

Interviewee: Courtney Erickson

Interviewer: Mia Miller

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Abstract:

Courtney Erickson is a single mother who lives in Chippewa Falls, WI with her four children, as young as kindergarten through 16 years old. In this interview, Courtney Erickson discusses her experience being a caregiver during COVID-19 while also balancing school and work and the difficulties that go along with those responsibilities such as overseeing her children's Zoom meetings and working from home. She shares the ways the pandemic affected her family life, the health of those around her, as well as her struggles with recovering from addiction amidst the pandemic.

Mia Miller 0:03

Okay, so currently it is 11am. The date is December 10 2021. As of now there have been 49,458,520 cases of COVID-19 and 790,766 deaths in the US. In Wisconsin, where interviewee lives, there have been 905,850 cases, and 9,298 deaths. And then in the US 60.4% of the population has been fully vaccinated. So if you could just tell me your name. And then if you wouldn't mind sharing some demographic information such as your race, ethnicity, age, gender.

Courtney Erickson 0:51

Sure. My name is Courtney Erickson. I'm 36 years old. I am a Caucasian female. I'm from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, where I still live currently.

MM 1:04

Awesome. So you responded to the call for caregiving and COVID oral histories. And we greatly appreciate having your input for this collection. Can you tell me in your own words, how do you define a caregiver?

CE 1:22

To me, a caregiver is somebody that is responsible for providing care to another person. In my case, I'm a mother, I have four children, so I'm their caregiver.

MM 1:36

Alright. And then how long have you been performing a caregiving role? And did you identify as a caregiver before the pandemic?

CE 1:45

Yes, my oldest daughter is 16. So I've been a parent for 16 years. I've also been in caregiver and other aspects in nursing homes and assisted living homes. But for the past 16 years, for sure, I've been in a caregiving role.

MM 2:02

Okay. Could you tell me a little bit more about the caregiving roles and responsibilities that you perform for your family or household prior to the pandemic?

CE 2:11

Prior to the pandemic, I am a single parent. So I work and I do the household chores, you know, the cooking, the cleaning, the grocery shopping, I'm responsible for all the bills, the rent, internet, cell phone, all that basic stuff. The care needs vary depending on the ages, I have, like I said, I have four children. So for my older children, the caregiving needs are more transportation and guidance and some school monitoring stuff, help with homework and that kind of thing as far as, like, guidance with mental health and health issues and that sort of stuff. And then I have a right- currently a seven year old and a three year old. So throughout the pandemic, their needs were a little bit different. But right before the pandemic it was a lot of my little one was little so you know, the diapering, the toileting, the bathing, the teeth, brushing all the activities of daily living that she needed help with, and then my son still continued to need help with those things sees he was still pretty little so.

MM 3:31

Great, and then how's the pandemic impacted your caregiving roles for your family?

CE 3:37

So during the pandemic, I became a-I stayed at home I, because schools were closed, I ended up taking some time off of work. And then also, by proxy became a homeschool teacher for my, some of my kids. And that was, that was a big difference. It was different having them home, you know, 24/7 and not being able to go anywhere or do anything with them. So we didn't have activities or outings aside from things we did at home. And that was a big difference. Even like, simple things like providing the lunchtime meal was different for us, because normally they're in school for that and it had to be something that was worked into our day around schooling and that sort of thing.

MM 4:33

Great, so what have you and your family or friends done for self care or family care during COVID-19?

CE 4:42

Well, we did initially when the everything was shut down. We were doing like zoom visits with our family, my parents and my sister. I did some video chats with friends and we did end up expanding our circle, a little bit of my children's half sister lives like a block away from us. So we ended up having some playdates with them. It got to be where they were just restless in the house with each other all day long. Although my youngest one was continuing daycare, throughout the pandemic, they stayed open somehow. So they were never shut down. But also, like, a lot of-there was a lot of struggle, a lot of mental health struggles for myself, personally, I think for my kids as well. My older children are only with me part time, so they went back and forth. So they kind of got a little bit of a break. And then, we did end up utilizing-my youngest two children's grandparents took on the homeschooling role. For my son, I guess he just was not cooperative with me as his teacher. So that kind of was helpful, too. It gave us all just a little bit of a break. And you know, just that kind of thing. We did try to spend more time focused on family time, than school stuff, which may have hindered the educational aspect of it, but definitely helped the mental health aspect.

MM 6:31

Thank you. I touched on this a little bit, but what if anything, has been rewarding or meaningful about being a caregiver, for your family during this pandemic.

CE 6:45

Just being able to spend time together, it kind of put things in perspective as far as priorities. And you know, family, for me is my number one priority, even though sometimes things tend to pile

up and appear to take priority over my family needs. Like I said, the pandemic really kind of put things in perspective and allowed us just to like, reconnect as a family.

MM 7:17

Okay, what resources or networks, did you if any, did you draw on to manage the impact of COVID on caregiving for your family or household, so and then did you find there were adequate resources and support for your family?

CE 7:33

Well, I did utilize a portion of the unemployment aspect. I'm not full time since I'm a student. So we had a very small income. But I did utilize that. I utilized my family as a support was probably the biggest support. As far as schoolwork goes, there was not much support from the schools. I really was not impressed with the way that it was handled, even, you know, with the understanding that it was an unprecedented event, and not really anything anybody could have planned for. But my son has ADHD and is actually in special education, he gets pulled out a couple times a day, and that there was no resources offered for that while we were in quarantine. So, hence why his grandparents ended up taking over the schooling for him.

MM 8:38

Right. How has your caregiving role during the pandemic impacted your relationships with your social networks and communities said a little bit about this, but yeah.

CE 8:49

Yeah, so as far as social networks go, you know, we did include some of my friends and, and family into our social network during the pandemic. I found that being isolated was really detrimental to my mental health. I'm a recovering addict, and that was not-it was a real struggle for me during the pandemic. So I had to weigh my options of whether I wanted to risk exposure to COVID-19 or risk my recovery, my mental health, and so it really kind of gave me a renewed sense of gratitude for the social networks and connections that I have in my life.

MM 9:45

Yeah. Okay, and then, has COVID-19 affected your relationships with your family?

CE 9:57

Well during the quarantining part where we are all together and we are trying to do schoolwork together, that was extremely stressful for us, I would say that they had actually a negative impact on our family it's a lot for one person to do to be in school full time and then trying to homeschool a kindergartener or at the time and, and first grader because I was kindergarten and first grade during the pandemic, and then have a high schooler, a middle schooler that, you know, were semi-independent on their own things. Excuse me. But I would say, you know, during those times it had-it was really stressful and difficult for our family.

MM 10:45

Yeah. Have you or anybody, you know, gotten sick during the COVID 19 outbreak. And then, if anyone you know, has, what was your experience like responding?

CE 10:56

I've had actually quite a few people get sick. My children's grandfather, and grandmother both got COVID, the ones that were doing the homeschooling. Grandma was fine. She had really nothing except tiredness. And their grandfather ended up hospitalized with pneumonia and has a permanently collapsed lung. Due to COVID. My nephews actually just had COVID. And they are 11 and eight. And they had really no symptoms. They had typical cold symptoms. So I've seen a range of people that were severely ill and then people that didn't really know they had it.

MM 11:43

What was your experience, like in terms of care, and like hospital visits and things like that?

CE 11:54

So they weren't allowed to do any hospital visits with their grandpa. It was-for me, I had to like sit them down and talk to my kids about the fact that he was in the hospital because so many people were dying, and it has case was so severe, I felt like I needed to tell them that that was a possibility. And that was a really hard conversation. So it just was a lot more like added support for them and emotional support. And not really forcing the academic stuff during that time. Like just kind of being there for them and helping them process the possibilities of what could potentially happen.

MM 12:41

Yeah .Did you receive the vaccine?

CE 12:45

Yes.

MM 12:48

You did. What was your experience getting access to that vaccine, like, understanding when it was available, making an appointment, things like that.

CE 12:55

Well, I did mine through Walgreens. And that was a fairly easy process at the time. I know, Since then, I think the pharmacies are struggling to have enough available but at that point in time, it was fairly simple. It was just like signing up online and then going in and the whole process, you know, from start to finish, maybe took like an hour just because of wait times and paperwork and stuff that had to be filled out. But it was a pretty easy process for me.

MM 13:27

Yep. Did you experience any side effects with the vaccine?

CE 13:32

I didn't, I was tiredness was the only like, I slept for an extended period of time that night and into the next day. But other than that I had no other side effects.

MM 13:47

Have you or anyone you know had questions or concerns about the vaccine?

CE 13:54

Yeah, I mean, I-I know it's available for children five and up now and I have not vaccinated my seven year old. My 12 year old and 16 year old are vaccinated. I'm a little bit cautious of giving it to my seven year old because I'm not-I don't feel like we know enough about it to give children that young but so I go back and forth on that. I went back and forth on myself. Even getting it for myself but being a single parent, I can't afford for anything to happen to me. So I have to be here

for my kids. But I have friends that will not take the vaccine and will not have their children take it and absolutely don't think that it's the right thing to do so.

MM 14:48

And then you so you said that some of your friends refused to take the vaccine, don't want to take it. Has that affected your relationship with them in any way? or like, anything like that?

CE 15:02

No, excuse me. No, not really. You know, I-I don't judge people for the personal opinion I do, being as my father in law was so sick with COVID I like, that's my children's, like my children's half sister will not be vaccinated and her family won't be. And that kind of puts me on edge just a little bit, because I feel like, I felt a responsibility to have my children vaccinated to protect or have myself vaccinated to protect my children, and also to protect people that they spent time around. And so I guess maybe there's a little bit of judgment on my end with that and like, but at the same time, like it has not really changed, like the way we interact or anything like we still spend time together, and we still do the things that we were normally doing with them.

MM 16:04

How has your role as a caregiver informed your attitude about, and the vaccine and practices around vaccinations?

CE 16:14

Well, again, like I said, I really went back and forth on whether I was going to take the vaccine myself or not just because I-it's so new, and I'm still unsure of all the research, but being the primary caregiver for my youngest children, I'm-have full custody up, I know that I need to take every precaution to make sure that I'm here. And that, you know, if something happens to me, I don't know where they'll end up. So that definitely, like that was my main reason for actually getting it the vaccine was to make sure that or to, you know, do what I could to make sure that I was around for my kids. And also, like I said, to protect their family members that they see frequently.

MM 17:03

So you also mentioned this a little in the beginning the interview. How-Could you tell us a little bit more about how campus responded to the outbreak, and the different stakeholders on campus, so administration, but also the staff and students?

CE 17:27

So I feel like I'm trying to think back when this all first happened. So my first semester here was basically all online. And I think that was a good thing. Sorry, I think that that was a good, good response from the administration. I really feel like our professors take it seriously. You know, they're all masked, and we don't hear a lot of their opinions about the vaccine. And I think that's, you know, that's okay. We don't need to know what people's public opinions are about that thing, though, that sort of thing. But I do, you know, you can kind of get a sense for who would be supportive and who wouldn't be. And that is kind of reassuring that people are taking steps to keep everybody safe. As far as the student body goes, I'm a non traditional student, so I don't live on campus or anything, but for the most part, I see people wearing their masks when we're out in public and, you know, not really fighting against that. The one thing that I would say is that through the COVID pandemic, we have really proven that online accessibility to courses is-it's a capability that we have, and I know there have been some instances in which like, I've had to stay home with my kids when they were ill. And it wasn't really COVID related. So then I was denied access to online participation in my classes, and ended up kind of losing points that way. I don't know if that's necessarily a COVID thing, but it sort of ties into it for me because we've proven that the accessibility is there. It's just whether we're willing to implement it for something other than COVID or not.

MM 19:25

Yeah. Let's see, how has your-has your experience with COVID and being caregiver transformed the way you think about your role and roles of others as a caregiver or care work in general?

CE 19:53

I'm not sure if it really transformed anything. I think that it gave me a greater appreciation just for our health in general. But otherwise, I think, you know, it's always been, you know, kind of in the back of my mind that I need to take care of myself so that my kids have a stable parent, but I guess it reinforced those ideas for me.

MM 20:22

And then what have been your primary sources of news during the pandemic?

CE 20:34

Well, honestly, usually, like, I'll see something while scrolling through Facebook, and then I will, like, look up, like, other stuff about that. So I don't really watch the news because I find it

depressing. Otherwise, you know, my, my mom's an RN, she has shared a lot of information with me. You know, they watch the news a lot. So my dad has also like shared things with me, and then I'll go and like, you know, do my own research or whatever. But I tend to not really sit down and watch the news, just because I find it kind of depressing.

MM 21:09

From the news that you have seen on Facebook, or wherever you see it, have you seen adequate coverage of challenges that caregivers face during the pandemic?

CE 21:20

I don't know, not really, I don't think so. I think that in my experience there, they were either like, it was polar, it was either like, people were ecstatic. And they were thrilled that the kids were off school. And they, you know, were, you know, they took everything seriously and thought that that was the best way of prevention. Or I had, you know, the opposite group of people complaining that schools aren't doing their jobs, it's not our job to educate, and people that really didn't think COVID was a real thing. But I also, as far as like news coverage goes, I- I've seen some but I think like the mental health aspect of caregivers and their dependents or other roles, was not really covered. I also feel like having previous experience with elderly, working with the elderly population, that that wasn't really a big thing that was covered as much either was probably the impact of not having visits with family members. And the people who weren't able to, you know, leave, I know a lot of those places were close to the public, and people couldn't even go in to visit their loved ones. So and there wasn't a whole lot of that. And it might have been just me and not really seeking out but information.

MM 22:51

Okay. This is sort of in terms of government, what impact did the response of municipal and government leaders have on your role and the role of others as caregivers.

CE 23:05

While and I had a choice of really well, I don't know if it was a choice. But I had to make a decision about what I was going to do with my children, when they decided that schools were not going to be in person. That was a huge impact on us, I initially was going to continue working and then decided that I wasn't going to do that, if they needed to be home, because the pandemic was that bad than I needed to be home with them. The I, I think that like some of the mask mandates have affected certain things, but really children like when it comes to children, they're really they don't really mind wearing masks as long as everybody else's wearing them. Like if their friends are wearing them, they don't fight against it. But given the option, if only one or two

are doing it, they won't because no kid wants to stand out like that. And I haven't really had like, as far as any, like other mandates, I haven't really been affected by those.

MM 24:15

Alright. And then what attention or support, if any, would you like local, state or federal leaders devote to caregivers and caregiving challenges in the pandemic?

CE 24:34

Well, I think there needs to be a excuse me, I apologize. There needs to be more reset sources for Special Needs families, children that are in special education and that have certain struggles in education if they are, if we at some point need to be home again. There needs to either be relaxed expectations for all students or more resources available so that parents can help their students learn, you know, the most important things and maybe prioritize things so that they're not trying to cram a whole school day into a couple hours. I also think that it would be important for people who are not able to have childcare during the pandemic, to have the options of working from home, or, you know, temporary unemployment benefits to increase for those people who are caregivers and need to be at home. And I think just again, the mental health aspect of both caregivers and their dependents, I think is something that really should be highlighted and brought to attention. And, you know, resources should be widely available for like online support groups, or online activities that people can do with kids and, or others. And, you know, the availability of families to access the internet isn't always a thing either. And I know they tried to do that, when schools went online, but I feel like it would be an important thing throughout the pandemic, not only for schooling, but to be able to connect with other people, too, that they may not be able to see.

MM 26:28

Kind of going off of that last question, what was your experience, like, with your children's schools, while they were on Zoom, or when they were virtual.

CE 26:39

Um, so it was, it was interesting, because we had three different school ages in my house. So my high school student and had like some online like zoom classes, and she just like, she would just sit do them in her room, my middle schooler I think hers were more like, she didn't really join zoom meetings, probably as much as she was supposed to, I'm not really sure. But I know, I can really speak to my, my son who was in kindergarten and first grade. And when he was in kindergarten, they experienced, you know, things had just started to amp up. And it just, we just went into quarantine. And his teacher did a really good job. So it really depends on the teacher

his-the experience we had in first grade was not a good experience. We had maybe two hours of instruction time, and then there'd be a break. And then they were expected to log back on. And essentially, these young kids were expected to be like, on the computer for like four hours at a time in zoom sessions, and then also completing like a stack of work on their own. And especially for me with a child that had such high needs, we were only able to even do a fraction of like what was expected. And you know, that, as a caregiver, like make somebody feel really like, like, they're not doing enough or like that I'm failing, because I'm not able to get participation from him for some of these certain things. And, you know, as-as you can see, in my answer to that question, it took so much time and effort for me to try to focus him on his studies, that my older kids were sort of left on their own, you know, because I knew that they could work somewhat independently, you know, I wasn't able to really be present with them as much as I would have wanted to be. So, you know, it was it was it was a challenge.

MM 28:57

Yeah. Thank you. And then finally, knowing what you know, now, just throughout your whole experience, what do you think that individuals, communities and governments need to keep in mind for the future?

CE 29:13

Like I said, one of the biggest takeaways that I can take from this experience is that there are many occupations in which working from home is a possibility, and I think that needs to be an option for people. I-I don't think that productivity went down as much as you maybe thought it would have been the beginning. I also think that again, providing more focused resources for Special Needs families or high needs families. If there's ever a case where school is virtual, again, that that needs to be a thing as far as like university policy. Again, I feel that online presence in a classroom due to weather or illness, or you know, Family members illness should be incorporated into our policies. I also think that in the future if we have a shutdown, like we did, like occurred in 2020, that the government benefits for people who are, you know, experiencing unemployment. I think that was a good thing. But I also think that there should be some sort of benefits or assistance for- for employees that continued to work that, you know, maybe were kind of resentful. I know a lot of people that I worked with, were resentful that they continued to work throughout the pandemic, and they felt like they didn't really get recognition or any compensation for doing so. And I think that's really important. I feel like that created a huge divide. And the people that chose or that were able to stay home, I'm not gonna say chose to stay home. I got to choose to stay home so that, you know, and that was just due to my employer's policy and the fact that they're amazing. So but people that stayed home, and then people that continue to work, I think there's a big discrepancy and, and resentment towards folks who had to stay home or got to stay home. But at the same time, you know, it wasn't like it was a vacation either. Sorry, I got rambley but.

MM 31:44

Oh, that's fine. alright, well, I won't take up any more your time. But thank you so much for talking with me.

CE 31:52

Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you.

MM 31:54

Thank you.

CE 31:55

Have a good day.

MM 31:57

You too.