

Interview with Mark Larson by McKenna Larson

Interviewee: Mark Larson (MaL)

Interviewer: McKenna Larson (McL)

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Abstract:

Mark Larson resides in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin by Lake Wissota and currently works at Market and Johnson in the safety manager position. In this interview, Mark talks about how COVID-19 has affected his job and the different programs he is involved with at Hope Lutheran Church of Eau Claire. In the interview he discusses what activities that he and his family have done to stay busy during the uncertain times and talks about how COVID-19 is bringing back family time and how there has been some positives to this pandemic in that aspect.

McKenna Larson (McL):

All right. Could I get you to state your name, date, and time for me, please?

Mark Larson (MaL):

Yes, it's Mark Larson. The date is November 10, of 2020 and the time is currently 7:10pm.

McL:

Perfect. We will start with some general background questions to give everybody a sense of who you are. Would you mind sharing your demographic information for the study such as race, ethnicity, age and gender?

MaL:

Yes, I am a 50-year-old white male, and I am half Norwegian and half Polish.

McL:

All right. I'll also have you state where you live and what's your favorite thing about this area?

MaL:

I live in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, I am actually outside of town, on the edge of town out towards Lake Wissota. And I believe that what attracted me to this area is the wilderness, the the

fishing, the recreation side of it, having Lake Wissota in this area, and being able to hunt and fish and all of our different golf courses in this area as well so-

McL:

Perfect. I'll, have you state where you work and for how long you've been in the safety manager position.

MaL:

I currently work at Market and Johnson Incorporated in Eau Claire, Wisconsin and I have been a safety manager now for approximately six and a half years.

McL:

All right, what are the primary things you do on a day-to-day basis when you're not at your job?

MaL:

When I am not at my job, I typically will I I enjoy golfing, I enjoy hunting and fishing, and I enjoy woodworking as well as spending time with my family and friends.

McL:

All right, when you first learned about COVID-19, what were your thoughts about it and how have your thoughts changed since then?

MaL:

When, when COVID-19 first started, I did not seriously think that it was as big of a deal as it as it has turned into. You know, when I when I hear the word pandemic, I guess I just think that's a general terminology and I did not think that it was as bad as it really was. It it currently has turned into you know, where I I am dealing with COVID-19 issues and concerns all day long throughout my job and I'll get into more detail in the future here.

McL:

Perfect. What issues have you had most concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic?

MaL:

I think the biggest issue that I feel, I-I think the most serious thing is that this virus can be spread by someone that feels perfectly fine and I think that is the biggest worry that I have is that we have a lot of people throughout the work sites and throughout the general public that are spreading this disease without even knowing that they actually are a carrier or that they are asymptomatic.

McL:

Alright, so we'll get back to your job here. How is COVID-19 affected your job, explain how it was before the pandemic and what you've had to change since you're still an essential employee.

MaL:

So when I when I first started before, as a safety manager is actually a carpenter and a superintendent with Market and Johnson and then I had a couple injuries and I went into the safety manager side of it. And, being a safety manager, I typically do job site audits almost every day. I will do a majority I-I would say anywhere from two to six different audits or two to six different job sites that I travel to throughout the day. It depends on where those job sites are located as to how many that I can actually get to throughout a day and what I'm looking for is I am looking for people that are following the rules, I am there as a resource in regards to people asking safety questions, any any questions in general to be honest, along with trying to coach a lot of the older employees that we have are kind of old school and they did not grow up with a safety background. The newer employees that we have actually did grow up with a lot of safety in their lives and they're almost easier to coach compared to the older people throughout, you know, throughout the job sites.

McL:

All right, perfect. So how has COVID-19 pandemic affected the employment of people you know, you can even talk about things at work that people have had to go quarantine for or something like that.

MaL:

Okay, so we have, we have roughly 275 employees at this time and those are the field employees-we have about 85 office employees as well. And it's kind of two, it's kind of twofold, I have been dealing with some of the office people as well, that are either a close contact and they need to be quarantined or they have actually been tested for COVID and they have come back with a positive result. So, we we have been dealing with a lot of, you know, transferring a lot of their equipment to home, so that the people are actually able to work from home and work remotely. And as far as the job sites, we have a lot of you know, I I get asked a lot, if if I was a contact of a contact, or if I was a direct contact-we have been working extremely close with a Eau Claire County, and Chippewa County, along with roughly 12 others. Every county has, has a guideline that they follow. So when we have an employee that works in a certain County, I'll take Baron-Barron County, for example, we make contact with Barron County, we explain what's going on and then we need to basically go through the the history of that employee to see who had close contact with that employee, and who needs to be a person of interest when it comes to being quarantined.

McL:

Okay, perfect. So we'll get into some more family questions so how is COVID affected your day to day activities and some of your hobbies?

MaL:

I would say, my, my plate was fairly full, before COVID in regards to being a safety manager and, you know, you hear the term putting out fires, people will call when they need something, and typically, it's they need it now. And so my position is very reactive- that I need to be able to go to a job site, if we've got a large crane, we've got a large air handler unit that's going to be moved on top of the building, just whoever needs help with a with a certain activity, they will call-we try to get them to give us a heads up and give us some warning, but it does not always happen that way. And, I would say now, I am averaging about 15 COVID calls a day and that is the initial call- and then I have to make two to five calls from each one of those-so that is what I put into my day between my normal job site visits. So, there's a lot of times that I will travel to a job site, and I will be on the phone in regards to COVID and I won't leave that job site for two to three hours due to all of the additional COVID calls that I have to make.

McL:

Okay, so how has the COVID 19 pandemic outbreak affected your community, of I know that you're president of Hope Lutheran Church, could you just speak about that during the pandemic?

MaL:

Sure, Hope Lutheran Church is in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and I am currently the president of the congregation. I am also the head of the trustees, I am on the personnel committee, and I'm on the buildings and grounds committee as well. And in regards to Hope Lutheran Church, we have followed what the ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] has put out as guidelines in regards to going online church and we have been doing that for I believe it's been about three, three to four months, I believe that we've actually been doing online church, and then we've actually set up a drive thru communion for our congregation. So, the people after they watch our service on Sunday mornings, they can actually drive through and receive bread and wine through a drive thru communion, which is really-really been a huge plus for us. Our pastor is actually able to safely keep her distance, but still be able to see people in their congregation, which means a lot. We did, we did open again, for personal service for roughly three weeks, and it went really well, we were able to social distance inside of our church-inside of our sanctuary and we had an average of 40 to 50 people that would actually show up in person for church. And, we still broadcasted online, where we have about 100 people watching online as well. So that has went really good, but with the increase in the last few weeks in, in Wisconsin, in Chippewa County, in Eau Claire County, we have decided to go back to online only-and we are going to be online only through the month of December through the month of November-and I believe we're actually looking at going online all the way through the end of the year, until January of 2021. And, then we will reassess if we're able to hold service, you know, personal live service.

McL:

Okay and you're also, you also have a lot of activity with Sleep in Heavenly Peace around Eau Claire, would you mind elaborating on that?

MaL:

Sure. Sleep in Heavenly Peace is a nationwide program that the youth director and I decided that there was a need, in the Eau Claire and Chippewa area for a program like this and, what Sleep in Heavenly Peace-what the entire a program is designed for, is to get kids off the floor and get them into a bed. And there is approximately 1100 children in Eau Claire and Chippewa area that do not have beds, they're either sleeping on a couch, they're sleeping on the floor, they're sleeping with another sibling, or parent and we just felt that there was a huge need for this in our area. So, the youth director and I traveled the Twin Falls, Idaho for training and we signed up to start a chapter-Hope Lutheran Church is actually sponsoring our, our chapter and they're not doing it with money, they are doing it with basically we're able to use their garage, and we're able to use their downstairs. And we have a lot of blankets, pillows, sheets, everything that gets donated to us for Sleep in Heavenly Peace and then we have what's called bed builds that are corporate sponsors. So, the corporate sponsor actually pays for the lumber, and the mattresses to make these beds for the children in our area. And, we have we started this, it would be almost-it's roughly one year old at this point. COVID has, we we were doing a bed build roughly every two months, and we were building 40 beds for children in the area and we have delivered over 150 beds to the local area. And we do that all with volunteers, volunteers actually build the beds and then volunteers actually deliver the beds to these children or to these families. We take the beds in, we set them up, we make them, and the kid actually has a place to sleep that night. And it has been just a just a tremendous operation. I it's something that's just near and dear to my heart because it's it's literally helping children that just that just need a little boost and there's children that are you know, six or eight years old that have never had a bed of their own, which is I think extremely sad. But yet, we're able to give them a bed and honestly, they look like it's Christmas morning and they are so excited. So, we have had a lot of a really, really good support in this area. People are very interested in donating for this cause and what COVID-19 has done is it's literally brought that to a stop at this point across the entire nation we are not able to host the bed builds at this time-and we are not able to do the deliveries into the family's homes at this time. We are hoping that COVID-19 will level off and hopefully go the other direction, whether that's vaccines in our future or whatever the case it is we're just hoping that we we can go in the other direction and we can get back to building beds for children and delivering beds for children.

McL:

Alright, perfect. Has the COVID-19 outbreak affected how you associate and communicate with your friends and family and in what ways?

MaL:

Yes, it has. I have two parents that are in their upper 70s and as a family I have a brother and a sister as well and we we have just been very careful. The contact that we have with our mom and

dad-we have just we have just been very careful on how how we approach that and it's, it's been a struggle, I'm not gonna lie about that. My parents are old school, they think that they will not get it. They think that there, there's like a false sense of security and I keep explaining-and so does my brother and sister that it is real, and it is something that they could definitely get-and it could really, it could really change their life-if not end it. So, it's it's extremely serious. Of course, my mom is upset in regards to Thanksgiving and Christmas coming up, that we will not be able to gather as a, as a family of, you know, roughly 30 people, we're just not able to do that at this time so it definitely has a direct effect. We do try to communicate online, we do try to communicate, you know, even just phone calls, and text messages, a lot more than we used to.

McL:

Alright, perfect. So, you mentioned that your parents aren't taking the pandemic very seriously, how do you think other people around you are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic? Do you kind of see the same thing going on there?

MaL:

Yeah, it is amazing with the amount of people that I deal with on a daily basis. I ever since this started, I've really controlled, keeping the social distance with the amount of people that I come in contact with throughout a day. I'm never less than six feet from those people and I'm never with the same person for more than 15 minutes throughout the day, so I'm really paying attention to that. Just because of the amount of people-I've I've had upwards of 100 people that I can talk to in one day going through several job sites. And it is a huge range between people that are extremely scared of COVID-19, and people that absolutely do not believe that it that it exists, that it's even a virus. The other thing we just had the the November election, the presidential election, and there is an amazing amount of people that think that this was all around based around the election and I think now they're starting to realize that this is not a political pandemic, this is a worldwide pandemic, and people need to pay attention to it. And, you know, I think we're going to talk about-I've had several close, close family, family members and friends that have actually gotten this and it does it does react different to different people.

McL:

All right, so talking about some of your family members have got it. Have you gotten sick with COVID-19 or any other close family members gotten it and what has been your experience in responding to the sickness?

MaL:

I think the the main thing that I-I've stated this before, with my family is, in early December, I came down with the sickness and I was extremely sick for less than a week, but I did lose my taste, I had a temperature, about 102 to 103 for three days straight and body aches and everything else. We never really heard anything about COVID-19 in December, but I have read a lot of articles that, you know from even Mayo out of Rochester [Minnesota] that states that the the COVID strain has come through the Chippewa Valley in September, November, December of

2019-kind of ahead of the actual outbreak itself. So, I do feel like I actually had COVID-19, it wasn't proven, I didn't get tested for it, but I do feel like I I did experience a sickness that was you know, identical to what a lot of my family members have told me. It it is really hit a lot of people different. I've seen I've seen people that literally are excellent singers, musicians that have not been able to sing for approximately six months at this point-they cannot get their lungs to work properly. And I've also experienced friends that are marathon runners that can't even run a mile yet and it's it's amazing to me that, you know that a sickness like this can actually affect someone that, that severe when they are actually a healthy person. I also have I I know, several of my friends who have actually lost their parents-they did have some underlining conditions, with the respiratory illnesses and COVID-19 when they when they actually a got that illness, they, there just wasn't anything they were able to do. It made the person go downhill extremely fast.

McL:

All right, talking about physical health, do you think that COVID-19 is affecting people's mental health as well with the quarantine, staying at home type of thing?

MaL:

Yeah, I do, I think, I think a lot of people have been so used to, you know, going 100 miles an hour, day in and day out and this has really had to make people stop and think about their actions, about their family's actions and it's a trickle-down effect. I think, don't get me wrong, I I think that there's a lot of very, very good things that have come out of COVID. In when I say that, I mean, there's, there's a large amount of people that have told me they have never enjoyed family time more than more than they ever have. And, the other thing is, there's a lot of people that have people in high school people, students or kids in high school, kids in college-those kids are home, and they're interacting with the family. There's a lot more games, cards, dominoes, puzzles being put together-there's just more family time and a lot more meals that have been with family. And I think-I think to be honest, COVID-19 has almost simplified the kind of the old, the old way-I mean, I'm 50 years old now and when I was a kid, I remember every weekend that we went, and we hung out with my grandparents, and we literally just went there to visit, and that's all we did. And we we play cards, and we do different things, but I think it's actually brought that back. And I think that family time is something that has made a lot of relationships stronger and I and I do look at I try to look at the positive side of it the best I can. It is it is an extremely-everyone's very vulnerable at this time and there's a lot of people that are very worried as to when and if this will ever get over. And, if we just have to if, for example, social distancing, wearing masks, if, if that is the new norm- the new normal- you know, there's a lot of people that just don't want to do that but yet, if that's what it's gonna take-that's that's what we need to do. And the other side of it is hopefully, with the new vaccines that are starting to come out, we're hoping that you know, you you'll have a COVID-19 shot, similar to when you get the flu shot. So-

McL:

Perfect, alright. So, we talked about some of the activities other people do during their family time, what have you, your family, and some friends been doing to stay busy during COVID?

MaL:

We have actually played a lot of cards and a lot of dominoes. We we've done some different projects around the house in regards to a new fire pit area in the backyard that the families kind of developed or put together. I also have a woodworking shop and we have made anything from headboards to tables we have refinished a lot of different furniture. So it's in doing a lot of like small side projects for multiple people. I've been able to help out, you know several people doing different things in my shop as well. It's just that the the social distancing aspect needs needs to always be there and you need to think about it at all times in order to not spread the COVID-19 you know, to them or from them, you know, to receive it. So that's always on the forefront.

McL:

Alright, perfect. So, you talked about some of the news articles you're getting information from what have been your primary sources of getting news for the pandemic either for work or guidelines like that.

MaL:

Yeah, I would say the the the local county, we've been dealing a lot with the local county. We have also been dealing a lot with the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]. And we, you know, we've we've done a lot of work with the AGC [Associated General Contractors of America] out of a Madison [Wisconsin], they are an outfit that does a lot for construction companies and we have worked extremely closely with them. We have been working very close with OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] as well, on a lot of a lot of the things that you just took for granted and I'll I'll give you an example-when it comes to silica and silica exposure, if you just think of a dust in the air, or when you're cutting a piece of concrete or floor slab, cement, and there's the white dust that comes up that is that is a lot of silica involved in that. We do fit tests for respirators for a lot of our employees and because of the pandemic, we literally had to give our supply of N-95 masks that were typically used for respirators, we had to give that PPE or protective, personal protective equipment, to healthcare providers. And so we donated the majority of our of our inventory to the local hospitals and clinics in our area, as well as some of the fire departments and police stations, just so that the people that were on the front lines were protected. And what that has done is it has really-we still struggle trying to get some of the PPE that we used to have, we we still cannot get it. And that has that has really made us think outside the box and come up with other other ideas. And, you know, such-

McL:

All right. So, let's talk about the future a little bit. So, knowing what you know, now, what do you think that individuals, communities, or governments need to keep in mind for the future of this pandemic?

MaL:

I think the the biggest thing is, people need to understand that everyone has their personal space, and we can cut down the transmission of any disease, if we just respect that space. And, if we can keep the social distancing, along with wearing the PPE in regards to masks or, you know, washing our hands often, and cleaning the surfaces a lot more than we ever have. I think all of that is a step in the right direction. I know, I know, personally, there's a lot of people that just did not wash their hands very often, they did not clean surfaces very often and now they are, and I think that is just something that we need to learn, learn moving forward. It doesn't matter if we're talking COVID-19 or if we're talking influenza, it it all helps cut down the spread of the disease or of the infection or whatever the case is.

McL:

All right, perfect. So that was great thank you so much for your detailed answers and your time. We appreciate it very much.

MaL:

You're welcome.