

Interviewee: Linda Brunner

Interviewer: Andrew Beine

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Abstract:

Linda Brunner works as a department assistant for the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. As a single mother by choice, Linda was raising her 5th grade son when Covid struck in the spring of 2020. In this interview, she describes what it was like suddenly living 24/7, being a caregiver to her child, as well as acclimating to the new world of working from home. Later, she discusses her experience in her department, and how she has felt supported and accommodated as a caregiver by her supervisors. In addition, she speaks to the importance of journaling her experiences and her hope that, when possible, working from home becomes a staple for modern working households.

Andrew Beine 00:03

Okay, so it is, let's see here, I forgot what day - it is Tuesday. It is Tuesday, May 2, 2023 and the time is 12:25[pm]. And I have Linda here with me. Thank you so much for taking some time to talk to us today.

Linda Brunner 00:23

You're welcome.

AB 00:24

So to start out, if you just want to share some just general demographic info, whatever you'd be comfortable sharing: race, eth-ethnicity, those types of things.

LB 00:35

Okay, I'm white, I'm between the ages of 50 and 55. I live in Eau Claire, and my pronouns are she/her/hers.

AB 00:53

And can you just briefly - we'll get into it a little bit in more detail later on - but just kind of [give] a general description or explanation of your role in the UWEC sort of community?

LB 01:06

Okay, I work at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. I'm the department assistant in the Department of Education for equity and justice. However, when COVID hit, I was the

department assistant in two departments, my current department as well as special education inclusive practices.

AB 01:35

Okay, um, so to start out with this is - we're collecting sort of the experiences and the stories of faculty members, staff, who are also identified in one way or another as caregivers. When you, I guess to start out - when you hear that term, "caregiver" or "caregiving", what comes to mind to you with - to you personally, when you kind of think about that?

LB 02:09

Me personally, it's as a parent. I'm a single mother by choice to one child. When COVID hit, they were 10 years old. So it was just him and I the whole time. And also a little bit of a caregiver to my mother. Obviously, my other siblings care for her as well. But we're very close. And, you know, I was very worried about her throughout Covid. And whether she would get very ill or not, as she, you know, she's older.

AB 02:52

Sure. And then, I guess you kind of explained it, but, so under that definition, that you would consider yourself a caregiver in those specific avenues of being a mother. And with your mother.

LB 03:11

Exactly.

AB 03:14

So - and you kind of touched a little bit about it, but if you want to talk a little bit more about sort of your roles, or what specifically the types of things you did as a caregiver, pre-Covid, and then post-Covid a little bit - go into a little bit more detail of how that kind of changed, for better, for worse, and the types of experiences you had both before covid and post.

LB 03:43

Right. So pre-Covid, my son went to public school every day. They were in the fifth grade when Covid hit. So you know, they would go to school, they would go to after school care. I would work all day and then pick them up and, you know, we'd go about the rest of our day. However, when Covid hit we were both home, 24/7, together. You know, school was canceled, after school care was canceled. I was told to work at home, which at the time seemed very daunting for me because being - you know, my title is "department assistant", but you know, basically I'm a department secretary and I had never ever been able to work from home before. You know, if my child was sick or there was a snow day, I just had to take vacation or sick leave or something. I was never given the option to work at home before. So now being told to work from home for the first time, I just didn't know how that was going to work. But little by little, I took more and more of my office home with me. You know, I was given all the equipment that I would need, thankfully. And, you know, I transferred my office phone to my cell phone. And somehow it worked. I mean, it really did, I really got used to it. I, you know, I enjoyed it. It - you know, when

the time came to come back to the office, it was a difficult transition, because I was used to being at home.

So when I started working from home, not only was it difficult getting used to working from home, but also my child was home with me all day, every day. And when Covid first hit, they - he didn't have much schoolwork to do. So it was just trying to balance me doing my job as well as trying to keep him you know - give him some free time, but at the same time, I made up my own things for him to do, you know. Because he just couldn't be online all day, every day playing video games. I mean, that just wasn't healthy. Although it was a way for them to keep up with their friends because he could still play online with his friends, and keep up with them. You know, talk. You know, that was his outlet. But in addition to me working, I created more things for him to do. I made sure he read every day and I made up writing projects for him. And when on the rare occasion that he did get schoolwork to do at home, you know, I helped him with that. And we did phy-ed at home. And so it was a lot. I'm not gonna lie, it was a lot.

AB 07:16

Yeah, that absolutely sounds like it. That's actually the first time I've ever heard with some of these interviews we've done - that you kind of almost took a educator role in maybe trying to fill in some of those gaps that suddenly younger kids had to deal with.

LB 07:35

Because I think, you know, when it started the teachers were in a new experience as well. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know, you know, what they could have their students do, just to be fair, because not all students had internet. And I get that. I want everything to be fair. But it was hard because he had very, very little to do. And and it just depended on who your teacher was and what your school was that some of them met every day. My child did not. And so I made him learn typing - you know, a typing app every day. I had him read. I had him do art projects. You know, I kind of had him write a journal of his experience with Covid and how it was making him feel. Because, you know, like I said, I wanted him to have free time, but at the same time, he needed to be stimulated and to get a break.

AB 08:48

Was he - did you find that he was sort of receptive to that, or willing to kind of do this - these extra things that you kind of were trying to encourage him to do?

LB 09:00

I think a little bit of both. You know, especially writing. Writing is never their first choice of things to do, but I think it gave him a good break of something else to do. And also I think it will be very interesting for him to read years down the line.

AB 09:30

Absolutely.

LB 09:32

But I think once - then once Fall hit, and you know, the teachers had more time to prepare [in the] Fall of '20. He changed schools. He went to a middle school then. They had more to do. He kind of thrived on that. Every Monday morning, we would sit down, we'd make a calendar. He would, you know, write down the assignments he had to do each day. The two virtual classes he had each day. And then I would write down my meetings. So he knew when he could and could not interrupt me. So we made a schedule like that every Monday. And so - and he seemed to like that, because, you know, every Monday morning, he'd be like, "gotta do our schedule". And it really helped us, so then he knew what to expect from the week.

AB 10:35

Sure. During the Covid, the sort of lock downs and everything were you able to find - typically, the answer to this is usually no with a lot of caregivers - but in terms of self-care and things you were able to do for yourself, did you find you had any time to do those kinds of things? Sort of -

LB 11:04

Honestly, since I became a parent, I don't do a lot of that anyways. But especially when Covid hit, it was hard. It was a lot of emotions. You know, some weeks were better than others. And it was just him and I, 24/7, all the time together. And yeah, I remember one weekend specifically, and I said, "well, is there anything you want to do or anywhere you want to go"? And he just kind of broke down. He's like, "well, where can we go? The only places we can go are gas stations and grocery stores". You know, so it was really hard.

AB 12:00

Yeah. So, now looking a little bit to the, like, "professional" sort of realm. I know you said when you started working from home, it seems like they adequately supplied you with the physical things you needed to kind of figure out the logistics of suddenly working at home. In terms of being a caregiver in general, have you found that your experience with - your job has sort of understood or been able to empathize with your responsibilities as a caregiver as well as your professional responsibilities? And have they done anything that has kind of made you feel supported in that way? Or conversely, maybe not as supported?

LB 13:01

Um, I'll answer that, and if I didn't answer it correctly, you can let me know. But I feel I've always been supported as a caregiver. You know, I'm a single mom, mother by choice. He is what I wanted for a very long time. And so he is my everything and so anybody that knows me knows that he is my number one priority. But I feel that my work at the University has always supported that. They understand. They know if my child needs something, I'm going to be there. If there's a program at school, I'm going to be there. But - so even before Covid I felt I was supported. You know, during Covid, there wasn't - there weren't any programs to go to or you know - life really shut down. There wasn't anything to go to so - but I believe they also knew that, you know, I didn't need to be at my computer every minute of every day obviously.

You know, if my son needed me to do something with him during the day I could do that, I had that flexibility. And as well as post-Covid now - well, as much as it is post-Covid - I have a

fantastic supervisor and she is awesome and she - and she is very understanding of my need to support my son and be there for him and help take him to his activities and adjust my schedule as necessary. But I feel - and I am very grateful and thankful for that. Because I know not all positions at the University are like that. I am very well aware of that, and I hear about them. So I am very lucky.

AB 15:21

Without getting into too much detail, can you share a little bit about the types of things that you hear maybe from other departments or other people that they've been having difficulty with? Or have they just said -

LB 15:32

Well, just in general, supervisors not always understanding if a child is sick, and they need to be gone for the day. Or they need to take them to the doctor or, you know, they want them at their desk all day long. And, life just isn't like that, you know? It's - you need flexibility. And, faculty have a lot of flexibility. And I know university staff, our positions, are very different from faculty. but at the same time, we need to be given some flexibility too. And I've just heard that some supervisors just don't provide that, and aren't as supportive as I have been supported in my role.

AB 16:44

What do you think -

LB 16:45

Now, post Covid - if, you know, my child is sick, and I need to be home with them, I'm given the option. Well, you know, if you need to take the day off, go ahead. But if you want to do some work from home, go ahead. Or even now, I'm given the option to work from home over semester break, or over the summer part-time, or even now during the semester. I work from home one day a week, which never ever would have happened prior to Covid. For me anyways.

So I think as a lot of people have said, Covid shown that most people can work from home and are productive and still get their job done. And, you know, and as horrible as Covid was for a lot of people, it has made the role for university staff a lot easier post-Covid. And, I mean, I understand [the] ground's people and facilities people don't have that option. But for me, I'm very grateful to have that option.

AB 18:12

Because there's - [coughs] excuse me - because there seems to be, like your experience seems like it's been an overall positive and supportive situation and that others don't, you know, maybe have it to that extent. So it doesn't sound like it's like a university-wide, you know, kind of "one size fits all" for everybody. Why do you think there's a difference than in how some are - how

some feel supported? And why some maybe don't? Is it like an individual just like a - their supervisors there?

LB 18:50

It all depends on who their supervisors [are]. And some are very flexible and allow, you know, different schedules and some don't.

AB 19:05

Do you think, if they're a caregiver, in their own lives, do you think that would have an impact? Maybe that they would be more empathetic if they know what it's like to be a caregiver or not necessarily?

LB 19:20

Oh, I believe so, yes. I wouldn't say 100%, but if you've lived it, you generally have more empathy for someone going through the same thing.

AB 19:40

Right.

LB 19:44

And I know human resources is, you know, trying to offer more classes and things like that on how to be a supervisor and things like that. But a lot of like department chairs, you know - I'm not bashing department chairs or anything, but department chairs are, you know, they're just thrust into that role. Not everybody wants to be department chair. However, somebody has to be in the department.

And, you know, and some people are just thrust into that role, and don't have the preparation for it. Whereas in other jobs, when you take a role, you know, you're going to be supervisor to somebody. You know, that's just part of the role. Whereas, you know, if you were hired as an assistant professor, you know, 20 years before, and now you're a full professor, and your department needs a department chair, you know, somebody has to do it. So they may be a very good teacher, but they may not have a lot of skills to be a supervisor.

AB 21:04

Sure. And you talked about this a little bit, when you mentioning that, sort of at the, in the midst of Covid, that it was kind of hard, emotionally, that it was just kind of you and your son 24/7. Was there - so the, I guess, the ability for people to kind of seek out help or resources from sort of the outside is limited, or almost impossible, during that time. But was there any instances whether it was even like, I don't know, like digitally or something, where you were able to kind of connect with either family or friends that you saw maybe help yourself balance, the kind of caregiving duties and your - the work that you had to do from home.

LB 22:16

I'm very lucky, and I have a supportive family. And when Covid first started, one of my sisters and I started talking every day. She would call me on her way home from work, because she's in healthcare. And she worked the whole time. And so she would just call me everyday on her way home. And so that was kind of adult conversation, a little bit of an outlet. And she would kind of tell me, you know, what's going on in the hospital and that. And luckily, that still continues today. And we've just continued it. So she was an outlet. At - when Covid first started, I was very scared and I kind of stayed away from my mom's house just because I didn't want to take anything to her or anything. But then after a couple of months, you know, she was staying home. And we were staying home, for the most part other than grocery stores. And we just kind of decided that we were going to spend time together. So we did start going to her house occasionally. So that was, you know, another person to be around, just to have an outlet. But that was about it.

AB 23:54

Okay. And then - I had one note that I kind of forgot to get to before, about the staying at home work. And how it's been kind of clear since Covid that a lot of jobs can be done from home that they weren't necessarily, you know, maybe seen to be the case beforehand. In terms of university work in general, do you see that as a trend that will continue? Where it's sort of more widely accepted that some of these jobs can be done from home just as productive? Or do you think Covid is kind of - it's at its peak now because of Covid, and then as the years kind of go by, they'll kind of go back to wanting people in the office or in-person, even if their work doesn't necessarily warrant that?

LB 25:00

I really hope that it continues to give people that flexibility. I know quite a few positions that still work from home full time, or even the majority of the time. So I really hope that continues. And I think people understand that, you know? If they go to an office, and they see that the person that they wanted isn't there, I think it doesn't - it's not a big deal as it used to be. And they know they can call or email and they'll still get their answer, or the help that they need. So I really hope that this continues and doesn't go back to the way it used to be. I think it's just better for everybody, just to have that flexibility, that little bit of a break.

You know that - for me, it's that one day a week where I can really focus on a project and know I'm not going to be interrupted, you know? I don't know, I really hope it continues. I don't see - I think if they would have made us, everybody be back, they would have done that by now. So - and they've made forms now that we can do that, that it's in writing these days, "I'm going to work from home". You know, they have all these questions that we have to answer, you know, what is our workspace like? Make sure it's safe for us. So I think if they were going to make everybody come back to campus, they would have done that by now.

AB 27:07

Sure.

LB 27:08

That that's just my opinion.

AB 27:09

Right. And then that one day, you kind of mentioned it - so do - you almost feel more productive? During that one day a week that you work from home?

LB 27:20

I do. It's just a little bit more relaxed. I know I'm not going to be interrupted. And I can just truly focus on something and get it done.

AB 27:36

Sure.

LB 27:40

And that's if you remember to take everything home with you that you need [laughs].

AB 27:44

[Laughs] Sure. Have you had any instances where you didn't didn't have what you needed?

LB 27:51

Oh, yeah, there were some days where it's like, "I wish I would have brought home that one piece of paper on my desk". But you know, you just find something else to do and do that project another day. It's always there waiting for you.

AB 28:06

I think that is kind of all the main points I wanted to get to. Was there anything specifically that I maybe didn't get to that you'd want to share for this project? About, like, your experience caregiving in general?

LB 28:28

I don't think there's anything else. You know, I think it just - I think it made everybody stronger human beings. Just because, you know, when we were initially sent home, and it was only going to be for a few weeks. And then a few weeks down the road, "oh, it's going to be this way for the rest of the semester". And in my head, I'm thinking, "I can't do this". I just, I can't fathom staying home another six weeks, and it continuing like this, you know? And then it continued even more and more, you know? And I ended up working from home for a year and a half. And at first it was just very overwhelming and scary. Just because you had no idea what the future was going to bring and a lot of unknowns. But, you know, somehow you make it through and you're stronger on the other end and - you know it was a horrible thing that we lived through and you know, it's still continuing you know? But obviously, the worst is over. And it taught us a lot too, you know? It taught us - like, for me, that I can work at home, and it has given me a lot of flexibility. And, you know, the whole mask situation: I mean, if anybody would have told me, I'd be wearing a mask every day to go to work and taking my temperature every day, and just all this stuff...

And I mean It's just - out of curiosity, I looked, I read through my last three years of journals to prepare for this, just to kind of refresh my memory of what we went through. And it was crazy. It was just unbelievable, you know? But here we are. And hopefully a pandemic like that never happens again in our lifetime, but you never know.

AB 31:10

Yeah, that journal - I think that's a really great idea that you sort of encouraged your child to do that, too. Because it's such a weird time for everybody, but I can't imagine being younger, you know?

LB 31:26

Yeah. And then it's really hard because they were finishing fifth grade, and so he never really got closure for that school. And he's told me many times throughout the last three years, like, "I just wish I could go back to that school and say goodbye to my teachers", or just "I don't remember what the inside of that school looked like, I just wish I could go back in and see what it was like", you know? Because usually on the last day of fifth grade, you know, all the kids line the halls and they walk through and high five, everybody, and, you know, they have, like a celebration or a ceremony or something. And no, he and he didn't get any of that. And I mean, I understand ending fifth grade is nothing compared to what the high school seniors or the college graduates went through, I get that. But he had his own, you know, own kind of separation thing where, you know, I wish it could have been different for him.

But we just had to- you know the teachers - I thought it was nice that teachers did have a parade, they drove by in their cars, you know. And that was fun for him to see everybody again. And then there was a day in June where we had to, like, take all the books and the textbooks, library books, musical instruments back to school, and then everybody had boxed - bagged up his desk contents. You know, when we made an exchange out in the parking lot, and it was just a surreal experience. And that was our way of, you know, saying goodbye to elementary school. And yeah, it was - nothing that you ever think it will be like.

AB 33:32

And then I guess, last question: for the journals, is that something you did before Covid?

LB 33:34

Yeah.

AB 33:36

Okay.

LB 33:41

That was a journal for many, many years.

AB 33:43

Gotcha. So not just kind of a one off...Okay, I think - yeah, if there's nothing else, those were kind of all the points I had, I think. Yeah, so I want to thank you again, for taking some time to talk to us. I think it's - we're almost sort of making a journal of this. Actually it's called, one part of this is called "Journal of the Plague Year". So it's, it's - yeah, just kind of getting these experiences told from the people, you know, that are living through it. And in 5, 10, 15, 50 years time, people will look back at it, and hopefully they haven't gone through a similar thing, like you said.

LB 34:33

Let's hope.

AB 34:35

Yeah, right. Yeah, so thank you, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

LB 34:40

You're welcome. Thank you very much. Take care.

AB 34:43

You too.

LB 34:44

Bye.