biology.

01:15 SR

How has COVID affected your classes?

01:17 EV

It's been difficult because there isn't as much in person instruction, it's a lot of online. But it also has me the opportunity to do my classes from home or remotely, so I don't always have to travel to campus.

01:37 SR

Do you have any jobs while you're in school?

01:43 EV

I work as a lifeguard at the pool at school.

01:46 SR

Does COVID affect any part of that?

01:50 EV

We do have to wear masks on the pool deck. And like being such a humid like environment, it does get hard to breathe sometimes.

1:58 SR

Okay. Where are you currently living right now?

02:03 EV

Right now, I live in an apartment on the edge of campus. So, University of Wisconsin-Madison, just on the edge of campus.

02:13 SR

What is it like to live in Madison during this pandemic?

02:18 EV

I'd say it's a very serious, the city of Madison Dane County takes the pandemic very seriously. And we've had mask mandates. So, like farther beyond campus, you still have to wear your mask. And they've had the mask mandate, more than most other counties in Wisconsin.

02:39 SR

How have you seen like the residents responding to COVID-19 in Madison, or just like people on the streets?

02:47 EV

Most like native Madison residents take it very seriously. Oftentimes, if you're not wearing your mask, even outside, they will remind you and tell you that you should be wearing your mask even when we're outdoors. The college students or the people that just live in Madison seasonally tend to take it less seriously. Just because like it's not their hometown area.

03:08 SR

Okay. And where are you from originally?

03:12 EV

I'm originally from Colby, Wisconsin.

03:15 SR

So, I know you go there over breaks. What differences do you see how COVID affects life in Madison compared to Colby?

03:25 EV

I think that in Madison, people do take it a lot more seriously. There was a bigger push to get vaccinated. You see, a larger percent of the population is vaccinated in Dane County compared to like, Marathon, Clark, the counties that like I primarily live in.

03:41 SR

And Colby is a smaller town to. [both speaking-unclear] Yeah. Do you think that has a part in it?

03:51 EV

Yeah, I think just because like, the people in the smaller town don't necessarily like, see the huge effects because it's just less people they don't, the probability of them getting sick or like terminal illness is smaller versus in a large city with a big hospital.

04:09 SR

Yeah. Have you seen anyone around you change their opinions about the pandemic since it began?

04:17 EV

Yes. Personally, when it first began, I really didn't think it was going to be that serious. And then coming to college and just like personal family experiences, I quickly realized that it is a lot more serious than I originally had thought. And that getting vaccinated and all that kind of stuff, taking the preventative measures is really important.

04:42 SR

Yeah. Have you or anyone you know, gotten sick during the COVID 19 outbreak?

04:49 EV

I did have COVID the end of September during 2021 [the year was actually 2020] right after I first moved here to go to college. And then Both of my parents have had COVID and my roommates most of them have had COVID. So I do know quite a few people that have had it.

05:07 SR

What was- what has been your experience in responding to the sickness? Or, like after having COVID have your views on COVID-19 changed?

05:18 EV

I guess, before having it, I wasn't really sure what to expect, because it is just so different between person to person. So there was that little uncertainty like, what if I get it? What if I do get really sick? And then the other part of me was like, Oh, I'll probably be fine. But at the same time, I didn't know. And I did get like sick, but I never had to be hospitalized. So thank goodness for that. But, like, I can see how those with like suppressed immune systems that could really impact them and how you do need to be careful, because it does affect everyone differently.

05:56 SR

Yeah. If you're comfortable sharing anyone that you have known, all of the people you mentioned that have had COVID, where any of them, like seriously, like, sick or had a lot of troubles with COVID when they had it?

06:15 EV

My grandpa, last, about a year ago, he had COVID. And he had to get hospitalized. And he already had some like, lung issues and like that just like exacerbated it. And unfortunately, he did pass away from that. And then just recently, my father was also hospitalized, you know, his oxygen levels were really

low, but he is home, he just has to use a little bit of oxygen until his lung capacity increases back to normal.

06:45 SR

Yeah, hopefully, he gets better soon. So, have you seen anyone around you change their day to day activities in response to the pandemic?

06:56 EV

Yeah, like, in the beginning of the pandemic, we first like, couldn't go to school anymore. So it was instead of like, wake up, go to school, like I was a senior in high school. It was wake up, do your online school at home. And then I still did go to work because I worked at a bank so it was a mandatory, like business. So instead of going to school, I would do school online while I was working. And that was really interesting. A lot of people couldn't have like athletic practices, like sports. I was supposed to play softball my senior year, so we didn't get that. Graduation was very different. And just like day to day, almost everything had to change. We had to wear masks, and like, we weren't supposed to go anywhere unless we actually had to.

07:52 SR

Yeah. Has the COVID 19 pandemic affected the employment of people you know?

07:58 EV

The employment?

07:59 SR

Yes.

08:01 EV

Yeah. My father, again, was laid off in, I want to say March, I think it was March or early April of 2020. So right after lockdown hit our area, just because they weren't getting very much like business at his job. So he was laid off for a while. And then he did go back to work in September of 2020. So he was laid off for almost six months.

08:32 SR

And where was he working?

08:34 EV

He was working in Abbotsford, Wisconsin, so just another city right next to ours, just at a business he was a welder.

08:41 SR

Okay. How have you seen others relationships change in response to the pandemic, like has COVID changed your relationships with family, friends, or the community or others that your notice?

08:57 EV

I think it has. In some senses, it's caused strains in relationship. It's been harder, because not everyone agrees on everything. And so then trying to family functions, holidays, events, it's been harder to get people together to agree on a situation but at the same time, those that like do agree and work together. I think relationships have gotten stronger. Because we do know how important family is and like we've lost loved ones. So we know that like when we can gather and be together we should make the most of our time.

09:31 SR

Yeah. Has COVID-19 affected how you communicate and associate with friends or family?

09:39 EV

I think it just has made me be a lot more careful. You know, if I don't feel very good, I will definitely like monitor my symptoms, give everyone a heads up, make sure they're comfortable hanging out with me because I wouldn't want to risk their health. I think just in general, everyone has to be more careful. And we value our time that we do to spend together. Because we know that, you know, we might have to go into that lockdown. And then we may not get to see each other for a while.

10:09 SR

Yeah. In what ways do you think that COVID is affecting people's mental health?

10:17 EV

I think it has really taken a hit on people's mental health. I think it really isolated people a lot and that's really not necessarily a good thing. For someone that's already struggling to be isolated to not have those close contacts, that can be really hard. And then those that weren't already struggling, it can really send them into a dark place not being able to do the things that they enjoy that give them a sense of relief throughout the day.

10:45 SR

Have you experienced any, you don't have to go in depth, but have you experienced any of mental health issues with COVID-19, like, since the pandemic?

10:57 EV

In high school, I was like, for the most part, like always very happy, upbeat. And being like cut off from my senior year of high school definitely did impact my mental health. I went through a pretty dark time where, like, I just didn't want to get out of bed, I had no motivation. And, yeah, it was just really hard to

keep going. And then eventually, like, you just had to push through it, because you had to keep going, hoping that someday it will get better. And then we could start to go out and do more and see people more and that definitely helped.

11:33 SR

Yeah, what do you feel could be done to aid those who experience this during the pandemic?

11:41 EV

I think really reaching out to those mental health resources, a lot of if you're a college student, a lot of universities offer counseling, reaching out to like, friends, family, anyone that you could just talk to relate to just vent [share how you are feeling] about things, because it does help to get it off your chest, and more people understand what you're going through than you think.

12:04 SR

Yeah. What issues of the pandemic concern you the most?

12:08 EV

I think just the overall health of people, because you really don't know how COVID will affect you until you get it. Some people are totally symptomatic. And others, you know, they end up getting hospitalized, even if they didn't have any previous health problems. So just watching out for everyone's health is a huge thing, because a lot of people take it for granted, and you would never want something bad to happen.

12:39 SR

Yeah, going along with that. What do you think are important issues that the media may be covering or may not be covering?

12:51 EV

I think that it's good and bad that right away in the beginning, it was huge, like death rates of COVID. And I think that was really bad for a lot of people's mental health, because all you hear is just bad news day after day. Like we were waiting, we're like a month into quarantine and all we hear is like, or lockdown not necessarily quarantined, but like locked down, and all we hear on the news is like, how many people have died, how many people have COVID, how many people are in the hospital. And that's really hard, because you're trying to find something to look forward to when all you're hearing is bad news. And I mean, I do understand that they're trying to make people take it seriously and get the point across. But, it was just really hard to listen to. I also think vaccination rates is a good thing to cover. So you just know, like, how many people are getting vaccinated, but it also creates a lot of divide, because there is such a big debate in some areas on the vaccine, like getting it versus not getting it. And I think

there are good sides and bad sides to pretty much everything that the media has covered. It's just sometimes really hard to hear, especially when it hits so close to home.

14:10 SR

Yeah, for sure. So you mentioned the vaccine, have you or anyone, you know, had questions or concerns about the vaccine?

14:20 EV

Personal experience, I at first when they said that there was a vaccine out, I was unsure myself just because, you know, the big red flag is that it is so soon, but you have to understand and like you do more research and you hear things and you never really know who- like what's true, what's false. But, you know, I just think that, like with all the advances that we have in medicine and technology, it's not really that soon for a vaccine to be coming out. We already have vaccination technology, so just trying to get a hold of like the virus figuring out what makes it it's special, that can definitely help. So, like I have been vaccinated since then, I had my booster and I do think it is important because even if you're not doing it for yourself, you can do it for others. So really just like do your research and don't always believe everything you hear from the internet like Facebook and social media sites, because you'd really don't know what is all true from that.

15:27 SR

Yeah. So, when you got vaccinated, did you have any side effects? Because I know, some people do get really bad side effects, and some people feel perfectly fine.

15:41 EV

So I got the Johnson and Johnson. My first dose was Johnson and Johnson, I got that in June of 2021. And I really didn't experience any side effects. I was maybe a little bit more tired than normal than next day. But other than that, like I went to work, I was fine. And then, just a couple of weeks ago, I got my Pfizer booster because the Johnson and Johnson was eligible to get your booster. So I got the Pfizer booster and 24 to 48 hours after that I felt really wiped out. I was really tired. Maybe a little feverish. And it definitely did wipe me out like that day was really tough. But after that, I felt fine.

16:29 SR

So what was your experience getting access to the vaccine? And the booster? Like, how did you know when it was available? Or like making an appointment, was that easy? Did you know where to go to make an appointment?

16:45 EV

When the vaccine first came available to like students like the university students, University of Madison, they emailed us and they told us but there was such a high demand and there was such limited supply, that they would post vaccine appointments, and they would fill up like within five minutes. So I

didn't, I wasn't able to get it through the university at first, just because there was such a large number of people that were trying to get it. And so when I was home, I did see something for a free clinic, I saw a flyer so I went on my lunch break one day and just got the vaccine. So I think outside of very like populated areas, it was a lot easier just because there wasn't so much demand and there wasn't a bunch of people flocking to one area. As for my booster, one of my friends had mentioned something to me about a booster being out otherwise, I hadn't known. But then making an appointment was super easy. They had a lot of options available.

17:54 SR

Okay, so we talked a lot about the pandemic, as for the future, what have been the biggest challenges that you have faced during COVID-19? And how do you think others can better prepare, if there is another pandemic in the future?

18:12 EV

I think just being prepared to be away from people for that long, was really hard or being stuck with the people that you were with for that long, is something that I definitely wasn't prepared for. Like I was not prepared to spend a month have only ever seen my brothers, my younger brothers. That was definitely it tried our relationship a lot. But you know, we just had to figure it out, give ourselves our space. And then thankfully, we are right now in an age where technology is huge so I was still able to communicate with my friends like FaceTiming, texting, Snapchat, we could all keep up to date on what's going with each other. Otherwise, without that outside communication, I think it would have been a lot harder not knowing how everyone else is not checking up, not being able to kind of escape your own little house for that short amount of time.

19:08 SR

Yeah. So having experienced what you have as a senior in high school when it started and as a college student right now, what do you think high schools and universities need to keep in mind for the- for any future pandemics?

19:25 EV

I think just really having a strong plan as to what would happen if there was another shutdown, if there couldn't be in-person classes because I know in high school, there wasn't much of a plan. It was a really big scramble we had like a week or more completely off of school without anything. So I think in the future, just always being prepared. A lot of my classes here at college do have the option and the ability to go completely remote if we would have to. So I think that is a really important thing. And they've learned a lot in the past couple years because you really don't know what's going to happen.

20:07 SR

Yeah. Okay, have you experienced COVID life in a bigger city? Oh having, sorry- having experienced COVID life in a bigger city and a smaller town, what things do you see being done in one that could be beneficial to the other?

20:26 EV

I think that, obviously, in the bigger city, you have a lot more opinions and Madison being very liberal right now, they definitely take COVID very seriously pushing the vaccine, we still have the mask mandate, it was just, it was supposed to be done the 26th of November, but they just pushed it out till sometime in January. So I think really taking mask wearing seriously. And really putting a limit on like, what you can and can't do, how big groups can be, is something that is good when it comes to the safety of people, but then again, in the smaller cities like Colby, you don't see the mask wearing but that is because like there are like less cases. And I think there are goods and bads to that. Because, you know, it kind of gives everyone a feel of what life was like before. Before we had to wear masks, before we had to like isolate, and there were like limits on gathering sizes. But I do think that that can be a problem, because life will probably never return completely to normal, like there's going to be a new normal. So I think smaller cities like Colby and other small rural areas could start to implement longer lasting like rules, like more masks, just to make the transition easier, because we know that COVID will never go away. And it will just keep happening, so they might want to continue on with the policies that have previously been enforced.

22:08 SR

Yeah. And having lived in Colby for a lot of this pandemic, do you think it would, it could be possible that Colby would put in place those procedures and cautions?

22:24 EV

I think it really just depends on what the numbers I don't think if there was not a lot of cases in the area, that there wouldn't be- people wouldn't find a reason to apply that unless it was like government ruled. But if there were to be more cases, I think more people will take it seriously, and then there'll be more for implementing it. But until that happens, I think there's still going to be a huge like, push against the masks and all the regulations.

22:57 SR

Yeah, for sure. And then going back to universities, do you have any advice for anyone in the future, any students in the future who may continue going through the COVID pandemic, or perhaps a different pandemic in the future?

23:18 EV

I would say first, just surround yourself with a really strong support system, because you will need it. Just going through college in general, you should have a good support system. And then, you know, even if there was like, another big event where we couldn't gather outside of our houses, being able to

communicate with people, so having that technology is really important. And then having the, like, motivation to get your schoolwork done. Like don't make in person classes your only reason you get up and you go like, get up every day for you just to get things done. Not just because you have to like you need to find some inside motivation.

24:02 SR

Yeah. And have you found an inside motivation for yourself during this time?

24:08 EV

It's been- it was difficult at first, but you know, you realize that, like, this is what life is gonna be like for a while. So you've got to find something to look forward to. Even if it's like, getting up, getting through all your stuff, just so you can watch a new episode of a new show. Or get up do this and then you can like order takeout from a restaurant that you really like. You just got to find something that makes you really happy.

24:33 SR

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for doing this interview with me. I'm gonna end the recording.
[recording stopped]