

Interviewee: Kathryn (Katie) Wallner-Kovarik

Interviewer: Wesley Kovarik

Date of Interview: November 8, 2020

Location of Interview: Interviewer's home and interviewee's home

Format: Zoom audio and video recording

Transcriber: Otter A.I and Wesley Kovarik

Project in association with: University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Abstract: Kathryn (Katie) Wallner-Kovarik was born and raised in Park Falls, Wisconsin and currently works in the Park Falls Paper Mill. In this interview, Kathryn will discuss the impact that Covid-19 has had in many aspects of her life. From her family, community, and workplace. With her experience with Covid-19 effecting her county and the research she had done on the topic; Kathryn will provide tips to help keep viewers safe and to hopefully limit the spread of the pandemic. In the interview, Kathryn talks about her beliefs of government involvement and what needs to be done (no names are mentioned, just beliefs as to what the government should/should not do).

Wesley Kovarik: Hello, my name is Wesley Kovarik, I'm with the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and I'm in Intro to Public History 386. I am here today with my mother; mother, would you like to introduce yourself?

Kathryn Wallner-Kovarik: Hello everyone, my name is Kate Wallner Kovarik and I am Wesley's mother and we reside in Park Falls, Wisconsin. How are you doing today?

WK: Doing okay, great. Okay, so let's go ahead and let's get started. You know what we're here for, it's about COVID-19 and just going to ask you a few questions. Are you ready?

KWK: Yes, I am.

WK: Okay. So, the first question I got for you is, uh, how did COVID-19 impact your community?

KWK: Well, it impacted in a lot of different ways. In the beginning, it was really hard to believe and we thought it only impacted the big cities and other countries and everywhere but us. And then recently, about Labor Day-ish, uh, it seemed that the numbers started climbing. And it started impacting people that were very close to us. It's – It's very different.

WK: Okay.

KWK: Okay.

WK: So, is it safe to say then Park Falls is just a small town compared to the likes of Eau Claire, Madison, and Milwaukee?

KWK: Yes. Park Falls is a very small town, roughly two thousand some odd people. Everyone's related to everybody. There are some out of towners, but not many. We get a lot of recreational people from Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Arizona; they come up to the great Northwoods, they love seeing the colors and they love the fishing and the hunting here. It's very rural. Like one grocery store, a couple of banks, and a couple of industries, not many, most people have to travel up to 20 some miles away to go to their job. So it is very, very small.

WK: Okay. So, it's – it's definitely like a tourist destination, right?

KWK: Yes, more so yes. And a lot of elderly people in this community.

WK: Okay. So – so – so definitely going back on the community, do you use any stores or just any sort of, you know, like any big changes that have occurred because of COVID and how it changed?

KWK: Yes – yeah – yes, a lot of them. All doors now have you have to wear a mask. In fact, several times I forget, when I'm in my vehicle, I have to go back to go get my mask. It is really strange to see people; it's hard to recognize them. The way we used to be able to shake and brace, hug. We're very touchy feely type of community. That's the way we've always shown our affection and respect and things now are very, very different. They are very cold. You want to, it's hard to express yourself. It's – it's a whole different way of life. I can't believe that we're all living through this. It's, it's scary; it's very scary.

WK: No, definitely it is – most certainly is and especially with such a big change. And so do you notice like the -were you also impacted, like, uh, say toilet paper and cleaning accessories or they are also like lacking in...

KWK: Yes, and we are still lacking. It's very hard to find Clorox wipes, toilet supplies, paper toweling, a lot of things. We still have amounts that you can buy, like per visit. Some of the costs of some things and your, uh, little dollar generals and stuff have gone astronomical. You don't see as many people out and about. Mainly now, most people are doing everything with a telephone, computer. A lot of ordering online, you'll see now where FedEx, UPS, they've got these pens, pencils, or whatever. They're – they're like an oil truck, Penske. It's called Penske. I'm sorry, U-Hauls that help deliver articles up here. We have with the elderly people we have most of them stay out of the stores. So you don't see them a lot. Even at the store, when you go in, you've got the wipes. Now you've got people that are cleaning the carts prior to you handling them; which I'm thankful for. And when you I mean, you just – you don't touch anything, you just don't want to get – you know – like we used to be able to bring in our reusable bags for grocery shopping. You don't do that anymore. They don't even want to see it, you bring it out to your vehicle. You separated – if you got something to go into a freezer bag, and you separate it there. They don't even do that at the store anymore. They don't take refunds, returns anymore. They very much frown on them. They don't want them, which can't blame them. It's just – it's really different. Scary different.

WK: Okay, yeah – no definitely, with as much as all that's been changed. It's – it's quite different to adapt. So, kind of relating, in a sense, kind of more of a recall; when you first heard of COVID-19, did you think it would impact your community? So, like, since you're in a more rural kind of community, you're not by any major cities or any major transportation plants, did you really – like – you know... So, what was your first thoughts? I should say.

KWK: My first thoughts were like, well, this started across – you know – across the ocean, and it would never impact us little towns at all. I was doing some schooling classes, they were all canceled, especially when the clinical started. So that was all put on hold and I just thought this was a little blip and life would go on. I never expected this and then of course, my son Wesley came home from college and I realized well that's Eau Claire, that's a big town - city -colleges – just a lot of children live in thousand, roughly give or take. And I assumed that - okay, that's the way we're gonna live. This is like a spring break. He might be home a little bit longer than normal, but he'll be going back. I never expected him to be home for the entire spring, which I literally enjoyed. Not a problem. But it was very hard for him being us out in the rural area, we only get six megabytes per second for internet speed, and that's the highest we can get. So it was very hard for him to do his schoolwork and everything else. But summers changed. Outdoor cookouts have changed, holidays, our traditions have really changed and we're about to see a whole new meaning of the word Thanksgiving and Christmas there will be a huge family it'll be probably be virtual. Except for our immediate family when it's - it's just very, very different. Lots of emails. It's just not the same at all. I never thought I'd love to see something like this. It's - it's

something you'd see on some; I don't know some TV show that you can't even make it up. Like aliens or something. You would have never dreamt something like this.

WK: Oh, yes. Uh, and so speaking of change, did you notice any changes in your workplace like a change in the environment or just how procedures are done in general?

KWK: Yes, a lot of different changes. You see people that you work with. Some are real ignorant towards it, some - a lot of different personalities you work with there and you get a lot of feedback. One guy his wife works at the hospital. Uh, the testing, you could test positive for several different things. Does not believe in it whatsoever. I'm scared to death to be around him. Where I work. We use a lot of computers. I have got some Lysol stashed. I've got hand wipes stash, sanitizers, you see him not at every workstation, you see my the entry ways there's masks, you know, no, cannot go any further mask is required. No one high fives anymore. No one handshakes, uh, you know, you stay your distance. It's literally impossible to work and fix something when you've got to stand six feet from somebody and a mask - very hard to understand somebody especially it's muffled and with a loud environment you - you almost take the pull down your mask a little bit so that they can hear you because you can't understand them. It's scary, because I realize how exposed I am. I try not to because I mean, it's just something you don't do. It's almost like not hearing something but for some reason you pull your mask down. I don't understand that why we do that. But we do. It's all a knowledge. It's very hard when you're sharing mouses - you know - mouse and key pads and monitors and - you reach in the same boxes, you're handling the paperwork. You see people with sores on your hands and whatever else not and you're just like, I don't want to catch anything you don't you don't know. I mean, I'm constantly sanitizing, my hands are completely raw from sanitizing. I can't, my job that I can't wear these disposable gloves all the time because the environment, it's just very, very hard and I'm constantly hand washing. As soon as I go past the bathroom, I'm in, hand washing. I just don't want to bring that home to my family. I don't want to touch my clothes with it because I mean, bring it home. I don't want to I just really makes me nervous.

WK: I understand that...

KWK: It is very – it is very different.

WK: Okay, yeah. I think...

KWK: I'm used to...

WK: Oh, yeah, I definitely understand what this kind of time - ah. Okay. So, going on to the next question. Uh, what are your thoughts on government performance of COVID-19? How do you think your local community handled it, your state fairs it, federal? Do you think performance was...

KWK: I think the performance was substandard. I believe they knew this was this bad, especially when people were dying like crazy, overseas. They should have never laughed at it, thought it was, "Oh, this will pass." I seriously cannot believe they have not come up with some type of medicine, a shot, a vaccine; something - they can fly people to the moon, they can. There's nothing we can do technology wise, medicine wise. There, I just cannot believe we can't. that this hasn't been worked on and already resolved. And people are still dying. Our community now has been hit again. Now it's really been hit. The hospitals completely full. The helicopters are flying out all the time. Now, they're always bringing it down to Marshfield. So they chopper them out. All the beds are filled up at this time. And you just - you can imagine it hitting this area. And you just wonder when is it going to be one of mine that may have passed that I'm going to have to deal with? Have I touched this person? I mean, have I come in contact with this person? It's - it's things you worry about. I touch on the lady that I work with that right now at work? I won't say her name. Is that alright?

WK: Yeah, that's definitely fine you're fine...

KWK: Wesley... Okay, there's a - there's a lady that I work with. I just learned of this weekend that I know she was working from home. And I thought it was because she just didn't want to be exposed. Well, I found out later on that she did - she owns another business outside of where we work. And there was a customer of hers that came in and I guess he did have COVID and they did a test on her because they did her tracing and she was - she tested positive for COVID-19. Anyways, at that point, all of us in management have really stepped up. We're all scared. We use the same copying machine we talk to each other. To me. Six feet, a mask is still too close. I wish I would just I - I know we all have to keep our lives going. We have to somehow do it and keep going but we need the materials, we need tools, we need, Lysol spray, we need Lysol wipes, we need more hand sanitizer, we need... I think everyone should have disposable gloves. I think everyone should be able to have those. We shouldn't have to pay for those. Those should be right at our fingertips. And especially with her where she was at. A lot of people have been into her office. A lot of people have been in there a lot and I don't think it's safe. It's It's scary. It's very scary.

WK: Okay... so, yep...

KWK: Wesley...

WK: and so just a follow up on that. So then, with your ideal, your belief on the performance of the government. Do you believe that government should be involved more? Or do you think it should just be left up to the people because that is such a popular debate coming up as of now.

KWK: I do believe the government should actually mandate mass - I know there will be a lot of upset people. But it should be mandated until this subsides. I do believe people should really think about their families. not laugh at this. It's not funny. I realized with all the testing they have now, more people have tested positive and that's I think because of the fact we are available there. There is so much testing out there. Now for us, we did not have that before. We just knew that warning signs, you know, loss of taste, smell, things like that fever. I'm feeling very achy, almost like a - a - a flu. But there's many more other side effects and trouble breathing and whatever else not. But I believe people should be very effective in their health, especially for the health of their family, if they don't think that much of themselves. I think government should - should mandate wearing disposable gloves. We all touch grocery stores, we all go to the bathroom, we touch doorknobs, that other people have touched, I - it was really scary before when people don't wash their hands. And it was always... it's not to me, it's just very uncluttered. And clearly like it's - it's not a good idea. I think that when you see someone I know people get a little P.O'd. But I think when you see someone, you should offer them a mask or offer them gloves. If not for yourself for themselves. And try to get them to take care of themselves and take care of each other. That's the most important part take care of each other. It's only us that can stop this and bring it - slow down until they get this vaccine or whatever miracle drug they're going to come up with. And I hope it's soon. I really hope it's soon.

WK: Okay and, uh, so then going off of how masks and - are - how you would call them. So do - so do you think masks themselves are efficient? I know you mentioned that gloves should also be an important factor. But, is there like anything else that you'd add or?

KWK: No, the thing of it is I see. With all the stuff I get in the mail, I see all these masks, they're acting like it's a trendsetter. Like, it's really neat. If you have sequins on them, they have no filters on them. They're just a tool. I - I don't, I don't believe in them. If they're not like hospital grade, I think they're just a they're joke, they're a piece of cloth with strings around your ears or around your head. I think you have to go to a real mask. That's what it's about. And I - I worry, I make a special thing in my head that when I even when I wear my I always wear my gloves. They're right in my vehicle. As soon as I go into a grocery store. Like I said, sometimes I forget my mask like a silly girl. But otherwise, my gloves go on. I actually carry a mask that's folded up right in my purse. So that in case I don't have it right with me that it's - it's I can just reach in my purse and grab it. Gloves, I make a note in my head. Like when I touch a grocery cart, I don't care how much they clean it, I don't care. I always make sure I never touch my eyes. As soon as I get that mask, you know, when I go in my vehicle, I take the gloves off, I make sure I turn them inside out. I do not touch them with my hands whatsoever. I do not touch my eyes. I do not rub my nose for some reason it makes you want to more but I don't touch any of the parts of your body where this could enter into your bloodstream. I don't want I'm worried about bringing it home to my family. My husband does have respiratory problems. And I know for him this could

be a death sentence. And it's very, very scary. I see a lot of people when they travel. There's people around us that travel. They come from Green Bay College or whatever. And they're coming home and they don't think nothing of crossing county lines and they'll do that several times a weekend. To me it's it's not safe. I think it's very irresponsible. This isn't funny this - this is - this is a death sentence and it's nothing to take lightly.

WK: Okay and so just elaborating since, you know, you've taken quite a precaution to keep everyone in the family safe. What would you recommend for safety measures? You know, besides the mandatory masks and gloves, like cleaning procedures, how commonly clean and all that what would you say should be some common safety practices I should say that people should follow

KWK: I believe from what I've read, and what media is telling us that even on cardboard boxes so if someone handled it like from Amazon or something that has COVID, what I do is when my cart - when I order online, because I do a lot of it, I just don't go to a Walmart anymore. I stay out of there. Just what I have to the essentials that I have to have for my family in town, like grocery store strictly that's about it. But otherwise, order everything online. And when Amazon delivers it or you know, UPC (UPS) or whatever, what I do even my mail, I use my gloves and I leave it set. I do not immediately open it up. I do nothing. I don't put envelopes in my mouth anymore. I don't you know to hold on to them. I do not I left things set by get a cardboard box. I have some Lysol spray. I spray it. I don't touch it for probably two days. I don't want. I'm just worried even with gloves. Why would I want to open that cardboard box up, handle it, get the stuff out, I don't know who put that stuff in there. They may be infected. And I don't want that for my family. So I every precaution back to those times when they deliver it, I'll leave it in the garage, I won't even bring it in the house. Everything sets out in the garage and I wait, hopefully by then whatever virus bug whatever's on there, it will dissipate/die off, because it's got not another human being to. In fact, I don't want to in fact, the cardboard, whatever. But I there's a lot of people out there working there amongst it. They don't even realize they have it. And it's really scary. It's very scary.

WK: Definitely, especially with again, all of the symptoms and uh, possible problems that COVID causes, especially with death being the number one highest on alerts. Uh, okay, well, thank you for your time. It was great hearing from you. And, yeah, I'm - thank you for let me have you for the meetup. Is there anything other? Is there any work you have to say? Or that you would like to let the public know or?

KWK: Yeah, I would, one of the things I have never done is - done, you know, to be traced, with this individual that I've come in contact with where I work. I'm, I'm anxious. I don't know, I've never been traced before. It's gonna be really scary. I'm worried I'm gonna have to be quarantined at home. My family. I'm, I'm worried financially, if I'm quarantined at home. I just I've never been even tested yet at this point. I've never had to be. I know we all should be and it will come. I know well, but the lady that was infected, it's the thing of it is that I seen her

probably within the first four days before she actually started studying at home. And then of course, I heard she was tested positive. Now comes this tracing. So I don't know how they do this do they go about who all came in her office and they start doing all this stuff? And I don't know how they do it. I mean, I have to give the government a heads up. Because it's, it's unbelievable what they have to go through. I mean, this is something we've never had to deal with before. It's no, it's just very, I I wish no one had to go through it. But the world is going through right now. We've never had a real loss rate to our family yet. I'm sure it will happen. But I'm hoping at this point Everybody stay safe and healthy. Wear the masks, wear a pair of disposable gloves; even if it's not mandated wear. Wear - wear the - wear the gloves. Don't touch your eyes. Don't rub your nose. Don't - just be so careful that you can't be careful enough with this.

WK: Yeah, just be safe and be cleanly right? Just practice all the essentials and...

KWK: Wash your hands good with good soap. Nice hot water. Yes. Be any part that touches your family, your body. Another part of the of what you touch everyday without your hands that you consider would be safe at home, your car door handles, things like that. Those are things that you may touch and you may not even think twice about it because you're at your place. Well, you already came from the grocery store. You have the gloves on your hands. And if that was on a grocery cart, you're - you're - you're just pushing it around. Everyone is.

WK: Okay. Okay, well thank you again for all – for just coming here, joining me, and just joining the interview. And having what you want to say come out. Just awesome. Thank you so much for your time.

KWK: Thank you Wesley and you stay safe and you stay healthy. Okay?

WK: Okay, I will do okay.

KWK: Okay, and let's just pray that this all comes to an end. It's the best thing that could ever happen. Okay, thank you for your time.

WK: Yep, not a problem. Again, thank you for having me on or, you know, for having - for being on here. Excuse me. Okay, just have a great day.

KWK: Thank you. You too. You have a good one.

WK: Thank you.

KWK: Thank you for having me.

WK: Yeah, no problem.