

Interviewee: Teresa Kirchner

Interviewer: Sierra Ramker

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Abstract: Teresa Kirchner currently lives in Southeastern Alaska with her husband and three children. She is a nurse practitioner working in an outpatient clinic setting, providing primary care needs to rural Alaskan communities. She discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected her job, in both positive and negative ways. She shares many changes she has seen in her community during the pandemic, and how those changes affect the everyday lives of those who live there. She shares advice she would give to those in the future from what she has experienced during the pandemic and goes deeper into how Alaska in general has handled issues regarding the pandemic.

00:02 SR

So this is an oral history interview for the Western Wisconsin archive. Today's date is December 13 2021. The time is 8:55pm. Current COVID-19 statistics are as follows. In the last 30 days, there are 49,844,242 cases total in the US, and 794,558 total deaths in the US. There is a total of 1,024,094 cases in Wisconsin and 10,389 deaths in Wisconsin due to COVID. There is a total of 147,975 cases in Alaska, and 856 deaths in Alaska and the percentage of the US population that is vaccinated is approximately 76% of people five and up with at least one vaccination.

01:10 SR

Can you say state your name for me?

01:11 TK

My name is Teresa Kirchner.

01:15 SR

If you're comfortable, can you state your age, race and gender?

01:20 TK

My age is 44. My race is Caucasian, and my gender is female.

01:26 SR

Thank you. So where do you currently live?

01:29 TK

I currently live in southeast Alaska.

01:35 SR

What is roughly the population of your town?

01:39 TK

The population of the town is close to 2000.

01:42 SR

Okay. What is it like to live there? Like how would you describe your town?

01:48 TK

It is small. Yeah, very busy at times, there's a lot of tourism in the summertime. There's a lot of people that in the state of Alaska travel back and forth, to different areas frequently. So the population can change. But it is a town that does have a road and it has a hospital and it has a grocery store. So it really has quite a bit of things.

02:22 SR

Has COVID affected tourism at all?

02:25 TK

COVID has been a big influence on tourism, and it has had a negative effect in that particularly the first year in 2020, there was no tourism. And then in 2021, there was increased tourism within the state. However, the state of Alaska has lost or had difficulties with it's cruise ship. And I don't know all the specifics of it, but I know that the cruise ships were not able to come and that greatly affected tourism.

03:03 SR

Okay. So, besides tourism, what were some of the effects that the pandemic had on the community there?

03:13 TK

things that I've seen with the community. First of all, it, it affected access to health care and any other services. It affected people's ability to move place to place to either go and access things that they needed for their home, like food, supplies, it limited people's social interactions, they weren't able to travel to see family members. They weren't able to access health care as usual, they could still access health care, under emergency services, but routine things that they normally that people would normally travel for was discontinued or on hold. So those are some big changes. School systems were disrupted with the at home serve school, you know, some people didn't have access to technology didn't have internet services. And isolation can occur to when you're not able to do your social things. So those are some of the things I've noticed.

04:35 SR

Yeah. So how are people able to- I mean, it was limited, like you said, but how were people able to get food that they needed during that time?

04:47 TK

So we saw that for our community, at least the grocery store still stayed open, and we were able to go but for people who, you know, say you had a high risk health condition or you were elderly, then that brought about concerns about, you know, how do- is it safe for me to go to the grocery store? Can I get my food? We saw people be very generous, and you know, help out their community members and go

purchase groceries for them and leave them outside, so they could get it or things like that. Another thing is that, in Alaska, there are a lot of people who hunt and fish just like in Wisconsin, and when you can't travel for that, luckily, we did see that that changed, and that people were encouraged to do outdoor activities and you could still do some of that, but hunting and gathering as groups was limited, you know, so it did affect some some access to food for people.

05:54 SR

Yeah. So how has the community responded to COVID-19? We kind of talked about like neighbors bringing groceries. But has there been any other responses that your community has taken?

06:10 TK

The community here I saw it, pull together and find out, you know, first of all, what resources they needed? How can we get- you know, and at first it was, what, basic need resources do we need to get from, you know, food, shelter. And then it was medical, the medical community too, you know, how do we get what people need to at first it was how can people get medications? Can they get cleaning supplies? Can they get masks? Can they get things to prevent illness, but then also to treat illness if they have that. So we saw networking with organizations outside of the community, so, large organizations within Alaska, and then also organizations from the lower 48, outside of Alaska and internationally even to help secure those treatments and those supplies that were needed.

07:28 SR

Yeah. Have you seen people around you change their opinions, day to day activities or relationships in response to the pandemic?

07:38 TK

Yes. Yeah. Many ways, I think that on a very basic level, interaction between people is different. Not as close in physical space. For some people who are very social, and like physical contact, like to give hugs, like, you know, that reciprocal touch. It's been a stress for some people, too. I've seen that take a toll on people. But I've also seen some positive changes, where families are spending more time together at home. And- there's a lot that's a big question [laughter] changes that have happened, people being more respectful or not respectful, but being more cautious if they're ill, and being cautious about being around other people, if they're ill, just being more cognizant of other people who are in their community that might need things. You know, I've seen some negatives in that some people become very anxious and very concerned that they might become ill and have withdrawn in some ways. Not gotten routine access to care, because they're concerned or not gotten routine access to health care, because they're concerned about becoming, you know, coming in contact with COVID or not being able to see family members that they haven't seen in a long time because they're concerned about traveling. So

09:29 SR

yeah

09:30 TK

so positive and negatives.

09:32 SR

So what has your day to day look like during the pandemic,

09:39 TK

Being a critical or essential worker, it didn't change in format, I mean, I still went to the physical structure of work. And it increased, the workload increased greatly, and there was concern and there's been multiple stages of it. So it has increased work volume, it has added stress, it in some ways though too, it was very helpful for us to review our practices, and what's- and to pull together as a team and as a group within a healthcare organization, and take on this task of working with the community and so it has increased camaraderie and helped in some ways like that.

10:45 SR

Yeah. When you had first learned about COVID, what were your thoughts on it?

10:52 TK

When I first learned about it, I was very unsure. Having seen previous outbreaks, viral outbreaks, illness, you know, and dealing with influenza on a yearly basis. At first, I was very unsure. Then there was fear, and concern and trying to look at all the different ways to try to prevent illness or help and things like that. So, I thought it would be a short term. In hindsight, [chuckles] I thought it would be shorter than it is and then it has been, but I've learned a lot.

11:40 SR

Yeah. If you're comfortable sharing, have you ever been tested positive for COVID?

11:47 TK

I have not myself. I have had a family member. I've had a family member that has. but I've not myself.

11:59 SR

Have you ever had to quarantine because you came in close contact with someone?

12:05 TK

Not for close contact, I did have to quarantine after travel.

12:09 SR

Okay, what was the experience like quarantining and being isolated for you?

12:16 TK

I did not like it. I was still able to work from home. so that was beneficial. But I did not like the separation. And I did not like trying to occupy or I did not like feeling restricted and I didn't like the feeling of separation, even within within a house, you know?

12:44 SR

Yeah. So what issues have most concerned you about the pandemic? That's a big question too [laughs].

12:56 TK

That is a big one [laughs] Again, that kind of, as we go, the trajectory of it, as I look at when things first happened, what most concerned me was, how do I, or the physical things, the things to keep people safe,

and if they did, you know, to prevent them from getting ill, and if they did get ill then how to prevent them from getting severe illness, and then as it moved forward, then it was efforts with vaccination. We saw things change and you know, then it was, and then we came across other treatments that could work, monoclonal antibody therapy, other medications, so you know, procuring those having those available, those have been concerns and, but you know, and that was on a professional level. On a personal level, you know, a fear that I may become ill myself and not be able to be around my family, fear that I will lose a family member, fear that my children would have lasting memories from this and also there could be damage to their school performance their social interaction. Those things.

14:34 SR

Yeah.

14:36 TK

So, those were ones.

14:38 SR

Yeah. How was online school for your kids? How did they, if you're comfortable sharing,

14:45 TK

That's Fine.

14:46 SR

How was that experience for them?

14:48 TK

It was difficult, for as much as they are familiar with using anything with a screen. It was still very difficult at first it was oh, you know, first couple weeks, it was great. And then it became, it was a whole different way of interacting, and then also taking in information and, and processing it. And then we struggled as parents, my husband and I struggled to take the teacher role on because we hadn't done that before. And it- both- or two of our three children. It's taken them time to catch up on basics and get back into where they should be.

15:41 SR

Are they still doing online schooling? Or is school back in person?

15:46 TK

They've returned in school learning. Yeah.

15:51 SR

So, that we kind of touched on this, but how has COVID-19 affected your family's day to day life?

16:00 TK

It affected it in that there was much less social interaction. Prior, it was, you know, frequent extracurricular activities, and we're slowly returning to those. But I will say that afterwards, there'll be less extracurricular activities than there were beforehand. But it did bring us closer together, also, I would say

16:28 SR

Yeah. Have- what have you and your family done for recreation during the pandemic?

16:38 TK

In that way, we were, it was a benefit that we like to be outdoors to begin with. So, we have increased our outdoor time. But it did change things like going to movie theaters, we haven't done that in a long time. Swimming, even swimming because the pool was closed for a long time. And so, some of those activities that were indoor definitely changed, but we have we've been able to do more outdoor things

17:14 SR

that's good.

17:16 TK

Mhm

17:17 SR

Has- how or has the pandemic affected how you associate and communicate with your family?
With-outside of your immediate family?

17:27 TK

Sure. It has, we were- so being at such a distance phone communication was always a big piece of communication with family, I would say there's more of the the platforms like we use FaceTime and the maybe more social media and then, but it was very difficult, because a lot of people from here travel to see their family. And when travel was restricted for a long period of time, it became very difficult for people and I personally knew of people that moved because they weren't able to be at such a distance from their family.

18:23 SR

Oh wow. So, what have been the biggest challenges that you have faced personally with COVID-19?

18:35 TK

Personally, it has been- I struggled with a disconnection with my family that [unknown] at a geographical distance from family and then also with a distance from family because of professional restrictions. And then personally, it has also, I would say, it did improve my family life in that my immediate family life and that we did have to come together and [laughs] and made our bonds I would say closer there.

19:21 SR

Yeah. So a little bit more on your job that you had mentioned. Can you explain a little bit about what you do?

19:31 TK

Yes, so I work as a nurse practitioner and I work in a outpatient clinic setting, so provide primary, help people with primary care needs.

19:44 SR

So what is your role- You go to some, like you said, some Alaskan communities, what is your role there? And are you the only one that goes to those communities or do you travel in groups there?

19:59 TK

I have had some experiences in the last couple of years, there's usually, where I've been a single person there, there are some people, other people, that are there that are there within the community, they live there all the time and provide support, but I usually work in a clinic where there's additional support people, but sometimes alone.

20:23 SR

Okay. What were some major changes within, you kind of touched on this, but what were some major changes within your job when the outbreak had happened?

20:37 TK

So, within my job, major changes, were also dealing with the things that we've talked about before, but then to having to be able to learn other people's roles and fit in when- if someone else needed to be out of work for 14 days to quarantine, that we had to learn how to perform their, their roles, in addition to ours. So that was a major one.

21:09 SR

Speaking of like people and filling in roles, did you ever have a problem with like shortage of workers where you are working?

21:20 TK

Yes. Luckily, it was not a sustained, and it's not been as severe as for people who work in long term care facilities or inpatient facilities, but we have had it where staffing has been affected and services were needed to be not withheld, but you know, limited or triage based on an emergency need, or an urgent need.

21:54 SR

So has there been any changes since the beginning of the pandemic, to now? Have things kind of lightened up, like with regulations or-

21:05 TK

Yeah.

21:06 SR

-any other changes?

22:07 TK

Definitely, vaccination made an- a change for us. You know, and even too something as simple as being able to travel, you know, now, at the beginning of the pandemic, you had just even changes in the quarantine time, or isolation time, you know, going from 14 days to 10 days for isolation, going from not being able to travel at all. So not being able to travel outside of your community, to being able to travel

within Alaska was huge. And then, you know, so pandemic started it was August, before I could travel outside of Alaska. So-

22:58 SR

Yeah.

22:59 TK

-those are big changes. Vaccination has also helped people to be together in indoors or, you know, in closer proximity.

23:08 SR

Yeah. So what were some major concerns, [chuckles] you also touched on this a little bit, but is there any other major concerns that you had, or maybe within these Alaskan communities that you go to that were huge concerns during the pandemic?

23:29 TK

So a major concern was, because these areas were remote, it was unlikely that the pandemic, or we would, you know, it was unlikely that COVID would come from within the community, that it would be brought into the community. And if you're traveling in and out of a community you feel a burden or responsibility to not be the person that would bring COVID-19 illness into the community. Then it was, so how do we prevent it from getting there then? And simultaneously it was, how do we help people if it is there? How quickly would it spread? How do we access resources if you're off the road system? You know, how long can it be until someone could get access to higher level of care? How are they going to get there? Do we have the resources we need and the timeframe while they're deteriorating to support them until they could get to a higher level of care? Then as it became more towards or continued prevention and then as vaccinations came out, then it was you know, a large effort to help communities become vaccinated and then with it becomes the the planning and the coordination, you know, getting the vaccination there, being able to store it properly. Helping community members who want to get it, get it, you know, doing home visits to give vaccinations. You know, but then too also managing what if someone has anaphylaxis reaction? How do we emergency handle that so? And then, and then we progressed to it being present COVID-19 illness being present in communities and how do we handle an outbreak scenario? How do we provide assistance to people if you have a whole community that's on quarantine and isolation? That takes effort and coordination of food, supplies, social support. So

25:50 SR

Yeah. So just wait I'm just gonna look at my questions here

25:57 TK

You're fine

25:59 SR

So you kind on touched on that. So talking about the vaccine, you've been bringing it up quite a bit. So 55.4% of the population of the state of Alaska is fully vaccinated? Did you receive your vaccine?

26:16 TK

Mhm. Yep, I did. I did. And I received booster vaccination too so.

26:26 SR

Why did you choose to get your vaccine?

26:30 TK

I chose it, I would like to say I did it for other people, but I did it for myself. I personally did it, knowing that it was a level of defense for me and my family. Because when you work in healthcare, you're always aware, too, that you can take something home to your family. So, I wanted to protect myself to be there for my family in the future and to protect my family currently. And then, but then also to protect my work family, which includes the people that I am allowed to help take care of so.

27:12 SR

Yeah, Did you get your vaccine in your community?

27:18 TK

I did, I was very fortunate to be able to access it. Early on, and as part of my community, so. And I was very nervous when I got my first dose. And I won't say nervous or as excited. I mean, it just became this momentous occasion in one instance, it was really surprising.

27:44 SR

Yeah. Is it easily accessible in Seward, or?

27:50 TK

Yes, yeah, I would say that, Alaska, really, I have had conversations with people in the lower 48 who have really struggled and even like my own family that lives in the lower 48, I've provided assistance with helping them reach out and find out where they could get it in their communities. But Alaska has been very proactive and very easy to access.

28:22 SR

Yeah. So the Alaskan communities that you do go to, you kind of touched on this, but is the vaccine fairly easily accessible there? Or is it still a lot of planning and a lot of work to make it as accessible?

28:39 TK

It requires less of a degree of planning than it did initially. But it's accessible and it's easily accessible. It's there if people want to get it and I have seen people be much more open minded to it than I had thought maybe. Just, you know, you watch the news, and you hear things about vaccine hesitancy and it does occur, but people, I've been surprised by their positive response.

29:16 SR

Yeah. So as a nurse practitioner, what would you say to someone who is hesitant about the vaccine?

29:25 TK

The biggest question is or the biggest thing that I want to know is, what questions they have. I want people to be able to make an individual decision and I want people to be able to access the information that they need to make that decision for themselves. I find that people sometimes haven't been asked simply you know, why do you- you know, what information do you need? And it can be that can be a bridge, it may not be an immediate response and people, they just might need time to think about it even too.

30:15 SR

Yeah. So, switching gears a little bit, in what ways have you seen or do you think that COVID-19 has affected mental health?

30:26 TK

I think that it has affected it, I see two parts of it, I see that it has made access to mental health care, on a tech- you know, through a technological, I'm not very good at some of those terms, but on a format such as through, you know, telehealth or phone visits, it has opened that up, that has become much more easier to access. But I do think that it also, [the?] pandemic restricted care for people in that, and then it restricted their access to services. And then it also added, you know, additional stress and anxiety and isolation to people. [both speaking-unclear] contributed to that.

31:25 SR

Yeah. Have you ever, or has anyone you've known, struggled with mental health during the pandemic?

31:34 TK

Yes, I think that. And it- I've seen it affect multiple age groups across the lifespan, and I've seen it affect individuals who had previously established mental health disorders, and I've seen it affect people who did not. So it, I've seen it affect many people in many different roles and many different avenues of life so.

32:13 SR

Yeah. Have you seen people struggling with mental health in the communities that you go to?

32:20 TK

Yes, it it's very isolating when you live somewhere remote, to know that you can't go somewhere else. It's not only restricting, but it almost makes it feel more remote. So that's been difficult too.

32:50 SR

Is there easily accessible resources for those communities?

32:56 TK

Yes. And Alaska as a whole, too, since moving here, I've been very surprised by the access to mental health care here. It's a system that's been invested in and is available for people to use. And, again, telehealth is a big part of services here too, so you can access it from where you're at, what your remote location may be.

33:31 SR

Yeah. Is there anything else that you feel could be done to help with mental health issues due to COVID? Or just overall?

33:42 TK

I think continuing, that's a big question. [chuckling] Yeah. There's- continuing to work together, continuing to develop a sense of community and working together is important. Because mental health can many times make individuals feel separate, or that they don't have someone that can help them. And then also, I feel like, in some ways, a pandemic, this pandemic has highlighted mental health. So, I'd like to see the additional support and it- not necessarily attention, but highlight that it brings to it.

34:31 SR

Yeah. So turning gears again, how have municipal leaders and government officials, in your area, respond to the outbreak?

34:46 TK

Very well. Very active, very involved. Very- whatever needs to be done. Attributing resources, financial resources, physical resources. Just you know, one thing in the state of Alaska and I have not lived here for a very long time, but long enough to know that there is still memories of a previous pandemic, the Spanish flu. And it greatly affected Alaska as a whole and Alaskan communities. So there are still those were there were comparisons that were made in the early stage of, you know, this is how we-, this is why we need to come together. We need to fix things and work to fight against this.

35:46 SR

Yeah. When had that pandemic happened around?

35:51 TK

So, it should be the Spanish Flu of 1918.

35:54 SR

Oh okay. Yeah.

35:56 TK

Yeah.

35:57 SR

So do you think that is why Alaska is fairly well prepared for this pandemic?

36:05 TK

I think it's a part of it. The day to day nature of life, too, and if you live in a remote area is that you-Preparedness, you do need to be prepared. There's also you know, I would say, Alaska as a whole, you have to be prepared. It's either the weather, or it's the envir- you know, it's the wildlife. It's many other things, but you do have to be prepared.

36:42 SR

yeah

36:43 TK

There's earthquakes, there's Yeah, things like that.

36:46 SR

Yeah. Do you have any thoughts on how local, state, or federal leaders are responding to the pandemic differently? If they are responding differently?

37:01 TK

No, I would say the biggest divide I've seen has been individual choice. You know, if people should- if there should be mandates for people to wear masks, or if there should be mandates for people to do different things, but.

37:23 SR

Yeah. What issues- what important issues do you feel the media is covering?

37:37 TK

I struggle with media.

37:41 SR

I could ask the other question, what do you feel- what important issues do you feel like the media is not covering?

37:48 TK

I feel like the media is over covering things sometimes. And I don't mean that- I mean, in that there's been so like, even with vaccination approvals, there have been times where the media has released something about a vaccination being approved or things like that before even you know, the healthcare community could address it. So then it led to people having a lot of que- community members having a lot of questions and concerns and misinformation potentially. I also think that the media coverage has contributed to people maybe being over inundated. There's just so much all the time. And while people have the right to be informed too I've heard many people say, I just have to turn it off. I can't listen, I have to take time away. So.

38:57 SR

Yeah. Where do you usually get your news from? Or news sources or such?

39:08 TK

Hmm. That's a- there's local news [chuckles] And I really tend to get it through CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], World Health Organization, you know, I guess I get it more professionally than [chuckles].

39:28 SR

Yeah

39:29 TK

than anything else.

39:30 SR

Yeah. So, with all of the things that you have experienced during this pandemic, has it transformed how you think about your family, friends, and community members?

39:46 TK

Yes, it has brought back the, for me personally, it's brought back the realization to not take anyone or anything for granted. There is not always tomorrow and it's impor-, you know, I hear people so much more, and maybe it's a regional thing, but I hear people say, take care a lot more often now. Take care, stay safe. It's, you know, wanting to recognize the value of each person in that moment, instead of putting it off until later.

40:26 SR

Yeah. Also knowing what you know now, how do you feel like individuals, communities and the government need to keep in mind for the future?

40:42 TK

Preparedness, there will come a point in time where this will be, I don't know if it'll ever be completely behind us, but where this will be less at the forefront. I would encourage communities to be prepared and to have action plans and to have basic supplies and to have resources available if this does happen again.

41:15 SR

Yeah. Is there anything that you would want, again, individuals, communities, or government to keep in mind, in the future for the communities that you go to visit?

41:29 TK

Preparedness is the same [laughing]. It is the same. And maybe that's where I get it from this though, work and personal do tend to go together. But taking care of the community as a whole is also important. Because that then allows people to be prepared, you know, so just, I don't know it's a fi-. I haven't figured it out myself yet. How do you be prepared without being overzealous too? You know, at what point do you step down, you know, from overthinking it to simply being prepared?

42:13 SR

Yeah. What advice, oh, you kind of already touched on that. What advice as a nurse practitioner would you give to future nurse practitioners that may be in the workforce during either this pandemic yet or in a future pandemic?

42:37 TK

To, S- hewh, that's a- I hadn't thought about that one yet. The first reaction that I want to say is to take care of yourself. To be as healthy as you can be for yourself, so that you can take care of other people. And then also to know your resources, know what's around you, know who can help you, to know that you don't have to do things alone, and that you are part of a group that's working on responding to a major event.

43:28 SR

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for doing this. I'm going to stop the recording quick. [recording stopped]