

Interviewee: Benny Anderson

Interviewer: Dan Benthein

Date: 15 December 2021

Format: Video Recording, Zoom

Location of Interview: Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Transcriber: Dan Benthein

Additional Equipment Used: Otter.ai

Project in Association With: University of Wisconsin Eau Claire

While Benny Anderson did grow up in New Richmond, Wisconsin, he went to the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire and currently resides in Eau Claire working as the director of Visit Eau Claire. Working in the tourism and entertainment industry, Benny discusses many of the ways in which the tourism industry has been affected by the COVID 19 pandemic, specifically in Eau Claire. He discusses that while there was a time at the beginning of the pandemic in which the industry did struggle, with much cooperation between Visit Eau Claire, the city, and other local health agencies, they were able to make a plan to reinvigorate the city with new options for tourists to attend, especially in outdoor settings. Overall, Benny really brings into clear focus an example of just how much COVID 19 changed our lives, and how businesses had to make significant adjustments in how they ran things in order to survive the pandemic.

DB: (0.02)

So, today's date is December 15 2021. The confirmed cases in COVID 19. cases and deaths in the US are 15 50,052,008. And the number of deaths are 796,010. In Wisconsin, there have been 928,112 cases and 1055 deaths. And the percentage of the US population that is vaccinated is 61%. Today, I will be interviewing Mr. Benny Anderson, who is the..

BA: (0.37)

I'm the director of visit Eau Claire.

DB: (0.40)

Sorry, I couldn't remember the exact title. So that's okay. Mr. Anderson, to start with, would you begin sharing like, some basic demographic information like your age, race, gender, stuff like that?

BA: (0.53)

Sure. And you can call me Benny, Mr. Anderson's, like a character in The Matrix, I believe. So I am all gosh, I turn 40 in 15, or 16 days on New Year's Eve, I am Caucasian. I am from New Richmond, Wisconsin, where I graduated high school, and I went to UWEC [University of Eau Claire Wisconsin} For Creative Writing where I stuck around afterwards to work in hospitality at Action City Metropolis resort for 15 years before taking this job on March 1 of 2020, as the Interim Executive Director and later got promoted to the full time.

DB: (1.35)

what are so like, what are the primary things you do on a day to day basis? Whether it be work, extra curricular things, things like that.

BA:

So yeah, so I, I work quite a bit, my choice. You know, it's a very busy world, in tourism in general, but especially in the last few years. Typically, I am, you know, working on a lot of things that are marketing, a little bit of budget, and a little bit of like destination development, or community partner events, in trying to support those. In my personal life, I have a wife, who I own a business with called Daredevil business consulting. And then I have three children, I have an 11 year old, a three year old and a one year old who was born during the pandemic, but not because of it.

DB: (2.25)

So, when you first learned about COVID-19, well, what did you think about COVID-19 Overall,

BA: (2.32)

so my story is actually really crazy. Dan, you know, when I first heard about COVID, I was actually on vacation with my wife in Las Vegas. And I was working in Metropolis at the time, and we were having a discussion about whether or not it was time for me to leave metropolis, and go after our company full force and, and do that, and at the time, I had never heard COVID. When I was in Vegas, and I got down there and as a hotel guy, you know, and I'm gambling and having fun. And but I'm also looking around at some of the, you know, the best operations in the world from hotels and attractions. And it's a ghost town, you know, right at the time, you know, there's, it was supposed to, you know, we got it on a steal at the last minute. And you know, didn't really think anything of it. And when we got down there, it was between Super Bowl week, and a really large event that's sold out in Vegas as well. But we were during the weekday. And so we just thought we had hit a slow time. And when we started looking around, it was actually Chinese New Year. And so I mean, Chinese... So when we started talking to the Uber drivers in the hotel years and all and the blackjack dealers and all of it about like, hey, this Chinese New Year seems like it should be a much bigger thing in Vegas, like they had brought in games. There's banners on every hotel property, all of the menus and everything had translations for you know, for Chinese language. Even Pepsi had a commemorative can about being Chinese New Year, during COVID. Sorry, I've got two screens, I'm going to make it look like I'm looking at you. And so what, when we asked them, they said absolutely. It's usually a busy time. And we said, Well, what do you think the different senses and they said, well, it's this Coronavirus. And they said, you know, this was as Wuhan was shutting down, you know, and really, that that first part of it. And so when we started talking to them, of course, I'm a sponge for information. And you know, I'm watching what it's done to Vegas, with no cases in the US at that moment. Right. And so I'm starting to pay attention to what I research what's happening in Wuhan. And, um, you know, not the best correlation, but, you know, I'm a huge you know, science fiction and movie guy, you know, right. And so Kevin watch insane, like, you know, you know, everybody was kind of talking about it as like, you know, for lack of a better term like the zombie apocalypse,

you know, right. Like, you know, that mass infection mass, you know, shut down, you know, what's the doing whatever, whatever. And so, I started watching it. And the last day we were in Vegas, the first case happened in Washington, I believe. Then that same day, there was a case in California. As we were leaving the airport, the next day of the first confirmed case was in Vegas. So I watched all of this. And then I went back home. And I put in my, my two weeks was the decision, I was going to start my own company, I watched things, but at the time, it still really was very small in the United States. And then I took this job on March 1, right, two weeks before the shutdown, as things were kind of blowing up. And I had a good solid week of not even having to worry about it here. We talked about it as an office conversation, but wasn't really in Wisconsin wasn't anything crazy, you know, I mean, Labor's cases, but nothing, you know, dramatic and, and as it happened, you know, we started to talk about in our office, I told them what had happened in Vegas. And I said, you know, what would we do if what happened in Wuhan here? How would we how would we survive? What would we do for tourism and marketing and in our operations in, you know, if we couldn't have music festivals? Or have restaurants closed down? Like, what would we do? And so the week before the shutdown, we actually practiced it, just by chance. We, we did turn off all we had some marketing scheduled for the music festivals and, and the Pablo, and we said, let's just save it, we'll put it on pause. And we'll mark it for outdoor trails and the sculpture tour and, you know, all the cool experiences that you can experience outside, right, because even then you were starting to hear outside was a little bit safer, you know, at that time, yeah. And so we did that, and a week, and we ran through the whole plan of what we would do just almost as a hypothetical exercise. And the next week, the world shut down. And so we were a little bit prepared, you know, for that, just by chance, because I happen to be in Vegas happened to see it happen to come home and talk about it with the staff, and go from there.

DB: (6.56)

So since the COVID, 19 pandemic hit, like, how have your thoughts on that changed? Like, have your thoughts on COVID changed?

BA: (7.04)

Oh, I mean, I think like anybody, like, you know, they, they have such dramatic changes, you know, when COVID first hit, it was, it was really weird around, especially with our role on the taskforce because you were taking a very progressive look at what COVID could do, and, and the the scariness of it, but it really wasn't happening here yet. You know, so when we would talk to people and tell them to prepare for COVID. And what it could do, there was months where nobody had ever knew anybody that they had COVID, as we were preparing for this, just by chance, once again, kind of a weird circumstance, I had a relative who got COVID, very early on from a nursing home, she was an employee there had a very bad case of it was told it was end of life, her family was not allowed to visit her, she went to Mayo. And this is as everybody else has not experienced this yet. And at that time, when you put on events were put on the ventilator, it was a death sentence still, because of the blood clots. She was one of the first patients at Mayo to survive on the ventilator, because they tested the drug on her because she wasn't supposed to

live. So as we were getting these updates about how scary COVID was in the real life, and then I'm trying to communicate that out to everyone else, that this is the possibilities of it, everybody else is like, it's not even here. It's not like it's, you know, like you've heard, I mean, everybody knows how that all went. Well, then as COVID became more real, you know, and we had masked mandates, and all of those things, you know, we saw a really strong community collaboration, and, you know, and started to see, you know, the possibilities of vaccines and all of that. So, then it was really more work, we immediately started working through what we could do safe, but starting to plan for the recovery in the future, you know, and looking towards that light. And so, you know, we were a little bit ahead again, of when everybody was in the scary part, we were saying there's hope it's time, you know, like, be safe, but plan. And then as you know, we got into that part, then we said there's growth, you know, and so we're always kind of looking towards the future of it, even right now. You know, everybody is very frustrated by COVID still being here, and boosters, and delta and you know, and all of it. And we're saying, you know, we'll get through this, but we're seeing signs of not only survival in and recovery, but we're having a better year on many levels than 2021. Personally, my feelings have evolved from COVID. You know, over the two years of it, it's a scary thing, and I hope we never have to go again. But it's perspective. You know, I had a child born during that time that I spent more time I worked harder in those weeks from home in the months after than I ever have, but I did it from my kitchen counter while I got to hang out with my children. We took breaks to you know, take walks and hang out and eat dinner together. And so like, I think my perspective, you know, is always to find, you know, a little bit Have the lock in the optimism even in the worst situations and, and then remember that right? When we get out of COVID, I don't want to forget how I felt being able to spend more time with my family and do all of that, or the things that I wanted to do when I was locked in my house, right? I wanted to go travel and do all these things. Well, now that I have the opportunity, you better take it, you know, you better you better, you know, life's too short. And things can happen. So yeah.

DB: (10.24)

So I kind of want to go back to your job a little bit now. And like, how significantly COVID-19 really impacted like the tourism industry and how it impacted your job. Kind of in that sense, because, obviously, COVID-19 overall had a huge impact on tourism. And I just wanted, can I know the scope of that?

BA: (10.45)

Yeah. So you know, we're funded by tourism. So basically, overnight, you know, our, our room tax collections in March dropped, I think 55%, at least, you know, right. And the problem is, is it was because our hotels had dropped at that point, you know, the city made a very aggressive move to keep our funding hall so that we could work to get back as quick as possible. So we kept all six of our staff. And we actually started up a really big marketing campaign for local restaurants, and then some community efforts. And then we became a strong, we became the voice of the task force for the COVID-19 economic recovery task force with the city, the city of Altoona, the Health Department, the chamber, Deki, etc, all these, the university, all these big

organizations, working together to protect the community and make the decisions that we needed to from a health standpoint, but also support business and our citizens. And it's one of the most unique efforts I've ever seen in one of the coolest things I've ever been a part of. That also allowed us to find ways to support our hospitality and restaurant partners very quickly, you know, we started getting really involved in the grants processes and in communicating their needs, and helping them find support. And then by May, marketing for them to have safe sound. Whoops, sorry, for safe travel to come back a little bit. And then also, um, you know, by June or July, starting to see some outdoor travel and expanding that out with, with a discussion with the Health Department about what can we do safely without setting ourselves back? What can we promote? How do we promote it, we just have these very unique conversations. In any other city, I have never seen the health department, the tavern League, the Restaurant Association, in the university all sit on the same call to be friends and how they figure it out. It's always been an argument. And we were lucky enough to have that. Yeah. If it drastically affected our, you know, what our income would be in what our partners were facing. But very quickly, we were able to find avenues forward to say, Hey, as long as we all figure this out, together, and in, you know, support each other, we will make it and we are having a record year in tourism. This year when we were supposed to be 30%. Down. Really? Yep. In September, we were up the state was up for the first time month over month from 2019. September, which is like that normal year, it's also the record year, they were up 1%. For the first time as a state, we were up for the fifth time in September, month over month, we're beating our 2019 year to date, and we were up 20% versus their one. So we've had some really good luck here. But we really attribute that to you know, we kept our eye on COVID. And what we had to do to be responsible, but we never took our eye off the ball is what we can best do to support our city and each other to get through that. So.

DB (13.53) :

So yeah, so I guess in regards to tourism, and like when people did kind of visit, I imagine a change between like how, what they did between 2019 and last year, like, kind of did you see a difference in like, indoor and outdoor things or like what people did tourism wise?

BA (14.12)

Yeah. But by far, I mean, you know, we were always lucky to have such cool events here. Right, you know, country jam, Blue Ox country fest rock fest, you know, the Pablo, like all of these things. Right? And, you know, we relied on a lot of that, you know, and when tourism didn't have a choice, you know, we could rely on outdoor dining, the trails were and gift card sales for future to come to the attractions right. So it was really it was a nice reminder for us and something we have not lost sight of. How many people went out and bought bikes that year and used our trail system which is ridiculously amazing. And in our backyard and under the sculpture tour, the second largest sculpture tour in the nation, is in Eau Claire. Really. Most people don't Know that you know, and this year and so then we went to go expand that this year will become the largest sculpture tour in the nation, because of how, because of how much we realized we're like, this is an asset that we've had for forever. We haven't forgot about, but it's easy to kind of forget how cool it is when you see it everyday. Right. And we had so much tourism from that. And then, you

know, those outdoor concerts and the tourism during that, like, people wanted that experience. They wanted to go eat on a patio, it's great, you know, right. You know, and so we saw a lot of those things. And then when we got everything else back, those things didn't go away. People that are coming to a show at the Pablo, they want it I mean, maybe not today in December, although today, like but they don't want to go get you know, a, you know, they like the outside experience, especially on the rivers and you know, all these beautiful patios and fire pits and everything that we have people like it. And so we try to remember that and, and use that now to augment the facilities that we lost during 2020 and make them better.

DB (16.07) :

Yeah, so have you seen the tourism industry start to change? Like, especially with the colder months? Have you seen people start to kind of come back to what the tourism industry originally was, like, a bit? Obviously, people still want that outdoor experience, but like, Are people starting to slowly return to things they did prior to 2020?

BA (16.28) :

Oh, yeah, we saw that even in like, I would say like, when the numbers went back to closer to normal during like us this last summer, you know, when we had JM. And you know, that, like, at that time, there was no delta concern. Things were really in a great place to everybody. Like we had bigger years and amazing years in the summer, farm tech days, a huge event, you know, 60,000 people coming. Like people really did that, as we got back to fall. And Delta was coming around the time the Pablo reopened, we've had a lot of shows here, people are starting to go back to movies and, and eating in restaurants, and you're still cognizant of the, the problems, but you have access to vaccines. And at this point, most of us have the boosters, you can wear a mask if you're not safe . I mean, like, there's plenty of tests and all those things, right. So we're really seeing people come back to that. And we, I mean, even last year, most people skipped Thanksgiving if you were skipping a holiday based on the concerns, but they went to Christmas by that point, because of how the numbers have changed. This year, September was more like that Thanksgiving number where people were being a little bit more cautious in September and October. By that point, we had kind of already gotten through the big, the real big push, you know, right, and most people went to Thanksgiving, it's anticipated Christmas will be pretty close. I mean, there's the threat of Omicron right now. But if you're reading the studies on it Omicron more transmissible, less of a threat than delta from a severity standpoint, not to be undersold. But you know, vaccine booster masking, you know, in situations like that, and what we know about how to handle COVID is allowing us to get back to things a little bit faster. And, you know, we may see a new wave or a new, you know, whatever. But we already have the strategies and how to face that when, when it goes, when it goes a little south on us. So we're seeing things come back pretty, pretty strongly.

DB (18.19) :

Yeah. So I guess in a different direction, but have you has like, COVID change, like your relationship with like, friends, family? And like, just the community overall?

BA (18.30) :

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you know, on the community level, um, it's made us incredibly stronger, you know, the, the taskforce, we were meeting. I mean, in my part of the task force, I probably had six to seven hours, at least a week, during the heyday, of meeting with all these different entities about how to get the word out the different things that were happening, you know, in figure that out, we're still meeting once a month, right now for an hour, but we've transitioned those efforts of all of us in there, you know, working together into new things, right? It's not always COVID Now might now might be broadband, or an event, or you know, but we kind of, you know, it's almost like that blood, oh, you know, right. Like, we went through this huge thing together. And before, a lot of these organizations were very competitive. They didn't always work together, you know, like, intentionally, you know, right. And when we all had to sit in that same room face each other, the other industries had to as well. I mean, I worked with a lot of hoteliers in my previous job where we had good open conversations, but the fact that they were sitting down with each other and saying, This is how we're doing this in this, the restaurants, you know, that their competitors at the end of the day, but they're sitting down together and saying, I got you What do you need, right? Like, you know, and I don't just mean like, they ran on the gloves like, Hey, this is what we're doing. Do you need some staff? This is support. I mean, we watched people that you know, we're figuring out money together like in grants and in, in competitive environments. So from a community standpoint, like we just have so much more trust and cooperation on every level across every sector. First that it just operates differently, right? Like, it's, you know, it's, it's friends sitting down and people who trust each other to say, you know, hey, we got it, right. From a friend standpoint, you're like, you're I mean, you know, we're still not back to the point of being able to see, you know, friends quite as often as we used to, because of, you know, workload and COVID, you know, and all of it or whatever. So, like, I mean, but that's how that part of this age bracket goes, for me, anyways, you have kids, you have jobs, you have wives, you hope to see your best friend from high school, you know, you know, at least once a month, but in reality, you settle for once a year, and you're talking taxed, you know, but I had friends, you know, from the COVID, from the taskforce, that became some of my closest friends in the world, you know, that I truly trust and, and love and I hadn't met them for for a year and a half in person, right, I talked to them every day, they were in my living room, my kids knew them from zoom calls. But they had, I had never met them in person, that's, you know, it's insane. You know, I'm a very social person, too, you know, right. So, um, but then on the other side, I had friends I had, that I had worked with other jobs and things that I hadn't seen any year and a half, because I didn't have access to go back to some of those properties, because they were closed down and do that. So it's a weird, a weird year, right? You know?

DB: (21.30)

So, have you seen people around, you change their, like, opinions on COVID their day to day activities, stuff like that, kind of like, oh, relationships and stuff like that?

BA: (21.42)

Daily. You know, and some of that is like, the saddest stuff in the world? You know, right. Like, everything in our world currently is bipolar eyes. Like, you know, it's not just politics, it's everything. If you've got an opinion, here, somebody's got an opinion here. And, you know, my favorite quote is, is that, you know, all the money is in the divide all the progresses in the middle. So, you know, everybody that is, you know, talking about that, that far left right side and pushing those agendas. There's a reason, right. I mean, like, you know, like, whether it's Fox News or CNN, I don't care who it is, you know, right. Like, either way, they're pushing something, and it causes problems. The real work is done in the middle, and finding compromises and solutions and figuring that out. So as we've watched, you know, some of that stuff happen. I mean, some of the scariest changes for us and COVID, when people didn't believe it, in the beginning before called vaccines. And people like it was just the flu, there was a member of a community that died locally. And when that member of the community died, I watched some of my most hardcore COVID isn't real friends have to take a moment and say, I lost a friend today, I lost a hero. And I, it's, it's, maybe I have to take a minute to say, it's a little bit more real than I thought, you know, right. And at the same time, I've had on the other side of it, you know, people who really believed, you know, in COVID, and we're very safe, that they get so frustrated at the end of it, that they're like, I'm done. Right, like, I can die. I don't care. Like, you know, it is what it is. So, um, so yeah, so there's, you know, I mean, people's opinions change daily, and they get that figured out. But, you know, that's, that's how the world goes on everything, you know, right. Like, I mean, you know, people, people change. So, yeah.

DB: (23.35)

Oh, yeah, for sure. So, in what ways do you think COVID, affecting, like, people's mental, physical health? And like, have you kind of seen that with being in the tourism industry?

BA: (23.49) I think it's both Dan, you know, I mean, like, I think a lot of people are focusing more on their, their personal health, you know, right. So whether that's a fear of COVID, or, I'm going to build up my immunity as best I can, I'm going to get, you know, I mean, I'm going to get fit. I mean, with everybody working from home, you know, bike sales went through the roof, because people were like, well, I've got the time to exercise I might, if I'm going to be locked in a house for a year, I might as well get hot, was, you know, one of my favorite friends' quotes, you know, right. So, but at the same time, I think that you're seeing more stressful environments, you know, and, you know, also, you know, I mean, COVID fog is a legitimate thing that, you know, when people get COVID, it affects them and, and some of those other long term, you know, side effects that are harder to recover from. I also think, I mean, like, for me, personally, part of my exercise was social activities, you know, I mean, I'm a huge softball guy, right. So, I didn't play softball for, you know, two years. I had to find other ways to exercise. I mean, you know, and I think I think it's positives and negatives. Yeah, I was like when fries and chicken strips during

DB: (25.11)

So, like so about like, the vaccine, like, Are you you vaccinated?

BA: (25.17)

I am

DB: (25.18)

Okay. Have you know anyone who's had like questions or concerns about the vaccine or like not getting vaccinated for certain reasons?

BA:(25.26)

I've known a lot of people for it, you know, in, you know, you know, I mean, at the end of the day, everybody has a choice. You know, I mean, there is some concern that there's not enough studies on, um, child reproducing, and I can't think of the word. Right, but that, you know, infertility, there we go that story. You know, there are some people that believe that they can, you know, stay healthier other ways, or control their exposure, or their idea with a lot of kids who have cancer, who, you know, have auto immunity issues that, you know, it's maybe not in their best interest to get a vaccine at that point, for you know, those decisions. So, there's, there's a lot of reasons out there that, that people have for that, but, you know, I've known quite a few of them that they do have those reasons.

DB:(26.16)

Like, was, what was your bill like? [do not know what I was trying to say here] So when you got the vaccine was, like, easy for you to access it? Or did you like have difficulties finding a means of getting the vaccine

BA:(26.30)

At the, at the time I went, it was pretty easy. You had to schedule an appointment. But it was at North High School [Eau Claire North High School], it was I mean, a very effective operation, you walked in, you know, and you waited in your car for about 20 minutes, but you'd watch 100 People go ahead of you in that 20 minutes. It was very easy to get, , you know, and the people were very nice, you know, I mean, doing all of it. And then about, you know, a month later, you went and got another one at the same situation was very easy. I just got my booster. And it was actually, I mean, even crazier, easier. I was taking my daughter and to get hers. And they said, and my wife said, Hey, you can get your booster. She called them and they're like, Yep, so we both got the jab together. And that was that, you know, right, and you're on your way. So. no, it was, it was pretty simple.

DB:(27.23)

Did you have any side effects from either like the vaccine or the booster.

BA:(27.28)

I have an 11 year old who every time I thought I was funny, when I got the vaccine would flick me in the arm. So I would say my arm hurt more than most people. And then on the booster, I was pretty tired. The second day, I've had that with the flu shot before to which I also got the same day. So I wasn't surprised. But anytime I get sick on any level, I typically just go sleep, you know, I don't care to whine or do any of it, I just take a nap. And I slept for 12 hours that day, which is about double what I usually do. And then the next day felt great.

DB: (28.06)

So during the pandemic, what, like, have you been following with the news? And if you have what have been your primary methods of sources of news during the pandemic?

BA:(28.18)

So I'm in PR [public relations] , and I'm responsible for the PR efforts of like, sometimes vaccine messaging or business messaging or all of it. So I tend to watch both things on both sides. Right? Because I don't believe either side is completely right, one way or the other. I think, you know, everybody takes it too far. I missed the old days of news where there was no opinion, you know, right. Like, you know, you your opinion was around the dinner table around the news, you didn't have that handed to you during the news segment. So I watch, like, even on Facebook groups, I like both sides of it, right? Like, I like the COVID accountability reports. I also like, you know, the anti masking groups, or I follow both, I don't like either. And then I watch what the messaging does on both sides. So I can say, Okay, this is a realistic concern for why people don't want to wear a mask or don't want to wear a vaccine, and this is why people are on the other side of it, super afraid. And then I tried to find messaging in the middle that meets, um, you know, what, what would be a best practice, you know, right. Like, in reality, the CDC [Center for Disease Control] is kind of the goalposts for, for where we base a lot of our opinions, you know, and so, you know, we try to we follow that, but then we also take like, I mean, when we have the masked man, they come up from Eau Claire, what we were actually hearing from a lot of businesses is we want a mask mandate. We don't want to have an individual mask policy that we are the bad guys for, we're going to complain about it. Right. We're gonna pretend like it bothers us, but we want the city or the state or somebody else to say, this is what you have to do, and we don't have a choice to enforce it right? Um, and that's what we, you know, want on the on the best side of it. You know, when the mass when it was coming down, a lot of people were ready for it and saying that we feel safe with that some captain in place still right, you know, but we watched both sides of the news just to kind of balance the opinions make sure I'm getting the whole approach and and try to figure out what's you know, what's, what's the compromise? What's the reasonable?

DB: (30.23)

Yeah, but that's really interesting to see both sides. Because I think the news a lot of times can be quite biased one way or the other. So what? So kind of on the news, do you see any issues that the news aren't covering that you think are important things that they should be covering, or like,

BA: (30.49)

My favorite news program during the pandemic was John Krasinski, from The Office, some good news. Because, and I've done this in every interview I've ever been a part of, for news, but I, it was a challenge during COVID, where every news reporter would come down, and the story that they wanted to do was what's the economic catastrophe behind an event closing down? Or? Or how doomed are we with that the hotel, you know, whatever, right? And it's my belief that that's not what people need to hear from me, right, I can give you a real number. But at the end of the day, you got to be able to see, you know, what you're working towards, in the future for it. So, the number one thing I think the news doesn't report on, is the optimism, right? Like, you

know, and I'm not saying that there are big tragedies that they have to report on, right, like, we need to know how many deaths we need to know all of them. But I think we need to take you know, a couple minutes of every newscast and find the stories that are people working together and helping each other out some of the most uplifting stories from COVID, you know, the apartments singing together while they're all in lockdown, you know, right, the way that people came together to do some of that stuff, like, you know, the the old Mr. Rogers, quote, look for the helpers. You know, um, and, you know, that's, that's what's gonna give people the hope, you know, right. And that's the part that is frustrating about the individual news team today is not only do we have Doom, gloom and doom, you know, write very little, you know, positive, you know, optimistic news or spin on that. We also then just blaming the other side, you know, and that's, that's where I think all of that is very dangerous.

DB: (32.34)

Yeah, I agree. Just not enough optimism, I think, like you said, just the news has just been a lot of negative stuff. That's kind of why I stopped watching it because I just didn't need that negative in my life. But yeah, so my next question is more focused on like the government and how you think the leaders like an Eau Claire statewide, nationwide, how you think they've been doing in response to the pandemic, if you think they've been doing a good job with stuff and like, how they've handled it.

BA:(33.10)

I think that there's challenges from the, you know, every level, I was the most impressed with the government working its way up. So city leadership, county leadership around here, just incredible efforts, you know, right. Like, there's really not, you know, left, right, politics and local government here, you know, I mean, sometimes a little bit, you know, whatever, right. But, like, for the most part, you know, I couldn't tell you what, Dale Peters his political affiliation is, or Dave Solberg, I have no idea. Michael Lot, any of those guys, you know, and they all just stepped in and worked together collaboratively and supported, you know, everything that we needed to do. I think it was a unique, an amazing effort. I mean, Dale Peters stuck around out of retirement for months to, to do that. Right. And he didn't have to, you know, you know, when you get to that state level, it's, it's, there was a lot of effort on both sides of it, you know, when I want to give them their due, but we got lost a lot in the right versus left, you know, and neither side is right, but we just didn't get the job done, sometimes the way that we needed to together, and then you saw that at the federal level as well, right. You know, both Trump and Biden have had their wins and their losses in that. And I don't think it's fair to cast blame on either side, nor would I have the experience or you know, even want to do that. I just think that the biggest missed is that we didn't work together as much as we could have. And locally, we saw how well it worked. You know, so It just and continue to struggle to work together.

DB: (35.07)

Yeah. So, kind of about the future, how do you think this is gonna, like impact our community? Do you think this is going to continue to be something that unites us? Or like, is it gonna maybe, like, pull us apart? I don't know.

BA:(35.24)

In our community, I think, you know, has united us a lot, you know, and especially at the, you know, the the business and collaborative level, there's a lot of trust, you know, and as long as we continue to do that, and handled conversations and open transparency efforts, you know, with kind of that common goodwill towards each other, and before that will do very well. I think that COVID will have less of a lasting impact, as you hear, like, in general on like, you know, eventually, I think you hit some level of flu like immunization, you know, or routine. And we see some of that, you know, go away and settle down. But I wouldn't be surprised to see, you know, I mean, even on my level, if I, I mean, when I was sick prior to COVID. I worked, right, like, never even thought twice about it, right? Like, when I was a kid, even if you were puking, you might still go to school, because your mom thought you might be faking it. And my mom was an ER, nurse, right? Like, like, she knows what sickness is, right. But that was just how it was. Same with work, you don't miss work, you know. And now there's more of that. That proactive pay, let's, you know, just be a little bit more responsible in that. So I think that that'll be a good change. But I also think that you'll see a lot lot more people realize that including myself, work, or live to work is not the answer as much as work to live is, you know, having a job and being successful is great, but at the end of the day, you might as well enjoy your life, you know, so.

DB: (37.04)

So, knowing what you know, now and like what we know about the pandemic, what do you think like individuals or communities, or governments need to keep in mind for the future. In regards to like this pandemic, and what happened, what we've seen the past couple years,

BA: (37.24)

A Plan A is better than a plan B. But if you're going to rely on plan B, you got to be able to trust your partners. Past that, I would just say, we've learned a lot about what economic stimulus can do for environments, you know, right? Like, I think you'll see some places be a little bit more aggressive in grant making, and things like that, to continue to stir up development, especially locally, when you look at the amount of development we have coming out of our ability to get grants and do all that here. It's been crazy. But I think you'll also see some of those conversations that hadn't been better have been forced by COVID Continue, right, like \$15 minimum wage, you know, I mean, everybody had an opinion on this before this. Now the market is driven it if you want to eat in a restaurant, you got to pay them to show up, right? Like, they're truly essential workers now, especially not just the title, you know, same with hospitals and all the other things, you know, but also, like, on that level, like, you know, you know, some of those work issues, should we be giving more vacation we don't always do as well in that in America as other countries, paternity leave, you know, you know, health care, like all of it, like what do we do? You know?

DB:(38.43)

So, kind of back to your job a little bit back to like the tourism...

BA:(38.50)

Give me one second [Moves off screen for a moment]

BA: (38.58)

Alright, Dan, there we go. Sorry.

DB: (39.00)

That's okay. So kind of back to what you've seen in Job industry. Like in regards to people, you know, have you seen how have you seen COVID-19 effect, like their employment and like, just, like, in what ways have you seen COVID-19 effect the employment? for the first two months, drastically bad since then, actually, really

BA (39.21) :

For the first two months, drastically bad, since then, actually well. I mean, most of my friends have either gotten a new job, gotten a raise or found a different circumstance that makes them happier. You know, so you know, I think that you have options now, you know, right. Like, in May, they might not last forever. It's a really strong job market with really strong wages and all of it but if you're not happy with what you're doing, you can make a change, you know, right. And especially if you have individual skills that are hard to come by, I mean, with the amount of growth that's out there. The way that the virtual world has changed. I mean, you can now work at some really great places across the nation from here in Eau Claire. Or if you're sick of the big city, you can come work in person at a lot of great places in Eau Claire, and have some of the new, you know, less of the struggles of the big city. Yeah.

DB: (40.23)

I actually kind of just thought about the spacing, while you said before, but like, you mentioned that you've been working two jobs has like, have you seen any difficulties with that with like, the pandemic still going on? Or like, how far does that then work? Two jobs as you do?

BA (40.39) :

Oh, I mean, that task force job, it was basically volunteer, but it was 40 hours a week. And yeah, there was I mean, hack, I mean, probably 60. You know, I'm on the low side, you know, and so it was a lot, but it was a different a lot, you know, I'm used to working a lot from, you know, my previous jobs, especially with the resort, but I was working on site away from my family. In this model, we could watch a movie, right? Like the movie could be on I'd be at the kitchen counter, I'd answer some emails, you know, I'd schedule zoom calls, you know, especially during naps, you know, whatever. But at lunch, I had a home cooked meal for lunch and dinner every day, I used my smoker more than I've ever used it, you know, and then I get to hang out with my kids and have time, right, but like, my day got extended, a lot of times, I would get up at five or six work before the kids got up, you know, work for a couple hours after they were awake, take a break. And then after they went to bed, I'd work for hours to answer emails and do some of those things. So that was, you know, a really unique time. But, I mean, everybody, I think people are working harder than they've worked before. But they're working smarter. Mm hmm. To take their breaks.

DB (41.59):

So I really imagine that being home was really, really helpful for you and kind of working and just being able to be with your kids.

BA: (42.10)

It was, you know, and then, at some point, you know, I mean, my 11 year old had come home from school, so she could help. virtual school wasn't that crazy, you know, in the, in the first year, you had very little work to do, you know, right, because they didn't quite have a plan. But then as the kids got older and wanted, you know, you know, more and more and more, right, like, at some point, you have to go back to a routine, you know, and so, and then, of course, my kids got louder, you know, right. I mean, I went from a baby in the two year old, to a one year old and a three year old, and that just isn't gonna work for, you know, a Zoom meeting, you know, for the most part now.

DB: (42.54)

So, being that you had a young family, like, what did you kind of do with your family? For fun? Or, like, what were some of those things that you guys like doing during the pandemic?

BA: (43.05)

Well, we went on a lot of walks, we built a play yard in our backyard, we got a puppy, that was a dumb idea. And then we played board games, we played some video games, you know, like, we wouldn't go on driving trips and do like some of the cool experiences, like they had that drive through Safari for a while. And, you know, you go see the Christmas light shows during the winter and a lot of that, but we just spent a lot of time outside. Yeah, you know, and, you know, right. You know, we Nerf gun battles and all that stuff. And then, you know, I mean, Disney plus, the timing of that was probably the best thing that Disney has ever done. So Yes.

DB: (43.43)

Yeah, just being in an area like this indefinitely. huge help. Because there's just so many, like you said, trails, get Chippewa River, it's just one of the better places to live in if you're going to be absolutely. Okay. Well, I think that's, I really got a lot out of this, I think, most of the questions that I needed to answer so I really, really appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule.

BA: (44.18)

Yeah, anybody else that you're talking to?

DB: (44.22)

No, so I had to.... Well, I did two interviews for this project. One person I knew personally prior to this class, and then one person that like I didn't know personally, so yeah, you're my second interview.

BA: (44.38)

Cool. Well, if you need any more, I got a lot of friends. You let me know.

DB:(44.41)

Yeah. Sounds good. Thank you very much again.

BA: (44.44)

Thank you, do let me know how it turns out.

DB: (44.46)

Sounds good. I will, have a good day. Bye

